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# **The Diversity Education Dilemma: Exposing Status Hierarchies Without Reinforcing Them**

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## **Abstract**

*A diversity education dilemma* occurs when exposure to information concerning status hierarchies, related to demographic and other socially salient identity groups, reinforces those hierarchies in the classroom. Discussions of diversity-related issues in a variety of management courses (e.g., immigrant issues in labor relations, the composition of executive leadership teams in strategy, workplace compliance issues in human resource management) may highlight or draw attention to status differences as individuals identify with—and are identified by others as belonging to—higher or lower status groups (e.g., based on race/ethnicity, gender, or physical disability). As a consequence, the “real world” status hierarchy is strengthened within the classroom with negative consequences for student learning. This study uses status characteristics theory to provide a framework for understanding ways in which one’s best-intended practices may be undermining student learning. The authors also propose a series of practical ways that instructors can mitigate the status hierarchy to create a more equitable learning environment while simultaneously tackling issues related to diversity.

## **Keywords**

diversity, management education, social status, status characteristics theory, social identity theory, classroom dynamics, learning

Diversity education is important for preparing management students to enter the contemporary multicultural workforce. In fact, there is widespread agreement among Americans that a crucial facet of college and university education is the preparation of students to participate effectively in a diverse society (Ford Foundation, 1998). Management educators play an important role in exposing students to many diversity-related topics not only in courses primarily focused on managing diversity in organizations but also in other courses that highlight demographic differences between members of the workforce. For example, a discussion in a strategy course may highlight the gender imbalance in top management teams, or a case on immigrant labor issues in a labor relations class may emphasize how differences based on citizenship and nationality may be equated with the “value” of workers in the U.S. labor market. Here, we argue that teaching diversity-related topics creates a diversity education

dilemma—that discussions of the various organizational problems related to racism, sexism, and other “isms” can inadvertently reinforce status differences among students. Because the presence of status differences has been shown to impede learning and depress performance of members of lower status groups (e.g., Cohen, 1982, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Lovaglia, Lucas, Houser, Thye, & Markovsky, 1998; Ridgeway, 1982), classroom learning objectives are undermined. This article argues that instructors need to balance the trade-off that exists between exposing the status hierarchy and reinforcing it. A controversy at the core of our discussion is the very meaning of diversity. After outlining our perspective on how diversity is best defined in the management classroom, we provide the theoretical framework for the diversity education dilemma, its consequences, and solutions. In doing so, we add to literature examining the teaching of diversity-related topics in the management classroom (Avery & Steingard, 2008; Day & Glick, 2000; Goodman, 2001; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001).

Numerous diversity scholars have debated the merits of using a narrow or broad definition of diversity (e.g., Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; Krefting, Kirby, & Krzystofiak, 1997; Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2003). The dominant discourse now conceptualizes diversity broadly—inclusive of protected classes, but also of categories such as work style, organizational position, and personality (Edelman, Fuller & Mara-Drita, 2001; Michaels, 2006). Linnehan and Konrad (1999) offer a convincing argument that by “diluting diversity” in this manner, the primary mission of diversity initiatives in the workplace—to improve “the career opportunities and work climate experienced by historically excluded demographic groups” (p. 399)—is not being addressed. We similarly support both retaining a narrow classroom definition of diversity and also focusing on reducing intergroup inequality in the classroom to give all students equal opportunity to learn the course content and develop their skills (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1997); however, doing so may create a dilemma whereby focusing on historically excluded demographic groups actually undermines learning objectives by reinforcing status differences among students.

The diversity education dilemma occurs when exposure to information concerning status hierarchies reinforces those hierarchies in the classroom. A status hierarchy is a relative ranking of individuals based on shared valuations of specific characteristics, such as occupational position, country of origin, gender, or physical attractiveness (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Discussions and activities centered on the characteristics of socially excluded demographic groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, disability) in a variety of management courses may highlight or draw attention to these status characteristics. This may inadvertently reinforce group boundaries as individuals identify themselves with—and are identified as belonging to—higher or lower status groups. As a consequence, the “real world” status hierarchy is strengthened within the classroom.

Although status differences among students can also be inadvertently reinforced through nondiversity related discussions and activities, we argue that the negative consequences are exacerbated when the learning objectives are directly linked to diversity-related issues. We are not proposing that diversity-related topics should be avoided; rather, we want instructors to take into account this dilemma whereby certain approaches and activities while adding value may also be undermining the opportunities of historically disadvantaged students within our classrooms. With this knowledge, instructors can better balance this implicit trade-off and can make more informed decisions about when the potential negative consequence is worth it.

We draw on status characteristics theory (SCT) to provide a framework for understanding ways in which our best-intended practices may be undermining student learning (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Cohen, 1982; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). Drawing largely from research

on SCT, social identity, and stereotyping, we conclude by proposing a series of practical ways that the status hierarchy may be mitigated to create more equitable learning environments.

