

## Generating Inequalities

How are inequalities generated? Why are economic resources increasingly concentrated in a few hands? Why do some people get paid less and others more? Why do some get better jobs, more training, and support from co-workers? Why are some people treated with respect and others as inconsequential? Who is deemed productive? Admirable? Contemptible? Expendable? Exploitable? Why are some firms profitable while others struggle to survive? Under what conditions are past inequalities eroded and replaced with new status hierarchies?

Social scientists have struggled with these types of questions for a long time. For several reasons we think that many of the past answers to these questions are deeply flawed. First, almost all prior work has ignored the actual social spaces in which income, respect, and other rewards are generated and distributed—organizations, firms, and workplaces. When social scientists do situate inequality in social space it is too often myopically focused on national markets and cultural processes, often ignoring the actual between-firm and historical variation in inequalities and their generative processes. Second, the most influential work in both sociology and economics has been misleadingly individualistic, ignoring the actual social relationships through which production is accomplished and rewards are distributed. In this sense, the theoretical model we develop in this book is an explicit alternative to the naive individualist and market explanations that dominate much political rhetoric and policy discourse in contemporary advanced economies.

We offer a general theory of inequality which foregrounds social relationships, organizations, and the intersectional complexity and fluidity that characterize social life. Our argument is that to understand the processes that generate inequalities we need to focus on relationships between people, positions, and organizations. We also believe that challenging existing inequalities requires attention to organizational variation in inequalities and to the relational processes which generate them. We reject social science approaches that rely on individual or societal explanations at the expense of interaction, social organization, and the relative power

of actors to extract resources—like money and respect—through their interactions with others.

We organize our argument around three core inequality-generating mechanisms—exploitation, social closure, and claims-making—each emerging out of the social relations within and between organizations. Our strategy is to draw on multiple examples of these general processes from the social scientific literature to illustrate and illuminate each inequality mechanism. Our examples are drawn from prior research in sociology, economics, anthropology, and management sciences. Most of these examples compare organizations in order to understand and explain the variation in inequality-generating mechanisms and outcomes. Our examples span qualitative, historical, and quantitative methodologies from multiple countries and times. Some of our most exciting work is in documenting contemporary organizational variation in gender, ethnic, and class inequality across organizations in the United States, Australia, Japan, Sweden, and Germany.

We focus primarily on organizations (which we use interchangeably with the term *workplaces*) because they are the social spaces in which most of the production and distribution of income and other employment-linked resources take place. By *organizations* we mean the socially constructed spaces in which individuals' efforts are coordinated to jointly accomplish a set of tasks to fulfill some goal or set of linked goals. The organizations we use to develop our theoretical ideas are primarily private firms (corporations, partnerships, joint-stock companies, etc.), government agencies, and nonprofit organizations. We suspect our model of inequality generation is extendable to other important organizational forms and social spaces, such as families, schools, churches, and even informal or illegal organizations. We will make some of these connections in the conclusion but largely leave it to others to extend the model to these important bases of social organization.

We rely on well-recognized social processes that are found in all interactional settings as the building blocks of our approach. At the heart of our account is the fact that human beings are social animals. Because of this the generation of income and other rewards and their distribution are produced through social relationships, and the most causally significant relationships are those that exist in relatively durable social contexts. In modern societies these durable contexts are typically organizations. Moreover, in contemporary societies organizations are the income-pooling devices from which other material inequalities flow. At the level of general processes, our arguments apply to any relatively durable social network, including governments, schools, families, and churches; but we spend most of this book within the walls of workplaces.

## RELATIONAL INEQUALITY THEORY

Our perspective has come to be called *relational inequality theory*, or RIT.<sup>1</sup> It has its roots in the social sciences with macro-level theories associated originally with Max Weber and Karl Marx and with the micro traditions of exchange theory and symbolic interactionism. From the Weberian tradition RIT takes a focus on meaningful action in cultural and historical context, as well as the basic insight that class, status, and power processes are always operating but not necessarily simple reflections of each other or equally influential. From the Marxian tradition we adopt the centrality of production as the source of resources as well as relational thinking about power and inequality as a result of claims over those resources. From symbolic interactionism we adopt the core sociological insight that people make sense of their world in interaction with others, negotiating order and change in durable social relationships and making identity and resource claims on each other. From exchange theory we adopt the idea that effective claims on resources reflect the relative status and power of actors in reciprocal or competitive exchange contexts. There are many other more proximate influences on our thinking, but that is for later. Let's begin with a brief and quite abstract outline of RIT.

Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (1999) is typically referred to as the modern genesis of RIT, but there is a strong influence in the earlier work of Frank Parkin (1979) on categorically based social closure; Arne Kalleberg, Michael Wallace, and Robert P. Althauser (1981) on the multiple bases of worker power; Peter Blau (1977) on multiple socially reinforcing status distinctions; Michael Omi and Howard Winant's (2014) racial formation theory on the role of contending political projects producing racial (and other) inequality formations; and intersectional theorists, particularly Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2009), on the historically embedded intersection of status-based inequalities. Relational inequality scholars share a focus on how categorical distinctions, when wed to organizational divisions of labor, become the interactional bases for moral evaluation, inclusion and exclusion from opportunities, and the exploitation of effort and value.

The starting premise of RIT is that the causally most powerful locations in social life are proximate networks of social relationships. People interact meaningfully and consequentially in social relationships, and the categories

1. The first use of the term *relational inequality* was by Charles Tilly (2000) in an essay in *Contemporary Sociology*. This was a summary statement of his monograph *Durable Inequality* (1999). RIT was originally inspired by *Durable Inequality* but has since developed into a more encompassing approach to social inequalities.

of our social world—including the categorization of people and value—are produced in those relationships. **The human mind organizes the world into discrete categories, including categories of people, but it is through social relationships that this categorization process plays out.** There is no such thing as an individual actor, absent the relationships he or she is embedded within. The idea that you challenge troubling racial and gender inequalities by changing people while leaving the relationships in which they are embedded untouched is a recipe for enduring inequalities. Similarly, a revolution to capture the state that does not constrain the social relations of status and power that people inhabit on a daily basis will simply create new inequalities and categorical distinctions.

The second central premise of RIT is that it is often, if not almost always, **within and between organizations that the influential relationships that generate and distribute resources emerge and a local social order develops.** In organizations social actors develop and enact hierarchies of power and status, typically around categorical distinctions between roles, jobs, and people. We also negotiate local social orders, importing meaning, status, and power from our environments, and become aware of both local and global cultural and material constraints on meaning and action. The same processes happen between organizations in the negotiation over who has access to organizational roles, exchange opportunities, and opportunities to exploit or cooperate in markets. **There is no direct line from culture or social structure or markets to human behavior as all actions are produced in local social contexts.** It is organizations that make social life, both its cultural and material production, possible.<sup>2</sup>

In our model, **social relations are the corrective to individualistic determinism, and organizations are the antidote to market determinism.** The notion that we will reduce inequalities by imposing utopian “free markets” is a policy prescription to empower already powerful market actors. The historical correspondence of the rapid growth in income inequality with the political economic turn to “free-market” ideologies bears this out.

It is from these two premises that the rest of our theoretical argument flows. If organizations are the site of the social relations that generate distributional inequalities, they must create and obtain the resources to be distributed. Thus, **organizations must also be understood as resource pooling devices.** They accumulate and pool resources, including income and wealth

2. Obviously, there are other organizational forms which are powerful in ways similar to modern workplaces. Historically, we can point to families, tribes, clans, feudal estates, guilds, slave-based plantations, and **colonial occupations as alternative organizational forms.** All were constituted as sites of production and distribution and organized via power and status distinctions between categories of people and roles.

to be distributed, technology and know-how, and productive skills and capacities. Organizational resources can far exceed what people can acquire as individuals. This happens through a combination of people, technologies, and jobs producing reasonably stable social relationships to accomplish relatively complex tasks.

Through these relationships and tasks, as well as their relative power in market exchange, organizations accumulate the resources that people within them then make claims on. People apply for employment, demand raises, negotiate access to skills and training, and acquire shares of the profits. Within any particular organization some claims come to be recognized as legitimate. When faced with resistance to claims, actors may successfully mobilize discursive or collective power to compel that their claims be honored, validated, or respected. When facing powerful opponents, people often fail in their claims. Many claims are never made, are ignored, or are repressed because the cost and/or probability of failure is too high. When claims are endorsed by powerful others or power dynamics shift, resources are (re)distributed and new inequalities are generated.

These claims on organizational resources operate through the twin social mechanisms of exploitation and social closure (Tilly 1999). **Exploitation** occurs when more powerful actors materially benefit at the expense of less powerful actors, taking increased shares of the resources available in the organization or in exchanges between organizations and their suppliers, customers, or governments. Exploitation is the dynamic face of successful claims-making. **Social closure**, only partly in contrast, is the exclusion of some actors from participation in the organizational production of resources or from valuable organizational positions or opportunities with institutionalized claims on resources. **Closure typically has two faces: the reservation of opportunities for the in-group (opportunity hoarding) and the denial of opportunity to the out-group (exclusion).** Conversion from closure into exploitation and vice versa can be a short step. For example, the difference between no access to credit and access to credit with high interest rates is the conversion of closure into exploitation.

