



Including Mechanisms in Our Models of Ascriptive Inequality: 2002 Presidential Address

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INCLUDING MECHANISMS IN OUR MODELS OF ASRIPTIVE INEQUALITY



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Sociologists' principal contribution to our understanding of ascriptive inequality has been to document race and sex disparities. We have made little headway, however, in explaining these disparities because most research has sought to explain variation across ascriptive groups in more or less desirable outcomes in terms of allocators' motives. This approach has been inconclusive because motive-based theories cannot be empirically tested. Our reliance on individual-level data and the balkanization of research on ascriptive inequality into separate specialties for groups defined by different ascriptive characteristics have contributed to our explanatory stalemate. Explanation requires including mechanisms in our models—the specific processes that link groups' ascribed characteristics to variable outcomes such as earnings. I discuss mechanisms that contribute to variation in ascriptive inequality at four levels of analysis—intrapsychic, interpersonal, societal, and organizational. Redirecting our attention from motives to mechanisms is essential for understanding inequality and—equally important—for contributing meaningfully to social policies that will promote social equality.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Rachel Ann Rosenfeld (1948–2002). For a quarter of a century, Rachel taught all of us through her exemplary research on ascriptive inequality.

IN ONE OF BRITAIN'S most celebrated nineteenth century murder trials, Adelaide Bartlett was charged with killing her husband, Edwin. The post-mortem revealed the presence of chloroform, a corrosive poison, in his stomach. Reverend George Dyson, Adelaide's intimate companion and Edwin Bartlett's decreed successor for Adelaide's

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hand, testified that he had purchased the chloroform at Adelaide's request. Thus, the evidence showed both motive for Adelaide—a younger and more desirable spouse—and means—death by chloroform. But the prosecution could not offer convincing evidence showing how the chloroform got into Bartlett's stomach. It is all but impossible to swallow because it causes vomiting. And if chloroform had been poured down Edwin's throat while he was unconscious, traces would have been found in his mouth, throat, and lungs—and none were. In view of the lack of evidence as to *how* the chloroform got in Edwin's stomach, the jury acquitted

this article begins. Finally, I am indebted to Charles Camic, Joan Huber, Rachel Kuller, Steve Pfaff, Franklin Wilson, and especially Lowell Hagens, whose comments on earlier versions helped me refine my argument. None of these colleagues bears any responsibility for any remaining problems.

Adelaide. After the verdict, Sir James Paget, founder of modern pathology, appealed publicly for the truth: "In the interest of science," he implored, "she should tell us how she did it" (Farrell 1994; Fordham 1951).

In this essay, I argue that although we have been studying ascriptive inequality in employment for over 30 years with increasingly sophisticated techniques, we have made little headway in explaining it.¹ We have failed to progress because most of our research has focused on *why* ascriptively-defined groups vary on their access to societies' rewards, rather than on *how* variation is produced in ascriptive groups' access to opportunities. In other words, our stumbling block is the same one that confronted the jurors in Adelaide Bartlett's murder trial: Until we determine how events occur or are prevented, we cannot satisfactorily explain them. Following Sir Paget, I appeal, in the interests of science and justice, for research on *how* people come to be stratified on the basis of their ascribed characteristics.

In the social sciences, "why" explanations tend to attribute variation across ascriptive groups in more or less desirable outcomes to actors' *motives*—the factors that prompt an individual to take a particular action (Garner 1999:727). Conflict theories of ascriptive inequality, which contend that dominant groups use their monopoly over resources to maintain their privileges, exemplify motive-based explanations. "How" explanations for varying levels of inequality, in contrast, spell out the *mechanisms* that produce that variation. By mechanisms, I mean specific processes that link individuals' ascriptive characteristics to workplace outcomes. Mechanism-based theories, which tend to be less general than motive-based theories, specify the practices whose presence and implementation influence the level of inequality in a work setting. Theories about the effects of formalization, transparency, and accountability, which I discuss below, are mechanism-based theories.

I argue below that deriving research questions from motive-based theories without also investigating the mechanisms through

which motives operate has precluded advances in explaining ascriptive inequality, both because motive-based theories are all but impossible to test empirically and because they ignore the proximate causes of variability in ascriptive inequality. There is, of course, nothing wrong with asking *why*; our lack of progress lies in our failure to ask *how*. We can neither explain ascriptive stratification nor generate useful prescriptions for policies to reduce it until we uncover the mechanisms that produce the wide variation in the social and economic fates of ascriptively defined groups.

I first review explanations for ascriptive inequality that focus solely on motives and outlines their limitations. I then discuss theoretical and empirical research that focuses on mechanisms. Although I draw examples from research in labor markets and the world of work, my thesis holds more generally for ascriptive stratification in other domains such as education, criminal justice, and health care. For convenience, I call groups defined on the basis of an ascriptive characteristic "ascriptive groups." When I talk about inequality across ascriptive groups, I mean groups categorized by the *same* ascriptive characteristic, such as color. A final prefatory note: Although I am critical of much of the research in stratification, I ask readers to bear in mind that I reached this critical stance primarily from reflecting on the shortcomings in my own work.

MOTIVE-BASED EXPLANATIONS: EXPLAINING ASCRIPTIVE INEQUALITY BY ASKING "WHY"

Motives—the purposes prompting our actions—are often seen in the industrialized world as the cause of human behavior. As Tilly (1998:36–37) observed, our reliance on motives to explain behavior reflects a narrative mode in which people's motives cause events. Thus, it is not surprising that many theories invoke motives to explain ascriptive inequality without addressing the mechanisms through which motives hypothetically operate.²

¹ Ascriptive inequality refers to inequality across groups defined by some ascriptive characteristic, such as sex, race, or age.

² While working on this article, I had to fight the impulse to speculate on *why* sociologists are predisposed to ask "why" rather than "how."

SOME EXAMPLES OF MOTIVE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

The attention that researchers in ascriptive inequality give to “why” can be seen in theories that view inequality as the result of separate individuals acting to advance their own interests. In these theories any aversion toward members of a different group might make intergroup contact psychologically costly to prejudiced actors. This reasoning led Becker (1971) to formulate one of the first systematic theories of employment discrimination. He claimed that the strength of employers’ *taste* for race or sex discrimination is expressed in the above-market wages they pay whites or men to avoid having to employ minorities or women. Likewise, customers’ prejudices motivate them to demand a discount for dealing with members of a group against whom they are prejudiced, and coworkers’ prejudices allegedly prompt them to insist on a bonus, thereby motivating nonprejudiced employers to pay equally productive workers unequal wages (F. Blau, Ferber, and Winkler 2001:219–21).

More generally, motive-based accounts of employment disparities across ascriptive groups derived from neoclassical economic theory make two important assumptions. First, the desire for maximal profits hypothetically prompts firms to employ the most productive workers available at the lowest possible wage. Second, firms that discriminate suffer a competitive disadvantage that is a disincentive to discriminate. Given these assumed motives, any difference across ascriptive groups in job opportunities or rewards must stem from group differences on productivity-related characteristics such as skills and turnover (Haagsma 1998). Economists also point to profit-motivated employers’ desire to minimize the costs of labor-market transactions, including information costs. Theoretically, employers try to reduce the cost of information by using ascriptive group membership as a proxy for individuals’ likely productivity or employment costs. This profit motive should give rise to ascriptive inequality regardless of the accuracy of employers’ beliefs about group differences on these characteristics (F. Blau et al. 2001:227–28; England 1994; Phelps 1972).

