

# “But the Fellows Are Simply Diversity Hires!” How Organizational Contexts Influence Status Beliefs



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*We demonstrate how organizational contexts influence status beliefs. Specifically, we draw from in-depth interviews conducted with current and former U.S. Foreign Service officers to explain how recipients of the U.S. Department of State Pickering Fellowship learn to accept a devaluing status belief about this accolade once they enter the Foreign Service. Within this organizational context is an established belief that Foreign Service officers who are not the prototypical “Male, Pale, and Yale” workers must be “diversity hires” who have entered the department through a “back door” and have a “leg up” because of their race. This racialized negative evaluation becomes linked to the Pickering Fellowship and affects all fellows. Our study offers insights into the intersection of racial diversity and status processes in organizations.*

**Keywords:** race and ethnicity, organizations, diversity, inequality

Status processes play a fundamental role in maintaining inequality. Since Max Weber’s ([1918] 1968) insight that status can be distinct from material resources as a form of social division, scholars have incorporated other forms of status hierarchy (such as race and ethnicity, gender, and disability) into social scientific analyses (see, for example, Ridgeway 2014; Roscigno 2019). Status is the position one occupies in a socially constructed and culturally supported hierarchy, as well as the respect and admiration that this positioning confers (see Ridgeway and Walker 1994; Magee and Galinsky

2008; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). Researchers continue to ponder how status processes operate in realistic social contexts (Rivera 2010) and why studying these processes matters for inequality (see Ridgeway and Markus 2022, this issue).

The organizations and institutions we interact with in our everyday lives are heavily implicated in the rising levels of global inequality (see Amis et al. 2018). But we know little about how organizational contexts have the power to shape status dynamics. We also know little about the emergence of status beliefs, how they

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become widely shared in organizational contexts, and what social processes maintain them (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). Because status is constructed through repeated social interaction and negotiation among actors in a given hierarchy (Bendersky and Pai 2018), it is necessary to understand how these interactions and negotiations shape status beliefs and, thus, individual outcomes. Research finds that these social interactions help determine who becomes a leader and who a follower (DeRue and Ashford 2010), who asserts their expertise in meetings (Owens and Sutton 2001), and how, through collaborative work, individuals assert their competence to be perceived as higher-status actors (Sutton and Hargadon 1996). In this way, these status organizing processes translate to the have and have-nots of organizational resources and expectations around who adds value to the organization.

These interpersonal evaluations are rooted in status beliefs—or widely held cultural beliefs that link social category differences to greater or lesser status-worthiness and perceived competence (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000; Melamed et al. 2019) and status characteristics—any recognized social distinction that has attached to it widely shared beliefs about at least two categories, or states, of the distinction (for example, Ridgeway 2001). Recent work expands classical theorizing on status beliefs and characteristics to focus on the role contexts and positionality play in establishing, reifying, evaluating, or diluting these beliefs (for example, Bianchi, Kang, and Stewart 2012; Valentino 2022, this issue).

Contributing to this growing body of literature in status research, we provide a case study of recipients of the prestigious Thomas R. Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship, a U.S. Department of State program that confers high levels of status and visibility on recipients. Specifically, we investigate how a change in organizational context can lead individuals to experience a shift in the way they perceive a status characteristic, and how a negative status belief established in an organizational context gets linked to a person's status characteristic. To unpack these processes, we draw from rich interview data to show how recipients of the Pickering Fellowship experience a shift in the way

they perceive this accolade and how their move through several organizational contexts facilitates this shift. We uncover how Pickering fellows go from contexts that hold a positive status belief about the fellowship (fellows' family and college communities) to one in which a negative status belief is established (the Department of State). Further, we show how linking a new distinguishing characteristic (the Pickering Fellowship) to a status-valued social difference established in this organizational context (the racialized evaluation of Foreign Service officers) causes a negative status belief to spread to the Pickering Fellowship.

Our case offers several contributions to the literature on status processes. Typically, status processes are associated with gender, race, and class, among other demographic variables. However, to the best of our knowledge, status processes associated with an accolade (in this case, a fellowship) have not yet been explored as a potential pathway for the formation of status beliefs. Studying the status beliefs tied to an accolade such as the Pickering Fellowship drawing from distinct yet related disciplines and levels of analyses—individual, group, and organizational—helps untangle the complexity of fellowship status as both a means of distinction and a reproducer of inequality. Further, we unpack the intricate, multilevel process by which Pickering fellows gradually learn to accept the devaluing status belief about their fellowship, and how this acceptance is necessary to maintain the status hierarchy in the Foreign Service. We demarcate how contexts dictate which status characteristics are amplified, muted, and relevant in explaining individual actors' experiences.

In what follows, we offer a background discussion of prior work related to status characteristics and beliefs. We then turn to our data and case materials. These allow us to trace status dynamics over time at the precipice of winning the fellowship while highlighting the processes by which fellows develop status beliefs depending on their organizational environments. Our in-depth, qualitative methodology focuses on these complexities through an analysis of interactions and perceptions, highlighting how negative status beliefs around the fellowship interact with hegemonic status beliefs around race in the United States.

### STATUS DYNAMICS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Status processes are dynamic, culturally embedded, and context dependent (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Rivera 2010). For example, an assistant professor can have, on the basis of his or her expertise, high status among graduate students. However, among all professors in the department, this assistant professor might not be conferred the same status as a senior faculty member. This variation is in part due to different situations valuing different personal characteristics. Once an individual achieves a certain status, that position is often precarious and must be affirmed through social interactions that continuously demonstrate worthiness (Magee and Galinsky 2008). Thus actors must deploy status maintenance techniques to solidify and affirm their position in the hierarchy.

Organizations are contexts that facilitate or constrain access to resources for people, influence their beliefs, and shape status dynamics (Scott and Davis 2015; Blau et al. 1971; Chen et al. 2012). Social scientists have increasingly come to view status as a necessary construct for understanding organizational and interpersonal dynamics and outcomes (see, for example, Gould 2002; Podolny 2005; Piazza and Castellucci 2014). One's position within a status structure affects the constraints an individual faces (Hollander 1958; Galinsky et al. 2008), and their access to resources (Bunderson 2003; Ridgeway 2014). A robust body of research shows that status characteristics strongly influence assessments and evaluations of individuals, for better or worse (Berger et al. 1977; Ridgeway et al. 1998). As status characteristics theory argues (Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980), expectations about performance and contributions are driven in large part by the status that individual is assigned based on personal characteristics. These expectations also shape how people associate with and interact with one another (Correll and Ridgeway 2006).

### ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS AND STATUS PROCESSES

Although classically theorized at the group level to predict labor distribution and group performance, status characteristics theory is an important framework for understanding boundar-

ies and processes within organizations. Status characteristics are widely held cultural beliefs, and because organizations develop their own shared belief systems (Scott and Davis 2015), we contend that organizational contexts can have unique status characteristics processes. Consider, for example, how status characteristics associated with women might be perceived to be more valuable at an organization in which communality and warmth, rather than those commonly associated with men, are desired characteristics. As such, organization-specific belief systems may indoctrinate actors with beliefs about status characteristics that are unique within the organization's boundaries (Bianchi, Kang, and Stewart 2012).

Status beliefs are a powerful construct because all actors in the social field—even those disadvantaged by the belief—come to accept, as a social fact, that the other group is better than their own (Ridgeway et al. 1998; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). These third-order inferences develop not just as perceptions about how specific others in a local environment evaluatively rank others, but also as the typical views of the community and evaluative perspective of “most” people (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Once these associations develop, beliefs about performance expectations become attached to the corresponding status characteristic. Status beliefs link status associations based on race and gender, for example, to interactional experiences among individuals (see, for example, Berger and Fişek 2006). Status beliefs often develop around preexisting social categories and form relatively quickly, and thus individuals often require little evidence or convincing that these beliefs are widely held or credible in some way (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). However, for these beliefs to be widely held, both parties, such as high-status and low-status groups, must accept them (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000). Once they do, the beliefs become a part of the fabric of social reality that shapes outcomes and behaviors for individuals differentially. Status beliefs are therefore instrumental in shaping how people engage, perceive, and interact.

In the Foreign Service, being a Pickering Fellow is associated with lower competence because it is perceived as a diversity or affirmative

action initiative. In our study, being a Pickering Fellow is one state of an accepted status characteristic; another is not being a Pickering Fellow. In an organizational context in which a negative established status belief is rooted in racial differences, such as White versus non-White, holding the fellowship can lead actors to expect that Pickering fellows are less capable, less competent, and less deserving of their positions within the Foreign Service. Our research presents an interesting puzzle around the intersection of race, status beliefs, racialized evaluations of merit, and status characteristics.

It is critical to consider how status beliefs and status characteristics might be racialized. Consider the research on affirmative action policies. Scholars have examined how these initiatives stigmatize the same job applicants and employees they meant to elevate. Experimental research has shown that participants evaluated hypothetical affirmative action hires as less competent regardless of their qualifications (Resendez 2002). This finding is partly driven by associations about the types of people who benefit from affirmative action policies—specifically stereotypes about women and people of color being less competent than White people and men (Coate and Loury 1993; Heilman, Block, and Stathatos 1997).

Recent theorizing on racialized organizations supports this contention. Victor Ray (2019) posits that organizations are racial structures where cognitive schemas connect rules to social and material resources. In line with a theory of racialized organizations, we consider race as constitutive of the organizational foundation of the State Department, its hierarchies, and social processes. The Pickering Fellowship aims to disrupt this hierarchy—whether intentionally or not—and, in changing the demographic makeup of the Foreign Service, brings to bear the centrality of the Male, Pale, Yale stereotype. Our findings offer clarity about this process.

Taking the presented theoretical perspectives and our data analysis together, we contend that associations made about the goal of programs like the Pickering Fellowship, the racialized structure of the department, and the racial composition of the Foreign Service brought into the department through this pro-

gram, serve to link negative status beliefs about marginalized groups with the fellowship, a distinguishing status characteristic. One of our goals is to tease apart how fellows and nonfellows make these associations, and how they shape and maintain the status hierarchy at the State Department.

### SETTING, DATA, AND METHODS

The Department of State is an executive department of the federal government responsible for foreign policy and international relations. Its primary personnel system is the U.S. Foreign Service, which consists of more than thirteen thousand professionals carrying out U.S. foreign policy and aiding U.S. citizens abroad (U.S. Department of State 2021). For our inquiry, the department is commonly known as a Pale, Male, and Yale organization. In 2016, 82 percent of staff in the top ranks of the department were White and 60 percent were male (Kralev 2016). Despite a growth in staff, the number of female and Black employees has declined in the past decades, and promotion rates are lower for them.

In 1992, the department launched the Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship Program. According to the fellowship's website, the program is aligned with "the fundamental principle that diversity is a strength in our diplomatic efforts" (Pickering Fellowship 2021). The fellowship "prepares outstanding young people for Foreign Service careers in the U.S. Department of State." The fellowship program offers \$42,000 annually for a two-year period for tuition, room, board, books, and mandatory fees for completion of two-year master's degrees. It also provides an orientation to familiarize the fellows with all aspects of the fellowship and to enhance their understanding of Foreign Service careers. The program also facilitates two internships for all fellows. Finally, the program offers mentoring from a Foreign Service officer for the duration of the fellowship.

### Case Selection

We selected the Pickering Fellowship Program after hearing that despite the prestige of the fellowship, some Pickering fellows choose to hide their status from their coworkers. In the September 2020 issue of *The Foreign Service*

*Journal*, Julie Chung, acting assistant secretary in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, wrote, “For years, I hid the fact that I was a Pickering Fellow and did not list it on my résumé to avoid being prejudged about how I entered the Foreign Service. Sometimes there was office chatter about how ‘those fellows’ were exploiting the system, and I would not offer up that I was one of them. It was not until I was promoted to Minister Counselor that I had the confidence to talk about the fellowship more openly and explain how we had to surpass higher requirements than normal Foreign Service applicants” (2020).

In the same issue of the journal is an article titled “Diversity at State: A Dream Deferred and a Collective Responsibility” (Escrogima, Miller, and Tilghman 2020). The authors state that “the Pickering Fellowship had gone from being a prestigious attribute to a stigma.” The piece explains two key issues. First is the common misperception that all fellows are people of color, and second is that recipients often feel compelled to downplay their background as fellows when it should be a point of pride. The authors, all former Pickering fellows, write that “some minorities in the Foreign Service feel compelled to share that they are not Pickering Fellows.” We were intrigued by these statements and conducted an initial ten pilot interviewees to learn more. After reviewing issues of the journal, reading online archives, and conducting pilot interviewees, we selected this as our case study.

