

Who Does She Think She Is? A Group-Level Theoretical Consideration of Women and Authority in Organizations

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Abstract

The presence of women in top management provides an opportunity to give theoretical consideration to the notions of authority, gender and hierarchy. Though women have now reached the highest echelons of power in organizations, the lived experience of executive women suggests an uneasy and precarious journey to, and existence at, the top of organizations. This article draws on the sociological literature on status and status hierarchies in order to posit certain consequences associated with having women in positions of power.

A distinction is made between status (individual level) and status hierarchies (group level), followed by a discussion of the processes through which status hierarchies are formed and sustained. Status hierarchies are viewed as functional for the group - both from an efficiency standpoint and in terms of meeting the group's socio-emotional needs. It is asserted that the intersection of gender and hierarchy serve to maintain existing societal gender relations, whereby men occupy positions of authority with women largely in subordinate roles. An important consequence of this positioning is that women who occupy positions high in the status hierarchy may be perceived as a threat, eliciting powerful responses, akin to backlash, from members of the group. Such responses have implications for how women negotiate their careers.

As a black woman, she says, 'it's inevitable that you're going to be challenged and observed. In some cases, it's going to feel like every time you walk through the door, you have to be on.' [DEC plant manager, Alexander, 1990]

There is one fresh crack in the glass ceiling in the United States—an African American woman has been named to as Chief Executive Officer of a Fortune 500 company. As Ursula Burns takes the helm of Xerox in July, 2009, she reaches a level of power and prestige that no African American woman has ever attained. Undoubtedly, she will carry with her the expectations and hopes of many more women of color who have their eyes focused on executive suite all across the country. Yet, Burns is faced with daunting circumstances -- Xerox's stock price hovered around \$6 per share during 2009—well below the \$20 per share when Burns' predecessor, Anne Mulcahy took office in 2001 and engineered a dramatic turnaround of the ailing company. Burns has to position Xerox to compete effectively against Canon and Hewlett-Packard in the wake of large layoffs and cost-cutting measures. Burns has a solid track record at Xerox, having risen from an intern to President before being named CEO. Because she succeeds a woman, perhaps she will not face the same set of challenges many women face as the “first” to occupy positions of influence and power. However, even with this historic announcement, the corporate world still has precious few women at the highest levels. There are just 14 female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, and their circumstances could be described variously as precarious or as opportune. As the opening quote indicates, women in influential roles may encounter challenges to their authority so frequently that they come to anticipate resistance when interacting with others in the workplace. Authority, when held by a woman, can be viewed as tentative, while a man's authority is often assumed. There is no easy resting place for women in authority—at any time, their power and influence can be called into question.

The central thesis of the article is that women in positions of authority challenge the status hierarchy in ways that generate anxiety for the group, which results in backlash. Women in authority receive signals that they have stepped outside of “their place,” and those signals have implications for how women negotiate their careers. To develop this point, I draw largely on the literature on status and status hierarchies to articulate the way in which women leaders pose a threat to existing status relationships. Threat perceptions can create uncertainty, confusion, suspicion and anxiety for the group, causing group members to resist, subvert and challenge authority exercised by women.

Examining the intersection of gender and status hierarchies places group-level dynamics as a necessary complement to the individual level analyses that dominate the extant organizational literature. Research on status hierarchies has been neglected in favor of “more easily identifiable, measurable, or manipulable formal organizational structure, despite the fact that they are not necessarily aligned with an organization’s formal hierarchy “ (Ravlin and Thomas, 2005). Ravlin and Thomas (2005) further state that “both formal and informal sources of status combine to produce unique hierarchies and patterns of interpersonal behavior. Status hierarchies are, in fact, a summary mechanism through which widely differing characteristics such as formal position, demographics, socioeconomic background, task competence, and interpersonal skills exert a unified, equivalent influence on an individual’s behavior and outcomes within organizational units (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).”