Sociological explanations of ascriptive inequality also assign causal status to the motives (or needs) of corporate entities that lead to ascriptive behavior by their agents. Consider, for instance, Kanter’s (1977:48, 63) explanation for women’s absence from managerial positions before the 1980s. In filling jobs involving uncertainty, she argued, corporate managers—virtually all white men—preferred “ease of communication and hence social certainty over the strains of dealing with persons who are ‘different’” (pp. 49, 58). In short, Kanter theorized that managers’ desire for informal communication *motivated* them to exclude members of some ascriptively-defined groups.

Conflict theory also often implicates motives in explaining ascriptive inequality. For instance, Blalock (1956) theorized that when minority groups become large enough to threaten whites, whites respond by relegating minorities to bad jobs. This thesis has spawned numerous studies on the impact of racial composition on black-white labor market inequality (e.g., Beggs, Villemez, and Arnold 1997; Burr, Galle, and Fossett 1991; Cassirer 1996; P. Cohen 1998; McCall 2001). None of these researchers addressed the mechanisms through which whites’ hypothesized fears lower blacks’ relative earnings, however, so a half century after Blalock proposed this hypothesis, we still do not know *how* the racial composition of labor markets affects pay gaps between racial groups.

More generally, the centrality of motives in conflict theory’s assumption that people seek to protect—if not to increase—their share of scarce resources obscures the importance of the mechanisms through which motives might operate (e.g., Collins 1975:232; Tilly 1998:11; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993:10). In 1988, for example, I argued that the basic cause of occupational sex segregation was men’s desire to preserve their advantages by maintaining sex differentiation in a variety of spheres, including the workplace. I claimed that men—like other privileged groups—protect their privileged status by making sure that the “rules” for distributing rewards give them the lion’s share (Reskin 1988:60). While I still believe this is true, I wish I had spent more of the inter-

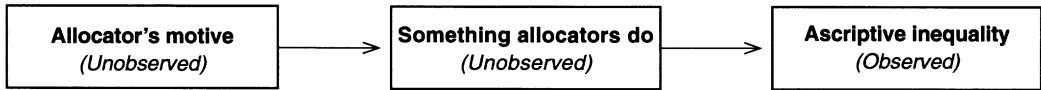


Figure 1. Causal Model Linking Allocator's Motive to Ascriptive Inequality

vening 15 years investigating *how* specific workplace mechanisms favor members of dominant groups to varying degrees, and *how* extra-workplace factors lead organizations to alter or maintain those rules.

The causal model underlying the theoretical approaches to stratification discussed above appears in Figure 1. All these approaches attribute ascriptive inequality³ to the motives of “allocators”—those actors who distribute scarce goods or opportunities among competitors; none specifies the mechanisms through which actors’ motives produce more or less ascriptive inequality.⁴

THEORETICAL LIMITATIONS OF MOTIVE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

Motive-based explanations for ascriptive inequality are deficient primarily because they are immune to direct empirical verification. Five problems undermine motive-only explanations of inequality. First and foremost, researchers cannot observe the theoretical cause—allocators’ motives. Motives are mental states, and mental states can rarely be directly observed. Indeed, some cognitive psychologists question whether people can really know even their own motives (Wilson and Brekke 1994).⁵ “The peculiar feature of the imputation of motives,” as MacIver ([1942] 1964:203) pointed out, “is that we are asserting a nexus between an overt action and a purely subjective factor that can-

not be exposed to direct scrutiny and that is not as such manifest in the action.” We cannot test, for example, whether corporate managers select subordinates who resemble them because they prefer social clones in certain posts, or whether blacks’ share of a metropolitan labor force affects how much (if at all) white pay-setters are threatened by their presence. Our inability to observe motives means that we cannot know which (if any) motives preceded an outcome. This is an important problem given that disparate motives can produce the same result (Schelling 1978; Wilson and Brekke 1994).

Second, ascribing motives to individuals based on their group membership assumes within-group homogeneity on the causal variable. Explanations that attribute motives to groups do not lend themselves to empirical verification because they ignore variation within the ascriptive group from which the allocators are drawn. Theories that assume *group*-based motives preclude the investigation of within-group covariation in, for example, the preference for socially similar subordinates and specific hiring and promotion decisions, or in whites’ perceptions of threat and the actions they might take to reduce blacks’ relative pay.

Third, motive-based theories are limited in scope, applying only to ascriptive inequality stemming from the actions of entities that can engage in purposive behavior. These theories cannot address inequality stemming from the actions of allocators whose motives are directed toward entirely different goals or from practices implemented in the past that persist in the present. As I show below, both inequality and equality can result from neutral mechanisms or structures that have disparate or identical impacts on ascriptive groups (Stryker 2001). Given the staying power of existing organizational policies and practices (Carroll and Hannan 2000; Stinchcombe 1965), the effects of these practices may bear no relationship to the reasons they were originally implemented.

³ Ascriptive inequality, the dependent variable in Figure 1, refers to the strength of the association between an ascribed characteristic and some outcome.

⁴ Note that this discussion does not apply to motive-centered models that specify causal mechanisms, such as efficiency theory, which specifies the employment practices that contribute to ascriptive inequality.

⁵ Even if we could be certain of allocators’ motives, treating them as causal agents involves a large leap of faith given how seldom people achieve their explicit goals (Tilly 1998:17).

Fourth, the causal priority of motives over outcomes cannot be assumed. As Elster (1989:16) observed, the best way to change people's minds may be to change their circumstances (also see Allport 1954).

Fifth and finally, disregarding the mechanisms through which motives operate leaves us in the dark as to the immediate causes of variability in ascriptive inequality. In failing to specify the intervening processes that give rise to varying levels of inequality, motive-based theories treat mechanisms as invisible hands. Lacking direct measures of theoretically meaningful explanatory variables, we must treat disparities as evidence for both the hypothesized causal mechanism and its causal effect on the observed group difference. As I argue below, this heavy load of inference is often balanced precariously on a single coefficient.

BALKANIZATION AND MOTIVE-BASED EXPLANATIONS OF INEQUALITY

Reinforcing motive-based explanatory theories is the division of stratification scholarship into largely separate specialties that are based on different ascribed characteristics (Reskin and Charles 1999).⁶ This balkanization of scholarship on ascriptive inequality reflects this country's "metanarrative" of discrimination *against* specific groups (Freshman 2000:428). This metanarrative implies that different explanations hold for different types of ascriptive inequality. Balkanized theories tend to assume that variation in some outcome across ascriptive groups is caused by something related to the particular characteristic that differentiates them.

