**Qualifying Examination**

Organizational Theory - Status and categories

November 2018

Leonard Schmidt

National Sun Yat-sen University

Status and Categories are two dominant constructs in the organizational literature. The following paper provides a review of relevant studies on the two seminal fields of organizational research. Adding to the overview of main themes that are addressed in literature, relevant and pressing questions for future research are discussed.

**Literature Review: Status**

Research to date has taken numerous approaches to describe how status affects organizational life. The present paper follows Piazza and Castellucci (Piazza & Castellucci, 2014) and maps a selection of literature based on their level of analysis. Applying this approach, the authors have utilized the macro- or market level, the meso-level that focus on status in formally structured environments and organizations as well as the micro-, the individual or group level of analysis.

Departing from the macro-level, this section reviews several research papers that carried out the question how status order affects a market. There is a prevailing consensus among researchers in the field that status-identities of organizations as well as status orders stabilizes a market (Castellucci & Podolny, 2016; Granados & Knoke, 2013; Podolny, 1993). While Podolny (Podolny, 1993) analyzed this perspective in the context of American investment banks, further studies asserted the stability of academic rankings (Burris, 2004) as well how status distance impacts the formation of firm-alliances (Castellucci & Podolny, 2016; Granados & Knoke, 2013).   
Subsequent research on firm alliances found that high-status firms have more alliances with other high-status actors as with distanced status actors (Granados & Knoke, 2013; Castellucci & Podolny, 2016; Podolny, 1993). The authors have established a two-fold reason for this claim. First, Granados et al. underlined that high-status firm cannot gain additional status through affiliations with lower-status firms. As higher the initial status of a firm, the lower its status gain over time relative to initially lower-status firms (Granados & Knoke, 2013). Second, as inter-firm relations acts also as a signal of quality, high-status actors may face a decline in status, as they form relations to lower status actors (Castellucci & Podolny, 2016; Podolny, 1993). In consequence, status divides a market and isolate firms in their market position.

Adding to the above consensus about the stabilizing effect of status order, another key-aspect discussed in literature is market uncertainty (Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Podolny, 1994, 2001). Researchers in this theme propose that greater the uncertainty in the market, the more actors may incorrectly judge each other’s capabilities (Lynn et al., 2009) which result in a self-restriction of possible exchange partners. In consequence, organizations limit their selection to firms with whom they have had prior interactions and those with similar status (Podolny, 1994). Adding to his earlier research, Podolny added a distinction of two types of market uncertainty. While egocentric uncertainty refers to a actor’s uncertainty regarding the best way to convert a set of inputs to an output desired by a potential exchange partner, altercentric uncertainty denotes the perspective of a focal actor’s exchange partners regarding the quality of the output that the focal actor brings to the market (Podolny, 2001). Complementing on the understanding of uncertainty and the stabilizing effect of status, his study showed that status orders lead organizations to avoid segments that are high in egocentric uncertainty (Podolny, 2001).

Next, the following section maps status literature that examines the meso-level, in formally structured environments such as organizations. With his seminal paper, Podolny established the view of market status as a "signal of underlying qualify of a firms products or services” (Podolny, 1993). Further, Podolny established the notion that consumers are willing to pay a higher price for products and services that are linked to higher-status producers. In turn, higher-status producers are able to create higher revenues compared to lower-status firms (Piazza & Castellucci, 2014; Podolny, 1993; Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012). In this sense, Bidwell (Bidwell, Won, Barbulescu, & Mollick, 2015) delineated another positive effect of high status. In a setting of investment banks, high-status firms were being able to employ more talents than their lower-status competitors, without paying them the full value of their abilities.

Sequential research added further positive effects of status, namely the reverse causal effect of performance on quality. Malter (Malter, 2014) found that high status signals to the perception of quality and organizational performance. In turn, stronger performance and higher perception of underlying quality improves a firm´s status, leading towards to a self-perpetuating upwards cycle. Another mechanism by which status generates benefits is related to the sense of security that goes along with a privileged status position (Sauder et al., 2012). In this notion, Washington (Washington & Zajac, 2005) describes that organizations with a historical legacy of high status are likely to hold the privileges of high status in subsequent periods, independently of their actual performance.

In contrast, more recent work describes a curvilinear effect of status on organizational performance. Studies show that performance improves with status until a high level, after which performance wanes (Bothner, Kim, & Smith, 2012; Castellucci & Podolny, 2016). In a research on the performance outcome of status in sports, Bothner et al. suggested that status fosters dispositions and behaviors that ultimately erode performance (Bothner et al., 2012). Several lines of evidence suggested that the reason for decline in status following a high-status position, can be explained with complacency and distraction (Graffin, Bundy, Porac, Wade, & Quinn, 2013; Sauder et al., 2012).