The first section begins by making a distinction between status (individual level) and status hierarchies (group level), followed by a discussion of the processes through which status hierarchies are formed and sustained. Status hierarchies are viewed as functional for the group - both from an efficiency standpoint and in terms of meeting the group’s socio-emotional needs. The second section asserts that the intersection of gender and hierarchy serve to maintain existing societal gender relations, whereby men occupy positions of authority with women largely in subordinate roles. An important consequence of this positioning is that women who occupy positions high in the status hierarchy may be perceived as a threat, eliciting powerful responses, akin to backlash, from members of the group. I then discuss the individual adjustments that women make in order to respond to (or in anticipation of) the backlash. The paper ends with implications for organizations seeking to tap into the potential of a talented diverse workforce.

Status, Status Hierarchies, and Gender

Sociology has long research tradition built upon the notions of status and stratification; however, there may be less attention to those concepts in recent years given the prevailing view that U.S. society is egalitarian, mobility is based largely on merit, and that major structural obstacles to advancement have been removed (Ravlin and Thomas, 2005). However, Ravlin and Thomas (2005) offer a cogent introduction to the status and stratification literature that can have utility for management researchers interested in inequality, power, influence, authority and diversity in organizational contexts. According to the authors, status “is acquired by an individual in a given

culture because specific objects, beliefs, experiences, and other concepts associated with that individual have become attached to value.” They distinguish between achieved status, which is associated with individual-level characteristics that are often the subject of management literature and ascribed status, which reflects the position or membership an individual holds within society, an organization or institution. One can see a connection between achieved status and Alderfer’s (1987) concept of organization group memberships in that accomplishment and achievement attributes are often reflected in one’s performance as a member of an organizational group. Similarly, ascribed status may be seen as related to Alderfer’s identity group membership in that ascribed status is not controlled by the individual. Further, identity group memberships do not change over time and come from having a shared biological heritage.

Individual status, whether achieved or ascribed, refers to the value associated with an individual as a consequence of his/her occupation, material worth, demographic characteristics, relationships with others, and the like. Men tend to occupy high status organizational roles that are more central, with more authority and decision-making power, and with higher pay. By virtue of their roles in organizations, men are viewed as high status individuals. Images abound of men in organizations—making the big sale, making the tough decisions, taking risks, generating wealth. Women, however, are perceived as low in status and stature. Images of women tend to portray women in support roles, waiting for the opportunity to attach to a high status male, working just hard enough to survive until the opportunity for marriage or other familial obligations arise. Perceptions about status, however, can shift—and have shifted - significantly over time and across circumstances. The negotiation of those perceptions has been the subject of much research and debate. Nonetheless, status offers an important cognitive mechanism for establishing order and predictability in the interpersonal realm.

By contrast, status hierarchy is a group-level construct that is refers to “patterned inequalities of respect, deference, and influence among a group of people.” (Ridgeway and Walker, 1995) These structured inequalities are based not only on perceptions of task competence but also reach further to “influence virtually all relational behavior, such a indicating when to defer, to listen, to speak, to be polite, to engage in social exchange, to ostracize, to support, to help, and to engage in many other interpersonal behaviors.” Status hierarchies need not be formally designated, but may emerge spontaneously (Bales, 1950; Fisek & Ofshe, 1970; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). “The generation of status hierarchies helps reduce uncertainty and cognitive demands by providing a consistent schema for whose views to pay attention to , who is supposed to be correct (whether or not this can be verified), whose directives to obey, what information can be safely ignored, and how to behave toward specific others (Ragins, 1997).” “If the current status ordering is generally accepted as stable and legitimate (Chattopadhyay eta l, 2004; Ravelin, Thomas & Ilsev, 2000), little attempt at movement and little conflict between groups are likely to occur.” There are also cultural influences. “Our assumption is that characteristics of individuals and the systems in which they are embedded influence the interpersonal processes of cooperation, competition, social exchange, and social judgment in producing inequalities in varying social environments.” “Hare, Borgatta, and Bales

