How Helping Can Reinforce or Attenuate Status Inequalities: The Case of Nonprofit Organizations

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This article examines one type of social exchange that signals status: giving and receiving help. I focus on formal helping exchanges between staff and participants in nonprofit organizations. Bringing together status theory with research from social psychology on receiving help and studies of nonprofits, I identify how the helping exchanges in these settings can reinforce or attenuate status hierarchies with important consequences for participants. I examine three attenuation practices (sharing control, establishing commonalities, and questioning causes) and three practices that can reinforce status hierarchies (asserting control, reinforcing differences, and assuming causes) to show how status processes play a powerful but unexamined role in the very places dedicated to addressing inequality.

Keywords: nonprofit organizations, helping, status hierarchy, inequality

Giving and receiving help is a universal human experience. We give and receive help all the time. Important for my purpose here, helping is a social exchange that signals status: giving help is a marker of high status and strength, whereas receiving help is a marker of low status and weakness (Nadler 2015). Status is the respect, admiration, and deference one is voluntarily accorded by others based on one's perceived competence and value to the group. As Cecilia Ridgeway and others observe, we care about our status because we care deeply about

how we are valued in our communities (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Blader and Yu 2017; Ridgeway 2019; Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue). In helping exchanges, offering help signals that one not only has some competence to address the issue but also is willing to engage in such effort for another. Both perceived competence and prosocial behavior are associated with higher status (Fragale 2006; Nadler and Halabi 2015; see also Benard et al. 2022).

Decades of research, however, have shown that the evaluative processes leading one person to be accorded a higher status than another are biased, powerful, often unnamed, and serve to maintain and justify inequality (Ridgeway 2019). We might wonder, then, how this universal experience of giving and receiving help is implicated in status processes that maintain inequality and in turn how helping can be offered in ways that attenuate status hierarchies and redress inequality. This article looks more closely at status, helping, and inequality. But rather than focusing on the status benefits to those engaging in prosocial behavior, which has been the focus of many who study status processes, I follow those who draw attention to experiences of those receiving help (Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna 1982; Nadler 2015; Nadler and Halabi 2015). When we look at the experiences of those receiving help, we start to see that how help is provided in a local setting and how it is organized more broadly in society is one way that status processes can exacerbate or redress inequality.

To illuminate the relationship between the how of helping and its consequences for inequality, I focus on formal helping relationships between staff and participants in nonprofit organizations, specifically those dedicated to addressing the causes and consequences of inequality, such as unemployment, sexual exploitation, affordable housing, food access, or criminal justice and police reform, to name a few. In these organizations, the status hierarchy is established at the outset: the staff person is assumed to have some ability and willingness to help and thus is initially accorded higher status.[1] But, unlike other settings status researchers study—where status hierarchies, once established, remain stubbornly stable, defended by those at the top—in formal helping organizations such as nonprofits, the higher-status person, the staff member, must deliberately attenuate the status hierarchy to be effective (Schein 2009). Most immediately, staff must address the status loss participants can feel when seeking help. Failure to do so can put participants at a disadvantage in achieving their goals as they manage stress and other difficult emotions from their experience of this loss (Nadler 2015). Even if participants do not experience a loss of status in seeking help, staff must also attend to the ways in which the organization may accentuate this status hierarchy, negatively affecting participants. Finally, staff must attenuate the status hierarchy by recognizing and supporting participants' competency to address the issue.[2]

I draw from research in social psychology on receiving help and studies of nonprofit organizations, my own and others, to show that how help is provided can accentuate this loss of status for the person receiving help, thereby reinforcing the status hierarchy between the giver and receiver. But I also show how help can be provided in ways that alleviate this loss of status and attenuate this initial status hierarchy. The article focuses on three types of practices: control, commonality, and cause. Specifically,

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1. Although the helper is initially accorded higher status, the status hierarchy between helper and helpee may be temporary and unstable, for example, where participants have some doubt about staff competence or willingness to help (Schein 2009). This means that the staff person may be engaged in complex but usually unrecognized status work: reassuring a participant about their desire and ability to help, addressing the loss of status a participant may feel asking for help while recognizing, supporting, and building the competence of participants to address the problem. The status hierarchies in helping exchanges are of course complicated by race, gender, and other markers of social status.

2. Participant competency is an explicit goal of many helping exchanges, whether this is recognizing and supporting someone's existing competence or building new competency in some domain. But this goal has not been recognized as having implications for status and status hierarchies.

it describes three attenuation practices (sharing control, establishing commonalities, and questioning causes) and three practices that reinforce the status hierarchy between staff and participants (asserting control, reinforcing differences, and assuming causes). It thus illuminates how helping exchanges may exacerbate inequality by failing to attenuate status hierarchies and how attenuating these status differences can start to address inequality.

