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The Relational Generation of Workplace Inequalities

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Abstract

In this article, I outline a dynamic, relational theory of workplace inequalities. I begin with the basic model offered by Charles Tilly in *Durable Inequality* that categorical distinctions, such as gender or education, are mapped, exaggerated, and naturalized within organizational divisions of labor. This argument is attractive in the generality and simplicity of its causal account, yet fairly weak in specifying (1) core organizational processes, (2) the micro-foundations and interactions that generate inequalities, and (3) the potential of intersectional dynamics to disrupt the durability of categorical inequalities. I offer an integrated interactional-organizational-institutional perspective on the relational processes that generate inequalities.

Keywords

inequality, poverty and mobility, organizations, occupations, work, race, gender, class, economic sociology

How are organizational inequalities generated? Why do some people get paid less and others more? Why are some people treated with respect and others as inconsequential? Why do these inequalities endure over time and spread across contexts? Under what conditions are past inequalities eroded and replaced with new hierarchies? My aim in this article is to present a model of inequality generation that can answer these types of questions. The model I develop stresses the relational generation of inequalities, the central role of organizations in producing those inequalities, and the dynamism produced by intersectional contexts.

I build upon the relational inequality model proposed by Charles Tilly in *Durable Inequality* (1998), operationalized in my prior work with Dustin Avent-Holt and elaborated upon by a network of scholars developing a linked set of ideas around the relational production of organizational inequality (see especially Roscigno and Wilson 2013, Wilson and Roscigno 2013). This work focuses on the role of social relationships, both between people and positions within organizational contexts, as the proximate causes of inequalities in access to respect, resources, and rewards. Relational inequality scholars share a focus on how categorical distinctions, when wed to organizational divisions of labor, become the interactional bases for moral evaluation, exclusion from opportunities, and exploitation of effort and value.

I make three contributions to this literature here. First, I add two core organizational processes neglected in prior theorizing—resource pooling and claims-making—to the more familiar mechanisms of opportunity hoarding and exploitation. Second, I build a social-psychological foundation under relational

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inequality thinking. Finally, I show that the categorical emphasis in relational inequality theorizing is fruitfully amended by a recognition of the intersectional processes that actually generate inequality in interaction. Intersectional thinking reveals both complexity at the level of interaction and the flexibility of categorical distinctions in historical context. While Tilly emphasized the durability of categorical inequalities, my model reveals their complexity, contingency, and resulting mutability.

I begin by outlining Tilly's contribution and the importance of having an organizational lens if we are to understand the generation of inequality. I focus specifically on four basic organizational inequality mechanisms. Two of these—resource pooling and claims-making—have been neglected in prior work. Two are familiar—opportunity hoarding and exploitation—but require some elaboration to be more scientifically useful. In the third section, I develop the implications of social psychology for relational inequality theorizing, stressing the cognitive bases of distinction, the creation of status expectations in interaction, and the dramaturgical production of inequality. Finally, I make clear that while we cognitively produce inequalities categorically, we actually interact intersectionally. Much of the dynamics in systems of inequality derive from intersectional contexts. I conclude with a short summary of the model and a discussion of methodological implications.

Thinking Relationally and Organizationally

Inequality is *not* lodged in positions, occupations, or even jobs but in the relationships between positions within organizations. Managerial jobs derive their authority from resources provided by their superiors and the deference of their subordinates. The skills of mechanics are relative to those of production workers. The respect afforded a dishwasher is produced in interaction with cooks, waitresses, and owners. The harassment of a newly hired electrical engineer comes from her coworkers or customers or bosses.

Inequalities are similarly *not* lodged in people, races, or genders but in the relationships between people and between status categories. Skilled workers are only skilled in particular organizational divisions of labor. Skill and effort must be recognized and validated by others in order to be the basis for claims on respect or income. Ethnic minorities require ethnic majorities, men–women, and capitalists–workers. It is the relations between people and positions that generate the power, status, and selves that appear to be traits of individuals and jobs.

Charles Tilly's *Durable Inequality* (1998) is typically identified as the work that brought a relational lens on inequality into focus. He described inequality generation as a process in which actors contend over the distribution of organizational value. He identified two primary inequality-generating mechanisms: exploitation, where some actors extract value from the work efforts of others, and opportunity hoarding, where actors monopolize valuable positions or resources for themselves and similar others. Opportunity hoarding is also referred to as social closure in much of the literature (e.g., Parkin 1979; Weber [1921] 1968). He also identified two mechanisms that propagate particular categorical inequalities. The first is the adaptation of actors to an inequality order. The second is the institutional copying of inequality practices across organizations. Adaptation produces acquiescence at the level of actors. Copying spreads practices across organizations, creating institutions and organizational fields. Both legitimate particular inequality-generating practices. The big, durable inequalities such as gender, race, and class are overdetermined in the sense that they are created interactionally, inscribed organizationally, and embedded in the structure and culture of societies (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Risman 2004). My contention is that it is their inscription in organizations that give these distinctions both their material consequences and durable character. Indeed, organizations are not neutral vessels but rather are inequality regimes embedded in social structures and populated by culturally infused people.

Central to Tilly's approach is the assertion that categorical differences between actors increase the likelihood and reduce the cost of installing inequality. The conclusion that actors create and use categorical distinctions to pursue individual and collective agendas to (re)produce inequality is widespread in social theory. In addition to Tilly (1998), we can point to Glenn (2002) on the relational and historically bounded nature of class, race, and gender; Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) on classification struggles; Abbott (2005) on jurisdictional claims; Lamont and Fournier (1992) on moral boundary work; and Ridgeway (2011) on categorical status expectations. Salient categorical social distinctions are the lens through which we observe moral worthiness, and thus these distinctions justify both exploitation and opportunity hoarding (Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Some categorical distinctions will be built around production processes. Specific divisions of labor produce unique jobs whose content and meaning is defined within the labor process. Other categorical distinctions will be imported into the organization and embedded in routine practices. Citizenship, race, class, gender, ethnicity, and educational credentials are among the distinctions that often become salient bases of workplace distinction. Mapping imported categorical distinctions onto internal divisions of labor magnifies the inequality that either alone would produce (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2009).

Tilly's (1998) insistence that organizations produced durable inequalities can be seen as contrasting with more individualist (e.g., Blau and Duncan 1967) or societal (e.g., Esping-Andersen 1990) approaches. As far back as 1980, James Baron and William Bielby scolded sociologists of inequality for an excessive focus on individual and societal status attainment. They pointed out that the generation of jobs, their rewards and resources, their relationships in divisions of labor, and the flow of money all happened in organizations. For sociologists who study inequality and stratification, this organizational insight has taken hold only slowly.[1]

While individual occupational and earnings analyses are often hampered by their lack of embedding in particular workplaces, there has been a clear movement in the stratification literature toward theoretical accounts that stress the relational resources associated with employment. Le Grand and Tåhlin (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., 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 all three accounts, while workplaces are typically not observed, it is the social relations between employers and employees that are the theorized distributional mechanism.