(1955) argued that status hierarchies developed because they were functional for all group members, of either high or low status, and certainly functional for the group from an efficiency standpoint. Earlier we discussed the role status hierarchies might play in reducing uncertainty; however, Hare et al believed that their research showed that status hierarchies assisted groups in managing their external environment and in accomplishing their tasks, especially, of course, when more competent members were given higher status.This idea, that the task performance of the group would be facilitated by status hierarchy, whereas cohesiveness would suffer, was one influence on the development of the conceptualization of groups having two leaders—a task leader and a socioemotional leader.”

The status hierarchy framework is in contrast to the individual-level view of gender and authority that focuses on the characteristics of the women, for example, as more collaborative or relational in style. For example, Jacobs makes the distinction between “power-over” which is the capacity to get people to do what they don’t want to do due to resources, status, expertise, reward or punishment, from “power-to” which is the ability or potential to bring about change. This, and similar views, are intuitively appealing and fit comfortably with existing stereotypes about women or femininity. Importantly, Ravlin and Thomas indicate that “the notion that status strivings in employees are useful to employers presents something of a paradox, as most employees will be rewarded for such strivings only to a certain point, beyond which they have stepped outside of their place in the hierarchy.” Whether women are chosen for (and are willing to accept) low status, subordinate roles, or whether roles which occupy women inevitably lose stature, is an enduring research question. What is clear is that societal norms and values are powerful influencers on the set of opportunities available to women in organizations.

Women in Authority as a Threat to Status Hierarchies

Authority is a combination of power, the ability to get things done, and legitimacy, which is the right to exercise power. The distinction between power, legitimacy and authority further highlights the earlier distinction between status and status hierarchy. An individual may have power as a consequence of his/her status; however, unless the power is viewed as preserving the established order, the individual will have difficulty exercising that power. Power, then, is an individual construct, while legitimacy is ultimately a group level construct. Legitimacy references an acceptance in relation to, and justification in defense of, an entrenched patterned inequality. This helps us understand the range of reactions to women who have influence and power. In cases in which that power is viewed as legitimate—is authority as we have defined it—women are likely to receive support and reinforcement. For example, a woman who is an executive assistant to the president of a company, is likely to be viewed as holding considerable (if not formal) authority. She is often described as “really making the decisions” within some circumscribed space. Her power is not challenged, and her achievements are celebrated. However, in cases in which the power is viewed as lacking legitimacy, the woman is likely to be viewed as a threat. Consider a woman who is the president of the company. She may be

described as aggressive, overbearing, and moody. Her power is challenged at every turn, and her any acknowledgement of her accomplishments is likely to be tempered.

Ironically, individuals justify the status hierarchy because of a basic need to see the world as fair and legitimate. Individuals who made attributions about the executive assistant and president would be loathe to examine the extent to which their comments reflect biases and prejudices. Their observations *seem* right to them—and, they are right in that they accurately reflect and reinforce the existing gender hierarchy. Ravlin and Thomas (2005) posit “system-legitimizing worldviews” as the set of beliefs individuals hold that make sense of, justify, and defend the existing status hierarchy. These beliefs are the mechanism through which status hierarchies can effectively reduce uncertainty, increase predictability by ensuring that proponents of the existing order get (and keep) valued resources—mostly, those at the top of the hierarchy. Individuals are strongly committed to their beliefs and react negatively when those perspectives are questioned.