Central to RIT is that these processes are not a function of disembedded local social relations but that relationships are always embedded in larger fields of action. The field in which an organization exists selectively strengthens some claims over others. **Laws, markets, cultures, social movements, and practices copied from other organizations are all field-level resources for claims-making within organizations.** Which resources and categorical distinctions generate legitimacy and coercive power are both local relational and external institutional products. Who is in the in-group and who is in the out-group are historical products of particular societies, cultures, and interactional contexts. In Mark Granovetter's (2017) language, actors are simultaneously

relationally, structurally, and temporally embedded. As a result, while exploitation, social closure, and claims-making are generic mechanisms generating inequalities, the actual levels and distributions of inequalities are profoundly contingent on actors' response to, locations within, and interpretations of both their organizational and institutional fields.

We summarize our argument as follows. Resources are generated and pool in organizations. Actors with legitimated claims gain access to those resources. Some people and potential trading partners are denied access to organizational resources through processes of social closure. Others appropriate organizational resources based on their ability to exploit weaker actors in production and exchange relationships. Actors are more or less powerful in these claims-making processes to the extent that they have cultural, status, and material advantages in resource distributing relationships. These power generating resources tend to be associated with categorical distinctions such as ownership, occupation, gender, education, citizenship, race, and the like. Which categorical distinctions are the basis for claims-making are institutionally and organizationally variable. Organizational and institutional fields influence, but do not determine, action and opportunities. Rather, actors use cultural and other tools to invent local strategies of action.

We will use the rest of this book to unpack our argument and to provide empirical examples from our own and others' work. But first a few words on where we fit relative to other approaches to the study of inequality.

#### HOW ELSE DO SOCIAL SCIENTISTS THINK ABOUT INEQUALITY?

There are three general theoretical orientations in the social sciences that dominate the way social scientists practice and engage in the study of stratification and inequality: status attainment, human capital, and heterodox economics/political economy. Our criticism of these three is that none foregrounds the actual social relations and their organizational contexts that are the proximate causes of resource distributions.

Largely missing the inherently relational nature of inequality production, status attainment and human capital theories both focus on individual characteristics related to inequality outcomes. They also both sidestep the organizational space in which these relations play out, with the former fixating on a national occupational structure and the latter on markets. Political economy and heterodox economic approaches take more seriously some notion of social relations, typically organized around power relations, but tend to ignore organizations and treat those social relations within a uniform national political economic context. We will discuss each of these in turn and then return to our central focus on relational processes.

#### Status Attainment and Human Capital Theories

In sociology there is a robust tradition of *status attainment theory*, which focuses on the biographical resources people develop to be successful in a stratified society. In this approach there is a set of ranked employment positions, most commonly thought of in terms of occupations, constituting a stratification structure. This structure is understood to be produced by the societal division of labor. People have resources for accessing positions, most centrally education, but also ascribed statuses such as sex, race, or the social connections of one's parents and acquaintances. The great strength of status attainment sociology has been to explore the impact of families and schools on the development of individual capacities.

On the other hand, the status attainment approach takes for granted the employment structure of opportunity and asks how people are allocated across that structure. We do not. We see the generation of the opportunity structure as the generation of inequality, and status characteristics such as occupation, education, class, gender, and race as central to both the development of jobs and their associated rewards. In this way we hope to solve some of the issues raised in 1980 when James Baron and William Bielby critiqued status attainment theory and urged sociologists to bring the firm back into our conceptualization of inequalities.

For many years the status attainment perspective was silent on the relational context of inequality, preferring to explore questions about societal meritocracy, especially whether or not particular societies were becoming more meritocratic, rather than ascriptive, over time. This was a classic question of the modern, industrial era, one that the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1893) predicted must happen to preserve the legitimacy of inequality and prevent class conflict in an increasingly interconnected production system. Durkheim's, and the early status attainment researchers', functionalist assumption that this must happen has since been tempered by a more scientific investigation into where and when it is or is not happening.

In addition, status attainment theory has begun to adopt more relational ideas about cultural and social capital from social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1986). This turn recognizes that people's resources are not only in themselves but also in their social networks and social capital, as well as in their interactional capacities, or cultural capital. This is an important addition in that it reveals the relational, interactional processes that sort people into positions. We, of course, emphasize this relational approach in our model but embed it in durable social relationships (i.e., organizations) and extend it to not just the sorting of people into positions but the creation and valuation of those positions.

