

CALL FOR PAPERS

RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences

Issue on:

Status: What Is It, and Why Does It Matter For Inequality?

Editors

Cecilia L. Ridgeway, Stanford University

Hazel Rose Markus, Stanford University

Status can be defined simply as a comparative social ranking on the basis of esteem, honor, prestige, and respect which creates a form of inequality and hierarchy among those ranked. This simple definition, however, leaves unanswered complex questions about what status really is as a social process and why scholars of inequality should be concerned with it. For instance, what do we make of evidence that concerns about status are often as or more powerful motivators for life decisions than economic incentives (Duflo and Banerjee 2019)? Why is it that threats to status foster conflicts and undermine performance, health and well-being (Anderson, Hildreth, and Howland 2015; Craig and Richeson 2014; Lovaglia et al. 1998; Wetts and Willer 2018)? And why and how does status matter for broader patterns of inequality in society based on valued life outcomes such as wealth, power, and health? (Ridgeway 2014)? The proposed issue grows from the need for a deeper story about what the nature of status inequality is and how it works that will allow us to address such questions (Ridgeway 2019).

In this issue, we invite theoretical and empirical papers that seek to enlarge our understanding of the nature and significance of status as a form of inequality and that illuminate the roles status plays in driving, maintaining, or changing inequality in wealth, power, or well-being in contemporary advanced industrial societies.

Max Weber ([1918]1968) pointed out a century ago that status is a form of inequality that is analytically distinct from the more familiar forms of inequality based on wealth and power even though it is typically correlated with them—an insight backed by subsequent empirical evidence (Espeland and Sauder 2016; Magee and Galinsky 2008). Wealth can be understood as the possession of material resources and power as the control of organizational positions that distribute valued resources but status is rather different from these (Emerson 1962; Tilly 1998). As a ranking of esteem, status inequality inherently and distinctively involves not just material processes but cultural beliefs that are shared by an “audience” (for instance, a group, community or whole society) about what and who is worthy of respect and honor (Lamont 2012; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014). And, because it is rooted in cultural beliefs held by a group or

community, status rankings can differ between groups and contexts, and people often participate in multiple, overlapping status rankings.

Although different from wealth and power, status is observably ubiquitous in social life. Status rankings pervade relations among individuals. They pervade relations among social identity groups like genders, races, and classes, and relations among organizations like universities and law firms. Status rankings even spread to the objects and material goods these individuals, groups, and organizations are associated with. Indeed, status, as a form of hierarchy and inequality, appears to be both ancient and universal in human societies (Blader and Yu 2017; Heinrich and Gil-White 2001). It is also a form of inequality that continues to penetrate modern, ostensibly meritocratic institutions in advanced industrial societies (Magee and Galinsky 2008; Rivera 2015).

Despite its pervasive, “right in front of our faces” nature, except for some health studies (Singh-Manoux, Alder, and Marmot 2003), status is often overlooked as a significant factor in broader patterns of inequality in life outcomes in contemporary advanced industrial societies. When we discuss status, we often treat it as trivial—a social vanity—rather than as a powerful inequality process with its own independent effects beyond those of wealth and power. And yet, as we noted at the outset, people give every appearance of being powerfully motivated by status concerns in daily life. Consider, for instance, the evidence that in recent U.S. elections support for iconoclastic political candidates such as Donald Trump has been fueled by groups of people who feel disrespected by urban elites and challenged by changing racial and gender relations. (Cramer 2016; Hahl and Zuckerman 2018; Hochschild 2016; Mutz 2018) These people feel the status insult and are angry enough to seek political action. By some analyses, perceived status threat has been as important a driver of such political behavior as economic or power issues (Cramer 2016; Mutz 2018).

What really is status as an inequality process that operates not only at the individual and interpersonal level but also at the organizational and societal level? What is the evidence that status has independent, significant effects on other broad patterns of inequality in society? For instance, do status processes drive patterns of inequality in society based on gender, race, ethnicity, or social class, and what is their significance for the maintenance or change of these patterns of inequality? How are status processes at the group or organizational level related to status processes at the individual level? For this issue, we seek papers that can help build the deeper understanding of the nature of status inequality and how it works that will be necessary to address such issues (Ridgeway 2019).

We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers from across the social sciences, including sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, economics, political science, and communications. Papers may employ a variety of methods and data from quantitative to qualitative. **We are interested in papers that address any aspect of our general call but that, in particular, deepen our understanding of what status really is as a social process.** As an aid in specifying what this might entail, below we offer a list of questions and issues, organized into broad themes, that such papers might address. This list is suggestive only, however, and not meant to limit the topics papers might cover.