The belief in male power as dominant and female power as subordinate is an example of a system legitimizing worldview in that it reinforces and sustains the organization structure (Oakley, 2000). There is ample evidence in the literature of this worldview. An early example is the belief that women are most appropriately placed in subordinate roles, such as those outlined in Kanter’s (1977) seminal work. Kanter posited stereotypical roles that women occupied and that served to maintain the status quo: the mother, pet, iron maiden and seductress. These roles circumscribe women’s lives by ensuring that women remain in subordinate roles. Kanter would have expected that those dynamics would shift as larger numbers of women entered the workforce; however, they appear to have endured despite increasing numbers—owing in part to the entrenched status hierarchy. They are part of the existing order, as accepted by all members of the organization—rather than prescribed by the proportion of women within that structure. Empirical evidence supports the notion of a gender hierarchy in organizations. Reskin and Ross (1992) examined the effect of gender on authority. Their survey of over 200 managers found that “women managers were concentrated low in chains of command, that they tended to supervise workers of their own sex, and that their role in decision making was primarily providing input into decisions that men made.” These results held net of education, experience, type of employer, and organizational level. In short, women managers had more narrow scope of decision-making authority. In addition, decision-making ability had a positive impact on men’s earnings—but not on women’s.

Spataro (2000) found that working with low status others results in lower performance, lower motivation levels and lower commitment. Assessing the performance of managers presents a unique set of challenges since the nature of managerial work is that it has a high degree of uncertainty. Organizational members are likely to resort to similarity as a proxy for performance, especially when viewing a team as high or low status.

When inequality is located in the individual, status differences become reinforced at the organization level. An important feature of this dynamic is that individuals need do nothing in order to enact the status differences. They exist is endemic in the social order, operate outside

the consciousness of organizational members, and generate positive affect for people. Any suggestion that causation may be properly placed at the group or system level is viewed with suspicion and as a distraction from the core issue of identifying individual actors—even as a threat to the order. One effective way to eliminate threats and to preserve the social order is, as Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (200) notes, to express negativity or hostility toward people who challenge the beliefs, values and worldviews. Ultimately, such individuals may be ostracized.

To the extent that women question or challenge (or in anticipation of such a challenge) the worldview, they become a threat to the status hierarchy. “As such, the roles that women have been taught to play and the attitudes that they have been encouraged to assume seem to signal a certain ‘second class’. This is even more important in a group setting since group members will elect a leader who seems capable of representing the best interests of the group.” (Applebaum, 2003) “...women are at highest risk of stereotypic appraisal when they form less than 15 to 25 percent of a management level. When women move in large numbers into upper management, as they are now poised to do in many professions, the evaluative norms will change.” (Applebaum, 2003) Moreover, Kolb (1997) found that women are less likely to be selected as leaders and that the same leadership behaviors are seen as more positive when displayed by males than by females.

While status alone is enough to influence perceptions, there is also evidence that women who identify strongly as female may be more likely to be viewed as rejecting the beliefs that undergird the status hierarchy. (see Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt, 2009, for a discussion of race). By contrast, men are assumed to be endorsing the prevailing hierarchy, resulting in the conferring of legitimacy. It bears repeating, however, that women need do nothing in order to trigger system-legitimizing beliefs. Their presence in high status roles is a sufficient signal that the gender hierarchy is at risk.

Backlash against Women in Authority

When women in top positions are viewed as threats to the status hierarchy, they become the targets of backlash behavior—an attempt to stigmatize the women in order to restore the validity of the hierarchy. Here, I present two perspectives that explain the nature of backlash.

Political View. Wells and Jennings (1983) argued against the notion of U.S. organizations as meritocracies, and that, instead, there are internal dynamics which act against the mobility and legitimacy of blacks in predominantly white organizations. Institutions are there to sustain the privileges of the dominant group. White entitlement, which asserts that whites have a rightful claim on the on positions of influence and resources, as well as the ability to allocate those resources, the scandalous paradox, which occurs when someone lacking social status or legal rights has authority over or receives what is perceived as more than a person who has either or both. The situation is both scandalous (ill-gotten) and paradoxical (a women in leadership). Such a situation elicits a legitimist impulse (we have to set things right), among those who experience status anxiety, which can manifest as resistance, hostility. Provides some

explanation for why females feel excluded, on the periphery or that they reach a certain threshold and then receive no further support.