In doing so, the article makes three specific contributions to our understanding of status and inequality. First, it focuses on the experience of those receiving help to show that the ways in which help is provided, how it is organized and institutionalized, matter a great deal for whether helping exacerbates or starts to redress inequality. In this way, I seek to show that helping exchanges are critical sites in which to disrupt the implicit bias that informs status hierarchies and in turn address their powerful role in maintaining inequality. Second, drawing attention to nonprofit organizations, the article shows how, in the very places intended to address inequality, status processes work as an invisible but powerful force to strengthen inequality. This is not inevitable, however. I show how some staff exercise discretion to attenuate the status hierarchy between themselves and the person they are working with, even in settings where such actions go against the norms of appropriate professional practice. Further, some nonprofits address status inequalities directly in the way they organize and engage participants. These organizations have the potential to address status beliefs that maintain inequality, including those about race, class, disability, and so on. Finally, the article discusses the broader forces that have obscured the role of status processes in these organizations, leaving these processes, and their impact, inadequately theorized and addressed.

Before proceeding, I want to be clear about key terms. The term *participants* refers to the individuals, families, or community who are the intended beneficiaries of nonprofit social change strategies. *Nonprofit organizations* refers to organizations whose mission is to work with individuals, families, and communities to address the causes or consequences of inequality, whether this involves providing services, revi-

talizing neighborhoods, or mobilizing for policy change. *Helping* describes the relationship between nonprofit staff and participants, recognizing that this term does not capture the breadth of these relationships, including how staff learn and receive from participants, nor does it reflect how these relationships vary across nonprofits. Even though the word can have a pejorative connotation, I seek to draw attention to the core feature of these relationships salient for participants: a status ranking based on their presumed competence and that of staff. A key assumption throughout this discussion is that status hierarchies in helping exchanges are no different from what extensive social science research finds about status rankings generally: they reflect biases about race, class, gender, and other markers of social identity. These biases, what Ridgeway refers to as cultural status beliefs, in turn serve to justify and maintain inequality. The section starts with a summary of how status processes reproduce inequality. I then move on to focus on helping exchanges, discussing both how status processes influence these exchanges and how these exchanges in turn challenge or maintain status inequality. Here I synthesize research from social psychology on receiving help, identifying three characteristics of the help that can reinforce the initial status hierarchy between those giving help and those receiving help. The next section extends these insights to nonprofit organizational settings. I conclude by discussing why status has not been more central in the analysis of nonprofit organizations.

HELPING, STATUS, AND INEQUALITY

Research on social status has long recognized the role of helping in status rankings (Nadler and Halabi 2015). Research shows how status processes influence who receives help, how the help is provided, what help is provided, and whether the helping exchange attenuates or reinforces status inequality.

Status and Inequality

Status is a comparative social ranking in which we voluntarily accord greater respect, esteem, and influence to those viewed as more competent in relation to achieving some collective goal (Ridgeway 2019, 3). Studies show that sta-

tus rankings emerge in the first few minutes of groups forming to accomplish a task (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980). Everyone has experienced situations in which we have been accorded high status, receiving more positive attention relative to others, and those in which we have been accorded a lower status, receiving comparatively less positive attention. We generally seek settings where we feel more valued and respected. Not surprisingly, status explains a wide range of human behavior and predicts one's overall psychological and physical health (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015). These feelings explain why we monitor our social status, comparing how our ideas, suggestions or questions are taken up and responded to in relation to those offered by others. It also explains why we might avoid seeking help and the potential status loss it portends.

Status hierarchies have been explained as an evolutionary response to ensuring the well-being of the community: they help resolve a fundamental tension between interdependence and competition in achieving collective goals by according the most influence and respect to those who can contribute the most to achieving a collective goal, thus ensuring the well-being of the group (Ridgeway 2019, 3). These status hierarchies, even if temporary and informal, help us make sense of what to do, and without needing to spend a lot of time figuring out who to follow or whether we should lead. But evolutionary explanations are not enough, as Ridgeway explains (2019, 38), in part because we often do not know who is most competent for achieving the goal. Instead, we rely on cultural status beliefs; beliefs that consciously or unconsciously associate competence with certain behaviors, such as taking charge; emotions, such as anger; and social identity markers, such as race or gender (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Berger and Fişek 2006; Ridgeway et al. 2009; Tiedens 2001). Status hierarchies, then, are not accurate reflections of competence or worth but instead represent biased social beliefs about competence and worth (also see Wilkerson 2020). Yet these status rankings are powerful precisely because they appear vol-

untary, held in place by cultural beliefs rather than coercive force.