There has also been a clear movement in the status attainment literature toward theoretical accounts that stress the relational resources associated with employment. Le Grand and Tåhlén (2013) have argued that the striking similarity of occupational ranking across countries documented in earlier stratification analyses (e.g., Treiman 1977) reflects real workplace skill distinctions. Employers value skilled workers and pay them more than others. Weeden (2002) pointed out that some occupations (e.g., credentialled professions, skilled trades) extract more pay from their employers because they develop relationships with the state in the form of licensing or other restrictions on labor supply, thus increasing the workplace bargaining power of these workers. The idea that care work is devalued and so occupations with care responsibility are paid less also posits a gendered interactional process that generates inequalities in respect and pay (England and Folbre 1999). In these three accounts, while workplaces are typically not observed empirically, it is the social relations between employers and employees that are the theorized distributional mechanisms.

At its core though, status attainment is an approach to social inequality that highlights the sorting of individuals into national occupational structures. As such, it ignores what we take as the core arena of inequality generation: social relations within organizations.

If status attainment theory is the dominant framework in sociology, human capital theory is the historically dominant approach in economics. In many ways it is also currently the most influential theory of inequality in the social sciences more broadly, and it is used to both explain and legitimate the distribution of employment rewards. In the human capital approach individuals are thought to act like small firms, investing in their productive capacity, getting jobs based on those skill investments, and then getting paid for their contributions to production (Becker 1964). This is a reasonable account, except when people are not paid for their skills or are over- or underpaid relative to their contributions.

Human capital theory incorporates a simultaneously complex and restricted relational lens to explain why productivity is converted into rewards. There is a basic employment relationship between employers and employees, but market competition reduces all action in this relationship to a Pavlovian behavioral response to supply and demand. Employers are reduced to a set of skill preferences, while employees are reduced to their skill profiles.

The theory begins by imagining a world of market competition which ensures that employers fairly reward productivity and efficiency. In this world firms are embedded in competitive product markets. Any firm that does not maximize production efficiency will be outcompeted by other

firms and eventually die. Capitalists must care about productivity and do not have the luxury of making status distinctions or pursuing more purely social comparisons and evaluations.

At the same time, competition in labor markets is assumed to discipline employers to pay people what they are worth. Otherwise, workers will quit, taking their skills with them. In this account, employment relations are disciplined by these two competitive markets to focus on efficiency in production and fairness in pay and nothing else. The fact that human beings are social and generate meaning through social relationships in particular contexts has no place in this theory, which reduces the social world to an imaginary, largely asocial, and very powerful set of market contexts. In practice, human capital theorists often recognize that both product and labor market competition routinely fail to produce fair income distributions but treat these as temporary anomalies rather than the norm. RIT does the opposite, treating them as the norm rather than anomalies.

The theoretical linchpin in the human capital approach is the notion of productivity, but the evidence on the link between productivity and the distribution of resources is a weak one. Productivity turns out to be difficult to observe at the individual level (Bishop 1987), and its most common proxy, skill, is clearly a social construct influenced by the power and status of workers (Attewell 1990; Steinberg 1990). Even in organizations that attempt to identify and measure productivity we find both that different status groups can be evaluated differently for similar contributions (Mueller, Mulinge, and Glass 2002) and that they may receive different returns for similar levels of observed productivity (Castilla 2008). Thus, within workplaces productivity is relationally constructed, subject to categorical biases, and routinely contested. One argument we make in this book is that it is more appropriate to think of standard human capital indicators of productivity, such as education and experience, as proxies for claims-making resources or status expectations, rather than mechanical contributors to an organization's productivity or a person's earnings.

Do not mistake us for arguing that markets do not matter. We do think markets are often field-level constraints on organizational behavior, but we see them as one among many. Labor relations organized around efficiency and productivity exist, but firms are also inequality regimes with cultural and institutional practices, status hierarchies, and the routine cognitive limitations of the normal people who work within them. Even in competitive markets, competitors are the same human animals whose cognitive capacities are channeled by past experiences and whose current choices adjust to relationships and opportunity structures. There is no such thing as an asocial, competitive market or organization (Zelizer 2007). In fact, rational productivity-centered efficiency is just as likely to be the product

of professional or cultural norms as it is of competitive product market pressures (Nee and Swedberg 2007).

Some labor economists have come to recognize the importance of firm variation in wage-setting. This realization largely follows the availability of administrative data produced by national governments that has allowed them to study how earnings distributions are linked to both individual and organizational traits. Early research in this vein documented the substantial autonomy of organizational wage-setting from individual human capital (Abowd and Kramarz 1999). As this literature has developed some labor economists have come to understand that firms reward human capital in complex ways inconsistent with the model of a single labor market, that wages reflect not only individual but also firm productivity, and that firms producing the same product have wide variations in their productivity (Card et al. 2018). In this book we make a great deal of use of this more recent move to bring the firm back into labor economics.

