



Audience structure and status multiplicity[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates status multiplicity, an under-theorized concept in sociological research. We assert that actors' status can vary both within and across audience segments and argue that embracing status multiplicity is important as it is local status, i.e., status as perceived by the actor's audience members, that drives action. We introduce a network-based conceptualization and measure of status multiplicity, and then use this measure to test our predictions in the setting of academic journal rankings and fragmentation in the field of management. The results show that (a) greater audience fragmentation corresponds to higher status multiplicity; (b) local status is a better predictor of actions than global status.

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1. Introduction

Status is a central concept in sociological theories. Much sociological research on status focuses on how status beliefs converge. For example, using status construction theory, Ridgeway and colleagues describe how status beliefs are updated as actors interact and how consensual status beliefs develop (Mark et al., 2009; Ridgeway, 1991; Ridgeway et al., 1998). Similarly, Gould (2002) explores how consensual status hierarchies are formed through actors' interactions as they balance the desire to be associated with high quality actors versus a desire for reciprocity. Lynn et al. (2009) investigate how socially constructed quality perceptions among actors lead to the emergence of status rankings. While this research focuses on cases when consensus does arise at equilibrium, an understudied implication of their work is that status beliefs may not converge in certain situations.

Intuition and some early sociological studies suggest that the status of an actor¹ may depend on the audiences we ask. For example, the status of an organization in one market segment might

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¹ For presentational simplicity, throughout this paper we use the term "actor" to refer to any entity that is being evaluated for its status, and we use "audience member" to refer to entities that make status evaluations. Clearly, actors and audience

differ from its status in another market segment (Breiger, 1974; Frank, 1985). Or, an immigrant might have high status where she originates from but low status where she migrates to. The status of a person might differ in different parts of her professional network (Abbott, 1981; Lynn, 2014). We believe that these examples will intuitively resonate with most readers. Yet, while recent sociology studies acknowledge the possibility of status multiplicity (e.g., Jensen et al., 2011; Podolny, 1993; Stewart, 2005), empirical and theoretical work on status multiplicity is scant. Accordingly, sociologists have called for more research on how status beliefs diverge (Jensen et al., 2011; Sauder et al., 2012; Stewart, 2005).

In this paper, we use the term *status multiplicity* to describe situations in which the status of actors differs across audience members. We assert that such cases of status multiplicity warrant further scrutiny. While the aggregate-level or global status of an actor is important, we argue that it is the local status, i.e., an actor's status as perceived by audience members the actor is engaging with, that drives action. Thus, we ask: When is status multiplicity likely to emerge? How can we measure status multiplicity? What are the consequences of status multiplicity?

We argue that a fruitful approach in addressing status multiplicity would be to combine network-based approaches (Podolny, 2001, 2010; Sauder et al., 2012) with audience-based approaches from organizational sociology. Audience-based approaches to organizations have contributed to a shift in macro organizational research (e.g., Hsu and Hannan, 2005; Hsu et al., 2009). This research stream has demonstrated that audiences take active roles in shaping various organizational outcomes. While earlier research

members could coincide. The conceptualization and measure proposed in this paper apply to both the two-mode and one-mode situations.

in this tradition has typically treated audiences as homogenous, current research has started to emphasize audience heterogeneity. For example, Pontikes (2012) demonstrates how certain audience members succeed in arbitrating the ambiguity of the target's classification. Kovács and Hannan (2010) show that activist reviewers evaluate category-spanning organizations differently than occasional reviewers. Kovács and Sharkey (2014) demonstrate that receiving a literary award does not influence the award-winning book's audience in a uniform way. Cattani et al. (2014) show that the reception of creative work in cultural fields depends on whether the artist is evaluated by peers or by critics. Ertug et al. (2015) show that reputation in the world of museums and art galleries is audience specific. The current paper joins this emerging research stream by studying audience heterogeneity in status evaluations.

We introduce a novel network-based conceptualization and measure to assess status multiplicity. While most scholars would not doubt the existence of some divergence in status perceptions, this divergence is assumed to be low (Podolny, 1993:869). How much divergence actually exists is an empirical question that has not been addressed in previous literature. To study status multiplicity empirically, we introduce a measure that generalizes alpha centrality (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2001) and Salancik's (1986) index of subgroup influence.

