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Excerpt

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Introduction

The work experiences of men and women, whites and nonwhites, differ. On this much the evidence is clear. Whether these differences resolve into unmistakable patterns of privilege and deprivation involves harder questions, and here the answers are not as clear. The effects of gender and race have been investigated in some detail in labor market studies and surveys of occupational attainment and mobility; as a result, differences in such matters as average pay and aggregate career prospects that are justifiably called inequitable are well documented. But except for a handful of notable studies that I will discuss later, comparatively less systematic attention has been given to differences in experiences at the level of daily work activities. It remains to be seen whether the patterns that exist at this level parallel those that have been documented at higher levels of aggregation.

Do levels and means of access to networks of organizational influence and communication differ predictably by race and gender? Are there systematic differences in access to the authority structure? Do the differences that emerge suggest that one group is consistently favored over others? What are the implications of such inquiries for traditional theories of organization? These questions are at the center of my concern here. It is in the immediate work arena that the impersonal forces of the occupational marketplace intersect with the structure of an organization. These two sets of elements, then, provide the backdrop for the personal encounters among individuals who are, in varying degrees, active participants in the construction of their own work realities, and who are in fact likely to use whatever resources are available to them to protect or further their own occupational interests. The social relationships in which different categories of participants find themselves involved are the end products of all of these forces, and they all deserve careful investigation.

Evidence on these matters will be offered from just one kind of organizational setting. I studied six interorganizational human service networks made up of agencies that employed professional and semiprofessional practitioners such as clinical psychologists, youth counselors, and social workers. In the

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delivery of social services, such coordinated arrangements are increasingly common. But this is not a setting that is representative of the work world in general. Moreover, the numbers involved are not large. The 256 respondents include 128 white women, 71 white men, 29 nonwhite women, and 28 nonwhite men. The claims and intentions of the study are shaped to fit these limitations. The value of the results lies in what they suggest about the range of patterns that are possible and likely when different interest groups work together in organizations, and what they suggest about the types of questions that need to be asked about the causal mechanisms that create differentiation among these groups.

My primary theoretical concern has been to determine how closely the work experiences of white men, white women, nonwhite men, and nonwhite women approximate the classical rational model of organizational participation. This model is the organizational counterpart of the human capital theory of work-force participation. It posits a consistent, direct relationship between individuals' investments of time, energy, training, and talent on the one hand and the formal and informal organizational rewards they enjoy on the other. The rationalism at the center of the model characterizes both the assumed frame of mind, or motivation, with which individuals approach the workplace and the procedures by which organizations distinguish among their members.

I did not take this broad paradigm as my point of departure because I approached the study with a rationalistic bias or because I thought it generated hypotheses with a very high probability of confirmation. In fact, I began and finished the study convinced that the useful limits of such rationalistic theories are quickly reached. However, straw figures can be useful. On some crucial points, the rationalistic paradigm does offer a clear-cut set of definitions and predictions, and thus provides a kind of theoretical baseline against which empirical observations can be compared. The same cannot always be said about most other models of organizational activity, including those that I personally find more persuasive. For this reason, the idea of rationality is a pivotal concept and is given a prominent place in the discussions that follow.

Note also that it is the simultaneous effect of race and gender that are of interest, not their effects taken separately or additively. Both the logic of my arguments and the findings I present converge on one perfectly simple point: Race makes a difference for both males and females, and gender matters a great deal for both whites and nonwhites. This truism has to be stressed repeatedly because the more usual approach has been to focus on either gender or race or to add the two variables separately (usually as controls or

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suspected “contaminants”) to a statistical analysis. Both of these strategies force an artificial separation between two attributes that in fact always operate conjointly. Little progress can be expected toward understanding the impact of ascription on the workplace until the intersection of race and gender is routinely accommodated by the research designs of organizational studies.

The participants in the study supplied a wealth of information about their relationships to the unofficial structures of communication, influence, and mutual assistance that tied together the interorganizational networks of which their agencies were a part. The nature of the work undertaken by these agencies required the members to supplement their intraagency, or local, colleague ties with professional linkages that crossed agency boundaries. Practitioners concerned about their work performance could not afford to take these contacts lightly. The ways they found to gain access to these informal interagency networks are the primary focus of this study. Similar information was also collected on the participants’ relationships to the formal authority structure, so that patterns of access to the formal and the unofficial could be compared.