Both status attainment and human capital theory, in their original forms, are normatively attractive to modern observers in their emphasis on productivity and merit as the primary or eventual mechanisms for distributing resources. Both have the same solution to inequalities—increase investments in education and reduce ascriptive biases around gender, race, and the like. They are optimistic theories. They may even be aspirational theories, telling us stories of which institutions and distinctions we might want to nurture and which we should extinguish. But even here, we should heed Daniel Bell's (1972) warning against embracing "unjust meritocracy" in which the educated or skilled profit at everyone else's expense.

While normatively interesting, these two accounts are not particularly accurate as empirical theories. Nor do either of them routinely theorize the role of institutions or social relations. Rather, like the blind man who mistakes the elephant's tail for a snake, each has discovered one aspect of inequality and mistaken it for the generative whole. At the same time, both status attainment sociologists and human capital labor economists are moving toward a more relational perspective. Sociologists are developing relational models at the individual level, and economists have discovered the importance of the firm. The value added by RIT for both sets of social scientists is the provision of an integrated framework to help bring the larger inequality elephant into focus and develop explanations for both its evolution and its variability.

#### Economics: Conventional and Heterodox

Conventional macroeconomics is the most influential academic discipline in the policymaking world. Conventional macroeconomic models

have developed primarily to explain and even solve the problem of economic growth, either ignoring inequality or assuming that growth will solve inequality problems (e.g., Lucas 2004). The real inequality problem for conventional macroeconomics is the standard of living, and the primary solution is to raise the standard of living of everyone through economic growth and higher productivity. Because these economists begin with the assumption of perfect competition in product and labor markets, the relative power of labor and capital, of various types of labor and of various organizational forms of firms, is assumed away. What remains is technological change and the crucial role of competition in markets to produce societal growth in efficiency, productivity, and total national income.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, much of the theoretical underpinning of conventional economic thinking has assumed the autonomy of the economy from the social. Social ties between trading partners are suspected to be deviations from free competition and rational calculation, allowing collusion and emotion to derail the efficient, power-free action of markets. In contrast, it is clear to us that the economy is always social. Markets are created with moralities (Zelizer 1979), embedded social ties of friendship and trust encourage trade (Granovetter 1985), arms-length relationships permit exploitation (Uzzi 1996), and all trade is strongly conditioned by the normative, power, and legal structures of organizational fields (Fligstein 2002). In Fred Wherry's terms, all markets have cultures (2012). From Harrison White's perspective all markets are networks of positive and negative social relationships (2002).

Heterodox economists, in contrast to their more influential colleagues, tend to begin with the assumption that markets are imperfect and infused with power imbalances. Thus, the relative bargaining power of various actors is an empirical question and is generally assumed to be important, at least to some extent. They have also preserved a focus on institutions and distribution, the latter typically rooted in the relative power of capital and labor.<sup>4</sup> RIT is largely consistent with this approach but goes further, emphasizing

3. By *conventional economics*, we are referring primarily to neoclassical economic theory, the associated deductive theorems and mathematical project (see for examples Becker 1976 and Friedman 2009).

4. In many ways this description masks the valuable heterogeneity among heterodox economists, who include post-Keynesian, institutionalist, feminist, and Marxian economists. What tends to unite these disparate approaches is a rejection of the more extreme assumptions of mainstream economics and a recognition of the role of power in economic life as well as the importance of social and political institutions (Lee 2009). Here we should also note that heterodox economist Nancy Folbre (2016) is exploring the intersection of RIT and labor economics.

the relative power of all actors in production and, of course, focusing on the particularly central role of organizations.

A prominent heterodox example is the recent work of Thomas Piketty. His 2014 book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* argues that capital tends to get higher rates of return than labor on its investment, so over time the natural outcome of capitalism is increased concentration of wealth in the hands of the wealthy and their descendants. This account has been particularly influential in that it corresponds to the great concentrations of wealth and the high shares of national wealth accumulated by the top rungs of society both during the initial growth of capitalism and again in the contemporary world. This account is simple in its assumptions, is critical of inequality in its argument, and bears a family resemblance to Marxian expectations about the concentration of wealth in the hands of the owners of capital. Although the Piketty account lacks social relations and firms are never mentioned, it does focus on production as the source of earnings and wealth, and sees the relative power of capital and labor to be central drivers of the distribution of new production. The great wealth of the top 0.1% of the world's population is always rooted in the ownership or control of some firm (or in a few instances whole countries).

On the other hand, Piketty's theory is even weaker than status attainment theory in that institutions, culture, and all status distinctions other than capital and labor are largely absent. Instead, an abstract idea—capitalism—is taken to have historically invariant laws. One thing we will see in this book is that there is a great deal of variety in inequality regimes within and between capitalist societies and that variety is precisely about the institutional fields, both societal and in production, that generate categorical distinctions, enable resource accumulation, and legitimate claims on those resources.

