Theory On Gender / Feminism On Theory

Paula England
EDITOR
Chapter 9

Gender, Status, and the Social Psychology of Expectations

Cecilia L. Ridgeway

Gender inequality has many iniquitous effects, but some of the most powerful and subtle of these occur in interaction. When women find, as they often do, that what they say in interaction is not listened to or taken as seriously as what men say, the consequences are varied and serious. Much of what happens in human society occurs through the medium of interaction. In our own society, the processes by which people are given access to rewards, evaluated, and directed toward or away from positions of power and wealth occur largely through goal-oriented interaction. When women are systematically disadvantaged in such interaction, they end up disadvantaged in power and wealth as well. They also end up disadvantaged in the struggle for identities of competence and self-worth, since interaction is the arena in which these are formed and affirmed.

Despite its importance, the interactional level of analysis is a relatively neglected component of the production of gender inequality. Most sociological theories of gender focus on either the individual level of self and identity or on the societal level of socioeconomic organization. An adequate theory of gender requires that we incorporate an account of gender and interaction. Expectation states theory uses the social psychology of expectations and the concept of status characteristics to account for the way women are disadvantaged in goal-oriented interaction (Berger, Conner, and Fisek 1974; Berger, Fisek, Norman, and Zelditch 1977; Berger and Zelditch 1985; Webster and Foschi 1988). While not a theory of gender per se, its value to gender theorists is that it offers a systematic account of the interactional inequalities of power and influence produced by gender.

In this chapter, I will describe the contribution expectation states
theory can make to an account of gender inequality. I begin with interactional inequalities, traditional explanations for gender’s role in them, and the distinctiveness of expectation states theory’s approach to explaining them. In the core of the chapter, I describe the theory itself and its account of interactional inequalities and gender. I also consider evidence for this explanation and way it has been used to intervene against women’s disadvantages in interaction with men. Then I step back from the theory to consider it from a feminist standpoint and analyze its strengths and weaknesses in that regard. Finally, I draw some conclusions about what the theory can offer to an understanding of gender inequality.

Interactional Inequalities

A long tradition of research shows that when people interact in regard to a collective goal or task, they quickly develop stable inequalities in how much they participate, how much attention they receive, and how influential they are over group events (e.g., Bales 1950, 1953; Torrance, 1954; Strodbeck, James, and Hawkins 1957). Expectation states theory views such interaction inequalities as behavioral indicators of an informal “power and prestige” order or status hierarchy that effectively directs the group’s goal-related activities and distribution of rewards (Berger, Comer, and McKeown 1974; Meeker 1981). Research dating back to the 1950s has shown that women generally rank lower in these informal hierarchies of power and prestige than do men of similar background (Strodbeck and Mann 1956). The question for gender theorists is why.

Early explanations drew on Parsons, arguing that men are socialized to be “instrumental” (i.e., goal or task directed) and women to be “social” or “expressive” (i.e., oriented to interpersonal relations) because this division of labor is functional for the group (Parson and Bales 1955; see Meeker and Weitzel-O’Neill 1977 for a review). The claim that such a role division by sex is functional for the group or society is now rejected by most sociologists (Meeker and Weitzel-O’Neill 1977). However, explanations in terms of socialized dispositions persist (for a review, see Eagly 1987). They explain behavior by means of dispositions that women and men internalize and carry with them from one situation to the next. These dispositions make people prefer to act in gender-stereotypic ways across a variety of situations. Such arguments suggest that women have learned to be less interested in instrumental activities than men, despite their importance in our society, and that this accounts for women’s disadvantage in behavioral status orders.

A related explanation argues that men and women learn different subcultural rules for interaction in childhood (Maltz and Berk 1982). The rules of women’s subculture neither value nor teach the tricks of instrumental accomplishment and power in the way that those of men’s subculture do. Although interesting, this argument has yet to be formulated in a fashion specific enough to explain how gender subcultures could be powerfully different when adult men and women interact so frequently. Also, it must explain that substantive content of women’s subculture without falling back on essentialist views of sex differences.

A problem that both socialized dispositions and subcultural explanations face is the variety of women’s and men’s behavior over differing interactional contexts. No woman’s societal standing is so low that there is not some goal-oriented interactional context where she acts high in situational power and prestige (with her children, for instance). Men similarly enact low interactional power and prestige in some settings. In fact, as Wagner, Ford, and Ford (1986) note, all men and women learn the behavioral repertoires of both high and low positions in interactional status hierarchies. It is just that men have more opportunities to enact the high status repertoire than do women.

Because of this behavioral variability, expectation states theory takes a radically situational and social structural approach to gender’s role in interactional status hierarchies. This situational approach contrasts with the transsituational view of socialized dispositions and subcultural explanations, but it is not necessarily opposed to it. In my view, if formulated more systematically, the subcultural and socialized dispositions arguments may yet contribute valuable insights into gender and interaction. However, the situational approach is a different level of analysis that looks to process in interaction itself, rather than to the individual level of women’s and men’s traits, to explain how women are disadvantaged in power and prestige orders.