After a theoretical discussion in Chapter 1, the presentation of these data proceeds in the following way. First, I present a sociometric analysis of the patterns of access to the informal colleague networks (Chapter 2). Five different dimensions of interaction and consultation are examined:

1. *work contacts* (patterns of day-to-day interaction)
2. *influence* (networks of informal decision making)
3. *respect* (hierarchies of professional esteem)
4. *support* (networks of trust)
5. *assistance* (networks of professional cooperation)

Two broad questions guided this part of the investigation:

1. Did the *levels of access* to these informal networks differ markedly among the various race, gender, and race–gender categories? That is, did one category dominate these unofficial exchange structures to the exclusion of others?
2. Were the *means of gaining access* to central positions in these networks the same for each race–gender category? Here the intention was to determine the combination of variables for each category that provides the best understanding of how they found their way into the informal networks. The list of possible explanatory variables includes training, occupational identification, work assignment, experience, rank, age, and ties to the external community surrounding the workplace.

After this sociometric analysis, Chapter 3 addresses a parallel set of questions about differences in access to the formal decision-making structure, this time concentrating on reports of the nature and frequency of contact with

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supervisors and the extent of participation in the official decision-making process.

Research setting

A detailed description of the programs that provided the data for this study is given in Chapter 1; only a brief overview will be given here. The six service delivery systems included in the study were part of a national program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice, that was designed to provide community-based treatment resources for juvenile offenders. Each of the systems was a clearly bounded network of cooperating agencies brought together to serve a single community or geographic region. The guiding assumption of the overall program was that such collections of agencies with their varying perspectives, skills, and resources would allow a more flexible response to the problems of troublesome young people than either the official justice system or isolated single agencies could provide.¹

The separate agencies that were brought into a given network were bound to each other in some fairly specific ways by formal contractual arrangements; but, more importantly for their day-to-day activities, they were linked together functionally by the interpersonal ties among their members that developed across agency boundaries. Webs of professional interaction evolved around the exchanges of influence, information, professional respect, and assistance, and these emergent networks provided the mechanisms by means of which the activities of the systems were carried out.

In the sociometric analysis in Chapter 2, these systems of interpersonal exchange are treated as if they were informal hierarchies, with organization members arrayed in positions from high to low according to their degree of network centrality. For an individual, a more strategic position in one of these interagency networks meant greater access to a range of professionally important and visible interpersonal resources. Because so much of the work with clients required the attention of personnel from different agencies, the jobs of very few individuals could be performed successfully in isolation from the larger interagency system. The division of labor among agencies and occupations placed loose constraints on the kinds of interpersonal ties that evolved, but these networks are still properly called “informal” because the precise nature of the linkages that developed was not officially prescribed in any detail.² There was leeway for both contention and cooperation among individuals in gaining strategic network positions for themselves.

The examination in Chapter 3 of differences in relationships to the formal authority structure focuses on the ability of individuals to participate in the

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decision-making process and to interact to their benefit with their immediate supervisors. From the point of view of fulfilling work-role obligations, a favorable relationship to official superiors can be a significant instrumental resource, whereas isolation from this formal system of decision making can be a severe handicap for an individual.

Together, these parallel investigations of informal and formal activities give a more complete picture of how ascribed status affects internal organizational differentiation. This approach also provides an idea of the degree of “coupling” of the formal and informal structures. This is assessed by determining whether access to the informal sociometric structure responds to the same or different sets of variables as access to the formal decision-making structure, and whether the extent and manner of the coupling vary from one member group, or race–gender category, to another. Predictions about the tightness of coupling vary depending on which of three possibilities is considered most likely:

1. that formal and informal activities are different but complementary facets of a single overall complex of organizational activity;
2. that the informal structure evolves as a reaction against the formal structure;
3. that the informal structure is the actual structure, whereas the formal apparatus is largely irrelevant or epiphenomenal.

How vulnerability to formal and informal isolation differs by race and gender is an issue on which several theoretical perspectives converge. Such differences are a matter of interest for conceptions of social stratification, theories of labor market participation, and, more directly of concern here, models of organizational activity. Investigating the simultaneous impact of race and gender – as opposed to examining only one of the two or treating both simply as potential contaminants to be statistically controlled – has been largely ignored in all three of these areas. In the case of organizational theory, the oversight is especially troublesome. To be sure, not all organizations are characterized by pronounced racial or sexual differentiation. However, examining internal differentiation along race and gender lines promises to provide a better understanding of how members of different demographic categories make their way in organizations; conversely, it should also help to clarify how organizations deal with social and demographic cleavages among their work forces. Insights from the study of race and gender may suggest what to expect for other divisions such as age, nationality, ethnicity, family background, and the like. These are factors that vary greatly in the direct instrumental relationship they bear to the tasks an organization is attempting to accomplish. Yet they make a great deal of difference in the lives of the members in the larger world outside the organization, and they may break

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through organizational boundaries to influence internal dynamics in profound ways.