The labor process tradition in the sociology of work has long understood that the social and technical relations of production produce divisions of labor, transmit power, and allocate rewards (see, e.g., Vallas 2012). It is in these social relations that we can most fruitfully observe and describe the processes and mechanisms that generate inequality. To do so, however, requires conceptualizing organizations as a more or less bounded network of social relations. The borders between the array of employees, owners, suppliers, and customers are porous, and so who is in and who is outside of the organization is a dynamic aspect of this set of relationships. Nevertheless, in the medium term, organizations tend to have durable sets of positions organized around technology, space, authority, and tasks (Tilly and Tilly 1998). The organizational division of labor is the architecture of production, distribution, and interaction. Roles, positions, and jobs make sense relative to each other.

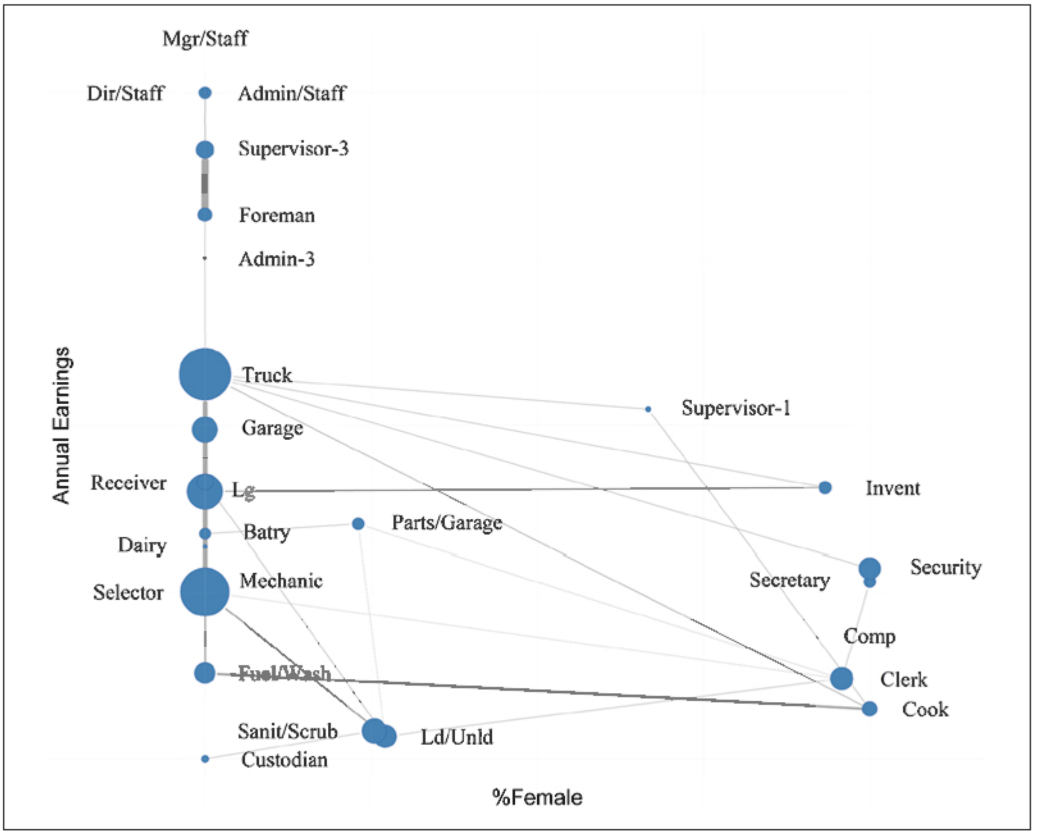

Figure 1. Network diagram of a workplace inequality regime.

Work gets done by the transmission of materials, products, information, commands, coercion, harassment, trust, and respect between actors in and around the production process. While people come and go, the basic relational structure tends to be durable (Starbuck 1983).

One of the most powerful ideas that have developed in the organizational inequality literature is that each organization represents an inequality regime—a regime comprised of the job, class, and status-based social relations within the organization; practices both formal and informal; and cultural models of people, work, and inequality imported from the society at large (Acker 2006; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). This notion of organizations rejects the image of organizations as empty positions, rational bureaucracies, or efficiency-obsessed capitalist firms (Roscigno 2011). The degree to which efficiency, competitive, bureaucratic, and racialized or gendered habits are embedded in organizational practices is an outcome of the organization's particular history.

Figure 1 is an illustration of a real workplace conceptualized in these terms. Each node is a job; each line is the relationship between jobs created by the movement of one or more employees between jobs over a seven-year period. Larger jobs have many incumbents, smaller ones only one or two. Some jobs are tied directly to many other jobs, others are more isolated. The *x*-axis ranks jobs on their sex composition. Most jobs are either all male or all female; there are more male than female jobs, and few jobs are sex integrated. The *y*-axis ranks jobs on their pay. Male jobs reach higher into the pay distribution and show a tall orderly internal labor market that reaches right into the management ranks. Mixed jobs are rare but include the lowest supervisory level, which is predominantly female. Although, there has been quite a bit of movement between male and female jobs over the observation period, the structure remains almost completely sex segregated because those gender-integrated job matches did not endure.

Of course, inequality regimes are more complex than the intersection of earnings, gender, and job mobility. Jobs also vary in their race and immigrant composition, skill levels, organizational tenure, and formal authority. There are also social ties other than mobility that are likely to be consequential, such as informal friendship networks, shared department, and the like. The bigger point is that jobs vary in their categorical resources relative to each other as well as in their material and social rewards. These relationships are the terrain across which effort, coercion, respect, command, production, and mobility are enacted.

Organizational Inequality Mechanisms

Tilly identified two primary mechanisms for distributing inequality—exploitation and opportunity hoarding. Yet, there is a third prior mechanism that has been largely ignored in contemporary sociology, namely, the generation of resources to be distributed, which I refer to as *resource pooling*. There is also a fourth mechanism that needs to be made explicit—namely, *claims-making*. These two mechanisms help us link durable inequalities to organizational environments as well as to what people actually do with each other.

Resource Pooling

Because that's where the money is.

—Willy Sutton on why he robbed banks

There is no inequality without a scarce resource to be distributed. Organizations are resource-pooling units. They generate income streams, which are then the targets of claims-making, exploitation, and opportunity hoarding. They also generate organizational cultures in which respect and dignity are unequally available. While the sociology of work has paid sustained attention to the distribution and dynamics of intrinsic rewards and access to respect, skill, and security (e.g., Braverman 1974; Hodson 2001; Kalleberg 2011), the stratification literature has tended to take for granted the source of material and psychic rewards.

