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Linking Social Structure and Interpersonal Behavior: A Theoretical Perspective on Cultural Schemas and Social Relations*

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To explain how interpersonal behavior in relational contexts usually reproduces but sometimes modifies macro structural patterns, I outline a conceptual framework within which to understand existing theories and evidence and to develop new ones. Actors create and enact structure by means of several types of shared cultural schemas ("ordering schemas") that represent or imply relations between specific or abstract actors. "Modular" ordering schemas such as fundamental sentiments, social identities, or status beliefs disaggregate the meanings of identities, settings, and events from their embedded contexts and represent them in abstract form. Generative theories view actors as possessing shared "vocabularies" of modular ordering schemas and shared schemas for combining those modular meanings to generate interpersonal behavior that responds flexibly to situational contingencies. The generated behavior largely reproduces structural patterns represented in modular schemas, but can produce novel patterns through unique combinations of cultural information. I then discuss how modular ordering schemas develop and become widely shared.

Everyday life is filled with *social relational contexts* in which individuals coordinate and shape their behavior in relation to others, whether in person, through the Internet, on paper, or with a cell phone. Throughout my career, I have been concerned with the power of these ubiquitous contexts not only to influence individuals, but also to link those individuals to the larger social structure in which they are embedded. I have been fascinated by the way these contexts bring the larger social structure home to the person's own experience. Gender and racial inequality, for instance, are dimensions of social stratification, but it is in relational contexts that these macro structural messages of inequality are delivered powerfully to individuals in ways that shape their future behavior.

I also have become convinced that social relational contexts are a considerable force in understanding the persistence or change of larger structural patterns themselves (Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Logic suggests that these contexts must continually enact structural patterns such as gender or racial inequality if those patterns are to persist. In the main, this is exactly what happens. Yet the contingent nature of interaction in social relational contexts is not entirely predictable. As a result, these contexts have a dynamic potential to introduce change into the larger structural patterns that they enact (Chase 1980, Fararo and Skvoretz 1986).

How then can we explain how social relational contexts mainly reproduce but also modify macro-level social patterns such as dimensions of stratification, social institutions, or widely held cultural beliefs? My goal here is to outline a theoretical perspective that represents my own best answer to this question. This perspective is not itself a theory, but rather an orienting conceptual framework within which to place existing theories and develop new ones. My intention is to suggest productive avenues for future work on the relationship between social structure and individual action.

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In developing this perspective, I rely heavily on several ideas that are widespread in sociological social psychology and on work done with several collaborators, notably Lynn Smith-Lovin, Joseph Berger, Edward Lawler, Morris Zelditch, and Shelley Correll. Thus, much that I say here is already familiar to many. After outlining this perspective, I will use it to develop some speculative implications about social relational contexts, social differences, and status beliefs.

THE COORDINATION PROBLEM

To explain how social relational contexts reproduce but also potentially modify macro structural patterns, it is useful, first, to remind ourselves how interaction in these contexts is accomplished. The problem of interaction is the coordination of one's own behavior with another's (Brewer 1997). To anticipate the behavior of the other in order to decide how to act, each participant must form some idea of "who" self and other are in this situation. To be effective in coordinating behavior, this definition of self and other in the situation must be more or less shared. In other words, as Mead (1934) and the symbolic interactionists have long argued and as an array of research has shown, interaction is accomplished by the development of a shared definition of the situation that represents a working consensus on who each actor is and what they all are doing in the situation (Goffman 1967; Hardin and Higgins 1996; Stryker and Vryan 2003).