Balkanization helps preserve the assumption that different motives cause different types of ascriptive stratification. Sex inequality at work, for example, has been attributed to men's hope to maintain their privileged status or to employers' desire to minimize turnover costs. Inequality based on sexual orientation theoretically stems from a different motive—homophobia, it-

self hypothetically a product of heterosexuals' insecurity regarding their own sexuality. Among motive-based theories advanced to explain racial inequality are antipathy or fear by employers, their belief that white customers are reluctant to be served by people of color, or that minorities lack necessary skills (Moss and Tilly 1996). The exploitation of undocumented immigrant workers hypothetically stems from the xenophobia or fear of competition by native workers (Tilly 1998:16).

Because different specialties assume that different motives produce different inequalities, different variables appear in analyses of the same outcome—earnings, for example. But if the lack of "soft skills" explains whites' advantage over blacks (Moss and Tilly 1996), why not include soft skills in analyses of sex differences? If employers are compensating something captured by AFQT scores, then why not include this variable in all analyses of earnings? Because we have constructed motive-based stories to account for these differently based expressions of ascribed inequality, and the stories tend to be group-specific. This essentialism reduces the power of theoretical explanations by obscuring the possibility that differential outcomes for each ascriptive divide result from the same general stratification processes. Of course, we cannot dismiss the possibility that some ascriptive characteristics operate differently from others, but we cannot assess the importance of such differences in analyses that are specific to a single group.

INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATA AND MOTIVE-BASED EXPLANATIONS

Perpetuating the problem of motive-based theories is researchers' heavy use of individual-level data to study ascriptive inequality.⁷ In such data, explanatory variables are limited to individuals' characteristics (and the individuals are those allocated *to*, not allocators, the actors whose motives are theoretically relevant in most motive-based

⁶ The structure of the American Sociological Association mirrors this balkanization. The ASA, which has no section on stratification, has six sections on various *ascribed* bases of inequality.

⁷ Although these data are usually analyzed for individuals, they may be aggregated spatially to metropolitan areas or states, or functionally to occupations or industries.

theories).⁸ As a result, data analysis typically begins by comparing the credentials and deficiencies of the ascriptive groups. Tilly (1998) summed up this state of affairs as “habit”:

[F]aced with male/female differences in wages, investigators look for average human-capital differences among the individuals involved. Noticing that school performances of children correlate with the social positions of their parents, researchers attribute those differences in performance to “family background” rather than considering that teachers and school officials may shape those performances by their own categorical responses to parental social positions. Encountering racial differences in job assignments, researchers ask whether members of distinct racial categories are distributed differently by residential location. (P. 30)

While I agree with Tilly regarding our disposition toward individual-level explanations, it is not simply a matter of habit. Individual-level explanations are the *only* explanations possible with individual-level data, and, like the gambler who keeps returning to a crooked casino because it’s the only game in town, many of us turn repeatedly to individual-level data, or direct our students to them, because they are almost the only readily available data.⁹

In quantitative analyses of individual-level data, the conclusions we draw depend on whether or not the partial coefficient for some ascribed status is statistically significant. Although researchers often speak of whether an ascribed characteristic “affects” the dependent variable (Sørensen 1998:250),

⁸ Some readers may object that this assertion denies agency to workers. Certainly there are workers who can write their own ticket with respect to their occupation, employer, rank, hours, working conditions, benefits, and pay; but they are the exception.

⁹ This is not the case for the employer data in the National Organizations Study (Kalleberg et al. 1996) or the Multi-City Survey of Urban Inequality. These data sets have made possible important mechanism-based research of ascriptive inequality in the workplace (Baldi and McBrier 1997; Holzer 1996; Huffman and Velasco 1997; O’Connor, Tilly, and Bobo 2001; Reskin and McBrier 2000; Tomaskovic-Devey, Kalleberg, and Marsden 1996).

whether or not a regression coefficient for an ascriptive characteristic is statistically significant indicates *only* whether there is an association to be explained in a particular data set and given a particular specification of the model. If the partial regression coefficient is significant, we tend to attribute its effect to some unobserved mental states, such as bias or threat, on the part of an allocator. If the partial coefficient is not statistically significant, then we infer different (and exonerating) motives by the allocator—to maximize productivity or reduce turnover, for example.

A case in point is a debate in the *American Sociological Review* over whether the growing wage gap between black men and white men in the late 1970s and early 1980s reflected increasing wage discrimination. On the basis of an unexplained effect of race on earnings in 1985, but not 1976, Cancio, Evans, and Maume (1996:551) concluded that race discrimination played an increasing role in the wage gap. Farkas and Vicknair (1996) disputed Cancio and her colleagues’ conclusion by showing that including a measure of cognitive skill among the regressors wiped out the significant effect of race on the pay gap. They interpreted this result as indicating that employers hired blacks for lower paying jobs than whites because whites had stronger cognitive skills, not because employers were biased against blacks.¹⁰

This intellectual skirmish over what belongs on the right-hand side in a regression equation—and the longer-running fight over the role discrimination plays in ascriptive inequality—is inevitable when evidence for or against allocators’ hypothesized motives boils down to the statistical significance of the residual effect of an ascribed characteristic. Bearing this in mind, consider a second example. Although male

¹⁰ In response, Maume, Cancio, and Evans (1996) challenged Farkas and Vicknair’s measure of cognitive skill, the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) score, as racially biased and hence an improper control for racial differences in cognitive ability. For discussions of the validity of using AFQT scores to capture racial differences in cognitive skills, see Fischer et al. 1996, Rodgers and Spriggs (1996), Jencks and Phillips (1998), and Raudenbush and Kasim (1998).

applicants to a high-tech firm were offered significantly higher starting salaries than women were, Peterson, Saporta, and Seidel (2000:794–95) concluded that the firm had not discriminated against women because, net of age and education, the sex difference in starting pay disappeared.¹¹ The firm also made whites significantly higher final offers than they made Asians and they raised their first offer significantly more for whites than for nonwhites. These race differences disappeared when the researchers added two variables to the equation: where applicants were first interviewed (at the firm or on campus), and how applicants had learned of the job (through a classified ad, a headhunter, or a personal contact).

Here too, researchers' conclusions about the reasons for group differences depend on what variables they include on the right-hand side of the regression equation. Although segregation is an important cause of the female-male pay gap (Jacobs 1999; Peterson and Morgan 1995), and female and male hires were apparently dissimilarly distributed across jobs (Peterson et al. 2000: 795), Peterson and his colleagues did not include in regressions any measure of the jobs applicants were offered. Meanwhile, they inexplicably included the site of the first interview as a determinant of starting pay. For regression analyses to explain group differences in pay, the specifications of earnings regressions must capture the way allocators set pay.

Ultimately, however, the problem in these papers, and in many others (e.g., Reskin and Ross 1992), stems from attempts to explain race and sex inequality by workers' personal characteristics. I am not arguing that individual-level analyses provide nothing to our understanding of ascriptive inequality. They reveal group differences that require explanation (e.g., Budig and England 2002; Waldfogel 1997), and they can rule out individual-level explanations for these differences. Without indicators of the causal mechanisms, however, we cannot discover the causal processes that lead levels of in-

equality to vary, so the theoretical meaning of the results is inevitably a matter of debate. Instead of enhancing our understanding of how ascriptive groups' outcomes come to be the same or different, we embark on a wild-goose chase in which we infer support for or against motive-based models based on whether ascriptive statuses have significant effects on some outcome, net of some set of individual-level control variables.