### *Data Collection*

We gathered qualitative data through in-depth interviews to investigate the status processes that lead fellows such as Julie to hide their status. We interviewed current and former Pickering fellows, Foreign Service officers (FSOs) who are not fellows, and other people who have worked directly with the fellowship program, such as members of the selection committee and program officers.

With theory generation in mind, we set out to investigate what established status beliefs in the Department of State fellowship could lead recipients of this prestigious fellowship to hide their fellowship status. From 2020 to 2021, we conducted thirty-six in-depth, open-ended in-

terviews. Each interview lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. Our entire data gathering process took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. We therefore conducted thirty in-depth interviews via Zoom and six interviews over the telephone. We recorded and transcribed twenty-one of the thirty-six interviews. Many of our participants still work for the State Department and therefore fifteen of them decided not to have their interviews recorded. To make up for the lack of verbatim transcriptions, we took detailed notes during and immediately after these interviews. When a participant shared what we considered a “good quote”—a quote that fully captured the message they were conveying—we asked them to pause so we could write it word by word. We assigned pseudonyms to all participants. When referring to cities, we chose pseudonym cities that we considered demographically similar to the city our participants referred to.

We used three main recruitment strategies: we identified Foreign Service officers through LinkedIn and contacted them via private messages; we used snowball sampling techniques (Handcock and Gile 2011); and we reached out to the Pickering Alumni Association’s leadership, who, after learning more about our project, sent out an email to all alumni and fellows and posted an announcement on their Facebook group. We asked participants about their experiences when winning the fellowship. We were interested in learning how participants felt when they won the fellowship and how they perceived it. Thus we probed for status, prestige, and emotions that emerged soon after winning the fellowship.

Our semi-structured interview guide also included an extract from the “Diversity at State: A Dream Deferred and a Collective Responsibility” article. During the interviews, we highlighted the following text: “Due to the misinformation regarding some of the fellowships, recipients often feel compelled to downplay their background as fellows when it should be a point of pride. In fact, some minorities in the Foreign Service feel compelled to share that they are not Pickering or Rangel Fellows.” Our interview questionnaire explored only a few aspects concerning the experience of Pickering fellows and nonfellows in the State Depart-



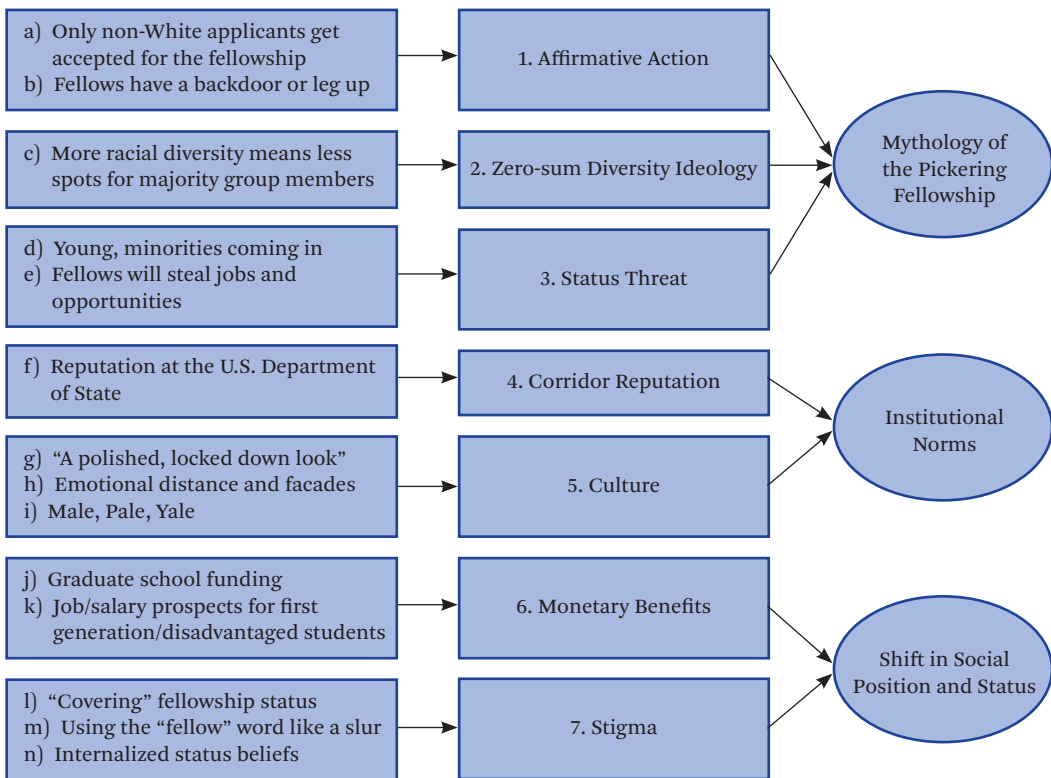
ment. We let responses to those answers shape the tone of the interview. For example, if a participant mentioned tensions rooted in the ethno-racial background of fellows, we asked questions that would help us understand how they related their race and the race of others to status.

**Data Analysis**

Our analysis involved three steps. In the first, we coded interview transcripts and field notes separately using the Atlas.ti software and then convened to share our preliminary results. We exchanged our coded files, reread each interview, focused on our shared coding categories, and discussed conceptual patterns. The second step consisted of looking at secondary codes and patterns across the interviews to collapse into higher-level nodes. For example, we grouped comments such Male, Pale, Yale and “FSOs are expected to have a polished, locked-down look” into a node called culture. The

third step involved collapsing the various coding categories into theoretically distinct clusters. We moved iteratively between our first-order codes and the emerging patterns in our data until adequate conceptual themes emerged (Eisenhardt 1989). In addition to the three steps, we carried out a members check (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey 2010; Nag, Corley, and Gioia 2007); that is, during our data analysis and writing process, we talked with informants to ensure that our interpretation of the phenomena aligned with what Pickering fellows experience daily at the Department of State and with what Pickering alumni experienced in the past. Figure 1 illustrates our final data structure. This figure shows the categories and themes from which we developed our findings and the relationships between them. We provide additional supporting evidence in table 1, which is keyed to figure 1. This table contains representative first-order data, which supports the second-order themes.

**Figure 1.** Final Data Structure



Source: Authors’ tabulations.