Preview of the findings

The data in Chapter 2 show that no ascribed status group clearly dominated any of the five informal dimensions of activity. Mean *levels* of informal centrality in the interagency networks were remarkably constant across race and gender categories. However, when it came to a comparison of *ways of gaining access* to these informal networks, some striking differences were apparent. It was only for white males that avenues of access closely resembled the classical rationalistic bureaucratic conception. With some exceptions, the informal organizational advantages they came to enjoy were a function of their bureaucratic investments, their hierarchical positions, and their work-related resources. The same could not be said for white women, nonwhite women, or nonwhite men. The experiences of the latter three groups were more likely to be linked to the nature of the clients they handled, their special ties to the surrounding community outside their programs, or their own personal, non-bureaucratic characteristics – age in particular.

What these findings indicate is that social service organizations, like others, are characterized by a complicated process of negotiation for informal work-related advantages. To use as currency in these exchanges, participants had both internal bureaucratic resources and external ties to the larger community, and quite different combinations of these internal and external investments and contributions were brought into play by white men, white women, nonwhite men, and nonwhite women.

When relationships to the formal structure are examined in Chapter 3, the pattern of equal levels of subgroup access that characterizes the informal structure is not apparent. Instead, the predominant finding is that nonwhites, especially nonwhite men, had closer relationships with the formal structure of authority than white men and white women did. Part of the explanation seems to lie in their superior ability to take advantage of their ties to the community outside the workplace. In addition to this surprising finding concerning race, the analysis revealed that the factors that seemed to work well for one group in the informal structure often turned out to be an advantage for another group in the formal structure. The indication is that tight informal–formal coupling was not characteristic of the organizations in the study. Given their level of professionalism, this may also be surprising, since professionalism can be seen as producing a comingling, or tight linkage, of informal and formal decision-making practices. To complicate the matter

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even further, in some cases factors that functioned as advantages for a group in the formal structure actually appeared as disadvantages for that same group in the informal structure. The presence of such trade-offs suggests that the organizations were “inversely coupled” rather than simply “decoupled.”

The implications that these results have for the classical stream of organizational theory are important. Narrowly conceived, the rationality principle at the heart of this body of theory suggests that the same reward allocation rules will function for all participants, and that where organizational exigencies alone are operating, ascribed factors such as race and gender will have a minimal impact on organizational functioning. The findings generally have a poor fit to this principle. The visible trappings of bureaucratic rationalism were certainly present in the organizations in the study, but patterns of daily formal and informal social relationships that actually conformed to the model were the exception and departures from the model were the rule.

It is equally important to note, however, that the results are not very handily accommodated by any one of several theoretical alternatives to the rationalistic approach. The problem is that no theory has yet incorporated a very precise or comprehensive argument about how racial and sexual differentiation – or ascription in general – affects internal organizational arrangements. The findings previously summarized illustrate what this means. Some of the patterns follow the outlines suggested by a simple model of discrimination based on differences in power, but at the same time other findings suggest that persons with supposedly disadvantageous race–gender profiles could turn their ascribed identities to good interpersonal and instrumental advantage. The results of this analysis sometimes ran directly counter to what a simple discrimination hypothesis would suggest. In the face of such contrasts, I have been very selective in the use of the words “inequity” and “discrimination” to describe the findings. Parsimony in this area of investigation is difficult, and in the present analysis it takes a combination of insights gleaned from several perspectives to make sense of the findings. At the present level of theoretical development, this is a result that may well be typical of studies that try to deal in any systematic way with the effects of race and gender – or other kinds of internal divisions – upon organizational relations.

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1. Rationality and equity in professional networks

Few would doubt that race and gender have an influence on patterns of interaction in the workplace; but, as the discussion in this chapter will show, consensus has not been reached on just how such ascribed factors affect organizational activities. Some argue that organizations are essentially even-handed in their treatment of different categories of personnel and that they do not add to the disadvantages that certain groups bear because of their location in systems of privilege and deprivation outside the organization. Others maintain that organizations duplicate and even intensify the patterns of advantage and disadvantage that exist externally. In the present investigation, the picture is further complicated because the organizations had some features that clearly worked against pronounced race and gender differences in work experiences, but other features that suggested that the competition for professional advantages and personal rewards was intense as well as uneven. I will review some of the important studies that deal with ascription in the area of work and then turn to a description of the rationalistic and nonrationalistic characteristics of the programs in the present study. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the measurement techniques and analytic strategies that were used.