## **The Core Dilemma**

We argue that a diversity education dilemma exists when discussions and experiential activities that focus on socially excluded demographic groups (e.g., a discussion of the history of illegal workplace discrimination against African Americans) inadvertently strengthens the existing status hierarchy. In an effort not to reinforce status hierarchies in the classroom, one could avoid altogether discussions of group memberships that imply status differences. However, we feel this option is untenable because awareness is a fundamental aspect of diversity education. Awareness of inequalities resulting from unearned privilege and disadvantage is an essential part of learning how to better structure work systems and to encourage interactions that will potentially reduce discriminatory processes within the workplace (Linnehan & Konrad, 1999). Many students enter college with limited exposure to diversity (Avery & Thomas, 2004; Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997); increasing awareness and learning to value differences moves students from “a relatively egocentric and cognitively simple state to a more other-centered and cognitively complex way of viewing themselves and the world in which they live” (Garcia, 1994, p. 429).

Evidence that many students have a fundamental lack of awareness is provided by numerous research studies indicating that many Americans believe that America is a meritocracy (Kluegel & Smith, 1982; Ladd & Bowman, 1998; Rasmussen Report, 2007) and that barriers to entry and advancement are no longer issues in the workplace (Rhode, 1997). However, ample evidence demonstrates the persistence of differential treatment in the workplace and in educational settings for high and low status groups. For example, research demonstrates that the status of the groups to which individuals belong—above and beyond individuals’ knowledge, prior experience, skills, and abilities—continues to influence hiring decisions (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Pager, 2003; Strum, 2001), promotion decisions (Gorman, 2006; Lach, 1999; Nelson & Bridges, 1999; Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, & West, 1999), and career trajectories (Bielby & Bielby, 1996; Cancio, Evans, & Maume, 1996; Castilla, 2008; Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Hull & Nelson, 2000; Smith, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1980). Thus, exposure to and engagement with information about other groups—including specific histories, cultural or world views, or contemporary challenges—should remain part of the management curriculum.

Notably, in educational settings, the presence of status differences has been shown to impede learning and depress performance of members of lower status groups (e.g., Cohen, 1982, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Lovaglia et al., 1998; Ridgeway, 1982). Higher levels of prestige, deference, influence, and expectations regarding competence are given to those individuals possessing high status characteristics (Brewer, 2000; Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Johnson, 1994; Kalkoff & Barnum, 2000; Ridgeway, 1982; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; Steele, 1997; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004; Wenneras & Wold, 1997). Given the relevance of competency expectations in the classroom, we aim to direct management educators’ attention to the effects of status differences on interaction and learning.

## Status Expectations and Social Interactions

Status has long been seen as a powerful mechanism shaping the inequitable distribution of material resources within social systems (Weber, 1922/1978). Status is less an attribute of individuals than an aspect of occupying a particular location in the social structure and is determined by shared beliefs about the value of particular characteristics and the individuals possessing such characteristics. Max Weber (1922/1978) states, “stratification by status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities” (p. 935). As such, higher status groups define what is considered legitimate, appropriate, valuable, and rational in terms of individuals’ behaviors, tastes, and values.

Status characteristics theorists (e.g., Berger et al., 1972; Cohen, 1982; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986) take the structural view of status detailed above and examine the ways in which it operates at the microlevel infusing this view with a symbolic interactionist’s perspective (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). According to SCT, initial status differences among group members shape members’ expectations for their own and others’ competence, merit, and motivation. These status beliefs can be spread to others through social interaction. Thus, if a student suggests through attitude or behavior that a low status student is less competent, this attitude or behavior can lead others to expect less from the low status student as well. This outcome may be even more pronounced if the instructor echoes these lower expectations—even inadvertently. When repeated encounters reinforce the relationship between a particular social group and competency expectations, status beliefs may be generalized to other group members and carried into subsequent settings and interactions (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000; Webster & Foschi, 1988). SCT research focuses on task-oriented groups. Given the common use of teams, group projects, and experiential activities in management curricula, we believe there is much for instructors to gain by engaging with this research vis-à-vis their own instructional methods.

Status is of particular importance in diversity education, where social categories are given a great deal of attention and social interactions are used widely as a pedagogical tool. It is important to note that similar to other organizational theorists (Avery & Thomas, 2004; Lau & Murnighan, 2005; Miller, 1994), we recognize the multidimensionality of social identities. Each student holds multiple social identities which, particularly when salient, simultaneously shape the perception and reception of this student by others as well as that student’s self-perception and his or her sense of belonging (Collins & Andersen, 2007). Although recognizing multidimensionality is crucial, our theoretical framework incorporates the notion that there are power differentials embedded within the structures created by this multidimensionality.<sup>1</sup> In other words, these overlapping identities and their associated statuses may simultaneously come to bear on an individual’s experience relative to others in the classroom to the extent that any particular dimension is highlighted in the class discussion. For example, in a classroom discussion of race and gender, the non-White females are likely to feel they are at the lowest level of the status hierarchy given the low status associated with both of these identities. While individual social identities might be contested, ambiguous, and fluid, our notion of multidimensionality is socially constructed but not unstructured. That is, it is hierarchical in nature.

