

STATUS INCONSISTENCY: A REFORMULATION OF A
THEORETICAL PROBLEM*

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This paper has two general objectives. The first is to formulate at the level of behavior certain relationships which we believe constitute the rudiments of a general theory of status consistency. The second is to assess the the extent to which various psychological theories appear to clarify the psychological processes which underlie these relationships.

Status consistency has generally been defined as equality of an individual's ranks on a number of status dimensions (Benoit-Smullyan, 1944, p. 160). We would like to stress here that status inconsistency does not refer to a lack of agreement concerning a given kind of rank. It refers rather to inconsistencies among different kinds of ranks on each of which there is agreement.¹ In the discussion that follows agreement regarding the individual's different ranks is assumed.

A basic difficulty with the definition of status consistency given above is that what is meant by equality is not clear. Gordon (1958, p. 189) has stressed the necessity of distinguishing between the degree of superiority or inferiority which persons assign to various places on an objective status dimension such as income and the objective dimension itself. Thus, it is important to avoid assuming, for example, that two objective levels of income are taken to indicate two levels of superiority or inferiority.

¹This point is made by Broom (1959, pp. 432-433).

Gordon's point is that status is a matter of evaluation, not objective difference. With this we agree. However, this is only one aspect of the problem of defining equality of ranks on different status dimensions. Another, and more basic problem, is that of explaining how evaluations of phenomena belonging to two different status dimensions come to be viewed as equal. How, for example, does a worker determine that the ways in which people rank his occupation and income are equal? Goffman (1957, p. 275) suggests that this is a matter of social definition. Pellegrin and Bates (1959, pp. 27-28) expand this view by holding that equality of ranks is determined by comparing one's ranks on different status dimensions with those of others in reference groups. Thus, they hold that workers compare their occupation and income ranks with the occupation and income ranks of workers in similar occupations. Note that in this example rank on a single status dimension, viz., occupation, is employed in selecting reference groups. One could argue that workers use income rather than occupation in selecting reference groups, and this brings us to a basic problem. What rank does the individual use in selecting groups for comparison and determination of the equality of his ranks on various status dimensions? Such a rank we shall refer to as a reference rank.

Pellegrin and Bates' conceptualization of the way in which the individual determines the equality of ranks can be viewed as a complex process similar to the type of process dealt with by Festinger in his theory of social comparison processes (1955). This theory holds that individuals in

the absence of objective standards assess the validity of their opinions and the goodness of their abilities by making judgments in terms of the similarity of their opinions and abilities to those of others.

We suggest that equality of ranks can be determined in another way which is similar to that suggested by Pellegrin and Bates but differs from it in that the individual's reference group is not another group but his own. In this case the individual determines equality of ranks by determining his rank within his own group on each dimension of status. Equality exists in this instance when all of his ranks are of the same rank order.

A problem which is closely related to that of reference rank has to do with the level at which the individual attempts to equalize his ranks. A number of authors have suggested that the individual attempts to raise all of his ranks to the level of his highest rank (Benoit-Smullyan, 1944, pp. 159-160; Fenchel, Monderer, and Hartley, 1951, pp. 476-479; Goffman, 1957, pp. 278-279; and Exline and Ziller, 1959, p. 149). This view, while it takes into account desire for high general status, overlooks the fact that some of the individual's ranks may not be changeable. A more accurate formulation would appear to be that the individual equalizes his ranks at the level of his least changeable rank except when his desire for high general status makes maintenance of existing inconsistency of ranks more preferable than a reduction in general status. The individual's most unchangeable rank shall be referred to as his equilibration rank.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the individual will employ his

least changeable rank as both his reference rank and his equilibration rank. Because of this we shall henceforth use in lieu of reference and equilibration rank the term focal rank.

The concept of focal rank raises the question of why some ranks are more changeable than others. An answer to this question requires that we define the types of ranks the individual may have. In attempting to do this we have drawn upon conceptions of stratification advanced by Davis and Moore (1945), Parsons (1953), and Riecken and Homans (1954, pp. 788-794). Davis and Moore (1945, pp. 243-244) hold that two types of ranks are positional rank and performance rank. Parsons' discussion of the differential evaluation of societal subsystems in terms of societal evaluations of the functional problems of adaptation, goal-attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance and the degree to which the subsystems contribute primarily to the solution of one of these problems (1953) suggests that another type of rank is one based on the importance attached to the objectives of the social system in which one is participating. Riecken and Homans (1954, pp. 788-794) have viewed conformity to norms as yet another type of rank. In the following paragraphs we shall attempt to integrate these conceptions of rank into a single conceptual framework which we believe can be used to describe the stratification structure of any social system.