Expectation states theory argues that women are disadvantaged in interaction not because of their preferences or knowledge, but because women have lower status value in our society than men. That is, widely held beliefs in our society say that men are more valuable, worthy of respect, and competent than women. This makes gender an external status characteristic in the theory’s terms (Locke and Hall 1976; Berger, Rosenholtz, and Zelditch 1980; Pugh and Wahrm an 1983; Wagner 1988). Under specified situational circumstances, the normal processes of organizing goal-oriented interaction make these gender status beliefs salient, assuming the participants hold them. The theory explains how, through a series of interaction processes, these beliefs affect behaviors and reactions in a way that becomes self-fulfilling, shaping the resulting power and prestige order. Thus the social structural fact of women’s
lesser status value joins with interactional processes to produce women's disadvantage in group hierarchies without any assumption about the individual dispositions or abilities of men and women.

To understand how beliefs about the status value of gender become implicated in the formation of power and prestige orders, it is first necessary to understand how these orders are created in interaction. Consequently, I begin with expectation states theory's explanation for the way inequalities of influence and prestige come about in goal-oriented interaction. Then I turn to the role of status characteristics such as gender in shaping interactional inequality.

The Formation of Behavioral Status Orders

Expectations and Behavior

Expectation states theory limits its scope to interaction where participants are interested in accomplishing a collective goal. Since much interaction, particularly that with significant consequences for social inequality, is goal oriented, this is a fairly broad scope. The theory begins with the observation that when interaction is goal oriented, participants look for a way to anticipate the likely usefulness of their own and their fellow interactants' suggestions. They do this in order to decide how to act in the situation, whether to speak up, who to listen to, and who to agree with when choices or conflicts emerge. In the theory's terms, interactants form performance expectations, which are anticipations about how useful their own contributions to the group goal are likely to be compared to those of each other group member. These expectations for self and others are usually implicit, out-of-awareness hunches or guesses rather than conscious judgments. Since interactants follow similar cognitive principles in forming performance expectations, as long as they have roughly similar cultural beliefs and information about one another, the expectations they develop are shared.

Self-other performance expectations are important because they not only guide the way you act in relation to another, they also guide the other's reactions to you. In so doing, they tend to become self-fulfilling. The higher your expectations for your own contributions compared to another, the more likely you are to speak up with your own suggestions and stick to them in the face of disagreement, and the less likely you are to ask others for their opinions. On the other hand, if your expectations for yourself are lower than for the other, you will hesitate before offering your own ideas. If the other disagrees with you, you may feel that s/he

must be right. In addition, you are likely to ask the other for her or his ideas, listen attentively when they are offered, and be inclined to evaluate them positively. Following this logic, the theory argues that the higher the expectations held for one actor compared to another: (1) the more opportunities the actor will be given to participate, (2) the more task suggestions s/he will make, (3) the greater the likelihood that these suggestions will be positively evaluated by others and, (4) the more influential s/he will be over group decisions. These behaviors together constitute the behavioral status or power and prestige order, as defined by the theory.

According to the theory then, the behavioral status order is determined by the order of performance expectations that group members develop for one another. The question then becomes, What determines the performance expectations held for one member over another? The theory asserts that people form performance expectations on the basis of information available to them about one another's external status characteristics, reward levels, specific abilities, and behavior in the situation. Gender affects performance expectations because it is a status characteristic in our society.

Status Characteristics and Expectations

A status characteristic is an attribute on which individuals vary that is associated in a society with widely held beliefs according greater esteem and worthiness to some states of the attribute (e.g., being male) than others (being female). Since it is based in consensual beliefs, the status value of an attribute can change over time and vary among populations.

Perhaps expectation states theory's most important insight is that the beliefs that give a characteristic status value (i.e., associate it with worthiness) also associate it with implicit expectations for competence. Race, gender, class, educational attainment, occupation, and age, among others, are status characteristics in our society. For each, those with more valued states of the characteristic are implicitly assumed by general beliefs to be somehow more able. It is these unstated assumptions that women are less capable than men that subtly but persistently disadvantage them in interaction.

Status characteristics range from diffuse to specific, depending on the specificity of the competence associations they carry. Gender, however, is a diffuse status characteristic. While beliefs do associate gender with specific skills (e.g., stereotypically masculine and feminine abilities), they also link it with diffuse expectations that men will be generally more able than women in most situations.
When a status characteristic is activated, or salient, in a goal-oriented encounter, interactants use the diffuse and/or specific competence expectations associated with it to form performance expectations for one another in the encounter. Research has shown that this occurs even when the characteristic is completely irrelevant to the collective task or goal unless something explicitly happens to stop it (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Berger et al. 1977). This means that once gender is activated in a situation, interactants use the culture’s general assumption that men are more capable than women to form expectations about the likely value of particular men’s and women’s contributions in this specific situation. Depending on other factors present in the situation, this usually means that both men and women assume that what the women have to offer will not be quite as useful as what the men offer and so need not be taken as seriously.