The source of material value to be distributed to organizational members is the flow of money into organizations. This idea was clearly present in Marx's account of the generation of surplus in production as the resource that organizations distributed. Human capital theory in economics also identifies the value accumulated from the sale of goods or services as the material basis for earnings distributed to actors in production (Becker 1962). Following the same insight, Joan Acker (2006) places class relations in production at the center of her notion of inequality regimes. Once resources enter an organization, they are distributed externally to pay for material and service inputs from suppliers. The residual income is a resource to be distributed to actors with claims on the organization's surplus.

Organizations vary in their productivity as a function of internal social and technical divisions of labor, skills embedded in workers, jobs, work groups, and technologies, as well as in the quality of coordination among roles (Becker 1962; Hodson 2002; Rubin and Brody 2011). But organizations actually accumulate income based on the sale of goods. This is not simply a reflection of the value produced by people in the organization but is about the value for which organizations can sell their products. In both neoclassical economic and Marxian economic theory, the volume of surplus value produced is a function of organizational productivity but only because sales price is assumed to be disciplined by product market competition to reflect only the value added in production.

The assumption that product markets are "competitive" is, however, inconsistent with what we really know about markets. Product markets are segmented networks of social relations among suppliers and customers. Firms manage competition by locating in protected niches (White 2002). Social trust among trading partners is a prerequisite for trade under uncertainty and is used to manage prices (Ferrary, 2003; Uzzi 1999; Uzzi and Lancaster 2004). Additionally, all markets are structured by the state in terms of who can produce and exchange and under what conditions, leading to great variation in the degree to which markets can be described as competitive (Fligstein 2001). Markets are not invisible hands but rather network structures, relationships between actors embedded in institutional space. Firms that are powerful in their exchange relationships extract higher prices from their customers and lower prices from their suppliers (Burt 1983), manipulate prices (Baker and Faulkner 1993), or simply cheat or absorb their suppliers or customers (Williamson 1981). Really powerful firms can influence the legal and normative environment in which they operate (Fligstein 2001; Tomaskovic-Devey and Lin 2011). Thus, organizational resource pools reflect both collective productivity within firms and the relative power of firms in product markets.

The flow of resources into organizations is a fundamental constraint on both the existence of the organization and its internal reward structure. It is these resources that actors attempt to exploit and opportunity hoard. Claims-making is the process through which this takes place.

Claims-making

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.
>
> —Marx and Engels ([1848] 1978)

Claims for respect, resources, and rewards are central to the generation of inequalities. The resources accumulated by an organization are distributed to actors who make successful claims on those resources. Owners, stock holders, executives, various categories of employees, debt holders, and the state make claims on resources. It is this dynamic process of claims-making that distributes organizational resources.

Claims-making is embedded in social relations and so reflects the power and status dynamics in those relationships. Owners' claims are strongly tied to property rights, which gives them power over surplus as well as investment decisions. Class-linked status hierarchies reinforce these legal claims. Employees' claims are commonly based on task competence. Job applications are claims of competence in doing the job. Finishing a task and reporting to your supervisor is a claim on respect and moral worth. Competing for a promotion or a raise is a claim of superior performance relative to others. Unionizing a workforce or professionalizing an occupation are collective claims. Workers with collective power use that power to garner some combination of respect, resources, and rewards, including a larger share of the resource pool, employment security, and autonomy from supervision. Groups collectively organize across organizations to make claims on the state in the form of law, regulation, or taxation.

Dustin Avent-Holt and I have described claims-making as a two-step process (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013). First, one actor makes a claim. Claims can be explicit, such as applying for a job, expecting to be treated similarly to coworkers, requesting a raise, or in the case of unions, bargaining the terms and conditions of employment. Claims can also be embedded in taken-for-granted practices, such as the standard wage attached to jobs or management-initiated salary increases. When influential actors recognize the claim, they direct resources or rewards to the claim-making actor. More powerful and persuasive actors will tend to make more and more ambitious claims and garner both more respect and rewards.

In constructing claims, actors mobilize locally legitimate cultural frames to articulate why they, or someone else, are more or less deserving. These resources will serve them best to the extent they are understood and legitimately accepted by other actors in the organization. In addition to basic task competence, categorical distinctions associated with position (Tilly 1998), field-specific symbolic capital (Özbilgin and Tatli 2011), and status expectations (Ridgeway 1997) should all be expected to be influential in determining the frequency of claims and their legitimacy as viewed by powerful actors.

Locally low status individuals and groups will make fewer claims on respect and resources and their claims are less likely to be ratified by more powerful actors. For example, in a study of Swedish college graduate job applicants, Jenny Säve-Söderbergh found that women propose lower starting wages than men. While Swedish employers discount all wage claims irrespective of gender, at higher wage levels, they discount women's bids more than men's (Säve-Söderbergh 2003; see also Correll 2001). So gender impacts the content of the original claim as well as its legitimacy when women make ambitious claims. Other research finds that even in organizations that attempt to identify and measure productivity directly, status groups can be evaluated differently for similar contributions (Mueller, Mulinge, and Glass 2002) or receive different rewards for similar evaluations (Castilla 2008). External labor market demand is also a frequent basis for claims-making (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013), although Nelson and Bridges (1999) show that such market claims need merely be plausible, not true, to be influential.

The ability to make a specific claim is conditioned by how local social relations limit what can be imagined as possible. Steven Vallas reports such a cognitive barrier in this comment by a union leader (reflecting on an earlier period of union strength):

> Referring to this period of material gains, one former union official recalled, "We almost ran out of things to ask for. I mean, what'd we want, our pants cleaned and pressed for us?" Like many others in his position, this man viewed management prerogatives as unalterable facts of economic life. (Vallas 1993: p. 190)

Even in a historical context where workers were relatively powerful, claims were limited to what can be contemplated—material resources and were limited by the assumption of management's prerogative over control of the labor process.

That skill is a social construction is well recognized in the labor process literature (e.g., Attewell 1990). The definition of skill can be actively contested as part of the claims-making process. In Tom Juravich's study of a wire harness manufacturing plant, managers actively denied the existence of the skills needed by workers to do their jobs (Juravich 1985). Steve Vallas (2006) observes engineers attempting to monopolize control over the production process by claiming centrality to the process of configuring work. In doing so, they marginalize technicians who can, in fact, perform the work. In this case, the professional skills of engineers are not required to do the work but are used to claim jurisdictional control over the production process.

One can think of claims as an ideological and political process that reaches far beyond individual workplaces as well. The political movement for comparable worth in the United States was precisely an attempt to value women's skills equivalently to those of men (Steinberg 1990). Caroline Hanley (2013) documents the conversion of skill from something understood as a result of production of particular goods or services to a valorization of "information processing" as the central source of innovation and value in production. She identifies this shift as arising self-consciously at General Electric (GE) as a managerial strategy to prevent unionization and devalue service and computer workers as information technologies revolutionized the workplace. This shift moved the core notion of skill and productivity to something lodged in managers rather than workers. This notion of managers as the source of productivity eventually diffused from GE to many other firms. While managers were once a nonproductive cost, they became celebrated as the primary source of value.