## Exacerbating Status Differences Through Pedagogy

In class discussions focused on diversity-related issues, attention is often shifted—purposefully or inadvertently—to the status group memberships of students in the course. For example, in a discussion on affirmative action, a student may be asked explicitly or implicitly to explain the African American perspective. Given that teacher and student expectations are partially based on their status group

memberships, we are concerned that inequalities in learning opportunities and outcomes are exacerbated by attention to status differences among students. Research has demonstrated that people are aware of the differential expectations of competency afforded to the various groups in the room (McKown & Weinstein, 2003) and as a result may perform worse if there are low expectations of them (i.e., stereotype threat; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Courses that frequently tackle diversity issues might experience even larger effects than other management courses, because research suggests that when status differences are more salient, the consequences for participation rates and learning outcomes are stronger (Lloyd & Cohen, 1999).

Lau and Murnighan's (2005) research on fault lines—imaginary lines that separate group members according to their differences on multiple dimensions—found that group member ratings were less favorable with respect to group processes and affect when they fell into multiple nonoverlapping social categories (e.g., young Caucasian women and older non-Caucasian men). These results occurred when the groups were faced with an issue unrelated to the demographic differences; however, when issues related to demographic differences are faced, Lau and Murnighan predict faultlines will have their greatest effect. This prediction is consistent with SCT and with our contention that certain pedagogical practices may exacerbate status differences as activities and discussions related to diversity are more likely to highlight these differences than are other types of activities and discussions.

Next, we review some common pedagogical practices to illustrate how the diversity education dilemma can play out in the classroom setting. Specifically, we discuss how classroom instruction may inadvertently reinforce status group boundaries and affirm stereotypical beliefs. Then, in the final section, we propose strategies for mitigating this dilemma. Using these ideas, educators can more critically examine some of their own practices to determine if they may be fostering unintended classroom consequences; they will also possess some tools to address these consequences.

### *Reinforcing of Status Group Boundaries*

When diversity-related topics are covered, activities, class discussion, and even the structure of course material may be centered on status groups. This focus results in individuals categorizing themselves and others as members of these groups and making intergroup comparisons. These comparisons occur even when the group identities are based on laboratory-generated minimal distinctions (Brewer, 1997; Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When the comparative groups differ in status, we believe focusing on them reinforces the status hierarchy operating in the classroom because students will not only see themselves as “different” from other students but also relatively more or less valued or respected based on where they fall in the status hierarchy. Although there is clearly individual variation in the degree to which any person views the status hierarchy as legitimate, empirical research supports the idea that, by and large, status hierarchies affect individuals' interactions and outcomes, and have negative effects on learning for members of lower status groups (Cohen, 1982, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Lloyd & Cohen, 1999; Lovaglia et al., 1998; Ridgeway, 1982).

One example of how pedagogy may reinforce group boundaries is the use of McIntosh's (1988) article, “Unpacking the Invisible Backpack.” The degree to which a student agrees with a series of statements presented in this article indicates the degree to which he or she reaps the benefits of White privilege. Students can be assigned this reading in advance of class or, in some cases, it is used in class to visually demonstrate a racial status hierarchy. In the latter case, students form a line and then step forward if they agree with statements such as, “I can, if I wish, be in the company of people of my race most of the

time.” At the end of the exercise, the literal and symbolic takeaway is that a larger percentage of Whites are at the front of the room and minority participants are “left behind.” This activity often evokes a powerful reaction from White participants who may have been previously unaware of the degree to which their position is privileged. However, the exercise may effectively educate the White students at the expense of the non-White students. One of the authors received the following comment on her year-end course evaluations, after having her MBA students participate in the exercise: “How dare you single out Michael [a Black student] like you did in that ‘walking through privilege’ exercise. I’m sure he felt horrible.” In this case, status group differences became more salient and stronger than those in place prior to the activity.

A second example of an activity which can plausibly reinforce status group boundaries is the “I am” activity (Allard, 2004). In fact, the stated goals of the activity are “(1) to help students learn about themselves by examining the roles and group memberships . . . by which they define themselves and (2) to further examine student self-descriptors for indications of roles and memberships they perceive as most important.” Students are instructed to write down single-word descriptors they would use to describe themselves to someone they have never met. After a few minutes of writing, the instructor asks students to star their three most important words. Then the instructor draws a 2 × 2 table with White/non-White and male/female as the dimensions. Students then write their three most important descriptors in the quadrant into which they fall. One of authors used this activity in class and it sparked an interesting discussion about identity, and in particular, race—exactly the type of conversation she hoped the activity would evoke. In the midst of this dialogue, a student announced, “Until this activity, I never noticed I was the only non-White male.” This student succinctly articulated our concern about reinforcing status group boundaries with such activities. Our experiences lead us to believe that a student, such as this one, might not necessarily be focused on or even aware of his membership in a lower status group vis-à-vis others in the class until these differences become salient through an activity or a discussion. While this became an excellent “teachable moment” during which students not only grappled with the demographics of the classroom, their workplaces, and neighborhoods, but also the implications of “otherness,” it also drew attention to the potentially negative consequences of this activity.