Following Bates (1956, p. 314) we conceive of a norm as a prescription for behavior and a set of norms as a position. A set of positions relevant to a single goal we view as a simple social system. Following Linton

(1936, pp. 272-273) we distinguish between norms which are included in all of the positions of a system and norms which are included in only some of the positions of the system. The former type of norms we refer to as universal norms and the latter type of norms we refer to as special norms. The special norms included in a position are viewed as being grouped into sets which define interrelated behaviors. These sets of norms we refer to as functions.

We conceptualize the degree of specialization in a system in terms of the number of positions in which different functions are included. In a highly specialized system each of the functions in the system is included in a small proportion of the positions in the system. In a lowly specialized system each of the functions in the system is included in a large proportion of the positions in the system.

Davis and Moore (1945, p. 244) suggest two criteria of evaluation of positions: functional importance and difficulty. Functional importance is determined by two sub-criteria: uniqueness of the functions of the position and the degree to which other positions are dependent on the position. Uniqueness in this theory is most closely related to our concept of specialization. An important fact emerges when uniqueness is seen as an aspect of specialization. This is that both easy and difficult functions may be unique. Because of this it is necessary to modify our thinking concerning the significance of uniqueness. If we assume that any increase in specialization involves a tendency to reallocate functions among positions in such a way that the difficulty of the functions included in any of the positions in the

system is fairly homogeneous, the following relationships hold. When specialization increases, functions become more unique to the positions in which they are included, and positions become more different with respect to the average difficulty of the functions they include. When specialization decreases, special functions become less unique to the positions in which they are included, and positions become less different with respect to the average difficulty of the functions they include. Thus, uniqueness and difficulty are positively related.

Dependence in Davis and Moore's theory is subject to the criticism that all positions in a system tend to be essential to goal attainment. When this is true positions consisting of easy functions and positions consisting of difficult functions are equally dependent on one another. A more acceptable way of using the concept of dependence would appear to be to use it to refer to the degree to which the goal of any simple system is viewed as essential to the attainment of the goal of a complex system. By a complex system we mean a set of simple systems. This definition of dependence is closely related to Parsons' conception of differential evaluation of societal subsystems in terms of the dominant values of the society (1953). The evaluation of the goal of a simple system in terms of the goal of the complex system of which it is a part we shall refer to as goal rank.

Since the evaluation of the goal of a simple system is constant insofar as the statuses of the members of the system are concerned, we can eliminate dependence in the sense in which we are using it so long as our concern is

with the evaluation of positions in the system. Although the evaluation of the goals of simple systems constitutes an important aspect of stratification and must be eventually incorporated in a general theory of status inconsistency, we shall not consider it further in this paper because we wish to focus on status inconsistency at the level of positions in a simple system.

The other type of rank which Davis and Moore discuss is performance rank. In our terms this refers to the evaluation of how well the individual carries out the functions included in his position.

Riecken and Homans' concept of conformity to norms as a base of status (1954, pp. 788-794) can be dealt with in our conceptual framework in terms of universal norms. Since universal norms are by definition included in all of the positions of a system they cannot, if the system is to function effectively, require ability which is greater than that of the least able members of the system. Because of this it is likely that conformity to such norms is taken as an indicator of commitment to the system goal. This type of rank we shall refer to as commitment rank.

Parsons' observation that there are expectations for attributes as well as performances (1951, p. 88) suggests that yet another type of rank is ability rank. One might object that ability is assessed in terms of performance. Under some conditions this may be the case, but because of the interest of the members of a system in the ability of an individual to occupy more difficult positions in the future, we postulate a tendency toward independent assessment of ability.

We may now summarize the types of rank which have been defined in the preceding paragraphs. Position rank refers to the evaluation of position and is based on the average difficulty of the functions included in the position. Performance rank refers to the evaluation of the individual's behavior with respect to special norms and is based on how well he carries out the functions which these norms constitute. Commitment rank refers to the evaluation of the individual's behavior with respect to universal norms and is based on the extent to which he conforms to such norms. Goal rank refers to evaluation of the goal of a simple system and is based on the goal of the complex system.