SUMMARY

Most of the theories purporting to account for employment inequality emphasize allocators' motives. This approach, I argue, has kept us from being able to explain variation in ascriptive inequality. Motive-based theories cannot be empirically tested because we cannot observe people's motives. Motives do not have an isomorphic relationship to outcomes. Motive-based theories attribute motives wholesale to all members of an ascriptive group, precluding analyses that take advantage of the explanatory power of variation among allocators. And even if we could establish why allocators distribute rewards more or less equally, this knowledge would offer little guidance for modifying social policies. If we are serious about explaining inequality, our theories and our analytic models must include indicators of causal mechanisms.

MECHANISM-BASED MODELS OF ASRIPTIVE INEQUALITY

Motive-based models of ascriptive inequality consign the processes that convert actors' motives into more or less disparate outcomes to a black box (see Figure 1). Inside that black box are mechanisms—the intervening variables that link ascribed characteristics to outcomes of varying desirability. Mechanisms are the processes that convert inputs (or independent variables) into outputs (or dependent variables). Thus, a mechanism is “an account of what brings about change in some variable” (Sørensen 1998:240). The physical world provides hundreds of examples of mechanisms: gears that convert power into speed and speed into power, circuit breakers that interrupt the flow of electricity, brake pads whose friction against

¹¹ From this and two other studies, Peterson et al. concluded that “women probably face no disadvantage in the hiring process in midsized and large U.S. organizations” (p. 813).

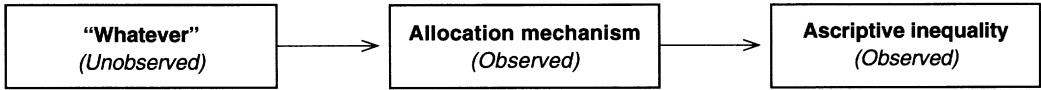


Figure 2. Causal Model Linking Allocation Mechanism to Ascriptive Inequality

Note: A variety of factors (denoted as “whatever”) influence what allocation mechanisms are operative: organizational decisions, economic constraints, or allocators’ conscious motives or automatic cognitive biases. Although the influence of these factors on mechanisms deserves study, we can explain the variation in ascriptive inequality without knowing why organizations or individuals implement particular allocation mechanisms.

wheels translates pressure on the brake pedal into deceleration.

The social mechanisms I discuss here are social arrangements that link ascriptive group membership to opportunities and rewards.¹² For example, the mechanism that converts workers’ hours of work per week into their weekly earnings might be a pre-negotiated agreement that stipulates an hourly wage, a minimum-wage law, or an informal arrangement in which wages are at the discretion of the employer. Many mechanisms can produce or prevent an association between workers’ race and their median annual earnings, including those practices governing workers’ access to employment and to standard versus nonstandard jobs, and, within firms, access to specific job assignments, as well as the practices that set pay per job or unit of work.¹³

Superficially, a mechanism-based causal model resembles the motive-based model (compare Figures 1 and 2). The important difference is that instead of an unobservable causal motive and an unspecified proximate cause (“something allocators do”), in mechanism-based models the proximate cause of ascriptive inequality is specified and observable. Consider, for example, how

¹² In arguing that social mechanisms are observable, I part company with rational-choice theorists, for whom social mechanisms are *unobserved* theoretical constructs whose high level of abstraction is necessary for broad explanatory power (Hedström and Swedberg 1998:10, 13; Kiser and Hechter 1991).

¹³ The mechanisms that cause ascriptive inequality to vary do not include abstract or global phenomena such as devaluation, discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, meritocracy, oppression, and social closure that describe but do not explain patterns of inequality (e.g., Reskin 1988; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993; Weber [1922] 1968).

employers identify prospective workers. Most often allocators—employers or their employees—draw on employees’ personal networks (Marsden and Gorman 1998). Because people’s informal networks tend to be homophilous, network hiring links the race, ethnicity, and gender of possible workers to whether and for what job they are hired (Elliott 2001; Fernandez and Weinberg 1997; Lin 2000). Ethnographic research and case studies point to *why* employers hire through networks—recruiting through informal networks is less costly, creates a richer pool of candidates, allows workers to hoard opportunities, and facilitates excluding workers from discounted groups (Fernandez, Castilla, and Moore 2000; Fernandez and Weinberg 1997; Waters 1999:105–110). But the difficulty of knowing which if any of these motives prompted a firm to recruit through networks prevents “why” scholarship from explaining variation in ascriptive inequality.

Although a case can be made for giving top priority to identifying organizational-level mechanisms because they are the proximate causes of levels of ascriptive inequality (Reskin 2000), we must also understand the role of mechanisms that operates indirectly through organizational-level mechanisms, as Figure 3 illustrates. Below I discuss mechanisms at the intrapsychic, interpersonal, societal, and organizational levels.

INTRAPSYCHIC MECHANISMS

Intrapsychic mechanisms, by definition, involve mental processes and hence are difficult to observe. Nonetheless, social cognition research has experimentally implicated certain intrapsychic mechanisms—automatic cognitive errors—in ascriptive inequality (for summaries, see Brewer and Browne

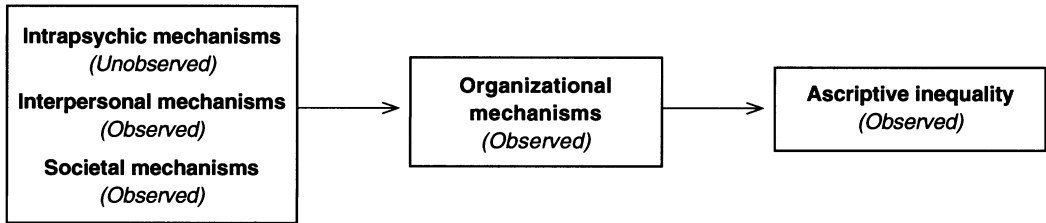


Figure 3. Causal Model Linking Distal and Proximate Allocation Mechanisms to Ascriptive Inequality

1998; Fiske 1998). The techniques through which researchers have observed these mechanisms permit investigation of their impact on workplace inequality, so I focus on them.¹⁴

Social cognition theory assumes that our brains seek to minimize cognitive effort in part through automatic categorization and association. According to considerable experimental evidence, we automatically categorize people into *ingroups* (people like us), to whom we attribute favorable traits, and *outgroups* (people unlike us), with whom we associate less favorable traits. We prefer members of our ingroup whom we are predisposed to trust, cooperate with, and favor in distributing opportunities (Brewer and Browne 1998; Fiske 1998:362). Consider an experiment in which subjects were instructed to distribute rewards between an ingroup member and an outgroup member, either equally or based on performance. Subjects tended to reward the performers equally when the outgroup member did better; when the ingroup member did better, they tended to base the reward on performance (Ng 1984).