As shown by Carley (1991) and others (Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985), to develop a shared definition of the situation by which to organize interaction, actors must start with at least some shared cultural information. Much of what I have to say here deals with this initially shared information. People also are aided, however, by the way our cognitive and emotional processes are tuned towards perceiving and relating to others. As Fiske (1992:878) says in summarizing a century of social cognition research, "[P]eople perceive to interact." Not only symbolic interactionist research in sociology but also cognitive research in psychology shows that we are tuned to forming an impression of others which allows us to take their perspective and to define and align our own perspective in response (Fiske 1992; Hardin and Higgins 1996; Stryker and Vryan 2003). Studies of nonverbal and emotional communication show a similar mimicry and self-other tuning process (see Spoor and Kelley 2004; Turner 2000). These alignment processes make interaction a cauldron of mutual influence, as each actor adjusts implicitly to the other. Through cognitive and emotional adjustments, actors come to literally "see" together. What they see in common governs their behaviors towards one another, even though it includes jointly understood ways in which they differ.

ORDERING SCHEMAS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

What actors are doing in social relational contexts, then, is coordinating their behavior by means of a shared definition of the situation. This shared definition is an example of what I term a *social ordering schema.* Sewell (1992) and Giddens (1984) argue that social structures have a dual aspect: they are constituted, on the one hand, by cultural schemas or rules for enacting the structure, and, on the other hand, by a pattern of material resources or effects that results from that enactment. My term *ordering schema* refers to the cultural schema portion of this dual approach to structure. This is a shared, sociocognitive, and affective schema concerning social relations; when acted on, it results in what we would commonly call an observable social structure among the actors—that is, a patterned distribution of behaviors and resources.

As this description suggests, ordering schemas are shared sets of organized, affectively tagged information that represent or imply relations between abstract or specific actors. Therefore they have three defining characteristics that distinguish them from other social or individual perceptions. First, ordering schemas specify *relations* among social elements (e.g., actors). Second, they are socially shared rather than individual schemas. Third, when acted upon, they give rise to an observable social structure among the actors involved.

People can hold ordering schemas as conscious beliefs. More commonly, however, they hold them as implicit, taken-for-granted understandings. Because I view ordering schemas as elements of shared culture, I—unlike Sewell (1992)—reserve the term *structure* for patterned distributions of observable behaviors and material resources. Like Sewell, however, I argue that people cannot enact structures systematically without shared cultural ordering schemas for doing so. Thus, ordering schemas are essential for the creation and maintenance of social structure.

The shared definitions of the situation that govern specific social relational contexts are only one type or class of ordering schemas. I will describe others, but always with an emphasis on the power of social relational contexts to create ordering schemas that are shared among the participants. Ordering schemas, along with social relational contexts, are the two central concepts in my theoretical perspective.

GENERATIVE THEORIES OF INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR

I can now rephrase my earlier question to ask "How is the everyday process of organizing social relations through shared definitions of the situation brought into line with larger social structural patterns?" Lynn Smith-Lovin and I asked this question a decade ago in a paper comparing affect control theory with expectation states theory (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1994). As we noted there, a commonly suggested answer is the idea that people use institutionalized scripts—how to behave at a wedding, for instance—to provide ordering schemas for their interaction. The difficulty of the script approach, however, is that it cannot explain how interactional events sometimes modify larger structural patterns. Thus we argued instead for *generative* models of behavior in social relational contexts.

Rather than as followers of detailed scripts, generative models view actors as possessing basic information on the cultural meaning of socially significant categories by which persons, settings, and events can be classified. In addition, actors possess rules for combining the specific information that is evoked in a given situation in order to generate a resultant course of action towards self and other in that situation (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1994:215). Through the use of a cultural "vocabulary" of shared meanings and a "grammar" of rules for combining these meanings, actors can respond flexibly to the specific contingencies of a particular situation, even if some of those contingencies are unexpected.

Because behaviors in generative models are based on combinations of basic, widely shared cultural information, these behaviors largely reproduce the social structural patterns of the surrounding society that are represented in that information. By forming unique combinations, however, they also can constitute unexpected, relatively novel behavioral patterns. Furthermore, because both the "vocabulary" of meanings and the "grammar" for combining the meanings are shared cultural information, the behavioral responses they generate remain mutually comprehensible to self and to other in the situation even when they are structurally novel. As a result, actors are able to create and maintain a shared definition of the situation even when unexpected contingencies occur. Generative models, then, can explain how interaction often follows institutional and structural scripts, as when the man is more influential than the woman or the Bride kisses the Groom at the Wedding. Yet they also can explain how events sometimes may not follow the script, as when the woman gains influence over the man or the Bride slaps the Groom.