Hanley's work contrasts with the dominant narrative explaining increased U.S. income inequality as one of skill-biased technological change, in which computer technologies increase the labor market value of the highly educated and displace the less educated from high pay, low skill employment. Her point is that skill bias was an ideological project, not a mechanical or market one. Tali Kristal (2013) identifies this process, not as skill-biased but as class-biased technological change. She shows that computerization reduced the income share of workers relative to capital *but only in industries with declining unionization*. That is, the claim was successful because workers lost power resources.

The claims-making process is the interactional basis for both exploitation and opportunity hoarding.

Exploitation

> Exploitation . . . operates when powerful, connected people command resources from which they draw significantly increased returns by coordinating the efforts of outsiders whom they exclude from the full value added by that effort.
>
> —Tilly (1998: p. 10)

Exploitation occurs when one actor or set of actors benefits at the expense of others. We observe exploitation in an organization when we see shifts in respect, resources, or rewards between actors. The classic case, of course, is the appropriation of income by capital from labor, but in the view expressed here, all actors in organizations are potential beneficiaries or losers in a claims-making process over organizational value. A well-known example is the undervaluing of typically female tasks or jobs with resulting income transfers to customers, employers, or male workers. This definition of exploitation is about the reallocation of jointly produced organizational resources, not the value added by particular actors.

There are other more familiar relational models of exploitation. Marx assumed that value has a source (labor), is relational, and can be inferred from capital accumulation and the resulting income and wealth inequalities (Wright 1997). Sorenson (2000) defines exploitation as existing in any market exchange when the value received by one party exceeds what they would have received in a perfectly competitive market. Both approaches are relational and are about power to extract income from others. Both imply normative baselines—labor as the legitimate source of value and competitive markets as just distribution systems. My normative baseline is interactional: Exploitation is visible when one actor accumulates respect or rewards at the expense of another. Redistribution is an act of power over others, even when redistribution is the usurpation of resources by subordiates (Murphy 1988). It is the situational exercise of power in the relationship that creates redistribution (Roscigno 2011).

Slavery and theft are systems of naked exploitation, supported by or in spite of the state. Raising prices when market demand is high, irrespective of production cost, is as well. Effective labor unions transfer income to organized workers both directly in production and by changing the relative bargaining power of labor in societies (Western 1997). The contemporary reallocation of capital by nonfinancial firms away from production and toward financial speculation decreases the relative power of production workers, leading to increased inequality among workers as well as larger shares of the value stream being distributed to executives and owners (Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013).

Muñoz (2008) shows how a U.S. employer created an "immigration inequality regime" in which undocumented workers could be "super-exploited":

> . . . on the U.S. side of the border, we see what I call an *immigration regime*, where employers can use workers' racialized status to engage in super-exploitation. The immigration regime serves to limit workers' movement into the primary labor market, where they could enjoy upward mobility through higher wages and better working conditions. (P. 63)

The same study identified another plant owned by the same company but on the Mexican side of the border accomplishing the same exploitation process but using gender as the categorical distinction to channel resources and rewards to owners.

Paules (1991) shows how organizational practices can be set up to encourage exploitation between workers in the same job. In her study of waitresses at "Route," the tipping system meant that most pay came directly from relationships with customers, prompting waitresses to compete against each other for tables. Waitress' income came at the expense of coworkers.

In a study of the devaluation of women's work, Sheryl Skaggs and I tried to figure out where the money went from the devaluation of women's work. For the sample of organizations we examined, profits were neither improved by wage penalties to female jobs, nor did the total cost of production drop, which might benefit customers. Thus, it was male coworkers who benefited from the devaluation of women's work (Tomaskovic-Devey and Skaggs 1999).

One of the most fundamental sources of exploitation in interaction is to deny an individual or group the capacity to make claims at all. Harassment and bullying by managers and coworkers is one of the most widespread mechanisms for stripping people of their credibility as actors. There is good evidence that such harassment reflects both class and status-based closure strategies (Roscigno, Hodson, and Lopez 2009). Harassment denies people agency. Harassment, hostility, and isolation often happen to women (Padavic and Reskin 1990) and racial minorities (B. B. Williams 1987) who integrate male and white workplaces.

Over the last 30 or so years, many employers have found ways to externalize production, stripping employees of citizenship rights once associated with their workplace (Kalleberg 2011). My colleagues and I have found for both the United States and Australia that this strategy of limiting organizational citizenship, even for workers employed on site, is a fundamental mechanism for generating class inequalities between managers and their workforces (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2009). Managers' wages go up when workers lose organizational citizenship rights.

Successful exploitation is often institutionalized in the status hierarchy of positions. Positions then become the basis for opportunity hoarding.

Opportunity Hoarding

> Opportunity hoarding, which operates when members of a categorically bounded network acquire access to a resource that is valuable, renewable, subject to monopoly, supportive of network activities, and enhanced by the network's modus operandi.
>
> —Tilly (1998: p. 10)

Opportunity hoarding happens when resources are lodged in positions, and access to these positions or their resources is reserved for incumbents and categorically similar actors. Jobs come to be associated with particular educational credentials, occupational licenses, genders, ethnic groups, families, or friendship networks. These statuses serve to limit opportunities for out-groups while preserving them for incumbents and socially similar individuals. Since most inequality is produced by the matching of people to jobs, it is opportunity hoarding of better jobs that for most actors is the key mechanism in access to rewards. The same can be said for respect and authority.

Professional certification and other forms of skill licensure are obvious examples (Weeden 2002). The complete exclusion of white women, black men, and black women from authority-invested jobs prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act is a historical example of extreme opportunity hoarding (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). Today, the sex and race segregation of jobs, although no longer total, can be interpreted as a basic social closure process as well (Reskin 1988; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993).

Opportunity hoarding, however, can be quite a bit more subtle and narrowly tailored to a particular in-group. Nancy DiTomaso (2013) shows how social capital-based selection processes lead to opportunity hoarding for friends and family. In her interviews with white employees, she found that almost every one of her respondents had found one or more jobs through a racially homogeneous personal network. When we share information with our friends and relatives, we are opportunity hoarding within our network (although it probably feels quite generous).

Lauren Rivera's study of how top-tier investment banks and management consulting firms recruit and select new hires discovered a two-step closure process in which first only candidates from Ivy League schools were interviewed and then candidates that felt like good cultural matches (e.g., played lacrosse in college) to the firm were hired (Rivera 2012). In this example, it is not social, but cultural, capital that generates a sense of being in the same categorically bounded network.

