

COMMENTARY

THE ROLE OF SETTING IN ELITE INFLUENCE ALLOCATION

Matthew A. Painter II

SOCIOLOGISTS' INTEREST in social interaction dates back to the founding of the discipline. For instance, Georg Simmel stated that, "The first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to know with whom one has to deal" (Simmel 1908 in Wolff 1950: 307). Visible status characteristics such as age, sex, and race have long been identified as mechanisms that enable social classification (Park 1928), which is important for social interaction as it divides the social world into comprehensible units (Abrams and Hogg 1990). By drawing on visible status characteristics, individuals form in- and out-groups. Yet, Keister and Cornwell argue that many status characteristics are initially obscure and may only become known over time. These obscure status characteristics affect the allocation of important social resources, such as influence, within groups. Thus, the allocation of influence within a given in-group is a function of individuals' visible and obscure status characteristics (Berger et al. 1977). Keister and Cornwell offer a two-stage conceptualization of influence allocation that extends Kalkhoff and Barnum's (2000) seminal work combining status characteristics and social identity theories. In Keister and Cornwell's conceptualization, individuals first use visible status characteristics to create in-groups and then assign influence to in-group members based on obscure status characteristics. The authors then explore factors that affect this influence hierarchy among the elite of a large Midwestern city.

In any social interaction, the setting is important as it frames and shapes the interaction. The setting frames the interaction by providing valuable background information both for the specific location(s) and the nature of the group under study. For instance, the population size of a given setting may affect elite in- and out-group formation. Additionally, the setting shapes the distribution of social resources such as influence among social groups. For example, some characteristics of a given setting such as elite network density may affect the allocation of influence as more dense elite networks allow for greater connectivity and increase the flow of information among elites. In this study, influence is allocated within a unique setting, a single city, which informs the authors' findings and discussion in several ways. First, the setting lends insight into the authors' counter-intuitive findings regarding race and gender. Second, whether status characteristics function as visible or obscure traits may differ by setting. Third, consideration of different settings provides support for the generalization of the two-stage conceptualization. Finally, setting shapes our understanding of how influence hierarchies may change over time.

Simmel commented that the setting shapes the conditions of social interaction, which then affects social processes such as the allocation of influence (Berger et al.

1977). Thus, the setting informs Keister and Cornwell's counter-intuitive findings concerning race and gender, which suggest a growing influence of minority individuals in traditionally white male elite circles. Since the elites in Keister and Cornwell's data live and work in the same city, elite networks allow access to information about other elites, independent of face-to-face interaction. The relatively closed and dense elite network structure (Gould 1989) ensures that if certain elites do not know other elites personally, they almost certainly know of them. This knowledge of a shared social category or identity leads to social cohesion (Abrams and Hogg 1990; Turner 1991). Therefore, elites may allocate influence to minority individuals based on the knowledge that they occupy a prominent position such as city mayor, district court judge, or university president. While certain visible status characteristics such as gender and race may prevent minority individuals from joining some elite in-groups, occupational status may be the visible characteristic needed to join other groups. Importantly, Keister and Cornwell's careful treatment of potential outliers does not support the notion that these findings may be due to specific individuals. Consequently, we can conclude that their results are reflective of a more general progressive trend toward growing minority influence. Thus, consideration of the setting allows key insight into the authors' findings and highlights the importance of setting for social interaction.

Setting complicates whether status characteristics function as visible or obscure traits. In non-experimental data and especially with data such as these, it is difficult to separate visible status characteristics from those traits that are known, but considered obscure. For example, Keister and Cornwell argue that education is an obscure status characteristic in most situations and operates as a sorting mechanism in the second stage, but this claim is tenuous among the elite. In a social interaction with no prior information, education will function as an obscure status characteristic and elites will discern each other's educational attainment from social cues. Details of a given elite's educational history will be revealed over time and contribute to second stage influence allocation as Keister and Cornwell posit. Yet, given the structure of elite networks, education—specifically where and how much—is certainly known and will operate as a visible status characteristic in the first stage by contributing to the sorting of individuals into in-groups. In this way, educational attainment and visible status characteristics such as age, race, and gender simultaneously contribute to sorting in the first stage. Thus, among the elite in a single city, education may be better conceptualized as a visible status characteristic and as a sorting mechanism in the first stage.