Psychodynamic view. Psychodynamic approaches suggest that groups have a life which can operate largely outside the consciousness of group members. However, the instinctive forces exert a powerful influence over perception and behavior. Bion (1961) posited three basic assumptions that occupy group life. Dependency relates to the assumption that a leader exists who will gratify the group's security and safety needs. This assumption has implications for our understanding of leadership. When women occupy leadership roles, it is likely to activate the dependency basic assumption. The group may be preoccupied with its confusion (e.g. is she really the leader?), uncertainty (can she do what leaders do to keep us safe?), suspicion (she can't really be our leader; so what is she really up to?), and anxiety (what will happen if she isn't capable?).

Bowers and Jeter (2004) examined these dynamics closely for African American women leaders who were facilitating group experiences. They posit the Mammy image as an archetype (also well documented by Dumas, 1985, and other scholars) for both black and white group members, noting that group members had strong reactions when faced with a black female facilitator. In the Mammy figure/Mammy behavior instance (when the facilitator's behavior approximated the stereotypical caretaking, nurturing, reassuring behavior of the Mammy), group members tended to stay on task, were organized and reported lower levels of anxiety. In the No Mammy figure/No Mammy behavior instance (the African American female facilitator did not fit the image and who did not behave in stereotypical ways), the group tended to operate without clear leadership, with members unable or unwilling to give up their individual power. In the Mammy figure/No Mammy behavior instance (the facilitator's image fit the stereotype; but her behavior did not), the group reported high levels of anxiety, had difficulty remaining on task and was aggressive in attempting to engage the facilitator. Bowers and Jeter conclude that black female leaders may face unrealistic expectations that "inhibit these women from expressing a range of responses and behaviors that are not only appropriate but are also the same response and behaviors that are accessible to other groups in leadership roles." In short, the perception that a black female leader is not "in her place" elicit powerful, negative backlash.

Alexander (1990, following from the opening quote) notes a similar instance:

"At corporate meetings in previous positions, Mrs. Pratt was often the only minority woman—and the victim of sexual as well as racial slurs. She says she learned early in her career to develop a tough skin. As an assistant personnel director at a Midwest electronics company, she gave seminars to senior executives on sexual and racial harassment. One day, after a four-hour presentation to 20 white senior managers, one of the men, whose last name was pronounced 'coon,' stood up and said, 'Do you mean the coons can't stick together?' All the men, including her boss, broke into laughter. 'I was speechless...' She coolly ended her presentation—and later 'cried all the way home.'"

Dumas (1985) illustrates that the backlash need not come from cross-gender interactions:

[T]he first black woman superintendent of public schools in a middle-sized urban community had held the position less than three years when she became involved in a series of angry disagreements with the Board of Education. From the reports of their conflicts in the public news, I was impressed by the fact that the one board member who consistently led the confrontation was also a black woman. No other voices on the board seemed to equal hers in opposition to the superintendent's handling of the business of public education or in support of her leadership.

I suspect that the board member who levied the harsh criticisms was doing so on behalf of at least the majority of the board. She was delegated to set the stage for the embarrassment of the superintendent, and for even more drastic action in the future. I am proposing that it was not by accident that the leadership for the opposition was assumed by a black female.(p. 332)

Dumas suggests that the board member is acting on behalf the (white) majority—which is consistent with the notion that all organizational members—both men and women, and of every race—would view a woman in authority as a threat to the existing order.