We also automatically link certain traits to social categories. In other words, we stereotype people based on group membership. Moreover, we process information in ways that help to maintain our stereotypes (Brown 1995; Fiske 1998:367). Exposure to stereotype-linked activities or traits can activate our stereotypes and thereby affect our behavior (Greenwald and Banaji 1995). For instance, white subjects subliminally “primed” with (i.e., exposed to) photographs of the faces of young black men became angrier

about a rigged computer glitch than subjects primed with photographs of white men, and white subjects primed with pictures of black men displayed more hostility toward an unseen partner in a cooperative task than subjects primed with pictures of white men (Chen and Bargh 1997). This and other research suggest that exposure to stimuli associated with members of a stereotyped group brings to mind the traits stereotypically linked to that group—in this case, the stereotype of young black men as hostile.

Sociological theories about intrapsychic mechanisms lack the sophisticated measurement techniques that characterize psychological approaches to cognitive bias. For example, Kanter (1977) and P. Blau (1977: 78–83) each theorized that skewed group composition fostered ascriptive inequality because members of statistical minorities are particularly visible to majority-group members. Hypothetically, majorities’ perceptions of numerically conspicuous minorities are distorted, leading them to behave in ways that disadvantage minority-group members.

Status expectations research has also shown that intrapsychic mechanisms contribute to ascriptive inequality. Theoretically when persons from different status groups interact, members of both groups expect higher-status group members to outperform lower status-group members (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch 1972; Ridgeway 1997). These expectations act as self-fulfilling prophecies, especially when the ascribed status that differentiates the groups is salient. For example, in mixed-sex interaction men have more opportunities to perform and others evaluate their performance more positively. Although this approach is better suited to answering “why?” than “how?” (Ridgeway 1997:223), its systematic theoretical exposi-

¹⁴ Readers can assess their own automatic race, sex, and age stereotypes by taking the Implicit Association Tests at <http://implicit.harvard.edu>.

tion provides a promising foundation for incorporating observable mechanisms.

Intrapsychic mechanisms, although the object of intriguing research, remain largely beyond observation. But sociologists' growing interest in cognitive processes should auger the development of techniques for observing intrapsychic mechanisms that affect our reactions to others, and thereby contribute to explaining variability in ascriptive inequality.

INTERPERSONAL MECHANISMS

Interpersonal mechanisms can affect the amount of ascriptive inequality in the workplace by converting allocators' mental states into differential behavior toward others depending on their ascriptive characteristics. If Kanter (1977) were correct in attributing women's exclusion from managerial jobs to managers' preferences for similar others, this effect was brought about through managers' interaction with candidates for managerial posts. The extent to which allocators base personnel decisions on an allocatees' age, sex, color, accent, or perceived sexual orientation obviously contributes to ascriptive inequality in work settings. Innumerable examples of equal treatment and unequal treatment are available; space permits just two. First, according to one of the few studies of employment discrimination against homosexuals, research confederates who portrayed gay or lesbian applicants were treated more negatively during the interview than persons who presented themselves as straight, although they were as likely as straight applicants to get a job offer (Helb et al. 2002). Second, a race discrimination suit against Kansas City Power asserted that managers made special efforts on behalf of white, but not black, applicants for promotion, such as making inquiries when their application did not meet minimum requirements (*Ross v. Kansas City Power and Light*, 293 F. 3d 1041 [2002]).

Importantly, allocators' behavior toward persons from different groups can indirectly reduce their relative performance. Such effects often occur in informal interaction. For instance, white experimental subjects who interviewed black job applicants tended to sit farther from them, made more speech er-

rors, and ended the interviews sooner than those interviewing whites. White interviewees whose interviewers behaved toward them in ways that interviewers did with blacks were more nervous and less effective than those treated in ways white interviewers treat white interviewees (Word, Zanna, and Cooper 1974). Thus, white allocators' differential interaction with black and white interviewees precipitates poorer interview performance by blacks that presumably reduces their evaluations relative to those of white interviewees.

Allocators' actions can elicit behavior in others that may culminate in more or less ascriptive inequality (Bargh 1999:372). In the experiment described above (Chen and Bargh 1997), for instance, both the experimenters and the experimental subjects rated the *task partners* of the subjects who had been exposed to black faces as more hostile than they rated the partners of subjects who had been exposed to white faces.¹⁵ In this case, the nonactivation or activation of racial stereotypes by subliminal exposure to pictures of black or white males affected whether whites behaved with hostility toward their task partners (an intrapsychic mechanism), and their hostility in turn provoked hostility in their partners (an interpersonal mechanism).

In sum, intrapsychic and interpersonal mechanisms can affect levels of ascriptive inequality, depending on whether organizational mechanisms intervene to blunt or eliminate their effects.

SOCIETAL MECHANISMS

Whether organizations follow personnel practices that foster or discourage ascriptive inequality depends on external social and economic factors. Among others, these societal mechanisms include normative considerations within establishments' institutional communities, the expectations of their clientele, collective bargaining agreements, public transportation routes, and laws and regulations. The impact of Title 7 of the 1964 Civil Rights Act illustrates how societal mechanisms can indirectly affect ascrip-

¹⁵ All the interaction partners had been primed with pictures of white faces.

tive inequality within work settings by influencing what employers do.

Title 7 and its amendments bar employment discrimination based on race, national origin, religion, sex, pregnancy, age, and disability. Of course, outlawing a behavior does not necessarily eliminate it. As Galanter (1974:149) observed, systems can accommodate major changes in the rules without altering everyday practices or redistributing advantage. The impact of laws on workplace mechanisms depends on their implementation. In the case of Title 7, Congress charged the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) and the federal courts with implementation (Blumrosen 1993; Burstein 1989; Burstein and Edwards 1994; Graham 1990).

The activities of enforcement agencies can affect employers' behavior by challenging or condoning particular personnel actions, by permitting business as usual, or by requiring changes in employment structures. Initially, the EEOC had the authority to do just three things: investigate complaints, attempt to conciliate those it deemed valid, and issue regulations (Graham 1990). In practice, for much of its existence the EEOC has given a free hand to employers. In its handling of complaints the EEOC signals the business community what kinds of practices are permissible, and after the 1970s, the message was that employers did not have much to fear (but see Heckman and Payner 1989).¹⁶ Over the longer run, variation in the agency's resources, political mandate, and specific actions demonstrates its capacity to affect employers' compliance with Title 7 (Blumrosen 1993). For example, its requirement that large firms report employment breakdowns across broad occupational categories by race and sex compels employers to assemble records in a form in which they and the EEOC can discern inequality. Thus, the extent of enforcement of Title 7 by the EEOC has been an important mechanism, albeit one that has often permitted ascription.

Judicial interpretations of Title 7 have also shaped whether and how firms implement personnel practices that contribute to levels

of ascriptive inequality. The direction of the impact of federal courts has varied substantially with shifts in its political makeup. In 1971, the Supreme Court greatly extended Title 7's reach by ruling that neutral employment practices that have a disparate adverse impact on members of protected ascriptive groups are discriminatory, unless justified as a business necessity. By relieving plaintiffs of the near-insurmountable burden of proving intentional discrimination, this decision encouraged employers to alter selection criteria or other practices that contributed to ascriptive inequality. Its effect during the 1970s was to reduce ascriptive inequality by prompting firms to modify employment practices.