These assumptions about competence and worth deepen inequality in a myriad of ways. At the level of social interactions, for example, status rankings influence who is seen as credible or legitimate, who is given credit for an idea, and who gets a confidence boost to support performance (Ridgeway 2019). Research finds that the same idea introduced by someone presumed to be more competent is evaluated more positively, that is, seen as more credible, than when it is introduced by someone assumed to be less competent or of a lower status (Foschi 2000; Ridgeway 2001, 362). Moreover, individuals who are accorded a higher status gain confidence that in turn boosts their performance, whereas those who are presumed less competent and accorded lower status face a performance burden, having to manage difficult emotions about their status while contributing to achieving the goal (Kemper 1991; Muscatell et al. 2012; Ridgeway 2019, 110). Finally, these biases lead to an extraction of value from lower-status actors, where the person accorded high status is credited with the work of the entire group (Ridgeway 2019, 130). Despite their inaccuracies, these status rankings stay in place because, even though we may disagree with the ranking, we presume that others agree. Indeed, studies show that when individuals try to challenge rankings they are quickly brought back in line by other members. For low-ranking members such challenges can have enormous costs (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). In this way, these status beliefs operate implicitly and quickly to create expectations which in turn influence behavior, giving unfair advantages to those assumed to be more competent. Once in place they become very difficult to change.

Helping, Status, and Inequality

At a basic level, both givers and receivers can experience a mix of positive and negative outcomes in helping exchanges (Konrath and Brown 2012; Nadler 2015).[3] For example, research has found that givers can experience burnout from overextending themselves, suffer

3. Critical to understanding the relationship between helping, status, and inequality, but beyond the scope of this article, is understanding the role status processes play in who is recognized as a giver and receiver. For

losses in productivity, and experience threats to their status (Barns et al. 2008; Flynn 2003). Givers also, however, can experience improved psychological well-being as well as greater esteem in the eyes of others (Konrath and Brown 2012; Nadler and Halabi 2015). Similarly, those who receive help can experience a mix of both self-threat and support (Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna 1982; Nadler 2015; Stroebe and Stroebe 1996). Receiving help can lead one to feel cared for, grateful, and part of a larger community. But receiving help can also lead one to experience status threat because asking for help can leave a person feeling dependent, incompetent, or indebted to the helper (Nadler 2015; Schein 2009).[4]

Research that examines the relationships between status, helping, and inequality can be loosely organized into three overlapping areas. One area of research examines how helping affects a person's status ranking, that is, the status gains from giving and the status loss from receiving (Flynn et al. 2006; Nadler and Halabi 2015). For example, work on costly signaling shows that individuals will incur costs to give in the short term to enhance their reputation over the long term (see Mauss 1990; for an overview, see Nadler and Halabi 2015). The competitive altruism hypothesis posits that individuals are more altruistic when their actions are public because their reputation is at stake. Indeed, studies find that these public altruists are accorded the highest status (Hardy and Van Vugt 2006). Other work has found that high-status groups will engage in defensive helping to secure their positions when status relations are less stable (Nadler et al. 2010).

The second area of research looks at how a person's social status affects the amount and kind of help a person receives. For example, some studies find that individuals are more willing to help those from higher-status groups,

a lawyer, than those from lower-status groups, a gas station attendant (Goodman and Gareis 1993). Others find that status affects the type of help offered. For example, Arie Nadler and Lily Chernyak-Hai find that a person perceived as weak is more likely to be given dependency-oriented help whereas a person perceived as competent and capable is more likely to be given autonomy-oriented help (2014). Plenty of evidence from African Americans' experience in the health-care system demonstrates that social status affects the amount and quality of help received (Aronson et al. 2013; Ayalon and Young 2005; Hollar 2001).

The third stream of research examines the experience of receiving help. This research finds that one's experience of receiving help will depend on the kind of help sought, the relationship to the helper, the culture in which helping occurs, as well as an individual's circumstances and social identity (Durham 1995; Fiske 1992; Nadler 2015; Shen, Wan, and Wyer 2011). This research also shows how the characteristics of the help can exacerbate or mitigate the loss of status experienced by those receiving help, which is my focus. This research suggests that three features of the help can affect this experience: control, cause, and commonality (Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna et al. 1982; Nadler 2015). Even if individuals do not feel a loss of status when seeking help, these features can affect the experience of social status in the helping exchange, leaving one guarded, stressed, and upset, or cared for, respected, and part of a team of people committed to the same goal. I briefly introduce these three features below and then discuss them in more detail in the next section.

Control
Control refers to the degree of autonomy participants have in the helping exchange. Re-

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example, the philanthropy of African Americans has only recently been given the recognition it deserves (Freeman 2020; Jones 1996).

4. Social psychologists explain this status threat using basic psychological needs theory to suggest that this experience compromises fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Nadler 2015, 308; see also Ryan and Deci 2000). Social exchange theory and equity theories explain the threat as a need to rebalance the relationship in some way by returning a favor or expressing gratitude (Fiske 1992; Gouldner 1960; Mauss 1990; Schein 2009). Such action serves to maintain social order and the optimal functioning of society (Gouldner 1960; Schein 2009, 28).

search in social psychology finds that when help reduces an individual's freedom, because of requirements or stipulations attached to the offer of help, it arouses a psychological reaction aimed at restoring this freedom. The extent of the reaction depends in part on the significance of the freedom to the recipient and the severity of the threat. This research has been used to explain why we avoid help or engage in behavior contrary to what was intended or desired by the helper (Brehm and Cole 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981; Burgoon et al. 2002). Apart from conditions attached to the offer of help, the degree of input one has in determining what help is provided can also shape the experience of receiving help, what social psychologists refer to as negotiated help (Durham 1995; Nadler 2015, 315). They contrast this with assumptive help, where help is given without request or input (Chentsova-Dutton 2012; Halabi, Nadler, and Dovidio 2011). For example, studies find that persons with visible disabilities spend a lot of time managing assumptive help, balancing the need to save face with the need for some assistance (Braithwaite and Eckstein 2003, 5). The lack of control experienced by those at the bottom of a hierarchy has been linked to measures of health and well-being, which is perhaps not surprising given that autonomy is a fundamental human need (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Marmot 2004; Sapolsky 2005).