**Table 1.** Data Structure

Second-Order Themes and First-Order Categories	Representative Quote
1. Affirmative action	
a) Only non-White applicants get accepted for the fellowship	“If you’re like, for example, a White person that grew up in Appalachia like that, that the department doesn’t support, the fellowship does consider that like a facet of diversity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.” (White, Male, Pickering Fellow)
b) Fellows have a back door or a leg up	“People think fellows maybe don’t have to take the test, well, no, they do. They actually have to take the oral assessment; they have to pass it.” (Latino, Male, Pickering Fellow)
2. Zero-sum diversity ideologies	
c) More racial diversity means fewer spots for majority group members	“We’ve been dominating this space for this long, and now you’re gonna come in, you got in, you know, cuz you’re a special case. So, where does that leave me? Nobody wants to hear about the White guy’s opinion anymore. If all these, you know, colorful folks are, you know, taking up the oxygen?” I mean, that’s just my impression, but like people just feel threatened because they’ve just been able to dominate that space for so long with such ease.” (Black, Female, Pickering Fellow)
3. Status threat	
d) Young, minorities coming in	“And I think some of [the negativity] goes back to ageism, and the Foreign Service because a lot of us are younger, right? The average age of entering the Foreign Service is in your 30s, yeah, and right now I’m 22. So, I’ll be going in at 24” (White, Male, Pickering Fellow)
e) Fellows will steal jobs and opportunities	“Many people in the State Department who believe now for the White male, there’s no way I’m going to make it to the next level, because the department’s trying to increase diversity, and I’m going to get screwed.” (Latino, Male, Pickering Fellow)
4. Corridor reputation	
f) Reputation at the State Department	“And much of that is based on what is called corridor reputation, which starts from the moment that you come into the service.” (Asian American, Female, Pickering Fellow)
5. Culture	
g) Having a certain look	“The good Foreign Service officers are the ones who are the most polished and the most lockdown.” (White, Female, Foreign Service Officer who is not a fellow).
h) Emotional distance and facades	“I think that the biggest struggle for me at the department and as a Pickering Fellow [is] the emotional veneer of more elite, Whites, and White . . . And everything’s very removed and distant and polished.” (Black, Female, Former Foreign Service Officer).

**Table 1.** Data Structure (*continued*)

Second-Order Themes and First-Order Categories	Representative Quote
i) Male, Pale, Yale	"Basically, it was an organization, for like Ivy League, elite White men, for many years, at least since its foundation." (Latino, Male, Pickering Fellow)
6. Monetary benefits	
j) Graduate school funding	"And so now that I had like, this was an opportunity to go to grad school, this is an opportunity to have a white-collar job." (Asian American, Male, Pickering Fellow)
k) Job/salary prospects for first-generation/disadvantaged students	"I'm a first-generation college student. And a first-generation like, white-collar worker. So, it was really life-changing for me." (White, Female, Pickering Fellow)
7. Stigma	
l) Covering fellowship status	"I am slightly worried about once I do enter the service, like whether to tell colleagues, if I'm a fellow or how open to be about that, because of the fear that it might essentially, like put this picture of me in other people's minds that might not be positive" (Black, Female, Pickering Fellow)
m) Using the <i>fellow</i> word like a slur	"I guess that the real thing is that sometimes people use the word <i>fellow</i> , and it had the same sting as if people were using the N-word, because that's really what they were conveying, at the time." (Asian American, Male, Pickering Fellow)
n) Internalized status beliefs	"I've known there was that stigma associated with the fellowship." (Black, Female, Pickering Fellow)

Source: Authors' tabulations.

## FINDINGS

Immediately after winning the fellowship, new fellows move up within the hierarchy of their social systems (their communities and universities). This new status characteristic (the fellowship) quickly becomes a valuable attribute to others in these contexts. Serena's experience depicts this phenomenon. As an ambitious young girl from a low-income family in the border town of Nogales in Arizona, Serena grew up uncertain about what the future would hold for her. Serena remembers bursting into tears when reading the Pickering Fellowship acceptance email. At the time of the interview, in early 2021, she held a senior position in the State Department. Serena never imagined that she would one day be trusted to protect the security of the United States, a country her Mexican parents migrated to before she was born.

When asked to think about how her life changed when she won the fellowship, Serena said, "The Pickering [Fellowship] changed everything for me. It gave me resources, and it changed how everyone looked at me. I felt like a celebrity for a while. Papi said I could be the first Mexican president of the U.S. Papi had never said that about me before."

In the context of her community, the Pickering Fellowship became attached to a positive status belief. Serena's proud parents quickly spread the news across their networks. They invited all her uncles and aunties to a big celebration. Soon after learning that Serena won, her classmates and childhood friends called her to ask for guidance on winning prestigious fellowships. Holding the Pickering Fellowship became something desirable to others in her network. During an interview, Serena ex-



plained: “When I became a Pickering, my friends would reach out all the time to ask for my opinion about their future. Before winning the Pickering, I was unsure about my future, and honestly, I never got this kind of attention from anyone. It’s like the Pickering became something all my friends wanted. I guess this is because the fellowship is a ticket out of poverty, out of Nogales, yes, and a ticket to a reputable career.”

Like the family and friends of Pickering fellows, college friends and professors positively value this prestigious accolade. Dan, a White young man who grew up in a trailer park in rural Kentucky, also felt the esteem of others when he won the fellowship, as he related during an interview:

I was part of a program called Student Support Services Trio for First-Generation, Low-Income Students at school, they are like family. I remember calling my Trio counselor, who is like my second mom. I was like: “I got an email!” and she was like: “Did you open it?” I was like: “No! Oh my gosh, are you in your office?” She said: “I can be there in five minutes.” So, bedhead and everything, I put on jeans, go, and Virginia, the whole office, comes in, and we all go into her office. I opened the email, and it said: “Congratulations, you have been selected as a Pickering fellow.” I just screamed in a way that I have never done before, that I do not think I ever will again. It was like a bellowing scream from the bottom of my stomach. I just started screaming, and I was crying. We were all jumping. And then they started crying, and we were all screaming. It was just beautiful.