Since status characteristics are attributes of individuals, they are carried from situation to situation. However, whether these characteristics are activated and, if they are, what their status implications are varies depending on the nature of the situation and the other people in it. This is what makes the status expectancy account of gender and interactional inequality a situational and contextually specific one. Although the theory argues that people follow general principles in organizing their interactional status relations, people apply these principles to the specific details of each goal-oriented context. As a result the particular order of influence and status that emerges is specific to that context.

The theory assumes that the status characteristic of gender is activated (and affects the influence hierarchy) whenever the interactants include both men and women or whenever gender is believed to be relevant to their collective task. This means that gender will be activated and influence the status hierarchies of mixed-sex groups but not always those of same-sex groups. In mixed-sex groups gender will advantage men over women except when the collective task is a stereotypically female one. In that condition, women will have a moderate advantage over the men. In same-sex groups a gender-stereotypic task or goal activates the status implications of gender as well, but these equate the members rather than differentiate them. A task stereotypic for the other sex activates assumptions of low competence and status worthiness for all members of a same-sex group. A task stereotypic for the group members' own sex activates assumptions of shared high competence and status worthiness. In addition to these well-documented means of activation, Fenell, Barchas, Cohen, McMahon, and Hildebrand (1978) and I (Ridgeway 1988) argue that, when a group is delegated its task by an organization whose authority structure is disproportionately one sex, and the members of the group are the other sex, gender will be activated in that group. This means that in a male-run organization, women will struggle with the low-status implications of being female even in an all-female work group.

As these conditions of activation indicate, society's status valuing of men over women has complex and varying effects on the influence hierarchies of encounters. First, the status value of gender is salient in most goal-oriented encounters, particularly those with women members, but there are some where the theory predicts it will not be salient. The status value of gender should not be salient, for instance, in an all-male group working on a gender-neutral task. Second, when it is salient, it can advantage men over women, occasionally advantage women over men, or equate all group members with high or low status.

Thus far, I have talked about gender’s effects in the abstract, as if it were people's only distinguishing trait. The fact is that people have many attributes that carry status value in the society. A woman on a school board may be distinguished not only by being a woman, but also by being black, a physician, and older or younger than the other members. These other status characteristics are activated according to the same principles as is gender.

Expectation states theory argues that people combine the competence implications of all of a person's salient status characteristics to form an aggregate performance expectation for that person relative to others in the group. This includes characteristics that have positive (e.g., physician) as well as negative (e.g., woman or black) implications for the person's anticipated competence in the situation. The impact of each characteristic is weighted by its relevance to the group's goal. Thus, for a woman surgeon in an otherwise male medical term, being a surgeon will have a stronger impact than being a woman, but being a woman will still have an effect (Webster and Driskell 1978).

The theory proposes a formula for the way people combine information from status characteristics and other factors to create aggregate performance expectations (Berger et al. 1977). The impacts of all positive factors are combined, weighted by their relevance and subject to a diminishing marginal effect, and the similarly combined negative factors are subtracted from them. One effect of this formula is that inconsistent status information has a larger impact than additional consistent information of equal relevance, as evidence indicates (Norman, Smith, and Berger 1988). Importantly, the theory does not assume that people necessarily make such calculations but that they act as if they made them. The formula is a heuristic to predict behavior rather than necessarily a model of cognition.
Other Factors

In addition to external status characteristics, reward levels assigned to the interactants, their actual behavior in the situation, and outside feedback also combine to affect aggregate performance expectations and so status in interaction. The effects of these factors interact with status characteristics like gender in complex ways that I will discuss shortly. First, I will briefly describe the basic effects of each.

When interactants receive differential rewards, they tend to assume unless there is clear evidence to the contrary that there are also differences in competence. As a result, differences in rewards cause corresponding differences in performance expectations and status in the group (Cook 1975; Harrod 1980; Berger, Fisek, Norman, and Wagner 1985; Stewart 1988). The rewards can be almost anything of value, but the example of obvious relevance to gender inequality is differences in pay levels. If a woman in a mixed-sex work group is known to be paid less than her male colleagues, she will be doubly disadvantaged in others’ and even her own implicit assumptions about her likely competence in the situation. Her influence and status suffer accordingly.