Commonalities

Commonality refers to the extent to which the helping experience emphasizes mutuality between the giver and receiver in ways that attenuate the status hierarchy or reinforces differences in ways that strengthen it. Research in social psychology has focused on two features of a helping encounter where commonality is salient. First, when social identity is salient for the person being helped—say in the case of race or lived experience—one may prefer receiving help from others in the same group. For example, in an experimental study, Monica Schneider and her colleagues find that black students who received unsolicited help from a white peer experienced more negative effects, such as lower self-esteem or hopelessness, than white students who received unsolicited help from a white peer did (1996).[5] Second, if getting help is more public or explicit, it can further exacerbate a loss of status because it calls greater attention to someone and their situation, negatively differentiating them from others. For example, one study found that explicit support when the participant was aware they were getting help was significantly more distressing than either no support or implicit support (Bolger and Amarel 2007). This is even more true for issues that carry social stigma. For example, one study of people living with HIV and AIDS in China finds that implicit support was correlated with fewer depressive symptoms, whereas explicit social support was not (Yang et al. 2015).

Causes

Causes refer to the attributions we make to explain events, situations, or actions to ourselves and others. The social psychology research on receiving help has examined two types of attributions: those made about why help is needed and those made about why help is offered (Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna 1982).[6] I focus on the former.[7] Considering the causal

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5. If social identity is not salient and the issue is important to one's sense of personal competence, getting help can be more threatening from someone who is similar—getting help from another colleague with writing, for example—because in those situations, we tend to compare ourselves to the helper (Fisher, Harrison, and Nadler 1978; Nadler 2015). In those instances, we prefer help from someone who has a higher status, such as a boss or teacher.

6. The research on attribution in social psychology examines why we make the attributions about events (actions, experiences, situations) that we do, and the consequences of those attributions once made for our actions, feelings and expectations (Kelley and Michela 1980). The attributions we make are shaped by our prior beliefs (about the situation, ourselves or others, or effect), our motivations (need to feel a sense of efficacy or control or avoid feeling shame) and information about the situation.

7. Research on attributions about the helper's motives identifies three possible attributions: the person cares, has some ulterior motive, or is required to help us (see Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna 1982; Nadler 2015, 3; Weinstein, DeHaan, and Ryan 2010).

stories about why help is needed, research finds that, if individuals are told many people have a similar problem, or they attribute their problem to something situational rather than personal, they are more likely to seek help (see Tessler and Schwartz 1972). Others also make attributions about the situation of the person seeking help, and these too can affect a person's experience of the situation and of seeking help. For example, one study found that sexual assault victims had longer recovery times when they received comments implying that they could have prevented the assault, such as you were not careful enough (Ullman 1996). Overall, this research finds that if we attribute our need for help to something personal, we are less likely to seek help than if we attribute it to a situation or something outside our control. Moreover, if we attribute our problem to something personal, such as our inability to deal with a situation, our experience will be more negative when we do seek help (Mitchell 1988). All of this will depend on our beliefs about ourselves, our need for effective control, and whether having this problem is central to our ego (Nadler 2015; Fisher, Nadler, and Whitcher-Alagna 1982).

Next, I turn to formal helping exchanges in nonprofit organizations. In these settings status processes are complicated by organizational hierarchies, where staff have more institutional power and authority than participants do. Here, staff must attenuate the status hierarchy, between themselves and participants, to realize desired goals, something not formally recognized in most organizations. This makes these status hierarchies somewhat distinct, as research finds most status hierarchies are stubbornly stable, defended by those at the top.[8] The necessity of staff attenuating of the status hierarchy between themselves and participants is easy to see when we recall that those with

higher status benefit from performance advantages such as confidence boosts, enhanced credibility, and credit for the collective effort of the group. Because participants' competence and leadership are essential for realizing the goal, failure to address their loss of status leads to all kinds of disadvantages including stress, sadness, anger, and other negative emotions, complicated cognitive processes, energy loss from monitoring the high-status person, and so on. Not only do these consequences affect participants' ability to achieve their goal but they have their own toll on participants' health and well-being. Yet, this status attenuation work and its impact on participants have largely remained invisible.