Social psychology already has several well-developed theories of interpersonal behavior that meet my definition of a generative model of action. Affect control theory is a generative theory of how people draw on widely shared fundamental sentiments to form expected meanings in the situation which they attempt to maintain through their behavior (Heise 1979; Mackinnon 1994). Expectation states theory is a generative theory of how actors use widely shared beliefs about the status and competence associated with individual attributes to form aggregate expectations for each other in the situation—expectations which, in turn, shape their def-

erence and influence regarding one another (Berger et al. 1977; Wagner and Berger 2002). Identity control theory (Burke 1991, 2004) and Stryker's identity theory (Stryker 1980; Stryker and Burke 2000) also take the general form of generative theories of interpersonal behavior. The empirical success of these theories suggests the explanatory utility of taking a generative approach to interpersonal behavior.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MODULAR ORDERING SCHEMAS

Generative models of behavior are flexible because they take a "modular" approach to basic cultural information. This approach disaggregates the meanings of things that always appear combined in some way in actual, material experience, such as different identities, settings, and events. One can view affect control theory, for instance, as a modular approach to the meanings embedded in institutional scripts.

When Lynn and I argued for the modular approach inherent in generative theories, we did so heuristically because such an approach better allows us to explain how social relational contexts usually reproduce larger structural patterns but sometimes modify them. Now, a decade later, I am willing to go further. I submit that the modular approach of generative theories is not only heuristically advantageous; it also provides an empirically more accurate representation of how people actually hold basic cultural information. Studies of gender stereotypes, for instance, show that people actually harbor abstract cultural schemas about who "men" and "women" are despite the fact that no one has ever met someone who is a man or a woman without also occupying many other identities at the same time as a person of a given race, age, social class, occupation, and so on (Eagly and Karau 2002; Fiske et al. 2002; Spence and Buckner 2000).

It is almost weird, when you think about it, that people have such abstract cultural schemas of identities. Later I will return to what might govern the disaggregation of such identities in our cultural schemas. Generative theories, however, show how this cultural disaggregation allows people the flexibility to recombine identities so as to apply them to a broader array of contexts. Abstract cultural schemas about men and women, for instance, free the enactment of gender from the institutional confines of family and reproduction, allowing people to "do" gender in combination with other identities in any context (Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

The modular elements of cultural information that actors possess, according to generative theories, are also, by my definition, a class of cultural ordering schemas. Modular schemas are organized sets of cultural information about *abstract* identities, events, and situations that imply particular patterns of relations among *abstract* actors. When acted upon, modular schemas create distinctive patterns of behavior and resources. Status beliefs about gender, for instance, are a cultural module of rules or instructions for performing gender so as to create behavioral and resource hierarchies between otherwise similar men and women (Ridgeway 2001; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). Fundamental sentiments are modular meaning rules for enacting institutionalized identities and events. In identity control theory, social identities and role identities similarly are modules of cultural instructions or standards for self behavior. Modular schemas imply relations among abstract actors, while local definitions of the situation represent relations among specific actors. Both are ordering schemas, however.

The "grammatical" rules by which people combine their basic, modular ordering schemas to decide how to act in a situation are also ordering schemas. Like modular schemas and local definitions, they specify socially shared rules for relating social elements which, when acted upon, create an observable social structure. Yet, they are ordering schemas of a different type than modular schemas and local definitions of the situation (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1994). As Sewell (1992) would say, these combining rules are "deeper" schemas that are aligned closely to cognitive processes—albeit culturally framed cognitive processes (Adams and Markus 2004)—such as those which structure impression formation or form rational choice calculations.

