

## CHAPTER 2

# Expectation States Theory

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### INTRODUCTION

Women in work groups often feel that their ideas are ignored or mistakenly credited to one of their male coworkers. African Americans often say they feel that they have to perform twice as well as their white counterparts to be given the same level of recognition. The ideas of people who talk more in a group are often judged to be more valuable than those offered by less talkative members. People with more prestigious jobs are more likely to be chosen leader of a group, such as a jury, even when their job has little, if anything, to do with the task at hand. Women are more likely than men in a group to be interrupted. Ideas often “sound better” when offered by someone perceived to be attractive.

What all of these observations have in common is that some members of a group seem to have real advantages that are denied to others. They have more opportunities to speak, their ideas are taken more seriously, and they have more influence over other group members. In expectation states theory these hierarchies of evaluation, influence, and participation are referred to as the “power and prestige structure” or the “status structure” of the group. The theory seeks to explain how these inequitable structures emerge and are maintained, and how they are related to other aspects of inequality in society.

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## HISTORY

Expectation states theory began as an effort to explain some of the most striking findings of Robert F. Bales' (1950) influential early studies of interpersonal behavior in small groups (Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974; Berger & Zelditch, 1998, pp. 97–113).

Bales (1950, 1970) recorded the interactions of homogeneous, initially leaderless decision-making groups of three to seven unacquainted Harvard sophomore males over multiple hour-long sessions. Despite the initial lack of group structure and the social similarities of the members, inequalities in interaction developed quickly, stabilized over the first session, and then guided interaction thereafter. If inequalities emerge quickly in unstructured groups of social equals, Bales (1950) reasoned, status hierarchies are very likely in any group.

The inequalities Bales observed consisted of four correlated behaviors: participation initiated, opportunities given to participate, evaluations received, and influence over others. Bales (1970) found, for instance, that groups developed a most talkative member who talked considerably more than the others in the group. This most talkative person was also the one addressed most often by the others. The more a person talked, compared to the others, the more likely he was to be rated by others as having the best ideas and doing the most to guide and influence the group. The founders of expectation states theory, Joseph Berger, Bernard Cohen, Morris Zelditch, and colleagues, sought to explain why these correlated inequalities, labeled the group's "power and prestige" (i.e., status) structure, emerge together and how this happens even in a group of social equals.

Berger and his colleagues were also influenced by two additional sets of early studies. One set demonstrated the power of status structures, once formed, to bias group members' evaluations of each other and their behavior in the group. Riecken (1958) showed that the same idea was rated as more valuable when it came from a talkative group member than from a less talkative one. Sherif, White, and Harvey (1955) demonstrated that group members overestimate the performance of high status members and underestimate the performance of low status members. Whyte (1943), in his classic study of a street corner gang, showed that group members actually pressured one another to perform better or worse to keep their performances in line with their status in the group.

Another influential set of early studies demonstrated that when members of a goal-oriented group differed in socially significant ways, the interactional status structures that emerged tended to reflect the social status attached to each member's distinguishing characteristics. Strodbeck, James, and Hawkins (1957), for instance, found that mock jury members' occupational status and gender predicted how active and influential they became, how competent and helpful they were judged to be by others, and how likely they were to be chosen foreman of the jury. Yet, the question left unanswered was *how* this occurred.

These studies encouraged Berger and his colleagues to formulate expectation states theory as a theory of an underlying process that (1) accounts for the formation of interactional status structures and (2) can explain *how* these structures develop both in groups of social equals and in groups where people differ in socially significant ways (Berger et al., 1974; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Berger & Zelditch, 1998). The way people's socially significant characteristics, such as race, gender, occupation, or age, shape their access to participation, influence, and positive evaluation is an important aspect of social stratification in society. As a consequence, although expectation states theory began by explaining status structures in homogeneous groups, its explanation of status structures among people with significant social differences has become the most highly developed and commonly used aspect of the theory.

## AN OVERVIEW OF EXPECTATION STATES THEORY

Expectation states theory seeks to explain the emergence of status hierarchies in situations where actors are oriented toward the accomplishment of a collective goal or task. *Collective orientation* and *task orientation* are the scope conditions of the theory (i.e., the conditions under which the theory is argued to hold). Individuals are task oriented when they are primarily motivated towards solving a problem, and they are collectively orientated when they consider it legitimate and necessary to take into account each other's contributions when completing the task.

While not all groups have collective task orientations, groups that do are a part of everyday experiences in socially important settings such as work and school. Informal work groups, committees, sports teams, juries, student project groups, explicitly established work teams, and advisory panels are just a few examples. By contrast, people talking at a party or a group of friends having dinner generally lack these orientations and, therefore fall outside of the theory's scope.

The shared focus of group members on the group's goal (i.e., the collective orientation) generates a pressure to anticipate the relative quality of each member's contribution to completing the task in order to decide how to act. When members of the group, for whatever reason, anticipate that a specific individual will make more valuable contributions, they will likely defer more to this individual and give her or him more opportunities to participate. These implicit, often unconscious, anticipations of the relative quality of individual members' future performance at the focal task are referred to as *performance expectation states*.

Once developed, performance expectation states (hereafter, "performance expectations") shape behavior in a self-fulfilling fashion. The greater the performance expectation of one actor compared to another, the more likely the first actor will be given chances to perform in the group, the more likely she or he will be to speak up and offer task suggestions, the more likely her or his suggestions will be positively evaluated and the less likely she or he will be to be influenced when there are disagreements. The actor with the lower performance expectations, by contrast, will be given fewer opportunities to perform, will speak less and in a more hesitant fashion, will frequently have his or her contributions ignored or poorly evaluated, and will be more influenced when disagreements occur. In this way, relative performance expectations create and maintain a hierarchy of participation, evaluation, and influence among the actors that constitutes the group's status hierarchy, as depicted on the right side of Figure 2-1.

Given the importance of relative performance expectations for the formation of status hierarchies, it is crucial to specify how social factors influence the formation of the performance expectations themselves. As shown on the left side of Figure 2-1, expectation states theory posits three distinct processes. These involve: (1) socially significant characteristics (e.g., race, gender,

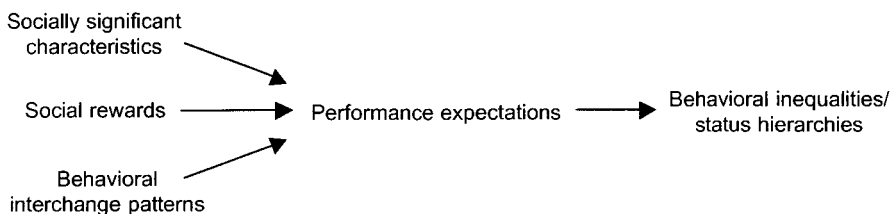


FIGURE 2-1. The formation of performance expectations and status hierarchies.



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