Dan was “treated with respect” during his remaining time in college. He felt “immense pride for winning this fellowship” and highlighted that “never in my wildest dreams it would have occurred to me, coming from a trailer park in Kentucky, that I would live in D.C.” With enthusiasm, Dan said, “My friends brag about me. My alma mater invited me to virtually visit a high school in Kentucky to talk about my experience and everything.” Once he started graduate school and his fellowship tenure, Dan continued to feel how others posi-

tively valued the fellowship. When talking about his first year of graduate school as a fellow, Dan said, “That high of being a fellow, like even a year into it, you are like: Oh my gosh! I am here, and the people’s reactions when you tell others or professors are like: ‘Oh, wow! You are a Pickering?’ Like when you get those reactions, I feel pride. And especially because we have a few ambassadors at my school, and they consult with me. They are, like, ‘Oh, Dan, what do you think?’ and they always call on us, Pickeringers, they are like, ‘What do you think about this?’ It is really cool.”

Pickering fellows of all races and cohorts described learning about the positive status belief attached to the fellowship in their educational institutions and families. Natasha felt “immense pride”; Carlos felt “esteemed and respected by others”; Wendy felt “smart and respected.”

When fellows enter graduate school, the positive belief associated with this new distinguishing characteristic is reinforced in this organizational context. Our analysis shows that professors and peers recognize the competitiveness and prestige associated with the fellowship. However, in graduate school, some fellows first learn that there might be another side to this status coin—a negative one they did not necessarily expect. Take, for instance, the sentiment shared by Marie, an Asian American Pickering fellow, about her experiences in graduate school. She felt, she explained, that “people resent that we get grad school paid for. People also sometimes resent that they didn’t know about it, but they could have applied [but did not] because they thought it was just for people of color.” Jenna, who is White, said that she did not share with people in grad school that she was a Pickering fellow because “it had a connotation for my peers. Perhaps a negative one more so at the time, which is unfortunate.” Eladio, a young Latino Pickering fellow who is still in graduate school and therefore has not yet entered the department, shared this view: “Truth be told, while I am Latino, I don’t like talking about my ethnicity or race because I don’t want to have the perception that ‘Oh, you’re here because of affirmative action.’ Like, no guys, I’m here because I’m good.”

The experiences of Marie, Jenna, and Ela-

dio highlight a gradual shift in how Pickering fellows perceive holding the fellowship. While most of the fellows we interviewed feel respected for their fellowship status in graduate school, we deemed it essential to show how some fellows begin to learn that not everyone feels the same way about it. Their time in graduate school serves as a primer for what looms at the Department of State. When most Pickering fellows enter their new workplace, they learn that a status-valued social difference is established in this new organizational context.

### **When the Fellowship Is Negatively Valued**

Our data analysis suggests that the status value of the Pickering Fellowship can drastically flip from one organizational context to another. Once fellows enter the State Department, they experience a painful shift in how they perceive the fellowship: from a context that holds a positive belief (family and college) to one in which this distinction is stigmatized (Department of State). Fellows discover that many Foreign Service officers presume that whoever holds the fellowship is less competent and less deserving of holding a position at their workplace. Fellows hear comments with negative connotations about the fellowship from various actors, which leads them to question the prestige of holding this accolade.

We show how fellows gradually learn to accept the devaluing status belief around the fellowship in the Department of State. We also show how the established status-valued social difference in this organizational context is rooted in racial distinctions (such as White versus non-White race in the Foreign Service), which causes the established status valuation to spread to a status characteristic (the fellowship). FSOs associate people who hold the fellowship with corresponding differences in status-worthiness and competence. Our data analysis suggests that two myths contribute to the established status-valued social difference in this organizational context: the Pickering Fellowship only targets people of color and the fellowship provides people of color a back door into the Department of State and a leg up once they are part of the Foreign Service. We explain these myths in the sections that follow.

### ***Myth 1: The Pickering Fellowship Targets Only People of Color***

The first myth contributing to the established negative status belief around the Pickering Fellowship is that it is only awarded to people of color. Cristina, a White woman and a Pickering fellow who worked at the Department of State for years, said, “I do not think I met many people of color in the State Department that were not Pickering fellows. The ones I knew were Pickering, and I talked to people of color through that channel. Foreign Service officers assume that the fellowship targets people of color only because many Pickeringings are Black or people of color. I would say the State Department does not recruit Black people outside of the Pickering Fellowship for the most part.”

Like many White workers in the Foreign Service we interviewed, Cristina believes that the only way for Black people to access the Department of State is through a fellowship program like the Pickering. Irma, a Black woman and Pickering fellow working at State, is well aware of how dissimilar others (that is, White workers) might perceive holding the fellowship:

There is this assumption that Pickeringings are Black, or maybe Latino, right? That it is only for minorities, when it is much broader. People do not understand the scope of the program. They just assume that it is an affirmative action type of situation and that you are not qualified. That has been my experience, from hearing others talk about Pickeringings, not realizing that I am a Pickering. They assume that if you are Black, you are either civil service or Foreign Service that entered via Pickering. This girl said, and I had to bite my tongue: “Oh! This guy, he is Black! And he’s not a Pickering! So, what is he doing here?”

Our data analysis suggests that many State Department workers question the competence of those who are not the prototypical “Male, Pale, and Yale” FSO. Many of the White Department of State workers we interviewed have a zero-sum mindset when they think about racial diversity in their workplace. That is, they reported that increasing minority populations in their workplace might reduce their chances of prosperity and success (for a broader conversa-

tion on the implications of status threat and zero-sum ideologies, see Craig and Richeson 2014; Koenig 2022; Mendelberg 2022). Most of the non-Pickering White FSOs we interviewed believe that if people of color enter the State Department through “diversity initiatives” such as the Pickering Fellowship, their chances of moving up within the organization decrease. Carlos, a Latino Pickering fellow, illustrated this phenomenon by talking about his experiences with White colleagues: “There are many people in the State Department now, White males, that believe ‘There is no way I’m going to make it to the next level because the department is trying to increase diversity, and I am going to get screwed.’ I cannot tell you how many times I have heard that from a Male-Pale-Yale guy who did very well, has done very well in his career, and says that to me, thinking like I would sort of agree with him, for some reason.”

Interviewees who had spent at least five years working as FSOs gave important explanations about the drivers of the myth that the fellowship serves as a back door for non-White FSOs. Martina is one of them: she is a Black woman who has been working at the Department of State for more than a decade. Martina thinks that “it is a racialized situation, because of White people pushing back saying that minorities were getting a benefit through the fellowship” Similarly, Maria, a Latina FSO who has been working at State for a long time, offers clarity on what might hold this myth:

People believe that the Pickering only targets non-Whites. Do you know what this is about it? It is about power. It is about privilege. To some extent, I guess it could be a threat, right? Because when you are used to being the dominant [group], it is a race in these positions. It could be perceived as a threat. And that’s why maybe there’s this backlash against it, because, you know: “Oh, are they taking over now?” And possibly, you know, taking over their positions or their legacy, right? So maybe it’s a threat to their legacy, fear of other people that do not look like them getting to where they’re at. And now you have this affirmative action move, and it’s like a threat to their legacy.

