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Spread of status value: Rewards and the creation of status characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Rewards have social significance and are highly esteemed objects, but what does their ownership signify to others? Prior work has demonstrated it may be possible for these rewards to spread their status to those who possess them, such that individuals gain or lose status and influence by virtue of the rewards they display. Yet, is this spread enough to produce entirely new status characteristics by virtue of their association with rewards? I propose a theoretical extension of the spread of status value theory and offer an experimental test considering whether the status value conveyed by rewards spreads to a new, nominal characteristic of those who come to possess these objects. The results indicate that states of a nominal characteristic do gain or lose status value and behavioral influence through their association with differentially valued rewards. Thus, rewards can create new status characteristics with resulting behavioral expectations.

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1. Introduction

During social interaction, people are categorized nearly instantaneously by the social cues they present. These include demographic characteristics, such as gender, racial and ethnic background, height, and attractiveness, but also possessions, institutional affiliations, and honors. The latter act as forms of rewards or cultural capital, which are objects people control, distinctions they receive, or positions they occupy that take on a level of prestige (Berger et al., 1983, 1998; Bourdieu, 1985; Bourdieu and Passerson 1990[1977]). Examples of these status symbols include prominent awards, the keys to exclusive venues, credentials from illustrious institutions, and luxury goods. Expectations about peoples' value, importance, and competencies are based on a combination of personal characteristics and these rewards, which operate as a form of shorthand for deriving the expectations key to structuring and facilitating social interaction (Blair and Banaji, 1996; Brewer and Lui, 1989; Ridgeway, 2011; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Stangor et al., 1992).

Given the importance of rewards for social interaction, many have theorized their precise role. Veblen (2005[1899]) notably argued that people grant status to those who possess wealth. Because people are almost instinctually driven to achieve increasingly higher levels of esteem (Campbell, 1995), displaying one's wealth with extravagant goods is an important means by which to achieve social status. To this day, certain objects and services can take on this luxury status with honor and distinction flowing to their owners, depending on the cultural context and backgrounds of the interactants. Similarly, Bourdieu argues that people hold widespread, institutionalized beliefs about the objects controlled by elites, which he terms cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passerson 1990[1977]; see Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Weininger, 2003). Cultural

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capital, such as exclusive educational credentials, awards, and goods that are affiliated with and used by those who have elite status, serve as a way to garner social prestige and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1985; Johnson et al., 2006; see also Hysom, 2009) and can be used by elites as a marker for recruiting others into their ranks (Bourdieu 1984[1979]).

Beyond these immediate outcomes, the status information that these rewards confer may also create entirely new status groups by virtue of their association with esteemed or devalued rewards. For example, if new organizations, immigrant groups, or subcultures come to be affiliated with highly valued rewards, such as certain technologies, esteemed occupations, or prestigious awards, the perception of these groups overall may become more revered through this association alone.

As Bourdieu states, symbolic elements of our culture are not only a structural product but also have the power to construct new social structures (Bourdieu, 1990, 1991). To this end, I expand the research on cultural capital and rewards by assessing whether differentially valued social rewards can create new status characteristics by proposing an extension of Berger and Fisek's (2006, 2013) spread of status value theory. I then provide an experimental test of this extension: After creating a social reward with differential status value, this study tests whether the status value from this reward spreads to a novel characteristic held by new possessors of the reward to create a status characteristic that affects power and prestige behaviors (e.g., deference).

1.1. Illustrative examples

As an example of this process, consider the case of the creation of a new research center. In academic communities, the use of certain statistical software programs generally is imbued with status value over others as members of the community tend to believe that those who use these particular programs are exceedingly proficient, even if other software programs accomplish the same task and no special statistical knowledge is required to use any program. When a new research center is founded, one of the possible ways through which it can gain status in this community may be by what software its members use, thereby helping to create a new status group. Over time, this new status distinction may diffuse throughout the community; this center's members may eventually enjoy status advantages even if they begin to use a much wider array of statistical analysis programs once the status of their organization is set.

Indeed, studies of new organizations highlight the importance of rewards for their success and survival. Khaire (2010) demonstrates that new firms in the advertising sector that participate in award ceremonies and use the largely honorific titles of already successful firms, such as chairs and vice presidents, are able to realize higher profits and faster growth. Rao (1994) describes a similar process related to certification contests: in various industries, companies and their products are awarded prizes for their performances on a wide variety of criteria. Successful companies enjoy the fruits of these prizes by being able to achieve greater success regardless of their and their competitors' future quality.

These ceremonies and structures function as a form of reward, as they are unrelated to the actual productivity or efficiency of the firm or its employees but are imbued with the status of established and successful firms. Additionally, as Rao (1994) points out, contests tend to create false distinctions between what are largely equivalent companies using criteria that may be the product of the same status processes. Yet, these new ventures gain status, and thereby continued success, by engaging in these pursuits. Indeed, not adopting such symbolic practices may actually harm organizations (see also Kamens, 1977). The 'winner' can indeed take all as even among roughly comparable firms, rewards affect firms' overall prestige and survival.

Similar processes may affect the status of new immigrant groups. For instance, their relative status in the United States may depend in part on the occupational prestige of the positions in which they cluster or are most visible, regardless of their originating backgrounds (Berger and Fisek 2008; Fernandez-Kelly, 2008; Silventoinen et al., 2007).

2. Theoretical background

This research is grounded within the expectation states research program, which is a body of theory and research explicating status processes and their effects on interpersonal relations and inequality. Within this program, status characteristics theory (hereafter SCT) elucidates how existing status differences pattern behaviors related to having differential levels of power and influence in small groups (Berger et al., 1966, 1977, 1972a,b). This theory applies to groups members working together to reach a mutually valued goal (i.e., who are collectively and task-oriented), such as juries or students working on a group project for their class.

There are two main kinds of socially recognized attributes distinguishing group members: diffuse and specific status characteristics. Diffuse status characteristics are culturally defined, socially significant characteristics (e.g., gender or race/ethnicity) that have varying states (e.g., male-female, White-Black). These various attributes have differential esteem, honor, and prestige valuations as defined by the dominant culture that correspond to diffuse and general competence expectations a person with a particular state is assumed to have (Berger and Fisek 2006; 2013). Specific status characteristics are associated with the ability to perform particular tasks, such as computer skills or business aptitude.

Once such a group is differentiated by at least one status characteristic, individuals will assign expectations about the performance and potential contributions of group members based on the valuation of the states of their status characteristics. The characteristic will be relevant to expectations regarding the individual's performance on the group's task unless the actors believe that it is irrelevant to the task at hand (the burden of proof principle). Behavioral inequalities favoring the actors who have highly-valued status characteristic states will then emerge with respect to opportunities granted to speak, actual

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