Another way in which group boundaries can be reinforced in the classroom is through course design and textbook selection. For example, many diversity textbooks use a framework that addresses individual groups one-by-one in the subsequent chapters so instructors may employ an approach to teaching diversity where a different status group (e.g., women, Hispanics, the disabled) is discussed each week. This structure encourages intergroup comparisons that emphasize one group’s standing relative to another. Moreover, the problem of incorporating multidimensionality within the standard model for textbooks is one that remains to be solved. American textbooks often consolidate many ethnic groups into a single umbrella category (e.g., Asian or Hispanic versus Chinese and Korean or Mexican and Cuban) thereby minimizing the distinct historical trajectories of each of these groups. But even when there is not an artificial collapsing of subgroups into an umbrella category, these practices may encourage students to view others quite narrowly, as defined by one or two historical events or characteristics. Hence, this contributes to stereotyping rather than promoting understanding of others as individuals. This approach

[C]an lead students to think of the different groups as animals in the zoo. If the intent is to help individuals learn how to be more polite or appropriate in their behavior with people from “other” groups . . . then the “group-a-week” approach has merit.<sup>2</sup>

However, the *othering* process increases the potential for strengthened group boundaries as well as stereotype affirmation.

We are not arguing that the type of activities, discussions, and course design elements discussed above are universally ineffective. Indeed, in our experience, conversations and debriefings which arise from such practices are useful in the classroom. These experiences provide students with tremendous insights into privilege, differences, and perceptions of differences. However, when students' status groups are fodder for discussions and activities and when a "group-a-week" model is used for course design, classroom inequity is a potential downside that should ideally be recognized and addressed. In the next section, we consider another way diversity-related pedagogy can serve to exacerbate status differences.

### *Affirming of Stereotypical Beliefs*

In this section, we discuss the mechanisms through which diversity education may create or affirm students' stereotypical beliefs. Though it feels particularly egregious to affirm negative stereotypes in the classroom, Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) found that making even positive stereotypes salient can depress performance of stereotyped students. In their study of female Asian American undergraduates who indicated that math performance was very important to them, Cheryan and Bodenhausen found that when others' high performance expectations (based on ethnic stereotypes) were made salient, the students had diminished ability to concentrate and depressed math performance.

We argue that attention to the ways in which stereotyping, often disguised as generalizing (as in the "group-a-week" approach discussed above), occurs in the classroom is warranted. Our first concern is the way in which representation of status groups often hinges on stereotypes about those groups. For example, stereotypical beliefs about gender are often affirmed in discussions of work–family issues. The stereotype that women are less committed to their work than male counterparts because of their commitment to their families is reinforced by the way in which many textbooks discuss family-friendly policies. Management textbooks often suggest these policies as a way to improve diversity and retain highly qualified women (with no mention of men), thus, reinforcing that these policies exist only for women and that women will choose family over careers. For example, one human resources management (HRM) textbook includes the following assessment:

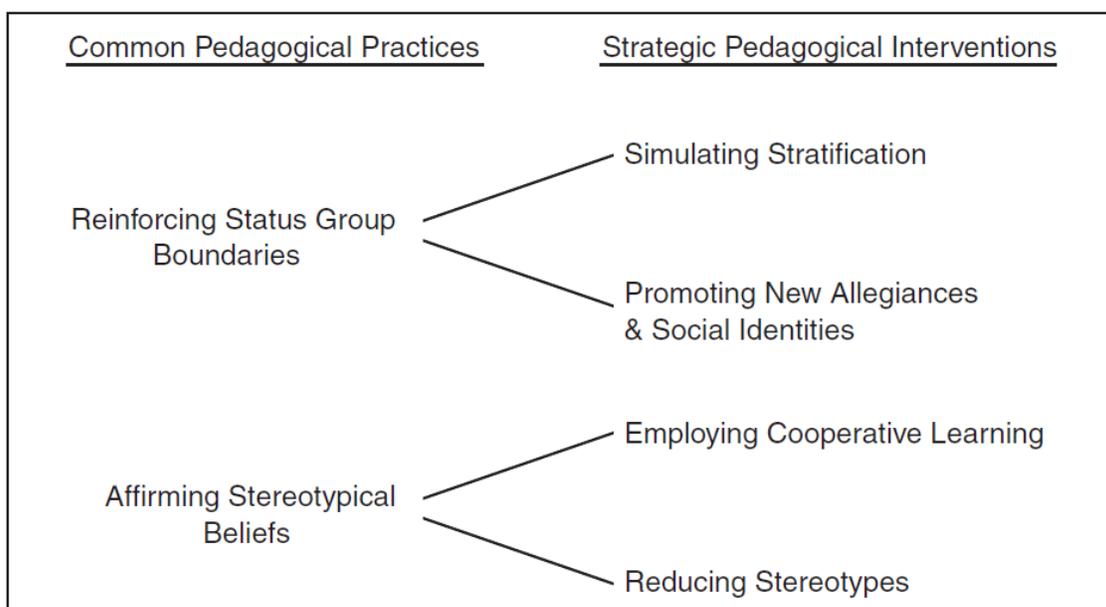
[O]nly a tiny proportion of companies provide day care and other support options (such as job sharing and reduced work hours for employees with young children). For this reason, many talented and highly educated women are forced to curtail their career aspirations and/or quit the organization in their late 20s or early to mid-30s—crucial years in one's career—if they wish to have a family. Practically all male top managers are married and have children, whereas the majority of women who make it to the top are single and childless. (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2007, p. 124)