The importance of the conceptualization of the social system presented above and the relationship of this conceptualization to types of ranks is that it provides clues as to the changeability of ranks. This problem, in turn, is significant in two senses. First, its solution leads to specification of the individual's most unchangeable or focal rank and the types of inconsistency to which he may be subjected. These types depend, of course, on the direction in which other ranks deviate from focal rank. Second, specification of focal rank and types of inconsistency make clear which of the individual's ranks other than his focal rank he must change and the way in which he must change them in order to equalize or equilibrate his ranks.

Of all of the types of ranks defined above, ability rank would seem to be the most difficult to change. Thus, we shall consider ability rank to be the individual's focal rank. Having specified the individual's focal rank, we may define types of inconsistency to which he may be subjected. In order

A decrease in specialization will reduce the average difficulty of the functions included in each of the positions in the system and will thus reduce the inconsistency between ability and difficulty of position to which a low ability individual in a difficult position is subjected. In the case of the easy position-high ability type of inconsistency, equilibration involves upward mobility, decreasing specialization, or increasing specialization. The reason why changing specialization in either direction is related to equilibration in this case is as follows. It is only when there is a relatively high degree of specialization that easy positions, relatively speaking, exist. Given a high ability individual in an easy position, a decrease in specialization will increase the difficulty of his position which will tend to equilibrate his position and ability ranks. However, given the same conditions, an increase in specialization will make some positions more difficult than any of the positions were before the increase. If positions are then reallocated among individuals on the basis of their abilities, the high ability individual who prior to the increase was in an easy position should receive one of the more difficult positions. This will tend to equilibrate such an individual's position and ability ranks much more than will a decrease in specialization.

We mentioned earlier that a desire for high general status may cause the individual not^{to} equilibrate his status.² We shall call such a desire status aspiration and define it as a pressure to maximize the heights of one's ranks. This pressure should counteract pressure to equilibrate when

²See p. 3 above.

position rank is higher than ability rank because equilibration will involve a reduction in position rank. It should reinforce pressure to equilibrate when position rank is lower than ability rank because equilibration will involve an increase in position rank.

On the basis of the considerations set forth above we can make the following predictions. Given that mobility is easier to accomplish than specialization and that the individual has high status aspiration, a low ability individual in a difficult position will not employ downward mobility as a means of status equilibration, but will attempt to decrease specialization. Given the same conditions, a high ability individual in an easy position will attempt upward mobility as a means of equilibration. If such mobility is not possible the individual will attempt to increase specialization.

Lipset and Zetterberg (1954, pp. 155-177) have reviewed the existing evidence on the relationship of status inconsistencies to equalitarian and authoritarian ideologies. Most of the evidence relates to inconsistencies between social acceptance and economic position. These authors show that both high acceptance and low economic position and low acceptance and high economic position are related to both equalitarian and authoritarian ideologies and indicate that a more general theory is needed. The predictions made above suggest that there are specific relationships between types of status inconsistency and equalitarian and authoritarian ideologies and should provide a basis for future study in this area.

There are findings which are somewhat more directly relevant to the predictions made above. These are found in the studies by Fenchel, Monderer,

and Hartley (1951) and Goffman (1957). Fenchel, Monderer, and Hartley's findings are suggestive with respect to our hypotheses concerning mobility. They found that subjects who felt they had low statuses in some groups and high statuses in other groups desired statuses which were equal to the status they had in the group in which they had the highest status. Goffman's findings are suggestive with respect to our hypotheses concerning specialization. He found that persons whose occupation, income, and education were discrepant showed a greater preference for a redistribution of power among government, business, and labor groups than did persons whose occupation, income, and education were not discrepant.

Let us turn now to the question of why the individual finds status inconsistency disturbing and attempts to equilibrate his ranks. The following theories seem most relevant to this problem: Heider's theory of balance (1958, Chapter 7), Festinger's theory of dissonance (1957), Homans' theory of distributive justice (1961, Chapter 12), and Thibaut and Kelley's reward-cost theory of interpersonal behavior (1959).³ For reasons which we shall make clear below, we believe ~~that~~ Thibaut and Kelley's theory is the theory which is most readily adaptable to the problem in question. Before considering how this theory can be adapted, let us consider some of the difficulties involved in attempting to adapt the other theories listed.

In terms of our conceptualization, status inconsistency comes about because position is ascribed rather than achieved. It is precisely this fact of ascription which makes it difficult to adapt either Heider's theory or

³In a recent paper Sampson (1963) has attempted to subsume both status consistency and various psychological theories of consistency under a more general theory of expectancy congruence.