Performance expectations are also affected by a person’s actual behavior in the group. To gain influence, of course, a person must participate and offer task suggestions. In general, simply engaging in more task-oriented participation improves the performance expectation others hold for you (Berger et al. 1974) although backlash can occur, as we will see later. Even more important than how much you say is how you say it, and how you present yourself in general. Verbal and nonverbal behaviors that give the impression of confidence tend to be interpreted as competence (Moscovici 1976; Berger, Webster, Ridgeway, and Rosenholtz 1986; Ridgeway 1978; Ridgeway, Berger, and Smith 1985). A direct gaze, firm voice tone, rapid, fluent speech, erect but relaxed body posture, and consistent arguments have all been shown to increase the perceived competence of a speaker independent of the content of her or his arguments (see Ridgeway et al. 1985 and Berger et al. 1986 for reviews).

Finally, and not surprisingly, clear outside evaluations or feedback on the competence of one’s task suggestions have a dramatic effect on performance expectations (Wagner et al. 1986). Evaluations can come from an outside authority or from rewards or costs accruing to the group once it has acted on the suggestion. Such outside tests of “real” differences in the usefulness of interactants’ contributions are quite rare, however. Competence in regard to the complex problems dealt with in most goal-oriented interaction is difficult to evaluate in clear-cut terms.

Research On Status Characteristics and Behavioral Status Orders

So a status characteristic like gender is only one of the factors that affects a person’s status and influence in goal-oriented interaction. Yet, when a status characteristic is salient, it tends to shape the subsequent display of other factors in such a way as to confirm the status implications of the characteristic (Berger et al. 1977). In this way, status characteristics like gender govern task behaviors, nonverbal manner, response to performance feedback, and future reward distributions. This is what makes the status effects of gender such a powerful determinant of interactional outcomes.

Status characteristics have such far-reaching effects on interaction for two reasons. First they have an early impact on the formation of performance expectations. Second, in addition to shaping performance expectations, they set in motion a legitimacy dynamic that affects the normative appropriateness of women’s efforts to achieve influence (Meeker and Weitzel-O’Neill 1977; Ridgeway 1982; Ridgeway and Berger 1986). I will discuss each of these in turn.

Shaping Expectations, Behavior, and Standards

People begin to form relative expectations for their own and other’s performance from the moment they know they will interact about a shared task or goal. The first information about the other that becomes salient forms the core for these expectations and subsequent information is perceived in terms of that core. Gender, like a few other important status characteristics in our society (e.g., age and race), can be quickly discerned.1 When you see or hear a person, usually one of the first things you recognize is the person’s sex. Of course, it is a testimony to our culture’s deep commitment to gender differentiation that people are so careful to follow social rules about how males and females should dress, wear their hair, and gesture, and thus present themselves in a manner that clearly indicates their sex.

When you not only know the other’s sex, but it is different than yours, relevant to the task, or similar to yours in being different from that of the authority structure, the status and competence associations of gender are activated. Gender becomes the basis for your initial performance expectations for yourself and the other. Information on other factors such as specific abilities or reward levels is usually not as quickly available as it is on gender and therefore is less likely to shape initial expectations. As a result, interaction proceeds on performance expecta-
tions based on gender. The subsequent flow of interaction may actually even discourage the later revelation of inconsistent information on reward levels or specific abilities. They become difficult to introduce into the conversation.

Imagine, for instance, that you, a woman, walk into a business meeting and see that all the other participants are male. Even before anything is said, you feel slightly less confident and the men feel a bit more confident about how well each of them is going to do. As a consequence, you hesitate at first. In that moment, one of the men jumps in and proposes an agenda. You speak up to disagree but your voice betrays your nervousness. Detecting your unsure manner, the men assume you cannot be too certain of your point and quickly dismiss your concerns. Their dismissal shakes you a little and you are silent for a while. In fact, the topic of discussion is something you have experience and skills in. You try to speak up again to tell the others of your expertise, but you have trouble getting the floor for long enough to explain. The others are now dominating the conversation. When the final decision is made, your opinions carry little weight.

There is substantial evidence for this account of gender's impact on interaction. Most comes from experiments explicitly designed to test different aspects of the theory. In order to show that the mere knowledge of someone's gender, when salient, is enough to create differences in performance expectations and influence, some experiments place participants in separate rooms, inform them only of each other's name and gender, and have them push buttons on a console to exchange opinions and make decisions on a shared task (e.g., Pugh and Wahrman 1983; Wagner et al. 1986). Other experiments show the effects of gender status and performance expectations on verbal and nonverbal behavior by recording face-to-face interaction between men and women (e.g., Ridgeway 1982; Wood and Karten 1986). In some of these studies, one participant is trained to act in a particular way, a woman to be assertive, for instance, and the reactions of other group members are recorded.