But what the courts giveth, the courts can take away. During the 1980s, federal courts chipped away at the disparate-impact doctrine, making it increasingly difficult for plaintiffs to win disparate-impact lawsuits. By 1979, for example, the Supreme Court allowed New York City Transit Authority to exclude participants in Methadone-treatment programs from *all* its jobs, despite the ban's disparate impact on minorities and the Transit Authority's failure to show that a global ban was a business necessity (Lye 1998). Congress amended Title 7 in 1991 to explicitly ban disparate-impact discrimination, but during the next decade federal courts rarely found practices with a disparate impact in violation of the law.

The right of workers who believe they have experienced discrimination to sue their employers is a third mechanism through which Title 7 has affected employers' practices. But workers' access to the courts has varied over time, as has the pressure on employers to check practices linked to ascriptive inequality. Title 7 initially allowed complainants to sue their employers if the EEOC provided no remedy. Until 1992, however, private attorneys lacked an economic incentive to take discrimination cases, given the low odds of winning (Burstein 1989; Donohue and Siegelman 1991; Selmi 1996, 1998). In amending Title 7 in 1991 to give plaintiffs the right to compensatory and punitive damages, Congress strengthened lawsuits as a mechanism to challenge ascriptive inequality—a financial inducement for attorneys to take on discrimination cases. In less

¹⁶ In the late 1990s, the EEOC has taken to court only a few of the approximately 80,000 complaints it receives annually (Selmi 1998).

than a decade the annual number of lawsuits tripled from fewer than 7,000 to more than 21,000.

Although employers' litigation victories far outnumber their losses, a few highly visible multi-million-dollar judgments for plaintiffs have influenced employers' practices. Some have done so directly through consent decrees that involve major alterations in employers' personnel practices. For instance, Home Depot revamped its human resources system to conform to a consent decree, developing minimum qualifications for each job and computerizing applications and thereby reducing network hiring (Sturm 2001). Often the impact of plaintiffs' victories has gone beyond their own employers. After Texaco paid \$3 million to settle a sex bias case, a corporate interest group warned its members to carefully review their pay policies.

Finally, corporations' potential legal liability has drawn the attention of entrepreneurs marketing products that may reduce employers' risk of liability. For example, employers can reduce their liability through practices designed to signal nondiscriminatory intent (Bisom-Rapp 2001). Such "bullet proofing" includes training on diversity and sexual harassment. Discrimination-liability insurance is also being marketed (Bielby and Bourgeois 2002). The impact of these products on the mechanisms organizations implement that in turn affect levels of ascriptive inequality remains to be determined.

In sum, Title 7's restrictions on employment discrimination created several extra-workplace mechanisms that in turn should influence firm-level mechanisms that affect levels of ascriptive inequality at work. Systematic investigation of the impact of variation in these and other societal-level mechanisms on organizational mechanisms will enhance our ability to explain ascriptive inequality at work.

ORGANIZATIONAL MECHANISMS

At the organizational level, mechanisms that affect ascriptive inequality include the practices through which employers and their agents somehow link workers' ascriptive characteristics to work outcomes. Sometimes employers base opportunities and rewards on

workers' ascriptive statuses as a matter of policy, favoring some groups and ignoring or harming others. For example, Atlantic Company refused to allow an African American manufacturing worker to wear "finger waves" because this hair style was "too different," rejected her request to wear her hair braided, and then told her that her ponytail was "too drastic," although white coworkers wore ponytails (*Hollins v. Atlantic Co.*, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit 188 F.3d 652 [1999]). More generally, employers might reserve jobs for co-religionists, give preference to heterosexuals, provide fewer medical benefits for one sex than the other, forbid workers from speaking any language but English while on the job, or use race or gender-conscious practices as part of court-ordered affirmative action. Variation in such policies mandating differential treatment affects levels of ascriptive inequality across firms (e.g., Konrad and Linnehan 1999; Reskin 1998; Watkins 1993).¹⁷ Moreover, some superficially neutral practices are designed to disadvantage particular groups. For example, the EEOC sued Alamo Car Rental for enacting a policy prohibiting female employees from wearing head scarves and then firing a Muslim woman for wearing a head scarf during Ramadan (<http://www.eeoc.gov/press/9-30-02f.html>).

Although personnel practices are unlikely to override organizational policies mandating differential treatment, the personnel practices that organizations implement can check or permit the effects of intrapsychic and interpersonal mechanisms. And their organizational practices are shaped by societal mechanisms. Thus, organizational practices are the immediate causes of variation in ascriptive inequality.

One practice that strongly affects whether allocators act on their preference is whether organizations conceal or make known to de-

¹⁷ For example, employers have fired Navajo (*EEOC v. RD's Drive-In* 2002, <http://www/eeoc.gov/press/9-30-02-c/html>) and Hispanic workers (*EEOC v. Premier Operator Services*, U.S. District court for the Northern District of Texas 113 F. Supp. 2d 1066 [2000]) for speaking languages other than English while in the workplace. For additional examples of cases involving differential treatment, see <http://www.eeoc.gov/pr.html>.

cision-makers allocates' ascriptive characteristics (Wilson and Brekke 1994). Variation in civil service rules illustrate the impact of revealing or suppressing this information. For several decades in the twentieth century, applicants for Civil Service positions were required to attach photographs to their applications: Ensuring that decision-makers knew applicants' race and sex maintained a white Civil Service for decades (Rosenbloom 1977:51-58). More recently, changes in the way that major symphony orchestras selected musicians show the impact of evaluators' exposure to allocates' ascribed characteristics. The introduction of "blind auditions" during the 1970s and 1980s brought female musicians into major symphony orchestras (Goldin and Rouse 2000). Finally, whether applicants must apply for jobs in person or can conceal their ascribed characteristics through computerized application processes influences ascriptive inequality in hiring through exposure control (e.g., Richtel 2000; Sturm 2001).

In many situations in which employers allocate opportunities and rewards, evaluatees' ascriptive characteristics cannot be concealed from allocators. Whether these characteristics influence allocators' decisions depends on how effectively personnel practices check allocators' discretionary behaviors (Bisom-Rapp 2001; Sturm 2001). Generally, the more bureaucratized personnel practices are, the less freedom managers have to act on their own stereotypes, biases, or impulses to favor ingroup members. The effects of bureaucratization operate through career ladders, job analysis and compensation systems, collective bargaining agreements dictating working conditions, and the availability of family leave and flexible scheduling, among others (Dobbin et al. 1993; Foddy and Smithson 1999). Of course, to the extent that allocators are bound by these policies will condition their impact (Edelman 1992; Flack 1999; Hochschild 1997; Nelson and Bridges 1999).

With respect to evaluation processes, the availability of relevant, objective information on evaluatees; the specificity of evaluation criteria; and the extent to which decision-makers are required to use the criteria all matter for levels of ascriptive inequality. In contrast, the more that performance-re-

lated information on allocates is available to evaluators, the less their ascriptive bias (Pugh and Wahrman 1983; Swim et al. 1989: 421). In addition, the vaguer and harder to operationalize the selection criteria are, the more likely that allocators' discretion will affect their decisions (Blalock 1991).