REINFORCING OR ATTENUATING STATUS HIERARCHIES IN NONPROFITS

Nonprofits are private mission-driven organizations dedicated to a collective or public good (Salamon 1999). In the United States alone, there are over 1.6 million registered nonprofits and many more informal organizations. Over the last several decades, these nonprofits have become important resources in communities across the country as people face the consequences of systemic marginalization, including policies that have led to underinvestment in public schools, safe and affordable housing, and basic health care along with the absence of living wage jobs (for example, Michener 2019; Quadagno 1994; Wetts and Willer 2018). My focus is on a subset of these organizations that work with individuals, families, and communities to address the causes and consequences of inequality. This subset includes organizations providing services to address addiction and sexual exploitation, revitalizing neighborhoods through small businesses development and the construction of affordable housing, as well as organizing and building movements to advo-

8. Research finds that status hierarchies change for one of several reasons: lower-ranked members challenge the status hierarchy through demonstrations of their expertise and commitment to the group (Ridgeway 2019); self-interested behavior of highly ranked members can lead others to question their commitment to the group and their legitimacy as a leader, resulting in a loss of status (Ridgeway 2019; Gould 2002); outside environmental shocks require new kinds of expertise that lead to new rankings (Magee and Galinsky 2008); or the group fails to achieve the goal, sowing doubt about the competency of higher ranked members (Bendersky and Pai 2018; Gould 2002). Recent research also shows that team leaders can frame tasks in ways that disrupt cultural status beliefs by emphasizing the importance of each member's contribution (see Manago, Sell, and Goar 2022, this issue).

cate for policy changes (Chetkovich and Kunreuther 2006; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Bear in mind throughout this discussion that nonprofits—the organizations that exist, how they are run, the ideas that inform them, the legitimacy they have in society—reflect historical and contemporary patterns of systemic inequity evident in wider society (Ray 2019; Wooten and Couloute 2017).

Nonprofits dedicated to addressing the causes and consequences of inequality are varied in their purpose, size, structure, funding sources, and staffing. Some are led or staffed by those from the community in which they work whereas others are led or staffed by people from outside the community. In some nonprofits, participants have a great deal of authority, sitting on the board, determining strategies, or working collectively to organize for change, with staff in more supporting roles. In other nonprofits, participants are not involved in organizational decision-making at all. Moreover, the strategies employed by some of these organizations explicitly challenge status beliefs, for example, by launching campaigns to destigmatize mental illness or prostitution or by creating environments that recognize the competence and talent of participants, whereas other organizations do not directly address participants' social status. This diversity means the status hierarchy between staff and participants will vary widely across organizations, where some status hierarchies are flatter and less defined and others steeper and more defined (see Accominotti et al. 2022).

Regardless, these organizations need to attenuate this status hierarchy between staff and participants to effectively address the goal. Some nonprofits understand this and elevate participants' status in the organization as one of their principal strategies. This is evident not only in the organizations that recognize participants' experience and expertise or emphasize more egalitarian relationships between staff and participants, as described, but also in how nonprofits approach helping. For example, in some of these environments the helping relationship is in the foreground, such as when an attorney is working with an asylum seeker; whereas in others it is more in the background, embedded in community and social activities, or part of mutual aid and peer support, where participants are recognized for their role as both givers and receivers (Borkman 1999; Gómez Garrido, Carbonero Gamundí, and Viladrich 2019). Still in other nonprofits, helping is reframed altogether as recognizing and investing in the leadership of participants (Miller 2017). Despite this diversity, in many nonprofits helping is foregrounded but the status hierarchy remains unaddressed, at least formally. Staff still can and do attenuate the status hierarchies in these settings, but these practices are not fully recognized or supported and may even go against the grain of professional norms or what is considered the right thing to do in the organization.

Drawing on studies that show participants' experiences in nonprofits, my own and others, I describe the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that these organizations and their staff can reinforce status hierarchies or use tactics and strategies to attenuate the initial hierarchy. I focus on the three characteristics of helping, as described earlier: control, commonality, and cause. Specifically, I describe three practices that can attenuate this initial status hierarchy—relinquishing control, establishing commonalities and questioning causes—and how the inverse of these practices—asserting control, reinforcing differences, and ascribing causes—can strengthen the initial status hierarchy. In discussing each, I offer four examples—two at the organizational level and two at the staff level—to illustrate the salience of each for the experience of those requesting or receiving help in these settings. Within each set, I provide one case of reinforcing and one of attenuating to draw into sharp relief how these practices may affect the hierarchy between staff and participants, and the consequences of such practices for participants. These practices and corresponding examples are summarized in table 1. Although beyond the scope of this article, how these practices are patterned within and across organizations would further illuminate how helping is organized in a way that reproduces or addresses inequality.