Such studies demonstrate that gender, once activated, shapes performance expectations that in turn drive verbal and nonverbal interaction. Wood and Karten (1986) showed that in mixed-sex discussion groups, gender did indeed lead to lower competence expectations for women than for men and that these expectations led women to have lower rates of active task behaviors and influence in the groups. Similarly, Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson, and Keating (1986) studied several verbal and nonverbal behaviors that have been associated with confidence, assumed competence, and power (Ellyson, Dovidio, and Fehr 1981; Dovidio and Ellyson 1982; Ridgeway et al. 1985). In mixed-sex dyadic (i.e., two-person) discussions of a gender-neutral topic, men, as predicted, showed higher levels of these behaviors. They spoke more and tended to initiate more speech, looked less at the other while listening, gestured more, and smiled less than their women partners. I and colleagues similarly found that gender status governed length of initial eye contact and speed of response during interaction (Ridgeway et al. 1985). That is, in mixed-sex groups, women looked away sooner and responded more slowly than men did or than women did when interacting with other women.

In Dovidio et al.'s (1988) study, mixed-sex dyads also discussed a stereotypically male and a stereotypically female topic. Exactly as expectation states theory predicts, during the masculine topic, men showed an exaggerated advantage in competence and power behaviors. They had much higher levels of speaking, initiating speech, eye contact while speaking, and gesturing and much lower levels of looking while listening than their women partners. However, when a few moments later these same dyads discussed a feminine topic, the power patterns of verbal and nonverbal behavior reversed, again precisely as the status expectancy argument predicts. With a feminine topic, women spoke longer, initiated more speech, gestured more, and looked more while speaking and less while listening than their male partners, although they continued to smile more than the men. The insight that in this study the same interactants formed one behavioral status order on the basis of gender and then reversed it, also on the basis of gender, demonstrates three essential points: It shows how strongly status characteristics can govern behavior in interaction. It indicates that they do this through their relevance to the task and the performance expectations this creates. Finally, it underscores the importance of taking a situational approach to face-to-face status and power.

Status characteristics and the expectations they create not only shape behavior. They also shape the way feedback on the interactant's performance is perceived. Foschi (1989, 1990) argues that when interactants differ on a status characteristic, as in a mixed-sex encounter, they activate different standards for assessing the competence of the high-status-characteristic person compared to the low-status-characteristic person. A woman in a mixed-sex group, says Foschi (1989), is held to a stricter standard for proving competence at the collective task and a more lenient standard for showing incompetence. Consequently, a woman must perform better than a man in a mixed-sex context to be perceived as having equal ability to him. An initial experiment conducted by Foschi (1990) supports the operation of such double standards for men and women in mixed-sex contexts.

Foschi's work demonstrates the uphill battle women face in achieving influence and respect when gender status is activated (except when the
task is stereotypically female. First, the competence associations with gender cause others to expect little from her and erode her own confidence. This in turn makes it difficult for her to present her ideas effectively. Then even those ideas she does present will be judged by a harsher standard than if from a man and seen as less indicative of status-worthy qualities in her. It is through means such as these that women find themselves without influence in mixed-sex task groups despite their efforts.

Gender and Legitimacy

In addition to their formative effects on performance expectations, status characteristics also control interaction by evoking legitimacy dynamics. As Meeker and Weitzell-O’Neill (1977) pointed out, people with high-status characteristics not only presume themselves more capable, they also act and often are treated as if they had a right to achieve high influence and respect in the encounter. Similarly, people with low-status characteristics struggle with the feeling that even if they are competent, they have no right to try for high status. A right to something implies that your possession of it is normative and legitimate and others should support your efforts to earn it. On the other hand, if you do not have a right to something, then your effort to achieve it is illegitimate and subject to others’ sanctions. If the activation of women’s low gender status creates an assumption that they do not have a right to an influential position in the group, then assertiveness on their part may draw a negative reaction.

Joseph Berger and I argue that a legitimacy process develops when group members hold beliefs about social reality associating an activated status characteristic with the occupation of valued status positions in society (Ridgeway and Berger 1986). For instance, most people believe, correctly, that more men occupy valued status positions in our society than do women. Such referential beliefs, as we call them, are activated along with competence expectations when gender is made salient.

These beliefs cause interactants to expect that those with higher status characteristics will also have higher status in the present encounter. They may not wish this to occur, but they expect, as a matter of reality, that it is likely. Since they expect it to be so, they are likely, even inadvertently, to act as if it were true. They do this by treating high-external-status members’ claims as appropriate and expected, but low-external-status members’ claims as a bit deviant, out of line, embarrassing, to be quickly overlooked. When they act this way and others in the group react similarly or do not challenge them, they take their expecta-

tions to be normative in the group. And, in fact, other group members are indeed likely to support or at least not challenge such action since they, too, are likely to share the widely held referential beliefs about the status characteristic. By this means, group members socially construct a normative right for those with external status characteristic advantages to be allowed to earn high status in the group rather than those with status characteristic disadvantages.