Status multiplicity has wide-ranging theoretical and practical implications. For example, if scholars only assess actors' global status levels, they might confuse the cases where some actors have middle status in multiple audience segments with cases where actors have high status in some audience segments but low status in other audience segments. Such cases might lead to erroneous conclusions when testing theories such as the moderating effect of high status on category breaching (e.g., Leahey, 2007; Phillips et al., 2013; Phillips and Zuckerman, 2001; Rao et al., 2003). If a scholar assumes consensus on status ordering within a group, when in reality the group is divided into factions, then certain actions might appear to not be driven by status because the effects of status from the perspective of the different factions might cancel one another out. On a more applied side, status multiplicity implies that actors who try to increase their status need to take into account audience structures and understand that blanket action might not be appropriate, instead they may have to address different audiences in different ways.

We study status multiplicity in the empirical context of journal rankings with management scholars, management departments, and management journals as audiences. The field of management provides an apt setting to study status multiplicity because it is an interdisciplinary field that draws on multiple core disciplines such as sociology, psychology and economics. In this setting, we demonstrate the presence of substantial status multiplicity – the status of journals does indeed differ both within and across audiences. Importantly, we show that status multiplicity is not purely due to differences in the relevance of the journals' topics to different audience segments. Following Podolny (1993)'s approach, we validate our status measure by demonstrating that scholars tend to highlight publications on their websites that have appeared in journals they consider to be high status. We close by discussing the theoretical implications of status multiplicity, such as how actions leading to high global status can lead to disadvantages in local networks, and how status multiplicity affects network formation.

2. Theoretical foundations

In the sociological literature, status refers to a position in a social system that can be ranked among other positions based on relative prestige or social esteem (Linton, 1936; Merton, 1968; Weber, 1962). The idea of multiple statuses was first noted by sociologists in the 1950s, and the flourishing research stream on “status

crystallization” and “status inconsistencies” later emerged (Blalock Jr, 1966; Hope, 1975; Landecker, 1960, 1981; Lenski, 1954). Lenski (1954) argued that the “uni-dimensional view [of status] is inadequate to describe the growing complexities of group structure as (...) the structure of human groups normally involves the coexistence of a number of parallel vertical hierarchies which usually are imperfectly correlated with one another” (1954:405). Lenski distinguished four dimensions of status: income, occupation, education, and ethnicity. Recently Zhao and Zhou (2011) applied the status inconsistency concept to an organizational setting. Through multiple status indicators of Californian wines, Zhao and Zhou (2011) show that the more inconsistent the status indicators are, the more they undermine the status claims of wines.

While the status inconsistency concept is related to status multiplicity, our focus is different: we do not focus on the possible multidimensionality of status but on how status perceptions differ among audience members. We argue that a more radical departure from current theoretical understanding of status is needed than is currently provided by the status inconsistency literature. For example, although Zhao and Zhou (2011) incorporate multiple status indicators, they implicitly assume that there is a single level of status and then incorporate multiple status indicators because status indicators are inherently noisy and multiple status indicators are necessary to shed light on different aspects of status. We, on the other hand, argue that in many cases no single level of status exists, and that status can *only* be characterized by an ensemble of status values. Note that our approach is different from the status inconsistency literature which emphasizes the global (negative) consequences of status inconsistency. Instead, we believe that even when status is inconsistent globally, strong local status consensuses can still thrive.

The possibility that status perceptions differ by audience members is not novel in the status literature. For example, in the Appendix of his 1993 article Podolny directly raises the prospect that status differs by audiences with the suggestion that: “[status] perceptions of competitors are highly correlated with the [status] perception of clients” (p. 869), but also goes on to brush this possibility as fairly implausible. Stewart (2005) again raises the issue but does not develop it further. Jensen and colleagues (2011) explicitly argue that organizations participating in multiple markets for the same product will face multiple audiences that may rank the same organizations differently. Lynn (2014) demonstrates that academic audiences differ in their preferential citations of academic work.

Before discussing the antecedents of status multiplicity, let us illustrate why including status multiplicity is crucial to understand status-based phenomena. Taking status multiplicity into account matters because action is at least partly local, and therefore action that is influenced by status is influenced more strongly by local status than by global status. Actors often take status as a proxy for quality (Lynn et al., 2009; Podolny, 1993), and they act based on locally perceived status. For example, whether an applicant is hired for an academic post depends on how the department members view the quality of the applicant, and they might use the status of the applicant as a proxy for quality (Podolny, 2001). The status of the applicant is based on individual perception and it is likely to stem from multiple sources (such as the applicant's previous university or the journals she has previously published in), but as the value of these status signals are likely to differ by departments, it follows that the status of the applicant will differ between departments. In general, if audiences incorporate status in their decision function along any dimension (whether as signal for quality, ability, or social position) they will also use local status of the entity, that is, their perception of status.

Let us elaborate on this point through a simple illustration. Assume that there are three journals, A, B, and C and there are two universities with job openings. One university assigns status levels

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