In sum, our analysis suggests that the myth of the Pickering Fellowship targeting people of color goes hand in hand with the belief that increasing racial diversity at the Department of State might diminish White workers’ chances of success or promotion. This belief shapes how FSOs perceive Pickering Fellowship holders. Our intention is not to suggest that the zero-sum mentality or the threat White workers perceive solely drives this myth. However, we find that the racial rhetoric concerning the Pickering program plays an essential role in maintaining this myth.

### *Myth 2: The Pickering Fellowship as a Back Door or Leg Up*

The second myth that contributes to the established negative valuation of the Pickering Fellowship is that the program functions as a back door for people to get into the Department of State or as a leg up that helps fellows be easily promoted. Many workers erroneously believe that fellows do not take the required oral exam to enter the department or that “they have it easier than most members to enter.” Pickering fellows learn that others might negatively value the fellowship through repeated interactions with nonfellows. During an interview, Andrew, a Latino FSO who has been working at the State Department for eight years, said this: “I remember a White male in one of my training sessions early on in my career. I do not even know how it came off. But he commented about how being a Pickering makes it easier for me, and how he had taken the test multiple times and kind of earned his way in, and how I did not earn my way in. The program does not give you an advantage, though. You have to compete with everybody else.”

Like Andrew, Karina, a Black woman and former Department of State worker, said, “I have heard people comment about how the program provides a leg up and it gets people in through the door. There is a misconception about what the fellowship is. People think fellows maybe don’t have to take the test. Well, no, they do.” Winning a Pickering Fellowship does not waive entry exam requirements. Nevertheless, a significant number of Foreign Service officers believe this. Derek, an Asian American FSO and a Pickering fellow, describes an en-

counter with a coworker that happened during his first internship several years ago:

In one particular instance, I explained the fellowship to an officer at the embassy where I worked. I had corrected his misinterpretation that fellows get some sort of backdoor in the department and that they get to skip the steps to enter the department. Later that day, this particular individual was having a conversation with a friend of mine, who later reported back to me that this individual continued to believe that I had a backdoor in, and it was like, I just explained that was not the case! In the future, this individual continued to say that Pickering's "cheated their way into the department."

Like the FSO Derek encountered, many believe those who won the Pickering Fellowship are less competent because they do not think they entered the department on their merits. Other fellows, such as Jenny, a Black woman and Pickering fellow who left the Department of State to pursue a successful career in public affairs, had strong opinions about this perception. Jenny said that "White people think fellows have a leg up when in reality fellows had to work twice as hard to enter the department." We did not record this interview, but Jenny's overall sentiment about this myth is that White State Department workers feel threatened by "the presence of people of color." Jenny related that people "make up excuses to justify the presence of people of color in a White organization, like saying the Pickering program is a back door."

Our analysis shows that being a Pickering fellow and a person of color working at the Department of State becomes associated with corresponding differences in status-worthiness and ability. A negative status valuation of people of color in this organizational context spreads to the fellowship. Teresa, a Black woman and former FSO, highlighted that "people at the State Department cannot reconcile diversity with meritocracy." In Western societies, people understand value as perceived competence and effort (Ridgeway et al. 2009). Those who consider the fellowship an initiative to promote racial diversity in the Department of

State view recipients as less competent individuals who entered the organization with less effort than others. We have explained how fellows gradually learn about the established devaluing status of the fellowship. In what follows, we explain how this negative status belief becomes widely held within the State Department and accepted by the group that holds high status and by the fellows. This process is essential to maintain the negative status belief about the fellowship within the department.

### **Internalizing the Evaluative Rank: Choosing to Hide Fellowship Status**

As we pointed out, a central feature of status beliefs is that all group members come to acknowledge and accept these distinctions (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). The negative one of the fellowship is inculcated into new Foreign Service members when they enter the State Department, fellows and nonfellows alike. Like Julie Chung, the acting assistant secretary referred to earlier, fellows accept the devaluing status of the fellowship within the Department. Thus many of the fellows we interviewed choose to hide that they are Pickering recipients to maintain what is popularly known as their *corridor reputation*, "the reputation that follows every officer throughout their diplomatic career." In the A-100 training classes (the orientation course at the Foreign Service Institute), all future FSOs learn, among other things, about the culture of the State Department. When talking about why she chooses to hide that she is a Pickering fellow, Daniela, a Latina FSO, said, "Much of that [fear of disclosing my fellowship status] is based on corridor reputation, starting from the moment you come into the service. As a result of this idea of corridor reputation, there is also often the initial sort of climb up, having to prove yourself with your FSO written exam results and how you did on your oral assessment."

Carla, an Asian American woman who worked at State for more than ten years, explained how she navigated the trickiness of disclosing her fellowship status:

I am very strategic about where I disclose it. It's mostly gut instincts, but I've talked about it in my graduate experiences for the most

part. The fellowship has been a tremendous source of pride for me, and I never thought about it this explicitly. But I think at some level also, because I've known there was that stigma associated with the fellowship, I actually had the opposite reaction where I think to some extent, I wanted to say: "Yes, I'm a fellow, I know, I'm going to do my work," but I never said this directly. But part of me is thinking in the back of my head: "I'm going to do my work and represent this fellowship. So, I want you to know that I'm a fellow, because if you have any misperceptions about the fellowship, you know, I want to be someone you think of when you think of the fellowship. That whatever negative perception you have, it is wrong."

On clear display here is how fellows wrestle with the pride they feel for being Fellows and the institutional perception of the fellowship. Though many of them want to be "out, loud, and proud" about their fellowship, they end up being what one interviewee called "closet Pickeringings" as a way to avoid perceptual and social penalties at work (see, for example, Yoshino 2007; Kelly and McKillop 1996). Eladio's response encapsulates this sentiment: "I heard that having that fellowship can be almost a stigma in the State Department. Because it has this terrible perception, I wonder if it can impact my chances of being promoted or considered for other posts. You don't talk about it too closely or too openly. Because [Pickeringings are perceived] as diversity hires, it really can hurt promotion status."