Generative theories, then, view actors as possessing two different classes of ordering schemas, through which they generate a third class of ordering schema: the shared definition of the local situation, which is the actual basis of their interpersonal behavior. Each of these types is a cultural artifact in that it is distinctively *shared* by the members of a defined collectivity. The local definition of the situation is shared by those in the relational context; modular information schemas and combining schemas are elements of the broader culture of an organization, subculture, or entire society.

THE LINK TO LARGER STRUCTURAL PATTERNS

Now let's consider more closely how behavior in social relational contexts is linked to larger social structures in this generative account of interpersonal behavior that I have outlined. Recall that *structure* refers here to patterned distributions of resources and behaviors. All social relational encounters take place in a preexisting context of established structures and other material constraints (Lawler, Ridgeway, and Markovsky 1993). Some of these preexisting features, such as formal role obligations, distributions of material resources, and the actors' sociodemographic characteristics, act in the situation as direct structural constraints that affect behavior in two ways (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1994).

First and most important, these structural constraints evoke or make salient for actors a particular set of modular ordering schemas—say, for bosses and employees, men and women, and the better and worse paid—that frame their definition of the situation. That is, these salient schemas become the basis for actors' initial expectations for one another's behavior. Second, insofar as these constraints materially enable or limit actors' behavior, they directly shape behavior in a manner that becomes an event to which the actors respond as they adjust and adapt their interpretations to form a shared definition of the situation.

The modular schemas made salient in the situation by structural conditions generally represent ordering rules consistent with those structural conditions. As a result, these salient schemas organize a broad range of behavior in a manner consistent with the structural conditions framing the situation, even when that behavior is not directly and materially constrained by those conditions. In this way, modular ordering schemas cause actors to behaviorally reproduce larger social structures even in circumstances in which the material constraints of the structure are insufficient to fully control individual behavior.

Viewed this way, the continuing enactment of larger social structures depends heavily on the cultural ordering schemas that individuals use to organize local relational contexts. After all, outside of total institutions, material constraints are rarely sufficient to fully determine behavior. The most important modular ordering schemas—that is, the ones that are shared most widely in the population and evoked most commonly in relational contexts—are cultural representations of central features of the macro structure such as gender, race, or occupational stratification as well as tools by which people enact those structural features.

SOCIAL RELATIONAL CONTEXTS AS "FACTORIES" FOR MODULAR ORDERING SCHEMAS

If this cultural "vocabulary" of modular ordering schemas is as important for the enactment of social structure as I suggest, a question naturally arises. How do ordering schemas of this type develop and come to be shared widely in a population? Although several well-developed generative theories exist to tell us how these schemas organize behavior and enact structures, we do not have a similar collection of theories about how these schemas develop and come to be widely used. If we are to understand how social structures are enacted and modified through individuals, we must develop systematic theories of how widely shared ordering schemas develop.

One obvious possibility is that modular ordering schemas originate as the perceptions of an individual who abstracts from and interprets his or her experience of social patterns and material conditions in a certain way

and then communicates this abstract interpretation to other people. Yet despite the superficial appeal of this "individual inventor" approach, evidence suggests that it is too simple. Growing evidence suggests that people's perceptions and interpretations are fleeting and relatively inconsequential for behavior unless they are verified or *validated* by the apparent support of others (Hardin and Higgins 1996). In other words, we are not sure we really "see" something until we have the sense that others see it with us. In particular, we are unlikely to use our perceptions as a guide to behavior, especially in social relations, unless we believe that others also accept or would accept those perceptions (Adams and Markus 2004; P. Berger, Ridgeway, and Zelditch 2002; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Ridgeway 2000a; Zelditch forthcoming). Ordering schemas, by definition, are guides or rules for behavior. If an individual's personal interpretive schema is to become an ordering schema with material, structural consequences, that schema must be validated socially by the apparent support of others.