Even more subtly, group-based differences in cultural tools can limit the ability to be a full organizational citizen, generating differential access to the core power network in a workplace. Geraldine Healy, Bradley, and Forson 2011, using Acker's model of inequality regimes, show how Bangladeshi, Caribbean, and Pakistani women in three U.K. public sector workplaces with strong commitments to equal opportunity still faced considerable disadvantages resulting from cultural disjunctures with coworkers and supervisors. Religious proscriptions on drinking and gambling, traits one might think employers would value positively, led to social isolation from managers and coworkers. Ellen Berrey (2013) in her study of a successful diversity program in a major corporation showed that even as the program was conscious of and worked to eliminate closure mechanisms preventing women as well as ethnic and sexual minorities from reaching top management positions, all production, sales, and service jobs were excluded from the program.

Opportunity hoarding around access to training is also widespread. Professional licensing limits the supply of skills and typically gives professionals control over the selection of coworkers (Abbott 1988). Lack of training in female-type jobs has been identified as one of the primary sources of their low wages (Tomaskovic-Devey and Skaggs 2002). Royster (2003) in her study of young men entering the skilled trades noted that white men tended to be paid for their apprenticeships, while black men either were not or had to pay for training.

Barbara Reskin (2003) criticized Tilly and closure theory in general for a focus on active mobilization and the linked assumption that actors' closure motives were important. She pointed out that much inequality is generated via interactional mechanisms that are taken for granted, rather than actively contested and negotiated. Certainly, people become motivated to preserve their advantages when challenged, but the bases for closure are often accepted even by the excluded. Reskin's caution, that attention to motivated closure can obscure more subtle interactional mechanisms, is well taken. I turn to that task in the next section.

Micro-Inequality Relationships

An attractive attribute of a relational approach to inequality is that it dissolves the distinction between structural and individual approaches to social analyses. Because inequality is generated in relationships, and both positions and power are understood via the connections among actors, there is no micro–macro gap to be bridged. Following Reskin, Tilly (1998) can be criticized for his underdeveloped micro-foundations. I propose that it is useful to incorporate three well-understood micro-foundations to support any relational approach to inequality. First, human beings think categorically and encode cultural messages that produce expectations of competence. Second, we interact taking into account status perceptions, whether generated by real competence or cultural expectations. Third, in interaction, we hold each other accountable for these inequality expectations. These micro-foundations are relational, generic to human social life, and typically act to legitimate inequalities.

Categorical Distinctions

While the world is organized continuously and in shades of gray, people tend to process information categorically and in black and white (Allport 1954). We tend to categorize ourselves and others into groups automatically and unconsciously). We are likely to categorize unfamiliar others on the basis of highly visible and easily attributable characteristics

(Ridgeway 2011). In turn, these categories have an almost automatic effect on our perceptual process once persons are categorized, influencing our impressions of them and often our behavior toward them (Devine 1989).[2]

We make as many distinctions among people as there are social locations—shared tastes in music, hometowns, favorite ball teams, alma maters, the list is endless. There are, however, categorical distinctions that are so culturally widespread that they are always latent in interaction. In the contemporary United States, these include at least race, class, gender, and age (Ridgeway 2011). These are the attributes where cultural expectations and stereotypes produce shared meanings associated with categorical membership. These cultural meanings encourage status hierarchies associated with expectations of competence and likability (Fiske et al. 2002).

Categorical distinctions are widespread and are used to both distribute and legitimate inequalities. Such distinctions become part of our identities, and we use them to make the in-group/out-group distinctions that produce status expectations useful for legitimating claims on respect and resources (Ridgeway 2011). Once established, status hierarchies encourage interactions marked by deference toward higher status actors (Goffman 1956). In addition, categorical distinctions enable groups to organize to both make resource claims and create the political will to struggle against other groups (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Collective struggles and routine interaction draw on these identities to legitimate claims that some actors are more deserving of respect and reward than others. Categorical distinctions between actors produce othering (Schwalbe et al. 2000) and are associated with in-group preferences (DiTomaso 2013), status expectations (Ridgeway 1997), stereotyping (Gorman 2005), and biases in information processing (Nosek et al. 2007). All influence the interactional processes that allocate respect and resources.

Status Hierarchies

The central function of any organization is to organize individuals to produce products or services that isolated individuals cannot. In this collective process, contestations routinely arise over who is most deserving of the value produced (Hegtvedt 2005; Jasso 1980). Social psychologists have repeatedly cited *both* status and competence perceptions as the mechanisms through which task-oriented actors legitimate inequalities (Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000).

Task competence seems to be a very generic basis for developing status hierarchies. When people interact around some task, they will tend to rank themselves and others in terms of perceived competence on the task (Berger et al. 1977). Social esteem flows to the competent. When we rank ourselves higher than others, we are more likely to lead, make claims on the group and its resources, and discount or disparage others. The reverse is true as well: When we rank ourselves lower in task competency, we make few claims, hesitate to act, and defer (Della Fave 1980).

Diffuse status characteristics such as gender or race generate expectations of competence as do situational characteristics such as current job prestige or actual skills relevant to the task at hand (Ridgeway and Nakagawa, forthcoming). When there are multiple status characteristics in play, as in the matching of cultural categories to organizational categories, people tend to perform an averaging exercise in which the most task-salient characteristics are weighted more heavily (Berger et al. 1977). Thus, we should expect exactly what Tilly (1998) predicted: The matching of culturally devalued status characteristics to low-power jobs should both produce and exaggerate inequality. The reverse is true as well: When the intersection of characteristics produces status inconsistencies, inequalities may be reduced or reversed.

Interaction Orders

The dramaturgical approach to interaction develops a further relational account of the interactional practices that generate and legitimate inequalities. The insight here is that in order for our actions to be intelligible to each other, we must take into account the implicit rules and procedural expectations of those around us (Goffman 1959). The implications for inequality are embedded in those relationships. Categories (e.g., race) and roles (e.g., jobs) come with expectations around status hierarchies and behaviors. Thus, there are limits on the kinds of claims we can make in any particular setting associated with the rules and procedures tied to particular relationships between people and positions. Individuals can make claims on organizational resources only insofar as they are credible in context. To make claims above one's station is to invite embarrassment or attack (Schwalbe and Shay, forthcoming).

The marriage of cultural categorical distinctions to organizational task distinctions creates interactional constraints on plausible behavior. Violating norms and procedures structured around these relationships risks emotional harm to both violator and their audience. Our audience holds us accountable for proper behavior. Actors are disciplined to do gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and class (Jackall 1988) appropriately in context. Actors who do not belong in context tend to generate a reinforcement of categorical distinctions in interaction (Padavic 1991; C. Williams 1992).

The audience is not only those directly involved in any particular interaction but what Michael Schwalbe (2008) refers to as "nets of accountability" associated with the larger system of relationships. Workers are accountable to each other and their supervisor but are also aware of other actors with authority in the environment who are likely to discipline behaviors that strongly violate status hierarchies. Thus, actors adjust not merely to their interactional partner but to the local symbolic culture (Özbilgin and Tatli 2011), the habitus of particular organizations (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008), or the inequality regime in its interactional and procedural expectations (Acker 2006). Because of their taken-for-granted nature, closure and exploitation can often be accomplished without much open opposition. Open opposition, however, often reveals the power in the relationship. For example, when employees accuse their manager of discrimination they should expect retaliation (Roscigno 2007). The legal system provides the potential to hold employers accountable, but it is weak relative to the local interaction order. Less than 1 percent of employees who believe they have been illegally discriminated against at work make discrimination complaints (Nielson and Nelson 2005).