### Institutional Political Economy

In political science and sociology, as well as elsewhere in the social sciences, there are also political economy traditions which focus on the role of the state and legal institutions in generating national differences in patterns of inequality. We share with these approaches a focus on the importance of institutions for creating the fields of action in which inequalities are generated. National labor market institutions set limits on exploitation and closure mechanisms at the firm level (e.g., Hall and Sokice 2001). National welfare state institutions transfer income and provide services to households, often reducing inequalities produced by the set of jobs produced in the economy and at the same time increasing the bargaining power of employees (e.g., Esping-Andersen 2013). Gender inequalities vary with a country's

support of families, women in particular, and gendered cultural expectations (e.g., Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012). These approaches share a common focus on national variation in the political and cultural processes that generate cross-country variation in laws and practices (Brady 2009). Comparative political economy is very clear in pointing out that inequalities vary dramatically across countries as a function of national institutions. Our contribution is to examine how these institutions are filtered through organizational relations and locally negotiated social orders. It is to these relationships that we turn next.

### THINKING RELATIONALLY

Our core claim is that inequality must be understood through a relational lens. Relational accounts of social life can be difficult to grasp. Most people understand the world through narratives that give priority to self-conscious choices, decisive leaders, and the tension between individual wisdom and foolishness. Most of the social sciences succumbed at least in part to this individualistic tendency during the mid-twentieth century, with cultural anthropology perhaps being the sole holdout. Status attainment theory and human capital theory are both representative of this individualistic focus.

Late twentieth century economic theory adopted a questionable model of economic behavior that has often been adopted in both economic policy and cultural accounts. *Homo economicus*, the imaginary actor in formal economic theory, is a rational, cognitively powerful, utility maximizer. She is smart, calculative, and out for herself. This imaginary person has been useful for theory building and central to the mathematics of twentieth century economics. When *Homo economicus* is placed in an imaginary world of competitive labor and product markets, in societies that defend property rights, investments in physical and human capital produce gains in production and fair distributions of its fruits. *Homo economicus* was invented and promoted partly to make the deductive scientific system work, but she has no basis in what we know about how real human beings tend to behave.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, *Homo sociologicus* understands and navigates her world through culture and relationships. She can be self-seeking, but she is also always other-regarding. She can be calculative but also habitual and emotional. She lives in a world not of perfect competition but of status and power imbalances interpreted through cultural and relational lenses. She

5. In general, academic economists are moving away from this stylized view of *Homo economicus*, but we agree with Granovetter (2017) that it remains as the orienting hypothesis in much analysis in economics.

lives in a world of negotiated social orders (Fine 2010). It is the *Homo sociologicus* model of actors and action that we draw on in this book. One downside of building a theory around this model of action embedded in a field of often contradictory and power infused institutions is that there is no simple mathematical solution to the problem of income generation and distribution. Rather, our model predicts considerable complexity in the social configurations that produce inequalities. The crucial advantage of our *Homo sociologicus* understanding of behavior and institutions over the *Homo economicus* model is that it more nearly resembles the real world created by living, breathing, thinking people.

The assumption that social causes inhere in individuals, rather than social relationships, is simply wrong. What makes social life social is not individuals but the relationships among them. Friendships, family ties, workplace divisions of labor, and shared identities—these are the relationships that create social organization. In this book we are particularly concerned with inequalities between people, especially as they are created via some enduring social relations. We focus on workplace inequalities because in contemporary societies most inequalities are generated through the relationships in and around workplaces.

A common mistake in social science, as in life, is to assume that the distribution of resources reflects individual essences or intentions.<sup>6</sup> In somewhat more sophisticated sociological accounts, inequalities are thought to inhere in positions. Both approaches miss the causal logic of relationships. Production is not the sum of individuals or even occupations but of a division of labor that joins people and jobs together relationally in a joint set of tasks. **A workplace is not simply a set of individual employees, but rather it is a set of relationships between people, organized in terms of tasks, authority, skills, status characteristics, and jobs. These relationships are then interpreted and negotiated through cultural lenses.** The work gets done not because the people have intentions but because they have relationships in terms of the tasks to be accomplished. It is true that their pay to some extent is tied to the position they occupy, but even that pay schedule is derived from current and past relationships.