If such legitimacy effects occur, and there is suggestive if not yet direct evidence that they do (Meeker and Weitzell-O’Neill 1977; Fennell et al. 1978; Ridgeway 1982, 1988; Carli 1990), then it is easy to see how they will increase the self-fulfilling impact of gender status on interaction. The creation of behavioral inequalities through performance expectations is insidious but essentially voluntaristic. Performance expectations control women’s behavior by making them doubt themselves and feel the pressure of others’ doubting of them. As a result, they actually behave as expected and contribute less actively to the group’s goal activities than they could.

Legitimacy effects are more coercive and take over where performance expectations leave off. If a woman resists the pressure of low expectations and insists on contributing actively and assertively, legitimacy processes can produce a “backlash” reaction against her (e.g., Ridgeway 1982, Butler and Geis 1990; Carli 1990; Ellyson, Dovidio, & Brown 1992). She is seen as strident or embarrassingly off track, wasting everybody’s time. Even if she persists, it is not clear that others, who assume that she has no right to be doing what she is, will even seriously listen to her substantive contributions. As a result, her chances of breaking out of the low status implied by her gender and gaining influence and respect in the group are limited.

Status Interventions

If status characteristics so thoroughly shape goal-oriented interaction, are women simply doomed to low status in mixed-sex groups when the task is not stereotypically female? Not surprisingly, expectation states theory has also been used to devise techniques for counteracting the governing effects of status characteristics. These intervention techniques manipulate both performance expectations and legitimacy effects.

One technique is to modify both men’s and women’s expectations for one another in a given situation by showing that the women, while lower in external status, are higher than the men on a valued skill (Cohen and Roper 1972; Freese and Cohen 1973; Pugh and Wahrman 1983). This increases everyone’s performance expectations for the wom-
en and lowers those for the men. The result is that the women and men then interact as equals. Convincing the group members that the women really are capable also removes the problems of illegitimacy they would otherwise face as they become influential. Wagner et al. (1986) showed that, even for stereotypically male tasks, clear feedback that the women were more skilled at it than the men resulted in high influence for the women.

For this technique to work, it is not enough to modify women's expectations for themselves. The expectations of the men in the group must also be changed or the newly assertive women will face resistance (Cohen and Roper 1972). Women often lack the power or resources to force a change in men's expectations. Furthermore, the demonstration of superior skills in interactional contexts is difficult, given the double standards that Foschi (1990) has shown. In fact, this technique works best when imposed on the interactants by an outside authority such as an organization within which the group operates. Not surprisingly, its greatest use has been in the classroom (Cohen 1982).

The second technique for overcoming women's disadvantage in mixed-sex groups works by neutralizing legitimacy effects. Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill (1977) suggest that women may try to defuse the resentment their task efforts arouse by presenting them as an attempt to help the group rather than as a competitive bid for status. Women's efforts to do this may partly explain their higher rates of positive social behaviors compared to men in goal-oriented groups. Subsequent studies have indeed demonstrated that when women who are competent at the group task participate actively, but accompany their task suggestions with positive social behaviors and statements of their cooperative intent, they achieve high influence in the group (Ridgeway 1982; Shackelford, Wood, and Worcel 1989). The advantage of this technique is its wide practical application since the woman has only to modify her own behavior to use it.

Each of these techniques will allow a woman in a mixed-sex group to achieve influence and status. The positive results of this are not trivial. It allows her ideas to shape what the group decides and does. It also gives her access to any rewards or opportunities that result from the group's activities. Furthermore, it shows her as a woman in a position of relative power, which can have salutary effects on others' and her own expectations for women. On the other hand, neither technique directly challenges the basic belief systems that accord men higher status in the first place. The second technique of showing cooperative intent is particularly conserving of underlying status beliefs since it does not challenge the fact that only women are required to engage in the stereotypically

female behavior of "being nice" in order to succeed in having their contributions acknowledged by influence and respect.

The Problem of Same-Sex Groups

The account expectation states theory gives for gender's impact in mixed-sex groups appears to work quite well. Tests of its predictions not only by proponents of the theory (e.g., Locke 1985; Pugh and Wharman 1983; Ridgeway et al. 1985; Wagner et al. 1986), but also by others (e.g., Wood and Karien 1986; Dovidio et al. 1988; Carli 1990), have demonstrated a strong pattern of support, despite a few nonconfirming studies (e.g., Stewart 1988; Carli 1989). The case of same-sex groups is more complicated. First, what exactly does expectation states theory predict for groups where gender status equates the members? Second, does it match the available data?

