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## **Complicating the Complicated: The Importance of Status in Understanding Constrained Career Choices**

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### **Abstract**

The article discusses the two factors that affect the ability of experts and peers to increase the willingness of women and minorities to persist on career choices in which they are underrepresented. The factors such as status hierarchies and numeric representation in a given career option and their interactions are evaluated. It adds that the interaction of the said factors should be considered in increasing the sense of belonging of women and minorities for their constrained career choices.

### **Keywords**

women - vocational guidance, minorities - vocational guidance, social status, group identity, career development, management, psychological aspects

In spite of gains made by women and minorities over the last several decades in the workplace, much work is left to be done to achieve equality. Of particular concern is the diminishing number of women and minorities at increasingly higher levels of the professional ladder. Understanding the factors that will encourage individuals whose groups are underrepresented in their work domains to pursue and persist in these careers is critically important. Nilanjana Dasgupta's (this issue) article, "Ingroup Experts and Peers as Social Vaccines Who Inoculate the Self-Concept: The Stereotype Inoculation Model," underscores the role that the presence of similar others (as peers or experts) can play in furthering these efforts.

We both were members of professional domains where we were overwhelmingly underrepresented, and indeed we both shifted to other domains as we advanced in our careers. Our biographies and professional work contribute to a full appreciation of the complex dynamics at work in undermining representation of women and minorities in certain occupations, particularly in the upper echelons. We appreciate Dasgupta's effort to include contextual factors to which the individual reacts as they navigate through their careers. Our "free choices" were not just constrained by our social context (including environmental cues and the presences of experts). They were and continue to be embedded entirely within them. Thus, we seek to further complicate the study of career paths by moving beyond a predominantly agentic perspective to a relational perspective. An individual is not simply an observer of

her surroundings or subject to them; she interacts with her social context, participating in both its maintenance and transformation (J. Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Giddens, 1984; Goffman, 1959; Turner, 1987). Indeed, individual labor market “decisions” shape the wage structure and prestige level of entire occupations (Padavic & Reskin, 2002; Tam, 1997; Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 2002).

We discuss the relational implications of two factors affecting the ability of peers and experts to increase an individual’s willingness to persist in domains where their group is underrepresented: (a) the hierarchy of ingroups and outgroups based on their relative social standing and (b) the relative numeric representation of one’s group. We discuss each here as well as the interaction of the two before concluding with implications for research on the social barriers facing minorities and women.

### **Status Hierarchy**

Individuals make career decisions within status hierarchies. A status hierarchy is a relative ranking of individuals and groups based on shared valuations of specific characteristics, such as occupational position or education (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). The shared valuations are based on not only achieved characteristics but also perceived or actual memberships in socially meaningful ascribed categories (e.g., race or gender). The role of status in shaping individuals’ workplace experiences and outcomes is garnering increased attention among management researchers, particularly those examining processes and outcomes within contexts where group differences are salient (e.g., diverse workgroups; DiTomaso, Post, & Parks-Yancy, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Nadler & Halabi, 2006; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005; Thomas-Hunt & Phillips, 2004).

Higher status groups have control over resources as well as ideas and opportunities. They define who belongs where and what is considered legitimate, appropriate, valuable, and rational. However, the particular location of an individual within the status hierarchy is based on beliefs that are shared across levels of the socially stratified system (whether the system is seen as legitimate by all and whether individuals or groups are working to change their social standing or not). Thus, status is both hierarchical and relative in nature; status exists only with a comparative other (Weber, 1922/1978).

Status must be taken into consideration, particularly in an achievement context, because status differences among group members shape members’ expectations for their own and others’ competence, merit, and motivation, as well as their perceived sense of belonging (e.g., J. Berger et al., 1972; E. G. Cohen, 1982; Ridgeway & Berger, 1986). Status beliefs imply a generalized competence that goes beyond stereotypes, which are more specific (e.g., women are more nurturing than men; Asians excel at math) with members of higher status groups seen as more competent than their low-status counterparts. Although an individual’s achievements may alter his or her location within a social hierarchy, even extraordinary achievements are subject to more or less positive interpretations. Thus, members of low-status groups may discount their own abilities and accomplishments (e.g., the imposter effect, discussed in Dasgupta, this issue, p. 232) and be less willing to persist in a given domain. However, there are at least four relational implications for how status may impact an individual’s willingness to persist in domains where their group is underrepresented.

