The Gender System and Interaction
Author(s): Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Lynn Smith-Lovin
Published by: Annual Reviews
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/223503

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
THE GENDER SYSTEM AND INTERACTION

Cecilia L. Ridgeway
Department of Sociology, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-2047; e-mail: ridgeway@leland.stanford.edu

Lynn Smith-Lovin
Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona 85721; e-mail: smithlov@u.arizona.edu

KEY WORDS: sex differences, social behavior, social status, identity, social networks

ABSTRACT

The gender system includes processes that both define males and females as different in socially significant ways and justify inequality on the basis of that difference. Gender is different from other forms of social inequality in that men and women interact extensively within families and households and in other role relations. This high rate of contact between men and women raises important questions about how interaction creates experiences that confirm, or potentially could undermine, the beliefs about gender difference and inequality that underlie the gender system. Any theory of gender difference and inequality must accommodate three basic findings from research on interaction. (a). People perceive gender differences to be pervasive in interaction. (b). Studies of interaction among peers with equal power and status show few gender differences in behavior. (c). Most interactions between men and women occur in the structural context of roles or status relationships that are unequal. These status and power differences create very real interaction effects, which are often confounded with gender. Beliefs about gender difference combine with structurally unequal relationships to perpetuate status beliefs, leading men and women to recreate the gender system in everyday interaction. Only peer interactions that are not driven by cultural beliefs about the general competence of men and women or interactions in which women are status- or power-advantaged over men are likely to undermine the gender system.
INTRODUCTION

Gender is a system of social practices within society that constitutes people as different in socially significant ways and organizes relations of inequality on the basis of the difference (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin 1999). The continued, everyday acceptance of the gender system requires that both people’s experiences and widely shared cultural beliefs confirm for them that men and women are sufficiently different in ways that justify men’s greater power and privilege. In this, gender is similar to other systems of difference and inequality such as race and class. Gender is distinctive, however, in that its constitutive cultural beliefs and confirmatory experiences must be sustained in the context of constant interaction, often on familiar terms, between those advantaged and disadvantaged by the system. As a consequence, events at the interactional level have a special potency for the gender system. As interactional events enact gender relations over diverse contexts, they confirm or undermine gender beliefs. Thus, interaction plays an important role in sustaining or modifying the gender system as a whole in the face of continually changing material and social structural conditions (Ridgeway 1997).

There are several reasons why men and women interact frequently compared to people on opposite sides of class and race divides. Because whom you interact with is partly determined by who is available, the fact that gender divides people into two equal-sized groups creates the maximum structural likelihood of cross-gender contact for both sexes (Blau & Schwartz 1984). Sexual behavior and reproduction also increase the rate of contact between men and women. In addition, gender crosscuts kin. Most people interact with other-sex family members such as parents, siblings, or children.

The frequent rate of contact between men and women not only makes interaction a powerful arena in the gender system; it also affects the basic rules that people use to frame interaction itself (West & Zimmerman 1987, Ridgeway 1997). Interacting with another requires at least a minimal cultural definition of who self and other are. Perhaps because it is a simple, fast, habitually used cultural dichotomy, research shows that people automatically sex categorize (i.e. label as female or male) any concrete other with whom they interact, even when other definitions, such as teacher-student, are available (Brewer & Lui 1989). This may seem “natural,” but ethnomethodologists have shown that sex categorization in everyday interaction is a thoroughly social process. It relies on cues of appearance and behavior that are culturally presumed to stand for physical sex differences (Kessler & McKenna 1978, West & Zimmerman 1987). Sex category is one of only two or three “primary” social categories constituted in our culture as essential to make another sufficiently sensible in relation to self so that interaction can proceed (Brewer & Lui 1989).
Although gender is deeply involved in the fundamental organization of interaction, people are many things in interaction in addition to their sex. Dichotomous sex categories make simple orienting frames, but by the same token they are too diffuse to define behavior adequately in most contexts. People also classify self and other in additional and more situationally specific ways, including age, ethnicity, and institutional role. As additional categorizations occur, research shows that they are cognitively nested within the fundamental understanding of the person as male or female (Brewer & Lui 1989, Stangor et al 1992). As a result, the interactional conduct of gender is always enmeshed in other identities and activities. It cannot be observed in a pure, unentangled form. Gender is a background identity that modifies other identities that are often more salient in the setting than it is.