Mark, a Black man and a Pickering fellow who has worked in the Foreign Service for years, has a similar concern. He explained during his interview how the two myths make fellows question their worth:

There is a tendency to either downplay the fellowship or avoid mentioning it altogether. People don't want to be perceived as having taken a shortcut. They don't want their credentials to be doubted. People think you're bypassing some of the entry requirements for Foreign Service, that you won't have to take the oral assessment or the written assessment, that fellows jumped the line. The fel-

lowship is very competitive. But for a lot of people, it still fuels that self-doubt, that like "Did I take a shortcut? Do I belong here?" The institutional perception of the Pickering Fellowship does not help, thinking it's like a shortcut around what other people had to do to get into the Foreign Service.

Mark highlights a critical dynamic of status beliefs. He emphasizes how both fellows and nonfellows begin to adopt mindsets that question whether fellowship winners deserve to be at the State Department. In reminiscing about his experience, Mark illustrates how high-status members' (such as those who fit the Male, Pale, and Yale stereotype) erroneous perceptions of the fellowship get imprinted on fellows. More important, he highlights the institution's role in maintaining this established negative status valuation. The question then arises of who tells fellows to hide their fellowship status. In the following section, we present how well-intentioned mentors suggest that their mentees be "discreet about the fellowship."

#### *Hearing from Mentors to Hide One's Fellowship Status*

One of the central selling points for prospective Pickering fellows is that they will have access to an extensive network of past fellows and mentors who can guide them through graduate school and while working as FSOs. Formal and informal mentors teach fellows about socializing, engaging with their colleagues and supervisors, and maintaining their corridor reputation. We asked our interviewees if they could remember specific advice from their mentors regarding these issues. Irma, a White former FSO, told us that her mentors asked her "to be humble regarding the fellowship because not everyone views it in a positive light." Indeed, FSOs who won the fellowship earlier in their careers and who are now mentors say that the fellowship can become a double-edged sword. Brian, an Asian American FSO who has mentored "over a dozen fellows," told us that "It [holding the fellowship] works both ways. In a negative sense, it gives us the status of someone who is filling a quota. Maybe you didn't earn your way into the State Department, which,



again, is why I think a lot of people are reluctant to advertise openly. They're part of the fellowship program because they don't want to have that status of not being a traditional hire. Maybe outside of the State Department, it can give you status among people who want to involve themselves with the Foreign Service or the government."

Although Brian does not explicitly share that he tells his mentees not to disclose their status, we deemed it important to present how mentors (and in this case, a former Pickering fellow) think about the process of disclosing the fellowship to others. Leah is a Black woman known to be "seriously committed to mentoring Pickeringings." Leah no longer works at State. She instead holds an important position in public service. However, she continues to informally mentor "whoever needs a mentor to navigate this White institution." When asked about the type of advice she gives her mentees concerning their fellowship status, Leah remembers her times as a Pickering fellow:

We had a higher standard, very specific requirements that we had to meet, but there was this feeling like we were coming in a non-traditional way, and you did feel compelled to hide it. This was very clear when you would run into Pickeringings. I remember an instance where someone from the second cohort, I ran into her on the street with another person, and it was like, oh, great to see you! The third person says, "How do you know each other?" and it was clear that the other fellow did not want me to indicate that it was through this fellowship. So, we did feel we needed to hide that we had received the fellowship.

In sum, our analysis reveals that an important part of the socialization between Pickering fellows and their mentors centers on navigating and discussing (or not) their fellowship status. Mentors make this suggestion given the stigmatized nature of the fellowship within the State Department. The advice of mentors plays a crucial role in how fellows internalize the evaluative rank and engage with others. All groups involved in this process acknowledge the evaluative rank. Fellows choose to hide their fellowship status to maintain their repu-

tation and to avoid being seen as less competent in this organizational context.

### The Negative Status Belief Affects All

We have demonstrated the racialized evaluation of the Pickering and Pickering fellows, but the established negative status belief at State affects all fellows. Taryn, a White woman who worked at the department for eight years before moving to industry, explained how the established negative evaluation affected her perception of being a recipient. Being a Pickering fellowship, she said, might not be "in line" with being a "very good FSO":

In the Foreign Service, there are the "very good FSOs" and then there are the "terrible FSOs," and there isn't any in-between. The good Foreign Service officers are the ones who are the most polished and the most lockdown. They are the people that you want to be like, with a good career reputation. People at State talk about being a Pickering fellow, they talked about it in the A100, and it was so damaging as if winning the Pickering was making a wrong step, and if you have it, that people are going to talk about you, that's not okay. It's rooted in what I think are just very fundamental cultural flaws in the Foreign Service.

Adam, a White Pickering fellow who has worked at the State Department for ten years, learned about the negative status belief attached to the fellowship when he was working in Korea:

There's one woman I met in my first tour in Busan. She's like, my picture of what the perfect Foreign Service officer would be. She went to an elite college in Boston. And she had that veneer all the time. I very occasionally saw breaks in it. She would say horrifying things. And some of the things she said made me realize I should not disclose I am a fellow. I think I heard it twice from her. It was just this shock of like, "Oh my god, you think that." She'll probably be an ambassador one day. And like, I've referred people to her because she's going places, and I admire her in a lot of ways. But it's kind of scary.

After this encounter, Adam learned to hide his fellowship status. During an interview, Carla, a White Pickering fellow who currently works at State, spoke of how the myths around the fellowship also affected her perception of the fellowship: “Somebody said something about the fellowship on a panel. I can’t pick out a specific person. It was more of what I observed. I heard things like people thought that we had an easier route. I know it was actually a harder route to get into this because I had to go to grad school for two years, which was paid for, and that’s awesome. But, you know, I had to do two internships, and it’s hard. And I also had to pass the test. I took the orals twice.”

The responses of White Pickering fellows provided a clarifying point for us: that the effects we are documenting are due to a negative belief about the Pickering itself, and not just direct, negative stereotyping of non-White members of the Foreign Service. We are not arguing that there is not a direct, negative stereotyping process. Instead, we contend that these distinctions illustrate how status, as a multi-level process, works. In this organizational context, linking the fellowship, which is a distinguishing status characteristic, to a status-valued social difference established at the State Department (being a White versus a non-White Foreign Service officer) causes the established status valuation to spread to the fellowship.