First, even if an individual sees herself as competent, others may not share this assessment. To be viewed by others as similarly competent to a high-status group member, lower status members, on average, need to exhibit greater objective success (Biernat, Fuegen, & Kobryniewicz, 2010; Foschi, Lai, &

Sigerson, 1994; Pugh & Wahrman, 1983). Biernat and her colleagues (2010) have found that minimum standards of competence are actually set at lower levels for low-status groups; however, the same performance by a high-status individual is more readily attributed to his ability compared to low-status group members.

Second, in-group peers/experts may not be seen as having actually “achieved” because they are also viewed as less competent. For example, Thomas-Hunt and Phillips (2004) found that in spite of similar levels of expertise, female experts were viewed as having less expertise than their male counterparts, and this resulted in groups with female experts performing worse.

Third, as a result of lower competence expectations, members of low-status groups may be given fewer opportunities and resources that would help them advance (Amoroso, Loyd, & Hoobler, 2010; E. G. Cohen & Lotan, 1997). In addition, the opportunities they are given may be high risk. Ryan and Haslam’s (2007) empirical research found that women were more likely to be given an opportunity to lead (e.g., promotions, leadership/training, development opportunities) when an organization was in a vulnerable market position rather than doing well, a phenomenon referred to as the *glass cliff*. If, as this research by Ryan and Haslam suggests, during their early attempts in leadership positions, women and minorities are disproportionately assigned to risky projects, this not only increases the risk of failure and the likelihood of criticism and scrutiny but also perhaps offers these individuals a distorted view of the stress and hassles of leadership within this domain and increases their likelihood of exit.

Fourth, status may affect the relationship between those who share a similar category (Duguid, Loyd, & Tolbert, 2010; Maume, 2011). For example, work on *value threat* theorizes that members of low-status groups may have concerns about being seen as legitimate members of their organizations (particularly in the upper echelons; Duguid et al., 2010). As a result, they may not want to associate with or support similar others because doing so may emphasize their low-status group membership and further compromise their standing in their group. Thus, an individual’s ability to identify with a peer or expert as a potential role model may be limited if those potential role models are trying to disassociate themselves from their low-status categories. Our focus on these four relational aspects of status captures the socially constructed and interactive nature of this construct. These dynamics may be further exacerbated by another dimension, the numeric representation of the group.

### **Numeric Representation**

Conventional wisdom suggests that more is better in terms of creating environments conducive to female and racial/ethnic minority advancement. This assumes a positive independent effect of numeric representation. Indeed, being in the numeric majority can be positive, as it suggests that one’s presence is normative in a given domain. Larger numbers can also increase opportunities for social resistance, for mobilization, and to seize political power. Consistent with this, much of the research on the effects of being in the numeric minority, or even a solo, has found generally negative consequences including social isolation, increased performance pressure, and decreased sense of belonging (L. L. Cohen & Swim, 1995; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Kanter, 1977; Niemann & Dovidio, 1998; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2003).

In spite of the benefits of being in the majority, in general we cannot “snap” our fingers and change the demographic composition of a group or organization overnight. Furthermore, increasing a minority subgroup’s representation toward balance or the majority may not always have positive results. Allmendinger and Hackman (1995) found that as the proportion of women increased to between 10 and

40% of their studied symphony orchestras, both male and female members reported a significant decline in their perceptions of numerous organizational measures (e.g., player motivation, orchestral integrity). Of interest, the decline leveled off and in some cases reversed as the proportion of women reached 50%. However, this suggests a Catch-22—the process of increasing diversity may lead to negative perceptions, which then act as an impediment to increasing diversity. In addition, “more” may not always be better. Chatman and O’Reilly (2004) showed that women were more likely to intend to leave groups that were dominated by women or gender balanced than groups dominated by men, suggesting that the mere presence of peers may be insufficient to encourage retention. Also, “more” cannot be the only answer to increasing the likelihood of pursuing careers where individuals are underrepresented because some groups will likely never be in the numeric majority (e.g., many racial and ethnic groups); in fact, some groups will not even realize Kanter’s (1977, p. 207) minimum goal of 15% to achieve numeric “minority” status.

### **Status × Numeric Representation**

A major complicating factor here is status. The status of a group shapes the consequences of numeric representation; there is an interaction effect between status and numeric representation. Individuals who are members of high-status groups frequently experience benefits even when they are in the numeric minority. For example, White men in female-dominated occupations are more likely to be promoted than equally qualified women, and thus ride a glass escalator up their career ladders (Budig, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Hultin, 2003; Maume, 1999; Ott, 1989; Williams, 1992; Wingfield, 2009). Other work has shown that solo men can receive benefits such as the presumption of leadership and undeserved favorable evaluations (Cohen & Swim, 1995; Fuegen & Biernat, 2002). In contrast, members of low-status groups experience the “downsides” normally associated with being in the numeric minority—many of which are articulated earlier.