Positioning Oneself for Survival

Are women then constrained to either adapt to fit stereotypical roles in order to minimize attacks—or to risk being constantly attacked? How do women respond to such attacks? Perhaps the informal roles posed by Kanter (1977) apply for women, viewed generally. Proudford and Thomas (1999) in applying the notions of women as “outsiders within” (Hill Collins, 1986) to the organizational context, suggest that women of color adopt informal roles that are in line with the status expectations. They draw similarities between women in the U.S. and women around the world, noting the comments of Latina Linda Chavez-Thompson, once an officer in the AFL-CIO:

“My own race of men thought that I was just not respectful of the fact that I was not supposed to be visible as a woman, a Latina woman....Anglo men were even less respectful. I think, for the most part, they felt I had taken their jobs or that I was in positions that should not be held, number one, by a woman, and number two, by an Hispanic woman. Their lack of respect took many forms: lack of information, lack of participation, refusal of invitations to the same places as men, to conferences or workshops.” (Henderson and Woods, 1999, p. 3)

Thomas et al (1999) indicate that “Chavez-Thompson's experience highlights the way in which women of color, despite their presence in positions which carry considerable legitimate authority, can nonetheless have their power, influence and ability to function effectively obstructed by the resistance of others. Such a dynamic makes it difficult for women of color to

directly assert their authority and places them in the awkward position of having been granted formal authority by virtue of position, only to have it discounted, usurped, or ignored, because of race and gender.”

As a result of attempting to negotiate the double consciousness (W.E.B. DuBois, 1903), bicultural life (Bell, 1990), living in two worlds, *marianismo* (Black, Stephens, & Rosener, 1992), or double tension (Gala, 1997), women of color adopt informal roles. “As our discussion of the following informal roles will illustrate, the result is that the organizational lives of managerial women of color are constructed in a way that magnifies their facilitative/emotional/social capabilities and minimizes their technical/analytical/cognitive capabilities.”

Negotiator role—Women act as intermediaries and “bridges” to facilitate interaction among multiple groups. If successful, they are often able to build a wide base of support. However, if unsuccessful, they lack a solid base and the power and influence that comes with holding leadership role in a single group.

Visible token—Women are given visibility and status because of their race and gender, rather than technical competence and merit. At best, they can be role models; at worst, they receive feedback centered around their visibility rather than skill level and competence.

Servant/Martyr—Women are confined to support roles, while men are viewed as key contributors. They may help men advance in their careers without ever receiving the support they need. The more invisible they are, the more they are valued.

Revolutionary—Woman champions the causes of the disadvantaged, unheard, and undervalued in organizations. They can be viewed as visionary or risk being ostracized as troublemakers and agitators.

Note that these roles do not stand in contradiction to the existing gender hierarchy—they reinforce it. Even the revolutionary role is akin to the “tempered radicals” notion of negotiating small wins that are, at their core, in concert with established behavior and interaction patterns. Thus, women who opt out of these informal roles in order to challenge the status relationships, e.g. take on a leadership or authority role without coupling that role with one of the informal roles discussed above, risk the type and intensity of backlash described in earlier sections. Accommodation strategies such as these can assist women in managing their career roles and moves. However, as the preceding discussion has indicated, changing or shifting the status hierarchy requires a group-level intervention. The implications of identifying, articulating and shifting the gender hierarchy exist at the organization level and would likely be addressed utilizing organizational development and change tools and methods.

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the challenges women face in asserting their authority in organizations. A conceptual framework based on the notion of status hierarchies helps us understand the authority dynamics associated with female leadership by (1) focusing on group-level factors and dynamics that shape experiences of authority, (2) explaining how authority dynamics are generated and their functional purpose, and (3) examining the intersection of gender, status and status hierarchy. In addition, the psychodynamic perspective was used to explain the intensity of responses to female authority. Going forward, organizations can ill afford to underutilize the talent of organizational members. Organizations make investments in the talent of their members, and it is ultimately to their advantage to facilitate a realization of that potential talent. As women continue making strides, this perspective has implications for practice. First, organizations can encourage members to question underlying assumptions and beliefs that sustain the status hierarchy. Second, organizations can recognize and reward both women who take on positions of authority. Lastly, organizations can identify and reward those who champion continuous examination and re-evaluation of the status hierarchy—not with an eye toward eliminating it but with an eye toward increased fluidity and mobility.

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