Social relational contexts are crucial arenas in which individuals expose their interpretive schemas to the reactions of others, and thus in which social validation might occur. Yet, as we have seen, these contexts also are arenas of intense mutual influence because actors align their perceptions to anticipate each other's behavior. Consequently the process of exposing personal interpretations to social validation in social relational contexts is likely to also shape those interpretations and change them into a locally shared understanding. As a result, the interpretive schemas that emerge from the validation process and come to act as modular ordering schemas are more likely to be shared, group products than individual inventions.

This analysis leads me to suggest that social relational contexts themselves are the primary (though perhaps not the only) "factories" that produce the modular ordering schemas by which actors reproduce or modify the macro structure. I argue, then, that actors in social relational contexts not only combine existing modular schemas to construct a local definition of the situation by which to organize their joint behavior. In addition, their shared experience in the context sometimes may lead them to construct new shared schemas that abstract from that experience to create generalized representations of newly defined identities, situations, or events that the actors can apply to future relational contexts.

Do these new modular ordering schemas that actors invent collectively in a given context have macro structural consequences? The answer depends on whether the new schemas spread to be shared widely in a larger population of actors. The farther they spread, the more likely that they will modify existing macro structural patterns or even create new ones by modifying the organization of multiple social relational contexts throughout the population.

Widely shared modular ordering schemas could develop in two general ways. First, structural conditions may place similar material constraints on actors in multiple social relational contexts, leading them to develop similar ordering schemas to interpret and manage their experience. Second, modular ordering schemas developed in one context may diffuse to others as actors carry their new schemas out across their social networks to the next related encounter and act on them there. This network-diffusion process corresponds fairly closely to Gary Fine's arguments (Fine 1979; Fine and Kleinman 1979) about the production of culture in small groups and the way group members spread new cultural products across their networks to other groups. His studies of the development and spread of cultural ideas among boys' Little League teams show that cultural products routinely diffuse from group to group along social networks (Fine 1987). In addition to such direct diffusion, new modular ordering schemas may diffuse to others indirectly by becoming institutionalized in formal procedures and represented in the media.

Both of the processes by which modular ordering schemas become shared beyond the local situation—simultaneous invention and diffusion—show that the development of widely shared ordering schemas such as status beliefs, common role identities, or fundamental sentiments is a true micro-macro

process. Micro-level social relational contexts are agents that create ordering schemas. Yet preexisting structural conditions set the material terms that modular ordering schemas interpret, shape the network pathways along which they spread, and determine the potential of these schemas to spread widely or remain confined to a local population.

AN EXAMPLE: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF STATUS BELIEFS

Following this reasoning, I developed status construction theory to explain how social relational contexts and structural conditions work together to produce one type of modular ordering schema: widely shared status beliefs about social differences (Ridgeway 1991, 2000a, forthcoming). I describe that theory briefly to illustrate two points. First, the theory shows how the general logic I have outlined can be used to develop testable theories. Second, and more specifically, it illustrates how actors' efforts to organize joint action under certain structural conditions lead them to form local definitions of their situation that drive them further to form new modular ordering schemas.

Status construction theory takes as a starting point two structural conditions: (1) a socially recognized but not yet consensually evaluated distinction that divides the population into at least two categorical groups; and (2) the assumption that people in these categorical groups are interdependent to some degree, in that they must cooperate regularly to achieve what they want or need. The theory focuses on the cooperatively interdependent encounters that these conditions create between people who differ on the categorical distinction. As in all goal-oriented social relational contexts, hierarchies of influence and esteem are likely to develop in these intercategory encounters. Such status hierarchies usually develop implicitly, through multiple small behaviors that the participants rarely notice. Because the actual origins of their influence hierarchy are obscure to them but their categorical difference is salient, status construction theory argues that there is some chance that the participants will associate their apparent difference in esteem and competence in the situation with their categorical difference.