Although there are likely many relational implications for how numeric representation and status interact to impact individuals’ experiences in given domains, we outline three here. First, a low-status solo peer or expert may have incentive to work against the entry of similar others to the group rather than embracing a mentor or role model function. Concern with being seen as legitimate members of their groups is theorized to be particularly pronounced for those with low status when they are in the numeric minority (Duguid et al., 2010). Experimental empirical work has shown that low-status solo women in high-prestige groups are less likely to advocate for a similar other joining their group because of three forms of value threat: (a) concerns that they will be accused of ingroup favoritism (Loyd, 2011), (b) concerns that the similar other will confirm negative stereotypes about the group, and (c) concerns about the similar other appearing better qualified than the solo (Duguid, in press).

Second, some recent work theorizes that incremental changes in numeric representation (i.e., moving from being a minority solo to part of a minority duo in a group) may also create relational challenges both within the minority subgroup and between the majority and minority subgroups (Loyd, White, & Kern, 2008). Members of low-status minority duos may still feel intergroup assimilation pressure from the majority and its associated negatives such as increased scrutiny and stress. These individuals may also feel intragroup pressure to provide social support to the similar other; however, providing that support may highlight their undervalued category. Indeed, Loyd, White, and Kern (2011) found that members of female minority duos were more likely to be seen stereotypically by male members of their groups. These women were also more likely to receive lower performance evaluations from men in their groups.

Finally, the increasing presence of low-status group members in a given domain can lead to a diminished status for that domain and make pursuing careers within it less desirable. For example, work done by women is devalued so occupations with higher percentages of women have lower prestige and lower pay (Gatta & Roos, 2005; Levanon, England, & Allison, 2009; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). The resulting lower prestige of the domain is likely to make it particularly unattractive for high achievers.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we need to account for status and the way it interacts with numeric representation in shaping the sense of belonging and the willingness to persist in domains where one feels underrepresented. Although the relationship between status and numeric representation poses numerous challenges in relation to advancement, we discuss here a potentially positive direction suggested by the literature on social identity (Amoroso et al., 2010).

Social identity theory highlights that part of each individual's identity derives from his or her membership in different social categories or groups (Brewer, 1997; Tajfel, 1969, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is important to note that each person holds multiple social identities that, particularly when salient, simultaneously shape the perception and reception of this individual by others, as well as that person's self-perception and his or her sense of belonging (Collins & Andersen, 2007). Although recognizing this multidimensionality is crucial, recognition of the status differentials embedded within this framework is also crucial.

Opening up the discussion to include complex identities may provide alternative tactics for creating environments where the need for "inoculation" is minimized. First, through their possession of multiple social identities, individuals may avoid some of the negative consequences of low status by having others associate them with the higher status groups to which they belong—within an organizational setting, for example, this may be their professional identity. Second, research has shown how a superordinate identity can help diminish ingroup/outgroup biases (Brewer & Gaertner, 2001; Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Managers, teachers, or others in positions of authority can emphasize membership by all in a group with common overlap such as the organizational identity; this emphasis should lead to a greater sense of belonging and fewer feelings that one's group is underrepresented. Finally, acknowledging multiple identities expands the potential to see commonalities across race, gender, and other visible social categories and possibly highlight other differences (e.g., class) among those perceived to be homogenous. This attempt to paint a richer picture of the present identities may allow individuals to perceive a broader set of mentors with whom they can relate, thereby expanding the existence of peers and experts in the individual's domain.

We operate in a stratified society as well as one where social identities are multidimensional (Collins, 1991; Davidson & Proudford, 2007; Davis, 1981). Social scientists also need to attend to the ways in which the complex identities we all possess are not currently modeled in the lab. Lab studies offer tremendous insight into many social processes; however, few have tried to represent the multidimensional nature of social identities or to capture the way in which group membership can be partial in nature (for an exception, see Yoder, Aniakudo, & Berendsen, 2003). Experimental research is often based on a minimal group paradigm or on unidimensional differences between ingroup and outgroup members. This is compelling in terms of finding differential treatment with these limited distinctions; however, it is not easily transferable to demographic groups with complex social histories and overlapping memberships.

Understanding the factors that encourage individuals whose groups are underrepresented in their work domains to pursue and persist in those domains is critically important. The conventional wisdom that “more is better” in terms of numeric representation for lower status groups is not empirically supported by research addressing the multidimensional nature of status. And, although it further complicates the story, status must be theorized and modeled as an integral part of interpersonal dynamics because those dynamics take place within social hierarchies.

## Note

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