One mechanism affecting allocators' discretion is the extent to which employers hold allocators accountable for their decisions (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978; Tetlock 1992). Accountability exists when allocators anticipate both having to communicate their decisions and having to defend those decisions (Tetlock 1983). Whether or not allocators anticipate being held accountable for their judgments affects how they mentally encode information, thereby influencing the likelihood of cognitive bias. Accountability is most likely to reduce ascriptive bias when allocators know they must communicate evaluations to candidates and justify them to their superiors (Blalock 1991:103). In other words, the transparency of allocation processes and their outcomes conditions the impact of accountability on ascriptive bias (Blalock 1991:41).

Another broad group of mechanisms includes those established to make ascriptive biases visible to employers, workers, and enforcement agencies. Particularly important is whether or not records of employment outcomes are collected and can be examined by ascriptive groups.¹⁸ For example, research subjects examined hypothetical data in which the sexes were equally qualified on average, but men's average pay exceeded women's. When they reviewed one female-male pair at a time, subjects were significantly less likely to detect discrimination and judged any discrimination to be less serious than when they reviewed aggregated data for the hypothetical firm (Clayton and Crosby 1992:73-79). In addition, whether earnings were recorded by ascriptive group membership influenced whether allocates noticed and objected to any ascriptive inequality (Major 1989).

¹⁸ The Office for Federal Contract Compliance requires contractors to keep such records by race and sex in order to make it easier to employers as well as regulators to detect unequal treatment (Cordova 1992).

The existence of sanctions exerts an important effect on how firms' personnel practices influence ascriptive inequality. For instance, the California Personnel Board encouraged state agencies to integrate all jobs, but threatened budget cuts for only those agencies that failed to increase women's and minorities' presence in specific targeted jobs. The targeted jobs became more integrated, but the nontargeted jobs became more segregated (Baron, Mittman, and Newman 1991).

The amount of ascriptive inequality in an organization also depends on whether organizational practices have a *disparate impact* on ascriptive groups. Disparate impact occurs when some neutral mechanism translates group differences on position, experience, or a credential into differential outcomes for ascriptive groups. For example, a nepotism requirement for membership in an all-white union local, although neutral on its face, excluded workers of color from the local (Freshman 2000, note 142). Whether or not policies have a disparate impact on ascriptive groups depends both on the practice and on whether the groups' members are differentially situated with respect to the practice (Hernes 1998:81–82). Whether or not a practice has a disparate impact can depend on whether a firm employs ascriptive groups in different jobs and whether the risk of a layoff, the chance of a promotion, or access to some benefit depends on one's organizational location (e.g., Yamagata et al. 1997).¹⁹

SUMMARY. The presence and form of organizational practices that require, permit, or forestall differential treatment are the proximate causes of varying levels of ascriptive inequality in places of work. They operate primarily by affecting allocators' access to information about allocatees' ascribed characteristics, controlling whether allocators can act on such information, and the extent to which they make differential outcomes visible. More generally, organizational-level mechanisms influence levels of ascriptive inequality by the extent to which they explicitly treat members of different ascriptive groups differently; the extent to which they

mediate the effects of intrapsychic or interpersonal mechanisms by curtailing, allowing, or even encouraging allocators to use discretion in personnel decisions; and the extent to which neutral organizational practices have a different effect on members of different ascriptive groups.

IDENTIFYING MECHANISMS FOR STUDY

Here I suggest ways to identify mechanisms for investigation. A promising approach lies in exploring contextual and structural "effects." *Structure* and *context* are fundamental concepts in sociology because they highlight the importance of setting on social processes. Although structural and contextual effects are not themselves mechanisms (Sørensen 1998:253), they are proxies for mechanisms that vary across settings. Variation in the association between cities' racial composition and the earnings gap across regions illustrates this point: Racial pay gaps for women are low in midwestern cities with low immigration, high-wage manufacturing, and higher levels of unionization (McCall 2001:538). Researchers should pursue how collective bargaining and the typical pay of blue-collar jobs penalize minority women for their labor market share. Other promising contextual or structural differences include the smaller racial pay gap in government jobs than in the private sector (Grotsky and Pager 2001), the difference in white men's promotion rates across work settings varying in their race and sex composition (Baldi and McBrier 1997), and men's greater advantage in the chance to exert influence over female coworkers when the sexes work in the same rather than in separate establishments (Mueller, Mulinge, and Glass 2002: 176). These and many other structural and contextual effects point to mechanisms for study.

Theory and *research* also can suggest organizational-level mechanisms for study. Research building on Weber's ([1922] 1968) recognition of bureaucracy's constraining impact on managerial discretion has identified several likely mechanisms that affect ascriptive inequality, foremost among them being formalization (Bielby 2000; Nelson and Bridges 1999; Perry, Davis-Blake, and

¹⁹ The alternative to disparate impact—identical impact—is likely to be taken for granted and hence is less obvious as a mechanism.

Kulik 1994; Reskin 2000). Investigating the specific processes that link organizations' sex composition to women's share of top jobs can adjudicate among theoretical interpretation, like labor supply, institutional norms, and internal pressure groups (Cohen, Broschak, and Haveman 1998; Konrad and Pfeffer 1991; Reskin and McBrier 2000; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 1996). Given the role of organizational inertia for maintaining inequality, Baron and Pfeffer (1994:205) called for research on its causes. Kim's (1999) account of the effect on the pay gap in 1993 of a 1931 decision by the California Civil Service to pay workers in predominantly female jobs less than comparably qualified workers in male jobs demonstrates this strategy's potential payoff in illuminating the mechanisms implicated in ascriptive inequality. If, as Cancio et al. (1996) speculated, the declining enforcement of EEO laws widened the racial pay gap, we need to investigate *how* this occurred. Finally, demonstrated disparities beg the question of mechanisms. Smith's (2001, 2002) report that African American workers are less likely than whites to have authority or control over financial resources at work directs us to look for operative mechanisms.

Case studies of firms offer a third source for identifying mechanisms for study. Fernandez's (2001) detailed account of how technological change at a food-processing company increased race and sex wage inequality is a case in point. Mechanisms apparently contributing to these increases included skill upgrading concomitant with computerizing the production process, whose effects fell particularly heavily on the firm's black workers. Dampening the ascriptive effect of technological change were a no-layoff policy during retooling, a wage guarantee for workers in retooled jobs, and substantial retraining. Of course, case studies do not permit conclusions about causal mechanisms unless they also consider events that did *not* occur (e.g., the firm declining to use upgrading as an opportunity to bust the union or to move to a right-to-work state, or failing to actively recruit minority and female candidates for the new high-tech jobs). In addition, they typically lack the covariation needed for conclusions about causal mechanisms. Nonetheless, case studies are

excellent sources for identifying possible causal mechanisms (Cockburn 1991; Cohn 1985; Milkman 1987; Pierce 1998). Studies of organizations' attempts to reduce ascriptive inequality (e.g., Sturm 2001) are especially likely to be useful.