The basic argument of this book is that if we want to understand the generation of inequalities, we need to focus on the relationships between people, positions, and organizations, rather than individual essences or intentions. Obviously, individuals' bodies, personalities, and intentions

<sup>6</sup> Emirbayer (1997), following Bourdieu (1977), makes the distinction between substantialist and relational analyses. In the former, we examine the correlations among things, attributes of objects, or people. In the latter, we begin by asking about the relationships among things or actors and privilege the analysis of transactions between actors.

influence relationships. In fact, they often represent important information incorporated into relationships. Because we think categorically, our brains typically search for distinction in order to produce a relationship. Is this person a friend or a stranger? A man or a woman? Educated or not? A full-time or part-time or temporary worker? A manager or worker? Owner or employee? These categorical distinctions are the bedrock of relationships. They are the moral frontiers we use to allocate respect and reward, to justify exploitation and exclusion. Thus, in some ways, this book should be familiar. We will talk about managers and workers, men and women, ethnic minority and majority, the credentialed and the uncredentialed. But we will insist on talking about them as relationships between people in some organizational context.

We will also talk about intentionality. The fundamental mechanisms for producing inequality are exploitation, social closure, and claims-making. Each of these depends on making categorical distinctions between types of people and then expropriating or reserving resources for the advantaged group. This can be intentional. It can be produced according to a plan devised by the powerful or challenged by insurgents. But intentions are never sufficient. There must also be acquiescence by the exploited and excluded or by third-party bystanders. This acquiescence may be a conscious decision not to fight or resist, but it may also reflect a local or cultural legitimacy to the ranking of categories or people or finally resignation in the face of current pain or promised punishment. Third parties may be unwilling to challenge unjust inequities for fear of reprisal or ridicule. Third parties may not even understand relationships as exclusionary or exploitative because their associated categorical distinctions preclude empathy.

While intentionality may matter, so too do unreflective social psychological processes associated with the legitimization of status hierarchies. Much contemporary inequality is produced via the monopolization of good jobs or the ownership of monopolistic firms. Most of this is legitimated by selection procedures, training decisions, and pay practices, all of which draw attention to the essences of incumbents, jobs, and firms, not the relational causal processes that originally produced the pay schedules and status-based sorting of people into jobs or the market success of firms.

When Charles Tilly published *Durable Inequality* in 1999 relational theorizing in the social sciences was beginning to be re-established. Status expectations theory in sociological social psychology had firmly located the production of status hierarchies in social interaction, rather than culture or individuals. Class theory had rediscovered the importance of social capital and cultural capital in producing individual advantages. Social network researchers had established that most people found jobs through social ties

and asserted that social structure was really just a set of enduring social relationships. Gender theorists had embraced the realization that gender is an interactional accomplishment, rather than a stable biological or even social trait. Some stratification researchers had realized that the value of positions was not simply about structural skill or prestige but also about how jobs assumed gendered or racialized or classed value in local interactional contexts. Since then relational inequality theorizing and research has established itself as a leading alternative to individual-level human capital or status attainment thinking. Importantly, because of its focus on relationships, not essences, RIT is compatible with the relational basis of causality in everyday life and supported by the rich array of qualitative work on how inequalities are produced in practice. We will draw on much of that work across this book.<sup>7</sup>

#### PLAN OF THE BOOK

We begin with methodological and theoretical overviews of our approach, followed by a chapter illustrating the rich variety of organizational inequality regimes that become visible via the RIT lens. The middle of the book takes the three generic mechanisms in turn, providing conceptual definitions and then empirical examples. We end the book with a look at the scientific and policy implications of the RIT model. We first do this with a chapter on how RIT fits into debates over the role of organizations in the dramatic growth of US income inequality since the 1970s. The final chapter looks into the more general social scientific and political implications of RIT. While we intend the book to be read as a whole, we have also written it to allow each chapter to stand alone. Each chapter tackles a central concept within our theory and so can be read as a deep dive into that particular concept connected to the larger theoretical project of RIT.

Chapter 2 explores the methodological approaches that we think assist social scientists in observing the social relations that undergird the inequalities we seek to explain. We begin with an intellectual history of inequality research in sociology, answering the question of “what went wrong” scientifically in this field. This chapter highlights comparative organizational research as offering particularly fruitful research designs for studying

<sup>7</sup> Emily Erikson (2013) has outlined clear distinctions between two types of research in relational sociology—formalism and relationalism. Formalism focuses on the formal structure of relationships and sees these as preceding and determining social life. Relationalism, in contrast, focuses on the content of social ties and how they operate in cultural and institutional contexts. We take the latter approach.

relational inequalities. Such research designs enable focused comparisons of the social relations across organizations, enabling researchers to compare either qualitatively or quantitatively the link between the dynamics of social relations and inequality outcomes within organizations. This chapter highlights two empirical exemplars in the study of inequality. The first is our own quantitative comparison of class inequalities in US and Australian workplaces. The second is Katherine Kellogg’s (2011) qualitative comparison of the struggles over professional training and gender among surgeons in three teaching hospitals. We conclude the chapter with an examination of the development of qualitative and quantitative comparative research designs from existing ethnographic work.