Media depictions and reports also contribute to this stereotype (Lester, 1996). The *New York Times*, for instance, starting in the mid-1950s regularly broke the "news" of an "Opt-Out Revolution" among highly educated women, whereby women are foregoing careers ostensibly to focus exclusively on their families (Williams, Manvell, & Bornstein, 2006). However, representative data show that highly educated mothers are more likely to remain in the labor force than other women (Boushey, 2005). Media reports such as these make misleading and erroneous claims often based on limited anecdotal evidence (for scholarly work refuting the existence of these revolutions, see Boushey, 2002; Merrill-

Sands, Kickul, & Ingols, 2005; and Williams et al., 2006). Instructors dealing with these issues compete directly with these media depictions, and in some cases, their assigned textbooks.<sup>3</sup> Even under perfect conditions, in terms of supporting materials and course design (e.g., instructional materials that present up-to-date and unbiased evidence), Brezina and Winder (2003) found that increasing an individual's awareness of the relatively disadvantaged position of certain status groups contributes to negative stereotyping.

Experiential activities using small groups and teams are common across management curricula, yet we suggest these activities can also affirm stereotypes. Often, instructors begin these types of activities without assigning roles, allowing team leaders and team processes to emerge—all of which becomes potential fodder for the debriefing of the exercise. One of us conducted an experiential activity in this fashion during the first session of a management course. Initially, when teaching at more homogenous institutions, she did not notice any problem; however, after running this activity several times at a university with higher levels of diversity, she realized that literally in every group a White man (and in the night classes, an older White man) emerged as the team leader. The activity itself was popular and served as an excellent foundation for a discussion of organizational learning and change. So although it can be hard to question the merits of an activity that so clearly engaged the students and enlivened discussion, we feel this activity inadvertently reinforced the hierarchical social structure on the first day of class, which most likely had implications for the remainder of the course. For example, the students who emerged as leader in that exercise may be more likely to take a leadership role in teams formed to complete class projects giving some students fewer opportunities to gain valuable leadership experience.

Although status hierarchies within classrooms can be strengthened by the common practices described above, these practices should not be summarily dismissed, particularly when diversity is a major part of the course content. Our goal is to develop ways of teaching that minimize the negative impact of status on students' in-class experiences. In the next section, we propose solutions, drawing from other disciplines, particularly social psychology, sociology, and education.



**Figure 1.** Strategic pedagogical interventions for the diversity education dilemma

## Strategic Pedagogical Interventions

We have found the following approaches to be effective in dealing with the diversity education dilemma. A brief overview of a highly-researched and widely-touted approach, cooperative learning, is followed by a discussion of three approaches that help to reduce social group boundaries: simulating stratified systems, promoting new allegiances and social identities, and reducing stereotyping. We have implemented these practices and feel they mitigate the degree to which content-driven discussions and activities reinforce the status hierarchy and that these practices contribute to the creation of a more equitable classroom for all students. Figure 1 illustrates the ways in which these pedagogical interventions map onto the problematic pedagogical practices discussed above.

### *Employing Cooperative Learning*

Cooperative learning occurs when students engage in a collective task in a small group (Cohen, 1994). Cooperative learning helps minimize the consequences of status differences because students understand upfront that each member possesses unique resources required to achieve their common goal. There are five principles to cooperative learning (task interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, and group processing), and many different techniques have been based on them (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Cohen, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Siciliano, 2001). Extensive research on cooperative learning has demonstrated its success as a status intervention primarily at secondary and elementary education levels (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2004; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Cooper, et al., 1990; Slavin, 1995; Johnson & Johnson 1990). Status interventions are defined as practices which attempt to rearrange the status hierarchy such that the consequences of status differences on learning outcomes are minimized (Cohen, 1994). For cooperative learning to be an effective status intervention, students must participate equally in a process. If high status students dominate the group interactions, this increases the status problem, because a student's level of interaction is a strong predictor of his or her learning (Cohen, 1994).

One of the best-known cooperative learning techniques is the *jigsaw technique*, where tasks are designed so that students work in small heterogeneous task groups and each student possesses a piece of the knowledge required to complete the task or "puzzle" (see Aronson & Patnoe, 1997 for a detailed presentation). The group is fully interdependent; every student is an expert in a distinct area and must share his or her knowledge with the task group for the group to be successful. Prior to meeting with their task groups, all of the students holding the same puzzle piece work together to master the material or skill, to discuss how best to teach their knowledge to their task group, and to practice their presentation of the material. This preparation is a crucial element in undermining the status hierarchy because it lets low status students feel and be seen as competent, which undermines status-based expectations about their abilities (Cohen & Lotan, 1997).