Intersectionality and Institutions

> Oppression is filled with . . . contradictions . . . each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives.
>
> —Collins (1990: p. 278)

While inequalities are installed categorically, real actors/jobs stand in relation to other actors/jobs in the organization and inhabit multiple categorical distinctions simultaneously and in historically specific interactional contexts (Collins 1990; Glenn 2002; Omi and Winant 1994). Inequality regimes result from the intersection of local narratives, positions, and people in historical context (Acker 2006). The meanings and power resources associated with particular categorical intersections reflect local interactional and institutional influences, producing complex inequalities (Ken 2008; McCall 2005).

Positions, people, and cultural understandings together produce local realities and local inequality regimes, which become realms of struggle, claims-making, and position-taking. There are always micro-politics over respect and resources challenging the current inequality regime (Schwalbe and Shay, forthcoming). There are concurrently macro-politics, encouraging some inequalities and discouraging others.

One can think of neoliberalism with its glorification of the individual and market ideology as a powerful force encouraging local inequality regimes to exaggerate individual inequalities and abandon organizational citizenship protections. The Civil Rights and women's movements moved racial- and gender-based subordination from hegemonic to locally enacted, interactionally contested and organizationally variable (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). The contemporary gay rights movement leads to new claims for nondiscrimination and equal opportunity regardless of sexual orientation. Geographic variation across the United States in the rate of unionization produced corresponding variation in the bargaining power of workers (Brady, Baker, and Finnigan 2013), and declining unionization in some regions produced geographic convergence in local inequality regimes (Hanley 2010).

Peter Blau (1977) in *Inequality and Heterogeneity* provided an early statement on what has since come to be recognized as intersectional thinking. He argued that when inequalities and heterogeneities were strongly associated in practice, categorical distinctions, such as race or gender, were converted into institutionalized status hierarchies. For example, in the pre-Civil Rights period in U.S. workplaces, white men held monopolies on essentially all authority-bearing jobs, and segregation in tasks by both race and gender was nearly total (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). This strong institutionalization of racial and gender hierarchies, enforced both culturally and by state action, meant that class, gender, and racial position were strongly associated in nearly every workplace. Strong institutionalization of categorical distinctions limits people's sense of the possible, mutes claims-making by subordinates, and generates high levels of inequality.

But categorical intersections can also be at odds with each other. People and positions are often, perhaps increasingly, heterogeneous in regards to their categorical positions. Women can be CEOs, minorities educated, and workers more skilled than their managers. To the extent that each workplace has a unique intersection of categorical distinctions, inequality regimes vary locally. In the absence of homogeneous national institutions as in the pre-Civil Rights era, there is no such thing as a national gender wage gap or citizen advantage, but rather there are many organizational inequality regimes generated by generic processes of relational inequality embedded in local social relations.

The organizationally and historically contingent nature of intersectionality can lead to contradictory inequalities. In her study of contemporary black male professionals, Adia Harvey Wingfield (2013) provides some good examples of the types of intersectional contradictions that arise when categorical distinctions fail to reinforce each other. She finds that the combination of high educational achievement and employment in high-status professional jobs provides high income and interactional class advantages for professional black men. But, as status expectation theory predicts, being black also means that their competence is often suspect by clients and coworkers. Being a black male is also a potential source of stigma, leading to emotional and cultural self-policing to avoid stereotypes or confirming racialized expectations. On the other hand, being black *men* can be a resource in male-dominated fields, especially in the ability to establish friendship and mentor relationships with senior white men. In other relationships, being black allows black men to identify with black and white women. Depending on the interactional context, being a black male professional may be a resource or a source of stigma.

The degree of inequality associated with class, gender, race, education, and the like can be expected to vary as a function of both local inequality regimes and more macro-institutional forces. This has been the focus on much of my contemporary research, and I summarize some of it to make this variation visible.

When the world is intersectionally complex, we should expect to find a great deal of variation in organizational inequality regimes. Figure 2 displays the gender gap in income in U.S. and Japanese manufacturing plants, circa 1980. At the time the United States and Japan had very different gender and labor market institutions. Lacking an effective women's movement, Japanese gender hierarchy was nearly complete. Also in Japan, high-wage firms organized their inequality regimes around lifetime employment systems for men, with long tenure providing access to increased

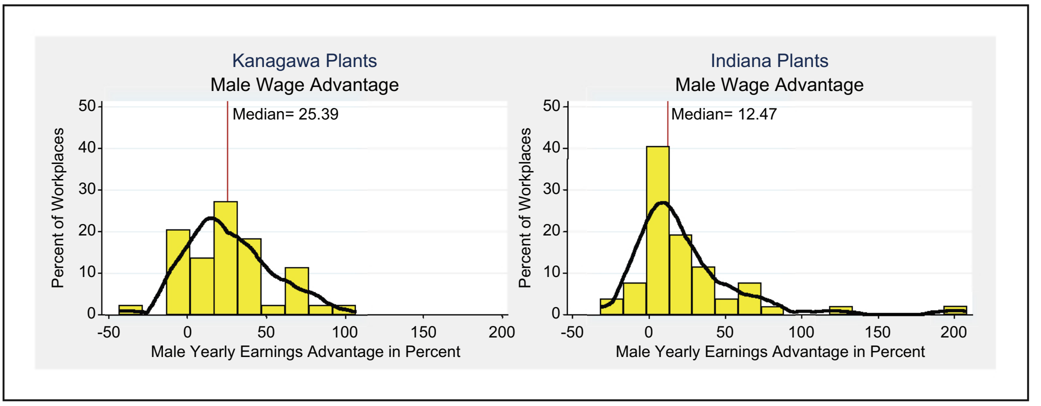

Figure 2. Japanese and U.S. manufacturing plant variation in male/female earnings gaps, circa 1980.
Note. Full-time workers, wage gaps adjusted for education, experience, tenure—see Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey (2012).

responsibility and higher paying jobs. While U.S. unions provided some security tied to seniority as well, distinctions among workers were more strongly tied to skill and authority in particular workplaces. The U.S. women's movement was in its second social and economic iteration, after having secured civil rights for (white) women in the early twentieth century. Not surprisingly, given these historical differences, the median gender gap in wages among full-time workers was larger in Japan than in the United States.

As Figure 2 shows, both countries display considerable variation in the size of the gender wage gap across organizations, and both countries include some workplaces with gender wage gaps near zero and even a very few where, net of human capital, women out earn men on average. Importantly, we can explain this variation in the gender wage gap in terms of historically specific intersections between gender and other social distinctions. We found that U.S. workplace variation in the gender wage gap was a function of the organizational intersection of gender with authority, education, and tenure. The skill and seniority distinctions that U.S. firms use to allocate income are only imperfectly correlated with gender, and in workplaces where women are more educated than men, have longer seniority, and have increased access to supervisory positions, the gender wage gap is lower. In Japan, the system was simpler: Earnings rise with tenure in high-wage firms and only men have long tenure in those firms (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012).