Control

Studies of nonprofit organizations do not explicitly examine status or measure the degree

of control participants have in these settings but do document the consequences of restricting participants' autonomy (Williams 1996; Joniak 2005). For example, several studies examine domestic violence survivors' experience in nonprofit shelters and find that these survivors would rather go back to their abuser than stay in the shelter because of all the rules in the shelter (Glenn and Goodman 2015; Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence 2016; VanNatta 2010). For example, one study reported that "about half of the participants gave at least one example of how the controlling and limiting nature of the rules, particularly those that involved monitoring their behavior, felt similar to what they had experienced in their abusive relationships" (Glenn and Goodman 2015, 10). The study reported the consequences of this for the survivors: "Rules and their enforcement directly affected participants during their stay in the shelter in two main ways: limiting access to resources and thus impeding progress, and causing emotional distress, including increased isolation" (Glenn and Goodman 2015, 12). As a result, shelters experimented with reducing the number of rules, and, as one study reveals, women stayed longer and participated more regularly in case management and educational programming (VanNatta 2010, 157). As one staff member reflected, "We had rhetoric that survivors are strong and powerful, but we didn't treat them that way. We handed them a list of 68 rules to follow while they were there and checked up on them. We weren't respectful in a lot of instances" (Russo and Spatz 2007, 5).

Aside from formal organizational practices, staff can also engage in informal practices that reduce or enhance the control participants have in these settings. For example, performance requirements create real dilemmas for staff that affect how they relate to participants. In studies of social enterprises, where participants are employed as staff and work side by side with professional staff, researchers find that organizational performance expectations create tensions leading professional staff to take over the tasks assigned to working participants or assigning them to simpler jobs, resulting in lower quality job training for them (Cooney 2006; Hustinx and De Waele 2015). In contrast, staff can also exercise discretion in ways that give participants more autonomy and control in the social enterprise. Andrea Chan finds that increases in self-esteem and optimism were associated with staff support that matched the specific demands faced by the worker and interpreted by the worker as helpful (2016, 1737). In another study where participants and staff also worked side by side, one participant described how a staff person approached this issue: "Without BJ I wouldn't be here. . . . [The rest of the staff focus on] rules, this rule that, this rule this, you can't do this, you can't do that and BJ just takes you aside and says, 'What do you think about this? Do you think there's room for compromise or something?'" (personal communication, June 24, 2015).

Organizations need some structure to organize and ease coordination, but the degree of autonomy and control participants have in nonprofits can attenuate or reinforce the status hierarchy between participants and staff, which affects their engagement and their social-emotional experience. The examples also confirm that in organizations two hierarchies exist simultaneously: power hierarchies and status hierarchies (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Staff have control over resources that participants desire, that is, the power hierarchy, but the examples also show that asserting control can rest on evaluations of competence, that is, the status hierarchy, whether it is the competence of participants living in a shelter or as employees in a social enterprise. These evaluations can be institutionalized in organizational rules, procedures, and norms (Ridgeway 2019).

Commonalities

Studies of nonprofit organizations show how organizational practices can draw sharper distinctions between participants and staff or can soften those distinctions, which have consequences for participant experiences. For example, in a study of a homeless shelter, researchers discovered that the volunteers had all sorts of privileges not afforded to the participants. For example, the volunteers had their own cubicle for sleeping, whereas those who were homeless slept in bunk beds crammed into a single room, creating a visible hierarchy de-

scribed as denigrating to participants (Wasserman and Clair 2010, 180). In a study of fifteen antipoverty faith-based nonprofits identified as successful, the organizations had a common practice: participants played a variety of roles, including volunteer, mentor, and board member. In these more role-fluid environments, participants described themselves as collaborators, not clients, and the relationships with staff as mutual, something that surprised the researchers (Netting et al. 2005).

Regardless of whether organizations employ explicit strategies that create more mutual relationships between participants and staff, staff also exercise discretion in ways that inadvertently emphasize these differences or that seek to find commonality and create more mutual relationships. For example, in a study of faith-based providers, Rebecca Sager and Laura Stephens describe participants' experience with one staff member: "[The leader], he's a nice guy, but he's got an ego problem. And he makes sure we all knew he was [professional] of the year, and on and on it went. . . . It's like this 'holier than thou' attitude" (2005, 311). In contrast, another study demonstrates the significance of finding commonality. The study reports that an immigration attorney explained a scenario where she stepped out of her professional role and went to lunch with her client, and how it positively changed the participant's engagement, where she was able to share more information that supported her case: "That moment of rapport, that moment of allowing us to have an interaction outside her just talking about all these awful things that had happened to her—was transformative and made the rest of the day easier. . . . There is a lot of discussion in the legal field, of how close do you allow your clients to become. Some lawyers never talk about their personal lives with clients, ever, period. I don't take that tack. I think there are times that it can really benefit [the client]" (Benjamin and Campbell 2015, 996).

These examples provide some evidence of how organizational and staff practices that emphasize commonality can attenuate the status hierarchy affecting participant engagement and their social emotional experiences. The examples suggest that even small moves to estab-

lish mutuality can go some distance toward establishing the types of relationships that make interdependent work possible. The importance of mutuality for participant outcomes has been well supported in some fields (see Repper and Carter 2011) but will depend on the context, the problem, and whether the mutuality triggers comparison (Nadler 2015). Again, we need studies that examine such practices—whether hiring staff with shared experience or identity, or simply supporting relationships that extend beyond staff-participant roles—and their consequences for participants' experience of their social status in nonprofit organizations.