Discrimination lawsuits provide a fourth source of possible mechanisms for systematic analysis. Because plaintiffs must assert exactly *how* employers have disadvantaged them, legal documents provide detailed accounts of employment practices from both sides. Nelson and Bridges's (1999) analyses of four discrimination cases illustrate how litigation can reveal possible causal mechanisms in ascriptive inequality. They found, for example, that by benchmarking predominantly-male and predominantly-female jobs to jobs in the private sector, public employers exacerbated private-sector pay disparities. They discovered too that unionization contributed to the earnings disparity between the sexes because men's jobs were more likely to be unionized, and male-dominated locals were more influential than female-dominated locals in the state's pay-setting bureaucracy. Law review articles also outline mechanisms (e.g., Oppenheimer 1993; Schultz 1998; Schultz and Petterson 1992), and published lawsuits provide considerable detail as to mechanisms (e.g., *Wards Cove v. Atonio*, U.S. Supreme Court 493 U.S. 802; 110 S. Ct. 38 [1989]).

CONCLUSIONS

Insofar as data exist, sociologists have thoroughly documented sex and race disparities in work outcomes.²⁰ And there our achievements end. Although researchers try to explain observed inequality, theories about actors' motives guide the search for explanation, and it is all but impossible to know actors' motives. The product of this approach is not explanation, but never-ending and unprofitable debate over the role of unobserved motives. Although the most satisfying explanations address both why and how, as Whorf (1956) put it, "The WHY of understanding

²⁰ Disparities across some racial categories, across ethnic groups, and by sexual orientation, disability, age, and religion are less well documented.

may remain for a long time mysterious but the HOW . . . of understanding . . . is discoverable" (p. 239, capitalization in original). Hedström and Swedberg (1998:10) concur that causal explanation must address *how* a relationship came about. If we are serious about explaining variation in inequality, our theories and analytic models must include indicators of causal mechanisms.

Two disciplinary practices reinforce our preoccupation with motive-based theories: the balkanization of research on ascriptive stratification and our reliance on individual-level data. The balkanization of research reflects the popular notion that different types of ascriptive inequality have different causes. This parochialism conceals both their uniqueness and their fundamental similarities. All forms of ascriptive stratification involve long-standing relations of inequality within stable hierarchies that are similarly ordered across spheres. Only by breaking out of this parochialism can we find general explanations for ascriptive inequality and discover whether and how they must be modified for particular ascriptive characteristics. Certainly the mechanisms that affect levels of ascriptive inequality are not unique to specific ascriptive divisions. The formalization of Home Depot's application and hiring procedures following a sex discrimination lawsuit benefited men of color as well as women (Sturm 2001). Although interdisciplinary collaboration is in vogue, scholars interested in ascriptive inequality must begin with *intradisciplinary* dialogue and collaboration. For this to happen, the desire to develop better explanations will not suffice; we need mechanisms that foster *intradisciplinary* dialogue.

The second obstacle to identifying the mechanisms that cause ascriptive inequality is that most of the readily available data come from surveys of individuals. Data for individuals can address only the equality of individual-level inputs and outcomes. As a result, the only explanations for which most individual-level data are suited are group-linked "deficiencies" (which are relevant because of employers' hypothesized motives) or the unobserved motives of unobserved actors. In analyses based on standard data sets, explanations involving unobserved motives are necessarily speculative because the

data do not include allocators (and even if they did, their motives are all-but impossible to know). Group-difference explanations are unsatisfying, both because they are founded on implicit assumptions about employers' unmeasured motives and because they fail to indicate *how* group differences on individual-level independent variables give rise to group differences in outcomes. And both approaches ignore our discipline's unique strength: the analysis of the operation of social structures. To explain variation in levels of inequality across ascriptively-defined groups, across contexts, and over time, we must analyze data for organizational and individual allocators that include allocation mechanisms.

Intellectually, the solution is simple: concentrate on allocation mechanisms. In explaining social stratification, identifying mechanisms is particularly important because—as the methods for distributing social goods—they are the engines of equality and inequality. As a practical matter, reorienting our search for explanations will require a major shift in the kinds of data in which our discipline invests. A large share of public funding for sociology goes to surveying individuals. As a result, the burden of collecting data that include mechanisms has fallen on individual researchers.

Publicly available data on employers would permit a broad shift to the study of mechanisms. Much of the mechanism-based explanatory research on ascriptive inequality has come from just two data sets: the National Organizations Study (NOS) and the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI). Although the researchers who collected these data made them available to the research community, the dissemination of such data can take years. Collecting data like the NOS and MCSUI for public use will be expensive, but our continuing investment in surveying individuals is also costly in terms of the return in new knowledge. With respect to ascriptive inequality, increasingly sophisticated analyses of the same individual-level data usually tell us what we already know: that significant disparities exist. And they fail to reveal what we don't know: the mechanisms that cause ascriptive inequality to vary in intensity across groups and settings.

In the absence of public data sets that include indicators of mechanisms, our primary recourse is the systematic observation of how specific mechanisms in particular settings affect levels of ascriptive inequality. As we accumulate empirical knowledge, we can generalize to more abstract mechanisms whose explanatory power extends beyond the settings we have studied. My discussion of organizational-level mechanisms illustrates how we can theoretically aggregate specific mechanisms into more general ones. For example, organizations use many mechanisms to ensure that allocators know or are ignorant of the ascriptive characteristics of those they are evaluating; each mechanism entails attaching or eliminating ascriptive identifiers. For example, by investigating which organizations do one, the other, or neither; whether there are conditions under which the effect of attaching or eliminating ascriptive information is the opposite of those summarized above and similar questions, we can build general theory.

We stand to gain not only better research and better theory; we stand to gain the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to social policy. Stratification scholarship is not simply a matter of academic interest. It can be consequential for the kinds of jobs people have, the education they can afford for their children, whether they have health insurance, and whether young people in poor neighborhoods have any basis to hope for a better future. We have done a stellar job of documenting the disparities across ascriptively-defined groups. Increasingly researchers mention the policy implications of their findings. For example, in the debate discussed above, Cancio et al. (1996) concluded from their analyses that we need better enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, and Farkas and Vicknair (1996) called for policies to upgrade minorities' cognitive skills. Both of these recommendations have merit, but neither of the analyses on which the recommendations were based provides persuasive support for the recommended policy. If our analyses cannot convince other sociologists, how can we hope to convince policymakers? And analyses that do not address the causal mechanisms are not convincing.

By pursuing the mechanisms responsible for varying levels of inequality, our scholar-

ship can contribute to ameliorating these disparities. The division of labor in the social sciences especially qualifies sociologists to address policies related to ascriptive inequality. In pursuing motive-based explanations and analyzing individual-level data, we have abdicated that role. Indeed, that abdication inevitably follows from estimating models without mechanisms, because such models provide no guidance for developing social policies for a more just society. Pursuing research that takes seriously how to reduce ascriptive inequality will advance scientific knowledge—and more important, it will produce scholarship that addresses the social inequality that drew many of us to sociology in the first place.

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