Class inequality should be expected to vary across organizations as well. When managers face workers with inferior claims-making resources, inequalities will be exaggerated. When workers have skill or gender or other advantages relative to managers, these class distinctions in the workplace will be reduced. Acker (2006) further predicted that the shape of inequality—the degree of hierarchy and inequality—as well as organizational practices and cultures can further intensify or mute this inequality-generating process. Figure 3 compares the earnings gaps between the modal manager and core production worker in U.S. and Australian workplaces. The United States, which has a history of weaker worker protections both through labor law and welfare state income supports, shows a pattern of higher class inequality than does Australia (actually to make the graph fit on the page, we had to truncate the U.S. distribution at 1,000 percent manager wage advantage). Again, we see that there is a great deal of workplace-specific variation in class inequality, and in both countries, in more than a few workplaces core production workers actually out earn the average manager. These class-inverted workplaces tend to be professional service firms, such as hospitals, engineering firms, or law partnerships, in which professional workers dominate and

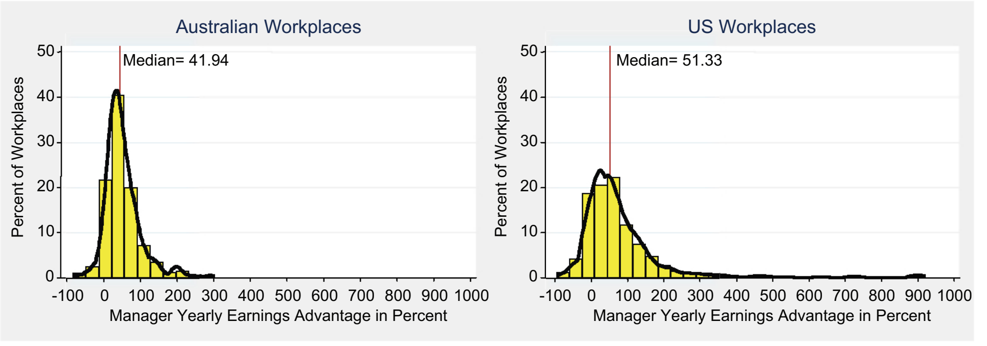

Figure 3. Australian (2002) and U.S. (1991) workplace variation in manager/core worker earnings gaps.
Note. Modal manager and core worker full-time wage—see Tomaskovic-Devey et al. (2009).

managers play supporting roles. In this case, skill monopolies for core production workers generate relational power that trumps the traditional class distinction around authority.

More generally, much of the variation in workplace class inequality visible in Figure 3 arises out of the local intersection between class and a series of other culturally salient categorical distinctions. Class inequality rises when managers are relatively more educated, male, white (in the United States), English speaking (in Australia), and permanent employees relative to the workers they supervise. Inequalities shrink when workers become more like managers or, as in the professional service firm example, are actually higher status than managers. Because in the United States, both the political economy and typical labor relations produce higher workplace inequality all of these intersectional processes are stronger in the United States than in Australia.

As Acker (2006) predicts, these intersectional process are conditioned by organizational practices as well. In Australia, about a third of workplaces set wages based on industry-level wage bargaining; in those workplaces, it is the intersection of skill and organizational citizenship rights that drive class-based wage inequality. In other workplaces, wages are set locally. In those workplaces, gender distinctions between managers and workers are particularly powerful in generating wage inequality, while skill distinctions are muted. Similarly, in the United States, gender and race-based distinctions play more powerful roles in generating class inequality in informal organizational contexts, and skill levels are more powerful bases of class distinction when human resource practices are formalized (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2009).

While interactions are guided relationally by expectations for local rules and procedures, there is always space for improvisation. The more complex the array of categorical distinctions in play (Schwalbe and Shay, forthcoming), the less institutionally policed they are (Martin 2004), and the more politically contested they become (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012), the more actors—even categorically disadvantaged actors—have room for improvisation and resistance.

National institutions influence the types of organizational inequality regimes that can and do develop. There are large national differences in labor market institutions, the political power and economic rights of women, workers and citizens, and levels of inequality. National institutions influence the freedom to exploit the effort of others. Historically, slavery was legal in many countries, but today, it is practiced less widely, and because it is universally illegal, it is rare and hidden. Slavery, whether legal or illegal, is a social relation built to exploit the maximum share of the value produced by others. Most modern countries develop labor laws that limit this extreme level of exploitation.

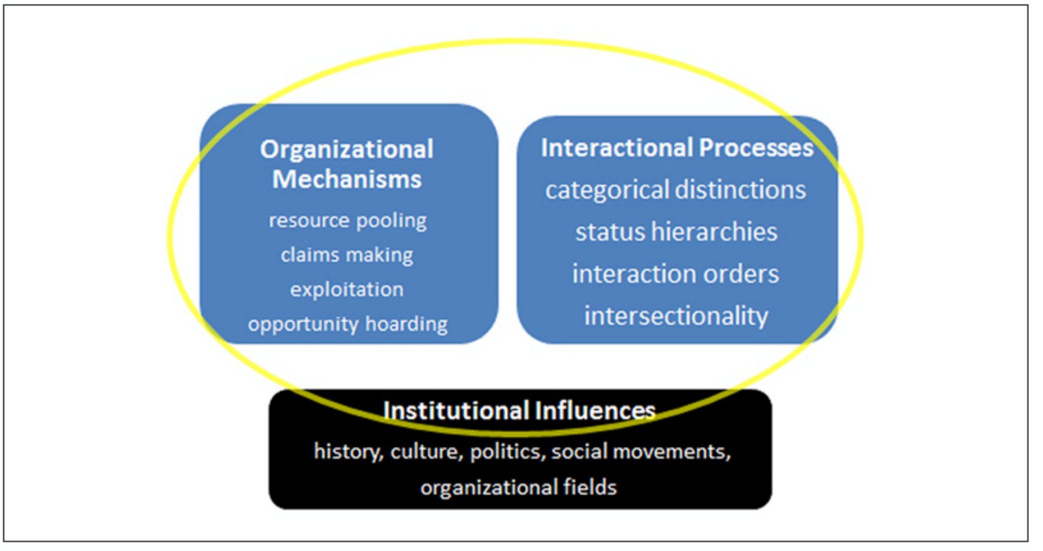

Figure 4. Conceptual map of organizational inequality regimes.