I have argued that when gender is activated in an all-female group, either by a stereotypically male task or by a male authority structure, the theory implies that all members start without much confidence in regard to the task and with a feeling that they are not really legitimate candidates for high-status positions (Ridgeway 1988). Consequently, task efforts are likely to be offered cautiously and be peppered with positive social behaviors to assure their own and the other group members' sense of their illegitimacy. As a result, initial rates of task behavior are likely to be lower and rates of social behaviors higher than in mixed-sex groups. Because this early pattern becomes normative, it may persist after group members resolve initial doubts and evolve a stable influence order. There is some evidence that women's behavior in all-female groups does differ in this way from their behavior in mixed-sex groups (Carli 1989).

When gender is activated in an all-male group (except, of course, by a stereotypically female task), all members are likely to feel like competent, legitimate candidates for high status (Ridgeway 1988). As a result, interaction may be rather competitive, with higher rates of task behavior and lower rates of positive social behavior than in mixed-sex groups. There is some evidence that all-male groups do sometimes behave this way (Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill 1977; Carli 1989).

The behavioral patterns predicted by expectation states theory for same-sex groups do occur, then. It is not clear, however, whether they always occur or do so only when gender has been activated by a gendered task or authority structure, as the theory requires. A basic aspect of the theory's situational and contextual approach is that gender
is sometimes not activated in same-sex groups. Since most authority structures are male, gender should be activated quite frequently in all-female groups. According to the theory, however, men sometimes should relate to one another not on the basis of their gender status, but in terms of other individual characteristics. Yet these ideas about same-sex groups have never been directly tested. Until they are, explaining same-sex groups will remain a weakness in the theory's account of gender, interaction, and status.

Feminist Concerns

Now that we understand the expectation states explanation for gender's impact on interactional inequality, we are in a position to step back from the theory and ask some additional questions of it. A number of feminists have pointed out the extent to which sociological theories, even those of gender, have continued to embody male bias (e.g., Stacey and Thorne 1985). How does the status expectancy approach to gender fare in this respect?

Specifically, I would like to consider three questions about the status expectancy approach that a feminist might ask: First, does treating gender as a status characteristic reify women into an abstract cultural stereotype that obscures the diversity of actual women and their experience? Second, does the status expectancy approach portray women merely as passive victims without explaining their resistance as well? Finally, is the theory's strong scientific orientation inherently male oriented?

Turning to the first question, Does treating gender as a status characteristic reduce women to reified cultural stereotypes? I believe the answer is no. The theory's insistently situational approach explicitly recognizes that the status attained by any individual woman depends not only on her gender but on the particular context she is in, her behavior, and her and the other interactants' other identities such as race or class. Furthermore, the impact of gender status itself, whether it is negligible or strong, whether it advantages or disadvantages a woman, depends on the situation she is in. One of the theory's great strengths, from this point of view, is that it provides a context-specific view of individual women's interactional status while still offering general principles to explain gender disadvantage.

In effect, the theory disaggregates one part of existing gender stereotypes, that dealing with the status value of being male or female, and shows how the substantial effects of this on the behavior of real men and women is part of a more general status process that can include many factors in addition to gender. The theory explicitly states that the cultural beliefs that make gender a status characteristic in our society are socially constructed and are therefore subject to historical and social variation (Berger et al. 1980; Wagner 1988). Furthermore, while the theory assumes that most men and women share status beliefs, it acknowledges that this is an empirical question. Some individuals may not hold gender status beliefs. Because of this social constructivist approach, the theory does not reify the status value of gender into an inevitable or unchanging quality of gender relations.

The second question is whether the status characteristics approach portrays women as passive victims of oppression without also accounting for their resistance. The answer is yes and no. The emphasis of the theory is definitely on the way status characteristics cause people to construct themselves and others into behavioral status orders that reflect those characteristics. The theory works hard to explain why and how people behaviorally conform to their oppression in this way. One of the things I personally find most interesting about the theory is the subtlety of the account it provides for how this occurs and for the power it demonstrates in self-fulfilling expectations. On the other hand, it is undeniably true that the theory offers no comparable account of why or when people resist this process, although it acknowledges that they occasionally do so. It does document intervention techniques a woman could use to resist successfully. Its legitimacy argument also describes the sanctions her resistance could arouse.

The third feminist challenge to the status expectancy approach is the most difficult. Expectation states publications espouse the construction of abstract, logically formal theories and the use of laboratory experiments to test them. Is this classic scientific approach inherently male biased? The philosophical issues that arise in the feminist debate over science are too complex and lengthy for me to argue properly here (see, for instance, Keller 1984; Harding 1986; and the paper by Sprague and Zimmerman in this volume). Instead, I will state my personal view, which may be atypical among feminists. I am persuaded with Keller (1982) that the historical dominance of science by men has yielded not only an organizational form that has excluded women, but a choice of questions to investigate and guiding metaphors for theories that reflect men's rather women's concerns (as these are constructed in Western society). I also accept the impossibility of "objective" or perspective-free knowledge. Finally, I believe our society wrongly valorizes scientific (i.e., predictive) knowledge over other forms of knowledge, treating it as a master narrative to which all other forms of knowledge are inferior. The result is a narrowing of our understanding of human experience.
However, these criticisms do not justify throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The scientific method will never yield truth or objective knowledge. However, I believe that the scientific method, by being as explicit as possible about its biases and trying to take these into account in its empirical tests, does provide as good a method as yet devised for distinguishing theories that are more predictive of our experience from those that are less so. Although predictive knowledge is not the only type of knowledge that renders human experience meaningful, it is one such form. Consequently, I think feminists should do science in order to produce a form of that valuable knowledge that is less male biased.