Another line of research has studied the effect of status on conformity (Durand & Kremp, 2016; Graffin et al., 2013; Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001; Sauder et al., 2012). In this regard, Phillips & Zuckerman have claimed an inverted U-shaped relationship between status and conformity. Studying the Silicon Valley legal services market as well as the market for investment advice, the authors found strong evidence for middle-status conformity. The researchers established the view that higher and lower ranked organizations are relatively fixed in their identities. To the extent that a firm’s identity is fixed, her actions cannot alter that identity, in turn organizations on both ends of a status ranking have no reason to confirm (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). Building on the middle-status conformity hypothesis, Durand & Kremp studied two distinct types of conformity, namely alignment and conventionality. While alignment refers to adopting similar attributes as peers, the conventionality describes exhibiting and emphasizing highly salient attributes in order to stand out from peers. By relating these forms of conformity to status, the authors show that alignment is more likely for middle-status organizations, while conventionality is more likely for middle-status individuals (Durand & Kremp, 2016).

This insight leads this work to the micro-level of analysis, the perspective on groups and individuals. In this line of work, a number of studies have reviewed beneficial outcomes for high-status individuals and groups (Flickinger, Wrage, Tuschke, & Bresser, 2016; Graffin, Wade, Porac, & McNamee, 2008; Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011). Graffin identified that top management team members received higher pay when they worked for a high-status CEO (Graffin et al., 2008). Besides higher compensation, the authors found that compared with the subordinates of less-celebrated CEO, members of top management teams who worked for high-status CEOs were more likely to receive better positions through internal or external promotions (Graffin et al., 2008). In similar vein, Groysberg et al. studied status in groups and found that the prominence of a group should increase the group’s access to resources (Groysberg et al., 2011). However, the researchers findings suggest that as more high-status members join, the group’s visibility may reach such a high level that it begins to plateau. Each additional high-status member joining a group could have a marginally decreasing benefit to perceived group effectiveness (Groysberg et al., 2011). Flickinger et al. studied executive dismissal decisions and found that a high status of the CEO relative to the Chairman of Board, protects an underperforming CEO against dismissal. The researchers also found that the relative prominence of outsiders in the same board of directors can counter this effect (Flickinger et al., 2016).   
Indicating certain drawbacks of status in individual- or group settings, the following section maps negative outcomes of high-status. In a setting of “academy-award” winners, Jensen studied consequences of sudden positive status shifts (Jensen & Kim, 2015). The author concludes that in firm settings, such as management promotion, individual status shifts can result in negative behavioral changes and thus lead to negative performance outcomes (Jensen & Kim, 2015). Graffin (Graffin et al., 2013) highlighted another negative outcome of high-status. The authors found evidence for their claim that high-status actors conform not more or less than lower-status actors, however they were more likely to be targeted by the market observers. Applying their hypothesis to the 2009 expense scandal involving the members of the British parliament, Graffin found that high-status parliamentarian were significantly more likely to exit Parliament when they had high levels of inappropriate expense claims than non-elite members (Graffin et al., 2013).

**Future Research: Status**

Despite the proliferation of status in literature, research on macro-, meso- and micro-level merely captures the positive aspects of status (George, Dahlander, Graffin, & Sim, 2016; Jensen & Kim, 2015). In a meta-analysis, George et al. found that a minority of papers emphasize the negative effects of social evaluations. When negative consequences of status are examined, subject of research are commonly aspects of occupying a high status position, such as earlier reviewed status shifts (Jensen & Kim, 2015), racial discrimination (Sauer, Thomas, & Morris, 2010) and behavioral depletion (Groysberg et al., 2011). An even smaller share of literature perceives negative effects of negative evaluations; that is, when negative social evaluations impair a low-status firm´s performance (Phillips, 2001). George et al. concluded that there is a predominant bias of the positive effects of seeking and leveraging of social evaluations and visibly less work on losing and regaining lost reputation and status (George et al., 2016). This gap, however hinders the discourse on organizational status from a holistic perspective on social judgement formation and status-discounts. Deriving from this view, the present work proposes further elaboration on the outcome of negative status shifts in the setting of a firm´s decline.   
In the line of work on negative status outcomes, Jiang et al. has proven that that the ship-jumping behavior of executives and the exit behavior of directors have potential connections (Jiang, Cannella, Xia, & Semadeni, 2017). Adding to this perspective, future research may study the effect of status dropout of low-status organizations, where the departing executives may trigger a vicious cycle of senior management team departing the firm. While Jiang et al. perceived the individual level of analysis, future research may take into account, how status aggregates from the individual level to the firm´s level, by studying to what extend the departure of management team can incite the organizations “race to the bottom”.