Festinger's theory. Heider's theory at its most general level deals with the similarity of affect toward parts of an entity (1958, pp. 182-183). It can be related to the problem in question by treating the bases of ranks as parts of an entity and the evaluation of these bases as affect. However, because in instances of inconsistency position is ascribed, ability should not be viewed as a determinant of position, and ability and position should not be viewed as an entity. Thus, the theory should not apply. Festinger's theory presents a similar difficulty. Brehm and Cohen (1962, pp. 228-230) have shown that the production of dissonance requires that the individual commit himself to behavior which implies the obverse of an attitude which he holds. Certainly in the case of an ascribed position there may be no commitment to the position, and, hence, no dissonance. A study by Jackson (1962) bears on this. He found that inconsistencies between racial-ethnic rank and occupational and educational ranks produced psychological stress symptoms except when occupational or educational rank was high and racial-ethnic rank was low. These types of inconsistency are precisely those which the individual should feel are not the result of his own actions.

Homans' theory of distributive justice holds that the profit which the individual realizes, i.e., his rewards minus his costs, should be proportional to his investments. This theory can be related to our conceptualization of status inconsistency by viewing rewards as evaluations of position and performance, costs as effort expended in performance, and investments as ability. The major difficulty which this theory presents is that it does not explain

why it is that a high ability individual should not find an easy position acceptable when it results in the same profit for him as a difficult position or why a low ability individual should not find a difficult position acceptable when it results in the same profit for him as an easy position. It is possible for an easy position to result in the same profit as a difficult one for an individual of high ability and for a difficult position to result in the same profit as an easy one for an individual of low ability because ability is relatively constant and the determinant of cost. If a high ability individual is moved from a difficult position to an easy one, rewards resulting from evaluation of position will be reduced but so will costs because the high ability person will be able to perform the easier functions with less effort. Conversely, if a low ability individual is moved from an easy position to a difficult one, rewards resulting from evaluation of position will be increased but so will costs because the low ability person will be able to perform the more difficult functions only with more effort.

Thibaut and Kelley's theory of interpersonal relations is very similar to Homans' theory of distributive justice. These authors also employ the concept of rewards and costs viewing them respectively as the gratifications obtained and the difficulties encountered in interaction. While Thibaut and Kelley have no concept of investments, their concept of comparison level by which they mean the standard in terms of which the individual evaluates the degree to which a relationship is satisfactory is very similar. Thibaut and Kelley's theory differs from Homans' in that they hold that high ability individuals weight rewards more heavily than costs and that low ability individuals weight costs more heavily than rewards. This clarifies both why

a high ability individual should not find an easy position satisfactory and why a low ability individual should not find a difficult position satisfactory.

Let us summarize now the points we have considered. First, we have attempted to define the bases of status which appear to exist in any social system. These are the individual's position, his behavior in his position, and his ability with respect to all the positions in the system in question. Behavior is further subdivided into performance of **functions which** vary from position to position and which have different degrees of difficulty and into conformity to universal norms which require little ability and which are the same in all positions. The latter type of behavior is an indicator of commitment to the system goal.

Second, we have attempted to construct a simple model of status equilibration. We did this by showing that if it is assumed that the individual is highly committed, status inconsistency will take the form of inconsistencies between position and ability ranks. We predicted that given a desire for high general status, an individual with low ability and in a difficult position would not attempt to obtain an easier position but would attempt to make all of the positions in the system more similar with respect to difficulty by effecting a decrease in the specialization of the system. This would in effect reduce the difficulty of such an individual's position. Given a similar desire for high general status, we predicted that an individual with high ability in an easy position would attempt to obtain a more difficult position and, failing in this, would attempt to make all of the positions in the system less similar with respect to difficulty by effecting an increase in specialization. If positions are reallocated on the basis of ability following such a change

in specialization, such an individual would obtain a more difficult position.

Finally, we considered a number of psychological theories which appeared to be most relevant to the problem of explaining why the individual finds an inconsistent status disturbing. First, we attempted to show that Heider's theory of balance and Festinger's theory of dissonance are difficult to adapt because status inconsistency comes about through the ascription of position. Next, we attempted to show that because ability affects costs, Homans' reward-cost theory, while more adaptable than Heider's and Festinger's theories, cannot deal with the fact that both low and high ability persons may obtain the same profit in a number of positions which vary considerably in difficulty. Then, we pointed out that Thibaut and Kelley's observation that low and high ability individuals weight rewards and costs differently takes care of this difficulty.⁴

⁴ For a more formal statement of the concepts and propositions presented in this paper see Kimberly (in press).

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