Some feminists also criticize scientifically oriented theories for their detached stance toward the phenomena being studied. This stance separates the perspective of the knower from that of the known. With Keller (1984), Stacey and Thorne (1985) argue that a detached perspective can transform the act of knowing into a morally repugnant and unfeminist exercise of power and domination over the known. There is some truth to this argument. However, I disagree with Stacey and Thorne that subjective or interpretive methods in which the knower seeks to identify with the perspective of the known provide any greater protection against domination by the knower. This is because, try as she might, the knower can never completely or accurately represent the perspective of the known. Interpretive like objective knowledge will always be imbued with the perspective of the knower. But in failing to explicitly represent a split or “otherness” between the known and the knower, subjective knowledge risks absorbing the known into the knower and in that way dominating the known. Thus, in my view, both detached and subjective modes of knowledge carry inherent risks for abuse and domination. Neither is superior to the other in this. Within either mode, it is incumbent upon the feminist researcher to guard against the potential for slipping into a dominating stance toward the known that is inherent in the knowledge strategy. Detached and subjective approaches are indeed the stereotypically masculine and feminine modes of knowledge in our culture. As feminists, we should resist being trapped within either.

From my point of view then, expectation states theory’s scientific orientation does not make it inherently unfeminist. This does not make it entirely unproblematic, however. Whatever its validity as a knowledge strategy, the language of formal theory and experimentation is a language of power in our society, a source of power that some expectation states papers can seem to flaunt. As a feminist working in this tradition, I believe such flaunting must be resisted. In my view, how-

ever, these problems do not invalidate the theory and the importance of what it can contribute to an understanding of gender inequality.

Conclusion

As a theory of gender and interactional inequalities of power and influence, the status expectancy account has much to recommend it. It documents how our society’s belief systems about gender, status value, and competence structure women’s and men’s expectations in interaction, which in turn drive their behavior and the development of situational legitimacy in a self-fulfilling manner. It shows how women’s disadvantage in interactional power and influence can be explained simply by means of social structural systems of beliefs and interactional processes common to all goal-oriented encounters.

There are several distinct advantages to the approach taken by this theory. First, it provides a much needed account of the mediating effect of interactional processes in the production of gender stratification. Interaction is the crucial arena through which individual women and men are directed toward or discouraged from various activities and paths of accomplishment. Interactional outcomes are also the basis on which many of society’s rewards of power, position, and respect are distributed. Consequently, no theory of gender stratification will succeed unless it incorporates an account of mediating interactional processes.

A second advantage of the status expectancy approach is that it explains women’s interactional disadvantages without recourse to individual women’s and men’s dispositional traits or gender-specific knowledge. That is, it is a social structural account. Ultimately, this may prove an extreme stand and the theory may have to be modified to incorporate some gender-specific attributes. However, for both sociologists and feminists, it is important to push the status explanation for gender effects as far as it will go. Only by doing so can we know how much of what we think of as gender is in fact the voice of status and power.

A third advantage of the approach is that it combines both a situational and contextually specific account of individual women’s power and influence with general explanatory principles about women’s systematic disadvantages. It spans the gap between accounts of individual diversity and abstract, generalizing explanations. Furthermore, it does this with an account that is both theoretically and empirically systematic.

The status expectancy account has limitations of course. Despite its
successes with mixed-sex interaction, its account of gender’s impact on status in same-sex groups is not yet fully adequate. Also, expectation states theory has just begun to broaden its scope to social as well as task behavior (Johnson 1988; Ridgeway and Johnson 1990; Ridgeway 1988). As yet, the theory has only a limited ability to explain such behaviors, despite their probable role in gender-based inequalities in interaction. These are significant shortcomings that must be addressed. Yet, despite them, the status expectancy account remains the most systematic and best documented explanation of gender’s crucial role in interactional inequalities.

Notes

1. In our society, race is also quickly known about another. This is partly why gender and race so often interact in their effects on face-to-face influence. But note that, according to expectation states theory, the status and competence associations of race are not activated in racially homogeneous interaction with a non-race-related goal or task.

2. This will not necessarily lead to poorer task performance. In fact, it may be superior for some kinds of tasks (Wood 1987).

References


Gender, Status, and the Social Psychology of Expectations


