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Status inconsistency in groups: How discrepancies between instrumental and expressive status result in symptoms of stress

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ABSTRACT

This study examines whether a mismatch between the positions that individuals hold in different status hierarchies results in symptoms of stress. Prior research has focused on inconsistencies between socioeconomic status dimensions (e.g., education and income) and did not find a significant relation between status inconsistency and stress. In this paper, we build on research on role differentiation and propose to study the effect of inconsistencies between instrumental status and expressive status in group contexts. We hypothesize that people with an inconsistency between these status dimensions experience feelings of uncertainty and frustration in their interactions with others and this manifests in stress-related symptoms. We test this hypothesis with data collected in a medium-sized Dutch childcare organization ($N = 93$). Polynomial regression analysis, visualized in response surface plots, suggests that status inconsistent employees report higher levels of stress.

1. Introduction

Status is an aspect of social structure that is important to individuals throughout their life-course, affecting the constraints and opportunities they face during their childhood (Dodge, 1983), working life (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011), and their retirement years (Clarke et al., 1984). Many studies have examined the antecedents and consequences of social status, but only a handful of studies have investigated the notion of *status inconsistency*. Conceptually, this refers to a discrepancy between individuals' positions in different status hierarchies that tend to be positively correlated in society at large. More than half a century ago, scholars started to examine whether people who experience such discrepancies also experience social and psychological tensions that result in symptoms of stress (Hughes, 1945; Lenski 1967). Drawing on the stratification dimensions proposed by Weber (i.e., wealth, power, and prestige), a number of studies have investigated how the membership in contradicting socioeconomic status groups (e.g., high income vs. low occupational prestige) affects the subjective stress that individuals experience (for overviews see Stryker and Macke, 1978; Zhang, 2008).

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At first, empirical research supported the prediction that status inconsistency would be associated with heightened stress levels (e.g., Jackson, 1962; Goffman, 1957), but these studies were later criticized for their methodological and statistical validity (Blalock, 1966). Subsequent research was only partially able to resolve these issues (see Whitt, 1983 and Hope, 1975 for overviews of the methodological issues associated with measuring status inconsistency) and could not reproduce previous findings (Hornung, 1977; Brown et al., 1988). Researchers therefore concluded that status inconsistency has no meaningful effect on stress symptoms (e.g., Brown et al., 1988; Hornung, 1977).

Building on research on role differentiation (Burke, 1967; Lewis, 1972; Rees and Segal, 1984; Theodorson, 1957; Turk, 1961), we argue for the retrial of status inconsistency as a research topic. This revitalization requires important changes in the theoretical conceptualization *and* empirical assessment of status inconsistency. From a conceptual point of view, we argue that the ranks that individuals hold in the sociometric hierarchies of the groups they are part of during their daily activities are important for their stress-experiences. From a methodological point of view, we suggest polynomial regression analysis and response surface modeling as a novel procedure that enables researchers to avoid the statistical problems that have often ailed earlier studies on status inconsistency.

In what follows, we first synthesize insights from research on role differentiation and status inconsistency and formulate our central hypothesis. Subsequently, we test this hypothesis with data collected among the members of a medium-sized Dutch childcare organization. Our results suggest that in this context, an inconsistency between instrumental and expressive status is indeed associated with higher levels of stress among respondents.

2. Theory

According to status inconsistency theory, conflicting status positions induce strain through two distinct processes (Lenski, 1967; Hughes, 1945). First, inconsistent status positions create uncertainty about individuals' self-image, because they are less able to determine how much value others place upon them. Second, status inconsistency tends to induce feelings of injustice and frustration. People may expect to hold high status in the eyes of others when they rank high in one hierarchy, but they might be viewed as holding low status because of their rank in a second hierarchy. Such situations tend to generate socially unpleasant situations and conflicting social expectations, resulting in symptoms of stress (Jackson, 1962).

Prior status inconsistency research has focused on social status as a broad, overarching construct based on different aspects of the socioeconomic hierarchy in society at large (Honjo et al., 2014; Winkleby et al., 1992). One problem with this approach is that indicators of socioeconomic status are only proxies of the status that individuals might hold in the eyes of others during social interaction. Personal characteristics that are perceived as valuable and prestigious can vary from one social environment to another (Anderson et al., 2015). Depending on contextual factors, discrepancies between socioeconomic status indicators might be inaccurate as a predictor of status inconsistency, given that other sources of status are more relevant and salient (Leary et al., 2014). For example, researchers in an academic context may predominantly focus on occupational prestige (e.g., academic credentials) as a source of status, whereas entrepreneurs and blue-collar workers may derive status from their income and wealth (cf. Anderson et al., 2012).

While the status hierarchies that matter for interactions in society at large are highly context dependent, there is evidence that the sources of hierarchal differentiation in groups are more robust. A number of studies have shown that groups tend to develop status differentiation along two distinct hierarchies: (1) an *instrumental* hierarchy, in which group members are ranked according to their ability to make contributions to the collective goals of the group, and (2) an *expressive* hierarchy, in which group members are ranked according the contributions they make to the social integration of the group (Bales and Slater, 1955; Burke, 1967; Lewis, 1972; Rees and Segal, 1984; Slater, 1955; Theodorson, 1957; Turk, 1961). The development of these hierarchies has been assumed to derive from two different needs (cf. Burke, 1967). One the one hand, groups need to coordinate their actions to achieve their goals and this leads to the development of a leadership structure in which group members are ranked according to their ability to contribute to these goals. On the other hand, groups need to deal with the frustration and hostilities that task-focused interactions can create, and this leads to the development of a hierarchy in which group members are ranked according to their sociability and their ability to contribute to the socio-emotional wellbeing of the group.

Early work on role differentiation has assumed that instrumental and expressive hierarchies are inversely related, meaning that those who rank high in the instrumental hierarchy are not those who rank high in the expressive hierarchy (e.g., Bales and Slater, 1955; Slater, 1955). This assumption was based on the notion that the task-directed actions necessary to become a respected leader create tensions among those who are deprived of the possibility to engage in such actions themselves. In this competitive view on group work, the tensions that instrumental leaders create make it difficult for them to also be expressive leaders. Later work (e.g., Burke, 1967; Lewis, 1972; Rees and Segal, 1984; Theodorson, 1957), by contrast, has shown that the two roles are often positively correlated, especially in groups that have a strong task commitment (Turk, 1961; Ellemers et al., 2013; Spears et al., 2005). The assumed reason is that strong task commitment makes it likely that group members appreciate valuable contributions to the task, without experiencing feelings of deprivation, given that such contributions make the group more likely to achieve its goals. In this cooperative view on group work, instrumental leaders have room to socialize with others and to take on also expressive leadership.

Even though instrumental and expressive status tend to be positively correlated (Ellemers et al., 2013; Leary et al., 2014), individuals might nevertheless sometimes experience inconsistency between the two (Rees and Segal, 1984). The literature on work groups suggests that such inconsistency is an important source for work stress, with group members feeling either