The theory argues, then, that out of the process of creating a shared definition of the situation to organize interaction under these specific structural conditions, there is a chance that participants also will form a fledgling ordering schema which links status and competence to the distinction based on difference. Because all the actors participate in the local definition of the situation, in which actors' influence and esteem correspond to their categorical difference, this fledgling schema appears to be socially valid, at least in the context. If the apparent correspondence between difference (on the one hand) and influence and esteem (on the other) is repeated for these actors in subsequent intercategory encounters, the fledgling schema is strengthened and appears to be valid beyond the original context. The theory argues that such repeated encounters eventually will induce the actors to form generalized status beliefs about the categorical distinction. These beliefs are modular ordering schemas in that they pertain to whole categories of actors, not merely particular individuals.

Once people form such status beliefs, according to the theory, they carry them to their next encounters with members of the other group and act on them there. By treating those others according to the status beliefs, the theory argues, they induce at least some of the others to adopt the belief as well. This, in turn, creates a diffusion process that potentially could spread the new status belief widely in the population.

Whether such a belief spreads widely or dissipates in a cultural noise of conflicting beliefs, and which group it casts as higher in status, all depends on the structural conditions that shape the terms on which people from each categorical group encounter one another. Do structural conditions give people from one categorical group a systematic advantage in some factor, such as material resources or technology, that is helpful in gaining influence in intercategory encounters? If such a biasing factor exists, the theory maintains that status beliefs favoring the structurally advantaged group will emerge and spread to become widely shared in soci-

ety. And even if no such biasing factor exists, according to simulations by Noah Mark (1999), there is still some chance that widely held status beliefs will emerge through stochastic processes alone, although the group favored in the emergent beliefs will be a matter of chance. Once widely shared status beliefs develop about the categorical difference, they delineate a new dimension of inequality based on category membership itself, and not on individual possession of some material advantage such as wealth.

Status construction theory is supported by a variety of logical and empirical evidence. Computer simulations show that if people form and spread status beliefs in intercategory encounters, as the theory says, the development of near-consensual status beliefs is indeed a plausible outcome under many social structural conditions (Ridgeway and Balkwell 1997). A series of experiments, in turn, shows that people in fact form and spread status beliefs in encounters with categorically different others, as the theory predicts (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). Furthermore, supporting my broader analysis of the development of modular ordering schemas, an additional experiment shows that the appearance of consensual support for (i.e., of the validity of) the association between difference and unequal esteem and competence in the encounters is crucial to whether actors form status beliefs on the basis of those encounters (Ridgeway and Correll forthcoming).

FINAL SPECULATIONS

The empirical support for status construction theory suggests that one reasonably may view social relational contexts as arenas in which modular ordering schemas develop. Does this conception, then, have any further implications? I would like to offer some additional speculations on the development of shared ordering schemas about social difference and status and their implications for patterns of social relations. Earlier I mentioned that people actually seem to hold basic cultural information about socially significant identities in the form of modular schemas about abstract identities, such as gender, race, or occupation, that are disaggregated in varying degrees from their instantiation in real, multiattributed people and specific contexts. How does this disaggregation of identities in cultural schemas come about? Part of the answer, I believe, lies in the way the problem of coordinating behavior in relational contexts drives attention to difference.

To define self and other in order to act, actors first must develop a way of categorizing the other on the basis of comparison and contrast—that is, as different from or similar to known, socially predictable objects such as the self. In this way, the problem of coordinating interpersonal behavior furthers the formation of systems of social categorization based on difference. To coordinate behavior effectively, these categorization systems must be shared with others in the situation; as we know, the sharing of perspectives is facilitated by the way actors work to align their responses in relational contexts. This suggests that the development of a shared definition of self and other in the situation by which to interact will also encourage the actors to form shared, more general systems for categorizing people on the basis of socially delineated differences (Ridgeway 1997). In a society of people who must interact regularly to achieve what they want or need, the repeating demands of organizing interaction in multiple contexts are likely to drive the emergence of widely shared systems of categorization based on difference. I call these modular ordering schemas *difference codes* (Ridgeway 2000b).