Furthermore, the propensity of others to perceive lower status students as less competent, and thus ignore, interrupt, and dismiss their contributions, is diminished (Cohen & Lotan, 1995, 1997; Pugh & Wahrman, 1983). In this context, lower status students play a critical role and must be included to successfully complete the task. The team is motivated to work together because the completed task (for example, quiz, product, strategic plan) will be evaluated. By undermining the extant status hierarchy, this technique significantly increases engagement and mastery of the material for all students, particularly lower status students (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Cohen &

Lotan, 1997). When we use the jigsaw technique at the college level, we find anecdotally that subsequent group discussions related to the exercise are not dominated by higher status group members either within the group itself or in full class discussion. This result is consistent with research conducted on elementary and secondary level students (cf. Cohen, 1982; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

Cooperative learning groups need to be heterogeneous with respect to status if they are to undermine the status hierarchy. However, instructors should not compose groups so that students can easily see the categories used to form the groups. For example, groups should not be designed so that every group has one non-White student and two White students. Miller, Brewer, and Edwards (1985) found experimentally that minority students demonstrated more bias toward majority group members when the groups had been composed based on salient group categories. Given that professors work with the same students for multiple sessions, there are many opportunities to create groups that cut across the status hierarchy in different ways at different times during the term.

Cooperative learning techniques incorporate the assignment of team roles (e.g., leader, recorder), thus allowing the various roles to be shared equitably among the students. This is effective, but we also offer two additional ways of encouraging more equitable group participation. First, we have students form groups based on their level of personal experience and academic knowledge of a particular topic (or task). For example, all the students who self-identify as having high personal experience and little academic knowledge of a topic will work together. This structure gives students an opportunity to learn and share information that might otherwise not be shared in a larger setting where the students with high knowledge or high experience are most likely to dominate group discussion. This approach is particularly useful when the topic is controversial or might elicit strong emotional responses such as in diversity education (see Thompson, 1993, for a detailed explanation of this approach). Students can begin their discussions by sharing knowledge and experience. Since they are not being asked to share opinions, they are less likely to react defensively. Students indicate that this method has made them more open and inquisitive about the topic (Thompson, 1993). Second, *think-pair-share techniques* (e.g., instructor poses a question, students write their responses for a brief period, then students pair up to share their insights) are simple to execute and afford all students the opportunity to engage with the material.

### *Simulating Stratification Systems*

Researchers have espoused the benefits of experiential learning and simulations in management courses (Zantow, Knowlton, & Sharp, 2005, p. 451). We add that simulations of stratified social microcosms, using randomly generated criteria as the stratification mechanism, are beneficial in terms of reducing status differences between students (see Coghlan & Huggins, 2004; Shirts, 1969; and Wetcher-Hendricks, & Luquet, 2003 for several simulations of this kind).<sup>4</sup>

For example, one such activity, Star Power (Shirts, 1969), begins with students drawing poker chips from a bag—where the different colored chips are worth different amounts. The instructor divides students into a three-tiered system based on their first draw. Only a handful of students end up in the top tier. The middle tier is considerably larger, containing about a third of the class. The majority of students are in the bottom tier. Students physically gather with others in their tier and wear name tags identifying them as triangle, squares, or circles. The instructor states that if students work hard at making good trading choices, it is possible to succeed by “moving up.” Students then engage in several rounds of

trading. Initial advantage or disadvantage accumulates with each round and there is an element of ambiguity with regard to what leads to success (i.e., upward mobility, e.g., square becomes a triangle) or failure (i.e., downward mobility, e.g., square becomes a circle). After each round, the instructor moves a few students (either upward or downward) based on their trades. As the simulation progresses, students who are upwardly mobile often forget about those they left behind, students in the top tier often generate unfair rules and abuse their power, and students in the lowest tier tend to become frustrated or withdrawn. Students reflect on their experiences in this type of socially structured microcosm based on a nonthreatening distinction, and, moreover, many are better able to see their own role within the larger social system, particularly because the activity is about interaction, not individually held beliefs.

A significant range of emotions and reactions can be generated by these simulations. For example, one of our students acutely felt the frustration of being in the lowest tier of the system. He was randomly placed into the lowest tier by picking “bad” chips in round one and he understood that he was not going to “win.” So, he folded his arms, had an angry expression for the entire activity, and made no attempt to engage with anyone. Another student, randomly placed in the elite group in the first “draw,” provided a textbook example of how members of high status groups may blame those who are disadvantaged for their condition:

I don't understand those students. They were rude and talking while you were giving us the instructions. They were laughing very loudly. And they were aggressive about trying to make trades. I guess I just don't understand what it is like to be a circle. I started out a triangle and still am one. I saw no need to deal with them and so I didn't.

Dorn's (1989) review of simulation research found that simulations such as Star Power increase students' interest and motivation. In addition, they improve students' interpersonal skills and increase self-confidence in decision making. Furthermore, they are most effective among students who perform poorly in traditional lecture formats (Dorn, 1989). Given the strong reactions students have to these simulated hierarchies and research on the merits of such simulations, we believe they are successful at helping students experience levels of the social hierarchy different from their own, while challenging the idea that individuals' hard work, knowledge, skills, abilities, or aspirations are enough to overcome structural barriers existing in society.

### *Promoting New Allegiances and Social Identities*

In this section, we draw from social identity theory (SIT) to consider how manipulating the groups with which students identify may be a way of decreasing status group boundaries (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We discuss two SIT approaches to reducing intergroup bias: *recategorization* and *decategorization*. Research in this area has primarily focused on equal status interactions in experimental settings; however, the close relationship between social identity and status group membership (Kalkoff & Barnum, 2000) suggests that these approaches will be promising status interventions as well.