The process of social judgement formation constitutes a second pressing question (Bitektine, 2011). The academic discourse to date has not emphasized the characteristics and context of individuals, who establish ties between organizations through mobility events. While recent studies of status and mobility ignores those effects, legitimacy research found that companies are judged by the extent to which top management teams have distinct career attributes (Higgins & Gulati, 2006).

Applying this perspective to the current understanding of status, shifts the focus to influential aspects that lie in the trajectory of the individual executive. Further studies may examine to what extent the status shifts in the aftermath of executive mobility are contingent to elements of the individual’s biography. Altogether, both approaches add to the general understanding of extended factors that influence and shape organizational status on both, micro- and meso-level.

**Literature Review: Categories**

Up to the present day, several lines of studies aimed to describe how categorical nomenclatures emerge among market actors to define organizational forms and establish boundaries between them (Cattani, Porac, & Thomas, 2017; Navis & Glynn, 2010). The following chapter maps a selection of literature based on the conceptual significance of the paper.

Earlier work in categories research highlighted how social classification systems organize audiences’ expectations and preferences (Hsu, 2006; Zuckerman, 1999). Based on a research of the American stock market which was found significantly mediated by product critics, Zuckerman concluded that organizations which fail to gain reviews by critics who specialize in a product’s intended category. The described mechanism is straight forward. The lack of reviews by specialized critics signals confusion over the product’s identity to market observers. In consequence, a firms performance will be impaired (Zuckerman, 1999). Previous research has established further mechanism of category membership and identity in markets (Mathias, Huyghe, Frid, & Galloway, 2018; Negro, Hannan, & Fassiotto, 2015; Smith, 2011). Smith (Smith, 2011) explored the decision-making foundations on which organizations may come to be favored by investors. Analyzing the association between organizational conformity and capital flows in the global hedge fund industry, organizational identity has been established as a lens used by audiences to make sense of emerging information. In their study on Alsatian wine makers, Negro, Hannan and Fassiotto propose that organizations were able to demonstrate their hard-to-observe quality by investing in a signal of category membership. In this research setting, the audience used the signal as a screening mechanism for category affiliation (Negro et al., 2015). The authors found that category membership can operate as a collective market signal to the extent that the costs of producing the signal fall with the producer’s quality. When the signal comes from membership in a social category, the strength of the signal increases with the contrast of the category, the sharpness of a category boundary. (Negro et al., 2015).   
Adding another perspective, Jensen, Kim & Kim theorized market identities as interfaces between organizations and their external audiences. The authors examined how the perceived market appeal can be influenced by the order in which the products or product features that determine their market identities are offered (Jensen, Kim, & Kim, 2011).

Another stream of research examined how changes of organizational identity effects -performance. (Bowers & Prato, 2017; Durand, Rao, & Monin, 2007) In their study of French haute cuisine restaurants, Durand, Rao and Monin (Durand et al., 2007) examined „code-preserving“ changes, a variation in the firm’s product range that preserves the social code as well as „code-violating“ changes which represents a variation in the product range that breaks with past codes and embraces another social code. The authors found that external evaluations improved when restaurants undertake more code-preserving changes than their direct competitors but decline when they make more code- violating changes than competitors (Durand et al., 2007). Adding to earlier insights, Bowers and Prato (Bowers & Prato, 2017) study situations of arbitrary category changes, where gains and losses of status occur without changes in a firms quality. The authors claim that exogenously generated status shifts can discount the perception of market observer. Their hypothesis were tested with sample of equity analysts at U.S. brokerage firms, suggesting that the greater weight accorded to high-status actors may be misguided if that status occurs for structural reasons such as category changes rather than because of an actor’s own quality (Bowers & Prato, 2017).   
Research to that point follows the notion that identities linked to multiple labels or if organizations identified with ambiguous labels, causes confusion and results in devaluation of the organization. While fuzziness reflects whether some producers or their products fit categories more neatly and cleanly than do others, label ambiguity represents how clearly a label is defined relative to other labels in its environment.(Pontikes & Barnett, 2015). Pontikes (Pontikes, 2012) elaborated on that general perception and proposes a differentiated view on audiences. While „market-makers“ are interested in redefining the market structure and see ambiguity as flexible and therefore more appealing, consumer and critics evaluate organizations differently. Ambiguity hinders „market-takers“ to find and assess organizations and will reduce the appeal to related organizations (Pontikes, 2012).