Possible Issues and Questions

Culture and Status Processes

What is the best way to understand the distinctive cultural aspects of status as an inequality process? Is it useful to think of status as some sort of cultural schema of evaluation (see, for instance Ridgeway 2019)?

Status beliefs are widely shared cultural beliefs about the comparative ranking in esteem among social categories of people, like genders, races, or classes, or of types of organizations, like universities (Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014; Walton, Murphy and Ryan 2015). How do such status beliefs *change* within a community, organizational field, or society?

Since status beliefs are about which groups and individuals are esteemed as “better,” they typically imply that actors who belong to higher status groups are somehow more competent in valued ways than those from lower status groups (Berger and Webster 2018; Poldolny 2005). Does the American ideology of achievement and meritocracy based on individual excellence rather than group membership blind us to the effects and importance of status in inequality of life outcomes (Major and Kaiser 2017)? In what way? Comparative research might be useful here.

Research that demonstrates how status, either at the organizational or individual level, draws on cultural processes to shape patterns of inequality based on power and resources would be of interest (Miyamoto et al. 2018).

Building Bridges Between Different Approaches to Status

Contemporary status research tends to focus either at the micro level of individuals in groups (Anderson and Willer 2014; Berger and Webster 2018; Fiske 2011; Ridgeway and Nakagawa 2014) or at the macro level of organizations and networks (Podolny 2005; Espeland and Sauder 2016; Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012). What are the connections between status processes between organizations and those among individuals (Correll et al. 2017; Fiske and Markus, 2012; Stephens, Markus and Phillips, 2014)? Can these perspectives be integrated and what would that tell us about the nature of status and its significance as an inequality process (Markus and Stephens, 2016)?

The Effects of Status Processes on Patterns of Inequality in Wealth, Power, and Well Being/Health.

How do status processes figure into continuing inequality and discrimination based on social differences such as race, gender or class? How are status processes related to prejudice towards some groups compared to others?

“Gateway institutions” are educational, employment, governmental, and health institutions that mediate individuals’ access to the valued life outcomes by which we typically measure inequality in society. How do status processes, especially those associated with social identities such as gender, race, or class, shape individuals’ encounters with gateway institutions and affect their life outcomes (Salter, Adams and Perez 2017)?

How do we build status processes into organizational structures, practices, and procedures and what are the effects of this on inequality?

Status systems are often overlapping or nested, such as systems of status valued identities like gender or race that operate within an organizational status structure of job titles. Research exploring the effects of such overlapping status systems would be of interest. Can an analysis of overlapping status structures help us understand the effects of intersectionality in social relations?

How do local, contextual status processes (for instance, norms, default beliefs, evaluations, expectations, and assumptions) accumulate over time and multiple contexts to affect life outcomes for actors (individual or corporate)?

What is the role of status in individual and population health (Demakakos et al, 2018)?

If we neglected status processes (that is, comparative rankings of esteem and respect), what problems would this create for our broader efforts to reduce inequality in society?

The Dynamics of Status Hierarchies

Status, as a shared ranking of who (which individual or group) is socially regarded as “better” and more esteemed than whom, justifies the inequality it creates in terms of “merit.” In what kind of position does this put low status actors and to what extent do they accept or resist this position? What kind of dynamics does this create for middle status actors?

Are social media processes intensifying status as an inequality process in contemporary society?

What generates perceptions of “status threat” and what types of reactions does status threat motivate? What are the links between status threat and identity threat or stereotype threat (Cohen, Purdie-Vaughns, and Garcia 2011; Steele 2010)? What is the significance of such reactions for structures of inequality between groups or individuals?

What is the relationship among dominance, prestige and status?

Among individuals, especially in the American context, status is often related to perceptions of valued forms of competence and agency, but evidence suggests that perceptions of group-orientation—willingness to act in the group interest rather than just self-interest—can also affect status (Bai 2016; Hahl and Zuckerman 2014; Willer 2009). Under what circumstances or in what contexts is group-orientation more or less important for status and why?

Additional empirical research on the power of status as motive in significant life decisions, including as an incentive in economic processes could be useful. How does status as a motivator involve relationships among the actor (individual or corporate), other actors, and the community or group?

Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to two pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on April 7, 2020 to:

<https://rsf.fluxx.io>

NOTE that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline.

All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to <https://rsf.fluxx.io> will be considered. Each paper will receive a \$1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org and **not** to the email addresses of the editors of the issue.

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **February 26, 2021** (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 1/26/21**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors

will submit their revised drafts by 5/19/21. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 11/1/21. The full and final issue will be published in the spring of 2022. Papers will be published open access on the RSF website as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse.

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