Causes

In nonprofit organizations, attributions about why help is needed are made by participants themselves, as well as by the organization and staff. These causal attributions may be explicit or implicit. For example, studies find that when participants read program descriptions that focus on empowerment rather than need, it has a marked influence on their self-efficacy (Thomas et al. 2020). Research also shows how attributions about participants' problems can be subtle, such as when flood victims find the used clothing offered by organizations belittling: "Many of the women, most of whom had donated to charity throughout their lives, began to realize the flaws in the notion that one person's trash is another person's treasure" (Fothergill 2003, 674).

Other studies point to how these organizations deliberately seek to change participants' causal stories through critical analysis of the structural causes of their situation (Dodge and Ospina 2016; Karriem and Benjamin 2016). For example, in her study of nonprofits providing social services to sex workers, Samantha Majic notes how these organizations, created by activists who fought for prostitutes' rights, mixed needed social services with causal analysis that challenged the predominant approach to criminalization of prostitution, including a sign in the waiting room, "Outlaw Poverty Not Prostitutes." Sex workers, in turn, developed self-efficacy, leading some of them to become more politically active (Majic 2011, 828).

For their part, staff can also exercise discretion in the ways they frame causes for problems

when talking with participants. One staff member described the subtle and unprogrammed ways in which she engages in attributional analysis to motivate participants to quit smoking and stop blaming themselves:

> I've gotten myself armed with a lot of detailed trivia, nuts and bolts stuff, and I pass that along and help a person to see . . . that when you look at it in this much bigger way, instead of being angry about whatever failing, you can just be like "I'm tired of big tobacco" . . . I got a woman to quit smoking three packs a day. . . . [I told her about] the research about how they put together the filters and then purposely put microscopic air holes punched along the side of the filters that line up where your fingers would hold it so that you are now covering the very thing [that is supposed to be ventilating] . . . so you smoke more. (personal communication, October 30, 2012)

Staff can also assume causes by automatically using labels for participants. One staff person recounted how she was talking with a participant and referred to her as homeless: "And she was like, 'I am unhoused I want you to use that word from now on.' I was like 'fine.' So we really got to know her as a person, how she wanted to work, and she got more comfortable with us" (personal communication, March 18, 2015). These examples provide some evidence that causal attributions about the problem affect participants, including their reaction, their sense of efficacy, and their successful accomplishment of a goal.

These examples illustrate the powerful role that status processes play in nonprofit organizations and how, by exacerbating rather than alleviating the temporary status hierarchy in helping relations, nonprofits can inadvertently reinforce inequality. Countless others have suggested as much, pointing out how these organizations are paternalistic, use labels that connote unworthiness, turn people from citizens with rights into participants with needs, perpetuate racism and white supremacy or, alternatively, how they address important challenges in ways that partner with communities, support and recognize participants' leadership and expertise, and help people claim their rights and advocate for policies that address inequality (Eliasoph 2009; Dodge and Ospina 2016; Gutierrez 1990; Hasenfeld 2000; Hulme and Edwards 1996; INCITE! 2017; Kissane 2003). But missing has been a basic account that would tie these observations together. This analysis provides such an account and, in so doing, names what has been a hidden but powerful force in these settings, status processes and their effects on participants.

To be sure, other research in this double issue shows that changing how one is ranked in a status hierarchy is not enough to address inequality. For example, even when individuals experience positive status shifts, these gains can easily be diminished as dominant systems reinscribe the meaning of these status gains in ways that can diminish one's status, for example, by attributing gains to special treatment rather than competence (see Portocarrero and Carter 2022, this issue). Moreover, participants themselves can feel uncomfortable with status gains if this separates them from close others leading to what Mesmin Destin and his colleagues (2022, this issue) refer to as status uncertainty, something that they found can be mitigated with social support.

We need to recognize that attenuating the status hierarchy between staff and participants in nonprofits does not do enough to address the inequities in institutions and systems that have created a need for these organizations. Still, without attention to the initial status hierarchy organizing these relationships, the assumptions about competencies that undergird the status hierarchy go unquestioned, the practices that attenuate status hierarchies remain unsupported, and the practices that reinforce the status hierarchy between staff and participants are not addressed. In the final section that follows, I step back to consider why these status processes in nonprofits have remained undertheorized and not fully addressed despite their significance for participants and for addressing structural inequality.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis in this article demonstrates the powerful role that status processes play in nonprofit organizations and how attenuating, or at least not exacerbating, status hierarchies be-

Table 1. Examples of Status Attenuation and Reinforcement Practices in Nonprofits