I suspect that the extent to which shared difference codes disaggregate identities from specific social settings or defined networks of actors depends to some extent on how useful actors find such codes for rendering self and other meaningful for interaction in settings outside the original contexts and networks where the codes originated. The broader the range of contexts to which actors effectively apply a given difference code, the more abstract the identities it describes are likely to become. The social reach of our difference code based on sex, for instance, may be related reciprocally to its construction as a simple, two-category system that can be applied to anyone (Ridgeway 1997).

Because social difference codes disaggregate attributes such as skin color, education,

or sex from the multiattributed complexity of individuals, they constitute new abstract categories or groups of people, such as "races." Only through the development of such difference codes can inequality be based on such categorical distinctions among people, rather than on the specific, idiosyncratic differences among particular individuals. By driving the formation of shared difference codes, then, the problem of coordinating interpersonal behavior in social relational contexts becomes a proximate cause of the unfolding of what McPherson labels *Blau space*. Named after the foundational insights of Peter Blau (1977), Blau space is the social grid of significant distinctions along which people in a given society locate themselves and around which social relations are organized.

As shown by the work of both Blau (1977; Blau and Schwartz 1984) and social identity theorists (Tajfel and Turner 1986), difference codes, once developed, not only organize social relational contexts, but also change the patterns by which people associate with one another. Once socially recognized differences develop, they become a basis for homophily in social relations (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). An interesting paradox exists here: if pushed to an extreme, homophily on the basis of a given difference would dissolve the relevance of the underlying difference code for organizing social relational contexts because people who differed on that distinction would rarely associate. This actually might happen at times. Yet such complete separation based on difference is problematic, despite homophilic tendencies, when people on each side of the difference boundary fail to get what they want or need unless they cooperate regularly with those on the other side.

Such conditions of cooperative interdependence, according to status construction theory, also are the conditions in which difference codes are most likely to be transformed into status beliefs (Ridgeway forthcoming). As a type of modular ordering schema, status beliefs exert distinctive social organizing effects in social relations (Wagner and Berger 2002). Let us reexamine these effects in light of the tension between difference and homophily in social relations. By attaching greater esteem and competence to those in one category of a difference than in another, status beliefs reify the difference distinction so as to keep mutual influence in interaction between different actors from dissolving their difference (Jackman 1994). At the same time, status beliefs provide instructions for interacting smoothly, if unequally, across the difference boundary. That situation, in turn, is likely to increase the likelihood that actors will interact across that boundary. Status beliefs, then, preserve the difference that fosters homophily but also keep homophily from eroding actors' capacity to form social relations across the difference.

Gender is an especially telling example of how status beliefs manage difference in the face of interdependence. Numerous factors cause men and women to be highly interdependent with one another and to have high rates of interaction, often on intimate terms (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). These very factors foster the utility of gender as a difference code for organizing social relations, and make it likely that it also will be a status distinction. Yet the tensions of interacting on terms of unequal difference also are likely to encourage homophily: members of each sex seek the company of others who know what it is like to be on their end of the gender hierarchy. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that despite the very high rate of routine interaction between men and women, gender also is one of the characteristics on which the highest rates of homophily occur in voluntary associations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987).

CONCLUSION

Metatheoretical perspectives such as the one I have outlined here concerning social relational contexts, cultural ordering schemas, and generative theories of behavior, cannot be subjected to direct empirical test. Rather, the "test" of such perspectives is whether they yield specific, testable theories that do receive direct empirical support (Berger and Zelditch 1993; Lawler et al. 1993). Viewed in this light, the empirical success of well-developed theories that fall within this perspective, such as expectations states

theory, affect control theory, or identity control theory, is encouraging. These established theories give credibility to the perspective's arguments about the significance of ordering schemas for the everyday enactment of social structure. Equally encouraging is the empirical support for status construction theory, because this theory instantiates and tests the perspective's arguments about the power of social relational contexts to create widely shared ordering schemas.

I have reason to hope, then, that the perspective I have outlined will prove productive for furthering our understanding of the relation between social structure and interpersonal behavior. This perspective returns us to our roots in sociological social psychology by focusing on the construction of shared meanings in social relational contexts as a crucial process in the enactment and change of social structure.

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