## DISCUSSION

Our objectives in this study were to understand how a change in organizational context can lead individuals to experience a shift in the way they perceive a status characteristic. Specifically, we have shown how a negative status belief about the Pickering Fellowship forms within the State Department and focus on the process by which fellows gradually learn to accept themselves the devaluing status belief about their fellowship. This is necessary to maintain the established negative status belief and also affects White fellows. In this way, we show that the effects presented in our data are due to an established negative belief about the Pickering Fellowship, as well as to indirect stereotyping of non-White fellows.

Our findings suggest that experiences with status are context dependent: at home and

school, participants experienced the esteem and respect of others. When they entered the State Department, they entered an organization where a negative status belief is established that is linked to the Pickering Fellowship, a distinguishing status characteristic. For many at State, holding a fellowship is a sign of lesser value because the evaluation of the fellowship is racialized: people believe that winning requires only being a person of color, nothing more. Thus, Department of State employees see fellows as less competent because they conflate racial status characteristics with holding the fellowship, even though some Pickering fellows are White. Notably, White fellows are not exempt from the stigma. Therefore, our case study highlights the intersection of race, myths, perceptions, and status. This phenomenon is essential to studying status beliefs and status characteristics because these elements are central to the widely held stereotypes of all the major groups through which inequality is patterned in the United States (Fiske and Bai 2020; Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007). The stereotype that people of color are less competent is reified here because nonfellows perceive the fellowship not as the opportunity equalizer it was meant to be but as a back door into one of the most prestigious institutions in the country.

## Theoretical Contributions

Our case offers two important theoretical contributions. First, we extend status characteristics theory. We do so by unpacking the process of how the established status-valued social difference in an organizational context is rooted in racial distinctions (White versus non-White in the Foreign Service), which causes the established status valuation to spread to a distinct, yet related status characteristic (fellowship holder versus nonfellowship holder). This process has been overlooked in much status research in part because this process is difficult to nail down; our qualitative approach allows us to keenly pinpoint these shifts and processes. Although status theorists have widely acknowledged that race and other dominant, hegemonic status distinctions (such as gender) play an essential role in status processes, the concept of race being linked to other status

characteristic or characteristics—though explored in other areas, such as intersectionality (Carter and Ponce de Leon 2022)—is on the periphery in much of the extant status research.

Second, we augment and extend the literature on status processes in organizations. We do so by examining how organizational contexts shapes status processes, highlighting the multilevel process of setting racial distinctions through the association of the race of fellows to a status characteristic. All status beliefs are rooted in communities and organizations, and the status attached to a distinguishing characteristic in one community is not the same as in another. Our case shows that a status belief embedded in the different contexts where the fellows socialize, whether with their families, the university, or the Department of State, does not change. What changes is the status belief held by the individual fellow about the fellowship as they enter the Department of State and learn about the established status belief.

### Practical Contributions

Despite the efforts, the State Department continues to primarily employ and promote White men. As many of our participants mentioned, conversations about racial diversity broke out throughout the department after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020. The department implemented changes after this tragic event. In April 2021, President Biden appointed Ambassador Gina Abercrombie-Winstanley as the department's first chief diversity and inclusion officer. We are in a critical historical moment that gives momentum to conversations around race and diversity (see Boykin et al. 2020; Portocarrero and Carter 2022). By providing detailed accounts of the experiences of FSOs during this time in history, our findings can inform policies to diversify the Foreign Service and other organizations.

More important, our work demonstrates that the policies used to diversify historically White organizations often have unintended consequences for the individuals who bear that burden (Heilman, Block, and Lucas 1992). Specifically, in taking an in-depth qualitative approach, we highlight important mechanisms that drive this stigmatizing process. In doing so, we provide a critical roadmap for policy im-

plementers as well as a cautionary tale for how these programs can reproduce negative consequences for those they are meant to advance.

### Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

Our study has limitations that provide fertile ground for future research. First, although we present data from nonfellows, we center the experiences of fellows rather than nonfellows and other important actors at State and what they think about this accolade. Thus we rely less on perceptions and more on the experience of having this status characteristic. Future research should examine this phenomenon in-depth and study whether perceptions change across organizational hierarchies. However, this approach does not diminish the value of understanding perceptions of Pickering fellows—particularly from a majority or nonstigmatized population. Thus one area of future work should explore the perceptions of fellows by nonfellows. Additionally, given the tight-knit, high-stress nature of the FSO program, research should explore how these processes might differ across the strength of the relationship or associations. For example, is this a case specific to the FSO program or would less closely linked actors exhibit a different response to these interlocking status characteristics?

Second, burgeoning research in this double issue also provides insights into new directions at the nexus of status beliefs and status characteristics. Specifically, Mesmin Destin and colleagues (2022, this issue) introduce the term *status uncertainty*, whereby aversive ambiguity about where one stands on the socioeconomic hierarchy has negative consequences for achievement and well-being. In this way, integrating themes from research here on status as well as class in organizations (Martin and Harrison 2022; Martin and Côté 2019) provides a promising, interesting research path.

Last, our study touches on the perception of diversity by highlighting how some individuals refer to the fellows as diversity hires. However, it does not thoroughly investigate what participants refer to when using the word *diversity*, particularly concerning fellowship status, despite this question being a growing area of re-

search. Ambiguity around diversity and inclusion is shown to lead national scholarship recipients to feel ashamed of their scholarship status (Portocarrero 2020). Experimental work in social psychology finds that diversity awards can funnel minoritized applicants away from more lucrative awards they qualify for to less lucrative ones (Germano et al. 2021). This research highlights some of the negative, unintended consequences marginalized actors face when in the presence of diversity programming. Further research could benefit from a qualitative approach and draw from status literature and sociocultural studies that explore evaluation, worth, and respect (see, for example, Lamont et al. 2016) to study how members of dominant groups value those who hold diversity accolades.

### Conclusion

On the whole, this study provides an in-depth, qualitative investigation on the role of how organizational contexts ebb and flow to shift the meaning of status characteristics among both those carrying the designation and those who do not. In an ever-shifting landscape wherein diversity policies and conversations permeate all organizations and equally prolific diversity programming arises, it is important to understand the interpersonal and organizational consequences of both. Other work has begun to document the implications of the diversity messaging and policies (see, for example, Windscheid et al. 2016; Groenveld and Verbeek 2012). This research begins to shed light on the programming. Our aim is to provide a foundation for explorations into the broader consequences and experiences of those who bear the “diversity hire” label.

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