	Organization Practice	Consequences for Participant(s)	Staff Practice	Consequences for Participant(s)
Control				
Assert control	Too many rules for participants in domestic violence shelters	Feel emotional distress, isolation Drop out of the program, returns to abuser (Glenn and Goodman 2015)	Take over participants' tasks, do not provide supportive assistance	Receive lower quality job training (Cooney 2006; Hustinx and DeWaele 2015)
Share control	Reduces rules for participants in domestic violence shelter	Engage more in programs Less conflict in shelter (VanNatta 2010)	Provide support that matches participant demands, enabling participants to gain competence.	Interpret support offered as helpful Have improved self-esteem and optimism (Chan 2016)
Commonality				
Reinforce differences	Gives volunteers better sleeping quarters than participants in shelter	Have inferred feelings of denigration (Wasserman and Clair 2010)	Leader lets everyone knows he received professional of the year award	Feel that leader has "holier than thou" attitude (Sager and Stephens 2005)
Establish commonality	Enable particpants to play variety of roles	View selves as collaborators and relationships with staff as mutual Programs identified as successful and innovative (Netting et al. 2005)	Takes a lunch break from interview with trauma survivor, talk about cooking and food, topics not related to the issue	Seem more comfortable and at ease; engaging more; making eye contact. Able to provide information to staff for asylum case (Benjamin and Campbell 2015)
Causes				
Attribute causes	Assumes donated clothes valued by particpants	Feel belittled by donated old worn-out clothes (Fothergill 2003)	Refers to participants as "homeless" (organization provides advocacy for homeless and formerly homeless women)	Get upset and correct staff: is "unhoused" (Author data)
Question assumptions about causes	Challenges prostitution as the problem: "outlaw poverty not prostitutes"	Feel greater self-efficacy Increase political participation (Majic 2011)	Shift blame for smoking from individual to big tobacco companies	Quit smoking three packs a day (Author data)

Source: Author's tabulations.

tween staff and participants is necessary for addressing the inequality that is the motivating concern of these organizations. We might wonder why these status processes, so important to the experience of participants, have not been more central to the analysis of these organizations. One reason is that evaluation models commonly used to assess the impact of these organizations focus on the effect of programs and services rather on than the relational context in which these interventions unfold. The effects of interventions reflect the concerns of funders, evaluators, and program designers. But participants experience nonprofits and their interventions through relationships. Therefore, without attention to relationships, particularly the status processes that structure them, evaluations not only miss these status processes and their consequences but can unintentionally exacerbate status hierarchies between staff and participants. For example, pressure to meet performance targets can easily exacerbate the status hierarchy as staff assert greater control, make hasty causal assumptions, and fail to take the time to develop the kind of mutual relationships necessary to address inequality (also see Benjamin 2008, 2021).

A second reason these processes have not gotten the attention they deserve has to do with the way organizational norms, rules, and procedures that are often taken for granted and presented as rational actually reflect the interests and concerns of those with higher status. This was evident in some of the examples discussed earlier, including when domestic violence shelters had rules to "keep people safe" but were experienced by survivors as coercive and controlling. As Ridgeway reminds us, organizations often reflect the needs and concerns of those that have higher status (Ridgeway 2019, 132; see also Acker 2006; Bonilla-Silva 2012; Evans and Moore 2015; Feagin 2020; Ray 2019; Wingfield 2010). Moreover, because attenuating the status hierarchy can increase the uncertainty about "what to do," nonprofit staff may feel more comfortable maintaining their role as helping experts who have the answers. This may be particularly true for staff with less experience who want to "get it right." Given high staff turnover, nonprofits often have a constant stream of new staff who may lean into their role as helping experts. Even when organizations have practices to ensure that the organization reflects the interests and concerns of participants, the larger institutional environment constrains organizations, making such practices difficult to sustain. Funding priorities, grant requirements, as well as laws and regulations in certain policy fields can all constrain nonprofits in these efforts.

Finally, status processes in nonprofits may not have received the attention they deserve because these organizations depend on the idea that they are "doing good" work: donors make contributions, volunteers give their time, and staff take lower pay because they believe they are engaged in meaningful work, work that contributes to addressing issues of inequality, work that is "doing good" (Breeze 2021). Indeed, we have entire systems dedicated to rewarding such prosocial behavior, including tax breaks for donors and nonprofits, government supported volunteering programs and the like. This association between nonprofits and doing good makes sense when we consider that prosocial behavior has important benefits to the group and thus should be rewarded (Nadler 2015). But this association can make it harder to critique such efforts without stymieing the motivation. To be sure, many have offered important critiques of nonprofits and the larger philanthropic sector over the decades. Recent critiques have echoed historic concerns, arguing that such efforts are antidemocratic, reflect elite interests, are paternalistic, and serve to maintain racial hierarchies (INCITE! 2017; Kohl-Arenas 2015; Morey 2021; Villanueva 2018). My point here is not to revisit these discussions but rather to suggest that the focus on givers—whether to celebrate or critique them—may explain why the relational experience of participants, including their experience of their social status, has not been systematically identified, theorized, or addressed. In the end, how help is organized and institutionalized, including within nonprofit organizations, matters a great deal for whether this universal experience reinforces or attenuates status hierarchies and consequently whether helping addresses or deepens inequality.

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