In more socialist welfare regimes, such as in the Nordic countries, workers have alternatives to employment and so more bargaining power as individuals relative to their employers. In these countries, wage setting is further constrained by inequality reducing practices and high levels of worker organization. In Sweden, for example, blue-collar wages are set at the industry level by collective bargaining and white-collar wages are negotiated at the workplace level. Martin Hällsten, Dustin Avent-Holt, and I find that working-class jobs show lower workplace wage inequality and smaller immigrant-native wage gaps than do white-collar jobs, as one would expect given skill-based national wage setting. We also find that the intersections of immigrant status with job, authority, and skill are considerably stronger influences on organizational inequality regimes in white-collar jobs that lack such institutional protection (Tomaskovic-Devey, Hällsten, and Avent-Holt, 2013).

National institutions are the dynamic product of political struggle. These struggles are often over inequalities and categorical distinctions. The rise and decline of union power in the United States is clearly an example. Particular movements for gay, disability, women's, immigrants', and minority rights around the world are as well. More abstractly, variations in national inequality institutions can be understood to be the result of dynamic political projects in a society. Actors at particular moments in history mobilize to weaken or strengthen citizenship rights, or the commodification of labor, or racial distinctions, and these in turn influence the relative power of actors in workplaces (Brady 2009).

Summary of the Relational Inequality Model

We interact meaningfully and durably in social networks. Organizations create relatively stable networks and pool resources. In organizations, we develop and enact hierarchies of power and status, typically around categorical distinctions between people. We also negotiate local orders, import meaning, status and power from our environments, and confront both local and global cultural constraints on meaning and action. Through their social and material practices and linked roles and positions, organizations legitimate and make durable social relationships.

Organizations also accumulate resources. Actors and positions make claims on those resources. Within particular inequality regimes, some claims come to be recognized as legitimate, right, and proper. Many claims are never made, are ignored, or are repressed. When faced with resistance to claims, actors may successfully mobilize discursive or collective power to compel that their claims be honored, validated, and respected. Once claims are endorsed by powerful others, resources are distributed and inequalities generated. Exploitation is the dynamic face of successful claims-making. Opportunity hoarding is the positional accretion of past rounds of exploitation. These four mechanisms—resource pooling, claims-making, exploitation, and opportunity hoarding—generate organizational inequalities. All are dynamic and interactional, so they are also the basis for the dismantling of existing inequalities and the growth of new ones.

The ability to contemplate a claim and the probability of validation are not only functions of local social relations but also of the institutional environment, which selectively strengthens some claims over others. Law, markets, culture, social movements, and models from other organizations are all resources for claims-making within organizations. Which resources and categorical distinctions generate legitimacy and coercive powers are relational and institutional products.

Although human beings process information categorically, reality is interactionally multiplex, producing a lived reality that is always intersectional. This interactional reality is always nested in particular historical and institutional moments. While the interactional and organizational mechanisms described earlier in this paper are fairly generic, their cultural, legal, and political content are not. Meanings are negotiated locally, at least when intersections are complex and contradictory, and both status hierarchies and claims-making resources are historically produced and contested.

Thus, there are two intersecting processes, one generic and the second contingent. The generic process is the validation of status and power-based claims within organizational social relations. Which categorical distinctions are consequential is contingent on both institutional and intersectional contexts.

Some Final Thoughts

There is a rapidly growing literature on organizational inequality processes. This literature takes advantage of historical (Hanley 2013), qualitative (e.g., Berrey 2013), and quantitative (e.g., Castilla 2008) case studies of particular organizations, as well as the systematic comparison of variation across qualitative organizational cases (e.g., Hodson 2001; Salzinger 2003), multiple organization cross-sectional quantitative analyses (e.g., Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2010, 2012), quantitative panel data for medium and large samples of organizations (e.g., Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012), and even experiments on organizational decision making (Castilla and Benard 2010). That is, relational inequality research uses all of the conventional methods available to social science. What they share is a focus on categorical distinctions embedded in particular organizational contexts, practices, and relationships.

Good science should tailor its observational strategies to the generative processes they wish to understand. Choo and Ferree (2010) stress the utility of comparisons of categorical inequalities across space and time (e.g., Glenn 2002; McCall 2001) as promising for revealing both the complexity of inequalities and their socially contingent nature. I agree, but would add that a great deal of this variation lies around us in contemporary organizational contexts, which we mistakenly assume to be homogeneous. Comparing organizational inequality regimes holds much promise as a research strategy.

Attempts to observe relationships are important as well. Here qualitative and social network researchers have clear advantages over conventional quantitative methods. On the other hand, it is those quantitative methods that allow for fruitful comparisons of national institutions, organizational practices, and complex intersectional patterns. Relational thinking clearly has some observational implications, but I would suggest that its greatest power is theoretical in identifying the generative processes we should be studying. In many substantive realms, sociology is moving toward a more relational stance in both theory and methodology (Mische 2011), and there is no defensible reason why this should not be the case in the study of inequality as well.

There are, admittedly, methodological implications that flow from relational inequality theory. It favors a focus on social relations over a focus on individuals. It also prioritizes organizational over occupational analyses of inequality. Indeed, both the resources to be distributed and the social relations that do the distribution are found in durable social networks: organizations.

Scholars who study inequality often have progressive, anti-inequality, normative preferences. One of the advantages of the model outlined here is the combination of generic and contingent insights. That inequalities are durable does not imply that they are permanent. In fact, shifts in culture, environments, and intersectional social relations all have the power to erode inequality structures relatively rapidly. Actors matter; subordinates' claims can be acknowledged and if sufficiently powerful become legitimate. This paper points toward claims, framing, and political mobilization in and outside of work as disruptive forces with real consequences. While *the* revolution is far from inevitable, at any given moment, in some organizational contexts, *some* revolution is highly probable.

Author's Note

This article was developed out of my presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society in Atlanta, April 2013. It should be read as closely connected to my theoretical and empirical work with Dustin Avent-Holt and in conversation with a larger community of scholars developing this relational inequality framework. The talk and the subsequent paper have been improved by comments from Dustin Avent-Holt, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Bill Danaher, Alexandra Kalev, Jasmine Kerrisey, Ken-Hou Lin, Ragini Malhotra, Steve McDonald, Nate Meyers, Joya Misra, Irene Padavic, Tony Paik, Vinnie Roscigno, Michael Schwalbe, Kevin Stainback, Sheryl Skaggs, Laurel Smith-Doerr, Barbara Tomaskovic-Devey, Steve Vallas, George Wilson, and Adia Harvey Wingfield. If I missed anyone, I am so sorry.

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Notes

1. This may be because organizational analysis is at odds with two dominant methodological traditions, the collection of survey data on individuals and the analysis of national institutions that produce country-level variation in inequality regimes. Both approaches allow us to explore important aspects of inequality. The former tend to stress individual traits and the latter national political economy, but both tend to skip over the organizational social relations that actually produce and distribute valued goods.
2. I am far from original in introducing cognitive psychology to relational inequality theorizing. See especially Massey's (2008) application of Tilly's theory and Browne and Misra's (2003) amendment to intersectionality theorizing.

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