In Chapter 3 we outline the basic conceptual components of RIT and their interrelations. We lay out the basic building blocks of our account: categorization and the intersection of categorical distinctions, organizations, exploitation, social closure, claims-making, and organizational fields and institutions. Both Chapters 2 and 3 give the reader the tools necessary to think through the empirical and theoretical content and examples we detail in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 4–7 detail each of the core conceptual components and the empirical evidence that underlies them. Chapter 4 describes organizations internally as inequality regimes in their own right, highlighting the variability in inequality regimes that exist across organizations. It presents qualitative, quantitative, and historical examples of inequality regime variation in the United States, Japan, Germany, Mexico, and Sweden for gender, education, citizenship, race, and class. This chapter stresses the importance of institutional context, organizational practices, and negotiated orders, as well as intersectional dynamics for the constitution of inequality regimes. Chapters 5–7 take the specific inequality-generating mechanisms—exploitation, social closure, and claims-making—and develop each in greater theoretical and empirical depth. We again take the reader through quantitative and qualitative evidence, providing numerous cases, comparatively when possible, to convince the reader of the plausibility of these mechanisms as generative of inequality within organizations.

Chapters 4–7 have been written so that each potentially stands alone. Exploitation (Chapter 5) and social closure (Chapter 6) will be familiar ideas to many sociologists. The inequality regimes (Chapter 4) and claims-making (Chapter 7) chapters are more innovative contributions within the theory. Neither has been developed in depth in prior relational inequality work. The claims-making chapter also links our work with basic sociological social psychology and cultural theories.

Chapter 8 brings the intraorganizational conceptualization of RIT into dialogue with interorganizational dynamics. In particular, we emphasize the

role of market power in inequality dynamics and the recent discovery that the growth of distributional inequality since the late 1970s in the United States and many other countries has largely been about growing inequality between organizations. The trend here is that powerful firms in many countries are reorganizing themselves in order to hoard income for an increasingly smaller and more homogenous set of high-earning employees and owners. While it is still the case that the bulk of distributional inequality is within firms, in many countries if RIT is a useful theory of inequality, it now needs to speak to relationships between organizations.

In Chapter 9 we conclude with a discussion of the theoretical, methodological, and political implications of RIT. For social scientists, we advocate the use of relational thinking, field-level notions of causality, and the power of organizational comparisons for documenting and understanding inequality generation. In particular, we discuss the plausibility of a political movement toward universalism that erodes historically defined categorical distinctions within organizations.

In Chapter 9 we also strongly reject market fundamentalist policy prescriptions with their near religious focus on competitive markets and economic growth. We propose in their stead a simple policy goal of increasing human dignity via reducing the power of categorical distinctions to channel resources. We outline three general mechanisms that will move us in this direction: evolving from tribalism to universalism, from hierarchy to citizenship, and from markets to human dignity.

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## 2

### Observing Inequalities<sup>1</sup>

Core to our argument is that by failing to observe inequality through relational and organizational lenses, social scientists have developed an excessively homogenous view of what inequalities actually look like. The failure to observe inequality comparatively makes the actual variation in workplace inequalities invisible. Social scientists worried about societal gender wage gaps or economic returns to education or immigrant group assimilation have failed to realize that there are almost as many gender wage gaps as organizations, that education takes on different meanings and receives different rewards across workplaces, and that immigrants are welcomed in some workplaces but shunned in others. In this chapter, we point researchers toward methodologies for incorporating this variation to explain the convergences and divergences of inequality within and between organizations.

Our theoretical conception of workplace inequalities has led us to embrace the idea that each organization is an inequality regime in its own right.<sup>2</sup> By *inequality regime* we are referring to the knitting of the cultural and material architecture of workplaces with the distribution of respect, resources, and rewards. Each organization exhibits its own intersection between status characteristics such as gender, race, and education among actors, positional hierarchies of power, status, and skill in the local division of labor, and cultural understandings of how to navigate local claims on dignity and rewards. These combine together to produce particular inequality regimes. We do not see this variation in inequality regimes as random but rather as organized by the cultural and material resources available in particular workplaces to define what seems possible, steering actors' behaviors

1. We published an earlier version of this chapter in 2016 as "Observing Organizational Inequality Regimes" *Research in the Sociology of Work* 28: 187–212.

2. The idea of inequality regime was proposed by Joan Acker (2006) and utilized extensively in our earlier work (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). Acker's insight was that the knitting of class, race, gender, divisions of labor, and local culture produced self-legitimizing inequality systems. In our work we stress the potential empirical variation produced by the autonomy of the local. We return to this idea in more depth in Chapter 4.

**Relational Inequalities**  
An Organizational Approach

Donald Tomaskovic-Devey  
Dustin Avent-Holt

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