Next, this review maps relevant studies that are related to category spanning, which describes a situation where organizations occupy multiple category positions. Commonly, literature in this field describes the negative effect of category spanning on organizational performance. Scholars typically explain this pattern of results with one of two arguments. Some contend that perceptual factors—namely, the difficulties that buyers have in making sense of category spanners—contribute to the observed pattern of devaluation (Paolella & Durand, 2016; Wry, Lounsbury, & Jennings, 2014). Others argue that the penalty for category-spanning derives from the perspective that organizations which do not focus their efforts narrowly on a single category are perceived to offer products of lower quality (Ferguson & Hasan, 2013; Hsu, Hannan, & Koçak, 2009). In the origin of the academic discourse on this theme, Hsu examines how penalties arise as a consequence of audience-side and producer-side processes for products that span multiple categories (Hsu et al., 2009). The authors claim that audiences refer to established categories to make sense of products. Products that incorporate features from multiple categories are perceived to be poor fits with category expectations and less appealing than category specialists. Drawing on that perspective, Ferguson suggests that a varied work history is an ambiguous signal: a worker with a diverse history could be multi-talented or untalented. The author found that in consequence, employers hire workers with specialized experience (Ferguson & Hasan, 2013).

On the other hand, researchers claim that spanning categories reduces organizations ability to effectively target each category’s audience, which in consequence decreases appeal to audience members. Wry, Loundsbury and Jennings added to this perspective that category spanning not necessarily leads to confusion, but rather to interpretations that rely on a structure where one category anchors cognition but is modified by features of other categories (Wry et al., 2014). Further studies suggest that the negative consequences are contingent to the observers´ theory of values (Paolella & Durand, 2016), the presence of identity labels (Leung & Sharkey, 2014) as well as categorical contrast—the sharpness of a category’s boundaries (Negro, Hannan, & Rao, 2010). Lowered contrast blurs boundaries among categories and in turn lowers the appeal of all products in a category and make it problematic for any offer to receive widespread acclaim. (Negro et al., 2010).

Another fruitful insight on the negative outcome of category spanning stems from marketing research (Dong & Chintagunta, 2016). Dong and Chintagunta studied cross-category effects on customer satisfaction in banking industry. The authors found that in settings were banks provide their customer with banking- as well as investment services, dissatisfaction with the firm in the investment category spills over into the banking category (Dong & Chintagunta, 2016).

**Future Research: Categories**

Besides the dominant view on negative outcomes of category spanning, research to date is disputed in the question, whether changing and occupying multiple positions in a market space is beneficial or disadvantageous to organizations.   
On the one hand, Zuckerman found that stakeholder penalize organizations, which did not fit into a single category scheme (Zuckerman, 1999). On the other hand, Hsu et al. propose that multiple positions in the same category may attract a broader audience from different categories (Hsu et al., 2009). Based on their status-identity framework, Jensen, Kim and Kim suggested that multiple positions may not be penalized, when positions across different horizontal categories are with the same vertical status (Jensen et al., 2011). However, prior advances omit to explore how multiple positions interact with each other and consequently shapes the status within and among categories. This lack in knowledge impede our understanding on how spanning multiple positions can enhance or hinder organizational status (Jensen et al., 2011). Studying the sequence of which organizations occupy multiple category positions, would contributes to this lack of knowledge and further explore the conditions that leads to either -discount or status-increase. Furthermore, advances on this point complements to a distinct understanding of Jensen et al. status-identity framework and add to earlier findings on overcoming the discount deriving through category spanning (Zhao & Lounsbury, 2016).

Another pressing question in the context of categories is related to changing category affiliations. Bowers et al. (Bowers & Prato, 2017) studied arbitrary category changes that were caused by external factors, controlled by a third party. They concluded that organizations, whose status increases because of additional category affiliations, experience corresponding increases in the stock market’s, while those who lose status face corresponding reductions (Bowers & Prato, 2017).   
However, the effect of changes of category affiliation that are pursued intentionally remain unclear. While intentional category changes result from common market expansion activities, research to date neglects to examine the effect on observer perception and consequently on organizational-level outcomes. Future research shall elaborate on this point and study settings of intentionally changes that may results through merger, acquisitions as well as by organizations expanding into new markets.   
It shall be assumed that organizations that increase and reduce their category affiliations through re-organization, will experience less discount in the perception of market observers, compared to arbitrary changes. It shall be further assumed that audience acceptance will be contingent to the number (Bowers & Prato, 2017), the frequency and sequence as well as the audience (Paolella & Durand, 2016). Together, the above outlined future research approaches add to the understanding how category affiliations and -changes aggregate to observer’s perception and shed further light on how organizations identity shapes.

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