Gender and race as factors in organizational stratification

The concept of rationality comes to us from Weber in several variations. It captures the shift from ascription to achievement in the allocation of positions and resources and from particularism to universalism in the evaluation of performance [cf. Parsons (1950,1966); Kalberg (1980)]. Through this set of meanings, the term “rationality” is closely identified, historically and theoretically, with the increasing reliance on complex, bureaucratized forms of organization. For Weber (1978), bureaucratic rationality was indexed by the ways in which access to formal positions and other resources were linked to expertise and by the presence of performance criteria based on the achievement of technical role obligations. From this principle of rationality, he de-

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duced that organizational practices would have a leveling effect on differences ascribed in the external society. This would be a natural consequence of the attempt to eliminate irrelevant or counterproductive considerations from the search for and utilization of talent (Gerth and Mills 1946:224ff; Weber 1978:225).

Questions about the accuracy and generalizability of this rationalist argument run throughout the organizational literature.¹ However, the idea that organizations are *in principle* universalistic and achievement oriented – or “intendedly rational,” to borrow the language of March and Simon (1958: 169ff) – is still a common assumption in theoretical discussions and is certainly part of the normative view of themselves that most organizations encourage, however vigorously they may reject the bureaucratic label. In fact, the basic elements of this thinking are not confined to discussions of business, government, and political organizations (with which classical theories were most directly concerned). They have also come to represent important questions in a wide range of other types of organizations, as elements of the bureaucratic way of doing things have found their way into more and more areas of collective activity.

In stating this, I am not overlooking the large literature on “bureaucratic” versus “professional” organizations [two particularly relevant sources are Bucher and Stelling (1969) and Lawler and Hage (1973)]. The point debated in much of this literature is whether the self-directed behavior of professionals or semiprofessionals (the latter being predominant in the present research) is compatible with the formal, rule-oriented nature of bureaucracy. Bureaucratic principles, it is insisted, do not apply where professionals are responsible for the organization’s central activities. This debate is not directly relevant in this study. “Bureaucracy” and “bureaucratic rationality” are not used here as synonyms for rigid formalization or strict centralization and discipline, but rather in the simpler (and what I take to be the more Weberian) sense of the coupling of rewards and advantages to expertise and performance. Defined in this special way, “bureaucracy” or “rationality” can be said to be the centerpiece in the image of themselves that professional organizations like to project.² In this image, the positions individuals attain and the rewards and advantages they enjoy are directly traceable to the skills, experience, and energy they bring to their work. Questions concerning the limits of these ideal principles are as relevant in professional and semiprofessional organizations as in any others.

The relationships involving gender and race under investigation here provide one way of assessing the extent to which such rationalistic claims and intentions are actually applied in practice. In a narrow reading of Weber,

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wherever rational mechanisms are fully operational, differences by race and gender in gaining access to professional and interpersonal rewards ought to be minimized. It is where rationality breaks down that particularistic and ascribed elements will find a point of entry.³ Considering the importance of this issue for organizational theory, curiously little of the existing literature has directly scrutinized the effects of ascribed characteristics on the internal allocation of system resources, rewards, and advantages. To be sure, there is ample evidence that women and nonwhites are at a disadvantage in finding their way *into* organizations and that they are disproportionately found in lower-level occupations and in positions that convey fewer rewards and less chance for individual progress (Siegel 1965; Rossi 1965; Treiman and Terrell 1975; Kluegel 1978; Treas 1978; Wolf and Fligstein 1979a). In fact, much of the research on labor market mechanisms is quite explicit about the existence of discrimination [for an excellent review of this work, see Martin (1980)]. However, what is unresolved is whether the work experiences of women and nonwhites parallel those of their male and white counterparts *within a given organizational position or at a given level of skill* – in other words, once the entry-level barriers are passed.

Some labor market studies have made use of organizational variables in attempting to explain race and gender differences in income and to account for differential access to decision-making authority (Kluegel 1978; Wolf and Fligstein 1979a,b; Halaby 1979; Grandjean 1979). These studies offer useful macroscopic generalities but little specific guidance for my purposes because they are not actually conducted in organizations. Typically, they rely on a small number of items of organizational information gathered in a sample survey [see, e.g., Wolf and Fligstein (1979a,b)], and they are unable to specify in any detail what the actual organizational practices are that would account for their findings. What is needed is a more direct look inside the organizational “black box” at the mechanisms by which individual attributes and resources, or investments, are actually translated into the daily work experiences of respondents.

Considering these mechanisms, a compelling argument is that in a culture characterized by sexism and racism, discriminatory practices must penetrate the boundaries of organizations; must, like a genetic code, be present in every part of the overall structure; and must operate even after differences in skill and credentials are taken into account. In order for this *not* to be true, there would have to be a marked disparity between the race and gender practices of organizations and what we know about patterns of ascription in the surrounding culture upon which, after all, they have to rely for their support. However, a parallel argument can be constructed that disputes the discrimi-