Recategorization serves to reinforce students' sense of belonging to the whole either by emphasizing membership in a superordinate category (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993) or by making crosscutting classifications salient (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001). There is ample evidence from SIT that by structuring intergroup contact so that membership in a superordinate category is made salient, that is, creating a common in-group identity, an instructor can reduce intergroup bias and conflict

(Gaertner et al., 1993). Categorizing others as in-group members rather than out-group members should result in more positive evaluations of others (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Even when individuals hold strong racial and ethnic identities, intergroup acceptance, tolerance, and trust can be increased when a superordinate category is introduced (Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996; Gaertner et al., 1993). For example, in many full-time MBA programs, entering cohorts are divided into sections. Members of a section take most of their first year classes together and are linked to each other by other institutional mechanisms (e.g., parties, group name, intergroup competitions). After discussions of diversity-related issues where status group differences might be amplified, an instructor can refocus the group on the superordinate category (in this case, their section) to activate the sense of belonging to the whole. Another way to foster recategorization is to create identity groups that cut across status groups—referred to as cross-cutting categorization (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001). In this case, when forming teams, instructors should purposefully use criteria that cut across salient status group identities (e.g., all the students born in February). Then, have students name their team and use these names throughout the course, thereby, helping to reinforce a team-level identity.

Social identity research also suggests that instructors can reduce intergroup conflict through decategorization, which provides students with a sense of each person's unique personality traits and life experiences (Brewer & Pierce, 2005). This process, whereby people see each other more as individuals than as members of particular status groups, requires open self-disclosure and social comparison (Miller, 2002). Decategorization techniques, such as sharing personal narratives, may be particularly valuable for low status group members, because being individuated may allow them to keep at bay lower expectations of competence associated with their status group. However, decategorization may be difficult for these individuals because they may not want to disclose information they are not sure will be validated by others (Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, in press). As such, decategorization may be easier to accomplish in smaller management classrooms and in full courses related to diversity issues where students have more opportunities to develop trust in their interactions within the classroom.

A central issue with these two approaches, recategorization and decategorization, is that students could perceive their important social identities, or their distinctiveness, as being threatened (i.e., not valued, ignored, or dismissed) by the instructor (Brewer, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). One option to deal with this concern is to take care not to represent one identity as superior to another (Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). We feel that if an instructor is authentic in the ways in which he or she promotes these new allegiances and social identities, then most students will not perceive any threat to their other social identities. For example, one of the authors has talked to students about their MBA community as being an underused resource and encouraged her students to tap into the strength of this network. She draws on Granovetter's (1973) work on social capital to talk about how the diversity within the student body can strengthen their weak ties far more than for peers at more homogenous institutions. These students have formed a networking group within a professional online community and taken it on themselves to create MBA discussion boards. These are all opportunities for equal status interactions whereby intergroup bias may be reduced and preexisting social identities are not threatened by the interaction.

### *Reducing Stereotyping*

People are inundated daily, in the media and elsewhere, with stereotypical images (e.g., Entman, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Lester, 1996; Norden, 1994). In an academic setting, we should be particularly

concerned with reducing stereotypes about performance and competence as opposed to preferences or attitudes, because of the formers' negative implications for learning. However, individuals tend to pay more attention to stereotype-confirming information and to discount disconfirming information (Stephan, 1999), making stereotype reduction a real challenge in the classroom. We discuss two research-informed strategies for reducing the degree of stereotyping in the management classroom: (a) providing accurate, unbiased information and (b) encouraging perspective taking.

In trying to undermine stereotypes, we must make sure to provide accurate, unbiased, and stereotype-inconsistent information. For example, with respect to accurately representing diversity, presenting aggregate data on "Hispanics" is likely to reinforce the idea that this category has a singular ethnic identity. However, students, particularly those who might end up working in places with a diverse population, should be aware of the unique histories of Hispanic subgroups (Portes & Shafer, 2006; Tienda & Mitchell, 2006). Similar to the concerns we mentioned, in relation to the "group-a-week" approach, the diversity within this population is hidden if too much emphasis is given to trend data without acknowledgement of important within-group distinctions. Additionally, attention to language can reduce biased representations. For example, in their textbook, Robbins and Judge's (2007) description of the introduction of family-friendly policies does not reinforce the stereotype that women are more committed to their families than their work by making it clear that other groups of individuals are also interested in resolving work-life conflict:

Work-life conflict grabbed management's attention in the 1980s, largely as a result of the growing number of women with dependent children entering the workforce. In response, most major organizations took actions to make their workplaces more family-friendly. They introduced programs such as on-site child care, summer day camps . . . But organizations quickly realized that work-life conflicts were not experienced only by female employees with children. Male workers and women without children were also facing this problem. Heavy workloads and increased travel demands, for instance, were making it increasingly hard for a wide range of employees to meet both work and personal responsibilities. (p. 629).