Considering a different setting provides support for the generalization of Keister and Cornwell's two-stage process. While their conceptualization certainly applies to other social groups such as the poor, it is important to remember that the specific mechanisms used in both stages are conditional on cultural relevance (Ridgeway and Berger 1986) and thus are setting-specific. Among the poor, sorting mechanisms in the first stage may be similar to that of the elite. For instance, occupation may play a role in sorting the poor into in-groups. Yet, in contrast to the elite, employment status may be more important for in- and out-group formation than occupation among the poor. Similarly, education may play a role in first stage sorting. Since higher education is relatively rare among the poor, educated individuals might be more well-known. In this way, education may function as a visible status characteristic both for the elite and the poor. At the second stage, the poor may allocate influence

due to culturally relevant obscure status characteristics that may include athletic and musical ability, volunteerism, or military service. In short, the elite and the poor may use similar status characteristics to form in-groups and allocate influence, but what is culturally valued and thus used as sorting mechanisms at each stage is setting-specific and therefore contributes to different patterns of influence allocation.

Finally, within a given setting, time affects influence allocation. The authors speculate that mobility is possible, but influence hierarchies are likely to be relatively stable. It is important to consider how time affects influence hierarchies as many individual and structural forces may contribute to the relative stability or mobility of influence among elites. For example, stability may be reflected in the ordering of elites within the hierarchy and/or in the distance between elites. Mobility within the hierarchy may be random or due to the disclosure of additional obscure status characteristics that affect the allocation of influence. Yet, it is unclear exactly how influence hierarchies maintain their stability or how an individual might lose or gain influence over time. A specific mechanism that provides insight into this uncertainty is the Matthew effect, whereby the status of the contributor shapes the perceived value of the contribution (Merton 1968). Therefore, elites with the most influence will reinforce their position over time and those with less influence risk losing status. In the event of mutual collaboration or independent proposals of similar ideas, the Matthew effect predicts that the higher status individual will benefit at the cost of the lower status individual. In this way, the Matthew effect may be thought of as a process of cumulative (dis)advantage (Merton 1968, 1988) or a feedback loop (Brewer & Kramer 1985). While some elites experience increasing gains to their initial position in the influence hierarchy over time, other elites encounter diminishing returns. Due to these diverging trends, time serves to exacerbate initial influence allocation. Thus, Keister and Cornwell might be too optimistic that, over time, there might be mobility within an elite influence hierarchy because the allocation of influence may actually be quite rigid and self-perpetuating.

Keister and Cornwell's paper makes a valuable contribution to the literature by extending status characteristics and social identity theories to a unique dataset. Their two-stage conceptualization of influence allocation can certainly be generalized to other social groups, but it is important to consider how a given setting informs our understanding of social interaction and shapes influence hierarchies within groups. In this way, scholars gain greater insight into how individuals sort themselves into social groups and how these groups distribute valued social resources.

Note

I am grateful to Adrienne Frech and Richard Petts for helpful comments.

References

- Abrams, Dominic and Michael A. Hogg 1990. "An Introduction to the Social Identity Approach" in *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances*, edited by Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Matthew A. Painter II

- Berger, Joseph, M. Hamit Fisek, Robert Z. Norman, and Morris Jr. Zelditch. 1977. *Status Characteristics in Social Interaction: An Expectation States Approach*. New York: Elsevier.
- Brewer, Marilynn B. and Roderick M. Kramer 1985. "The Psychology of Inter-Group Attitudes and Behaviors." *Annual Review of Psychology* 36: 219-43.
- Gould, Roger V. 1989. "Power and Social Structure in Community Elites." *Social Forces* 68: 531-52.
- Kalkhoff, Will and Christopher Barnum. 2000. "The Effects of Status-Organizing and Social Identity Processes on Patterns of Social Influence." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63: 95-115.
- Merton, Robert K. 1968. "The Matthew Effect in Science." *Science* 159 (3810): 56-63.
- Merton, Robert K. 1988. "The Matthew Effect in Science, II." *ISIS* 79: 606-23.
- Park, Robert E. 1928. "The Bases of Race Prejudice." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140: 11-20.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia and Joseph Berger. 1986. "Expectations, Legitimation, and Dominance Behavior in Group." *American Sociological Review* 51: 603-17.
- Turner, John C. 1991. *Social Influence*. London: Open University Press.
- Wolff, Kurt H. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.

Matthew A. Painter II is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at Ohio State University. His general research interests include family, immigration, methodology, and wealth inequality.