Providing stereotype inconsistent information is another way to weaken the psychological association between a negative trait and a status group (Stephan, 1999). Instructors can engage in a series of minor status interventions, for example, inviting guest lecturers who do not conform to stereotypes of their group, emphasizing material from their own biographies that is counter-stereotypical, and encouraging students to think of individuals who are counter-stereotypical. One diversity education textbook includes end-of-chapter activities, which instruct students to think of an individual from within a stereotyped group who does not possess the stereotyped trait or exhibit the stereotyped behavior and then also to think of a second individual who is not in the stereotyped group but exhibits the behavior (e.g., Bell, 2007, pp. 125 and 281). Providing students with status inconsistent information in this way has been shown to be an effective intervention (Cohen, 1994; Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Pugh & Wahrman, 1983).

Second, perspective-taking occurs when an individual consciously attempts to view a situation from the perspective of someone else. It has been shown to decrease both the perceived gap between the individual and the other (Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce, 1996) and the amount of implicit and explicit stereotyping (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000). In a management classroom, activities can be designed to encourage students to take the perspective of those outside their status groups. For example, a student might interview another student with respect to a particular workplace experience, and then write about the other person's experience, taking that person's perspective. Importantly, Galinsky and

Moskowitz (2000) demonstrated that the perspective-taker's reduced stereotyping was generalized beyond the individual target to the target's status group.

In this section, we have not attempted to generate an exhaustive list of guiding principles or practical approaches, given the sizable literature on best practices for university instruction (Bain, 2004; Campbell & Smith, 1997; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2005). Because every classroom has a unique climate, what works well in one case might not be as effective in another. Nevertheless, we believe that real potential exists for instructors to examine and adapt their own practices to diminish the diversity education dilemma.

## **Conclusion**

Status hierarchies operating within the United States shape, to a large degree, which individuals are fortunate enough to be in our classrooms.<sup>5</sup> We believe that instructors should do their best to see to it that this social structure stops at the classroom door. We have argued here that management classroom practices may reinforce this structure by increasing intergroup boundaries and affirming stereotypes. Ironically, diversity-related education with its necessary focus on historically disadvantaged groups may be particularly likely to strengthen the status hierarchy. However, completely eliminating awareness of category-based social status in the classroom is undesirable and unlikely for two reasons. First, structural barriers exist for lower status groups and must be understood in their historical context and in their contemporary forms. Second, when students leave the classroom they return to the "real world" where these status hierarchies operate as a matter of course, and we would be negligent if we did not help prepare students to recognize, navigate, and hopefully dismantle such hierarchies. Hence, the diversity education dilemma does not have simple solutions. But, by using interventions such as those discussed above to minimize the "real-world" hierarchy in our classrooms, instructors can increase learning and ultimately may reduce discrimination in the workplace as our students become managers themselves and set the tone in their respective organizations.

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## Notes

1. Although some management theorists have incorporated a sense of the hierarchy of identities (e.g., Davidson & Proudford's [2007] work considering how group identity and societal position shape resistance to diversity), the early theorizing on multidimensionality—termed *intersectionality*—comes from Black feminist scholars (Collins 1991; Davis, 1981). We deliberately use the term status hierarchy rather than fault lines (subgroups within a larger group setting) or multidimensionality because it captures both the intersections of differences and the hierarchical social structure that exists beyond any given individual.
2. This quote was borrowed from one of our anonymous reviewers.
3. For instance, many management textbooks rely on Deborah Tannen's (1990, 1994) popular books on differences in communication styles between men and women. Several researchers demonstrate that Tannen's conclusions, based on small samples of individuals' linguistic patterns and anecdotal evidence, are incorrect (Barnett & Rivers, 2005; Edwards & Hamilton, 2004; Hyde, 2005). At a minimum, textbooks tend to overstate Tannen's claims: (a) men and women speak a different language and (b) this leads to frequent misunderstandings between them. There is little acknowledgement of the within-group differences in men's and women's communication styles. Presentation of this type of work without any critical discussion reinforces gender stereotypes.
4. The simulations in the documentaries *Eye of the Storm* and *A Class Divided* also capture the powerful effect of status hierarchies on behaviors, expectations, and learning, generated relatively quickly using minimal group differences. The documentaries present Jane Elliot's experiment with her third-grade classroom (Peters, 1970) and the same exercise adapted for use among prison employees (Peters, 1985); the simulated hierarchies are based on nothing more than eye color. However, Volk and Beeman (1998) revisit the original footage and find that Jane Elliot sends a strong, implicit message about gender to her students by directing questions toward boys more than eight times as often than toward girls, acknowledging and visually confirming comments by boys almost four times as often as those by girls, and by referring to male students four times as often as female students (p. 41). We caution that the use of these compelling videos without any discussion of Elliot's differential gender treatment implicitly reinforces gender stereotypes about men and women's relative worth.
5. Carnevale and Rose (2004, p. 11) found that  

74 percent of the students at the top 146 highly selective colleges came from families in the top quarter of the [socioeconomic status] scale . . . just 3 percent came from the bottom SES quartile, and roughly 10 percent came from the bottom half of the SES scale

for students entering their first year of college in 1995. For additional research on the subject of access to higher education at elite universities and colleges, see Stevens (2007), Karabel (2005), and Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2006).

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