If gender is a background identity that is interactionally present but enmeshed with other identities, how are culturally shared beliefs about the typical natures, differences, and inequality of men and women produced and reproduced in peoples’ experiences? The answer is likely to lie in repeating patterns of associations across interactional contexts between the background identity of male or female and a diversity of situationally specific positions of equality or inequality. To the extent that such repeating patterns of association occur between sex category and interactional power and prestige, they are likely to facilitate shared understandings of men and women as different and unequal. They also reinforce gender as a fundamental personal identity for individuals and structure its meaning for them.

Two factors are likely to shape the patterns of association that occur in interaction between sex category and situational power and prestige. The structural contexts in which cross-sex and same-sex contact occur may interactionally advantage one sex more often than the other. In addition, cultural gender beliefs and identities, themselves a product of interactional patterns, are likely to shape the way actors organize their interactions within the constraints of their structural context.

As this suggests, we see cultural beliefs about gender difference and inequality and corresponding gender identities as both products and producers of the gender organization of interaction. We see a similarly reciprocal relation between the structural contexts in which men and women come together and their gender beliefs and identities: Beliefs and identities affect the network contacts that men and women seek and, thus, the structural contexts in which they meet.

These assumptions guide the organization of our review. First, we examine network studies because they offer us a picture of the typical patterns of interaction between men and women. They also offer a description of the structural contexts in which interaction creates stable network ties and the role relationships in which these interactions are embedded. Then we turn to the gender or-
ganization of interaction itself, focusing on the impact of formal positional differences, of cultural beliefs about gender status, and of gender identity processes. We shift then to examine how unequal interaction mediates cultural beliefs about gender and how interaction processes affect network contacts and structures.

NETWORKS OF MALE-FEMALE INTERACTION

Although men and women interact frequently, only a minority of these interactions occur between men and women who, except for gender, are otherwise peers in the power and status associated with their social roles and positions. Researchers find that gender homophily, the tendency for network connections to be same-sex rather than cross-sex, begins virtually as soon as children are able to choose their playmates (Block 1979, Lever 1978, Eder & Hallinan 1978). Since this homophily occurs at about the same time that children develop the knowledge that sex is a permanent personal characteristic, it is probably shaped by identity processes (Kohlberg 1974, Block 1979). The implications of this childhood division may be profound. Networks and knowledge co-evolve, with network connections creating shared knowledge which, in turn, increases the propensity to interact (Carley 1986, 1991). The common activities that occur in childhood play groups create gendered knowledge, which strengthens the perception of gender differences and erodes the common ground upon which intimate, status-equal friendship relationships between males and females must be based. Researchers have argued that these gendered subcultures increase the potential for misunderstanding between men and women (Maltz & Borker 1982, Tannen 1990).

Although peer friendship relations remain gender homophilous into adulthood, there are many similarities in men’s and women’s networks. Adult women and men have discussion networks of about the same size (Fischer 1982, Marsden 1987); young, unmarried men and women, in particular, have very similar patterns of interaction. Marriage and childbearing introduce subtle changes in networks, however, because of the gendered nature of family life. Wellman (1985) found that childbearing significantly reduced cross-sex contacts for women, drawing them into a female world of play groups and school activities. Women typically have a higher proportion of contacts with kin and neighbors than men (Fischer & Oliker 1983, Marsden 1987); although men get drawn into a more family-oriented female kinship network with the birth of a new child, this family embeddedness fades as the child ages (Munch et al 1997).

Women are much more likely to know friends through their husband’s work ties than men are to know their wives’ work friends (Fischer & Oliker 1983). Aldrich (1989) suggests that women are more supportive of their husbands’
networks than husbands are of their wives'. Structural factors also may be at work. Women are more likely to move with their husbands’ work opportunities than men are to move with their wives’ job changes. In a study of recent job changers in four white-collar occupations, Campbell (1988) found that children and geographic mobility had a much bigger impact on women’s networks than on men’s. Women’s network ties to co-workers shrank in response to having young children and to moving because of their spouse’s job. When the women in Campbell’s study moved because of their husband’s career opportunities, the diversity of their networks also decreased.

Voluntary group activities help create and reinforce the gender segregation of interaction. Voluntary activities create a highly sex-segregated environment for social interaction: Half of all groups are exclusively female and one fifth are all male (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1986). Women are more likely to belong to small groups organized around social and religious activities, whereas men belong to more large, work-oriented groups (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1982). Far from providing a venue where men and women meet as informal peers, interactions within the voluntary sector tend to reinforce gender segregation in society overall (Marsden 1988, 1990). The typical female voluntary association membership generates face-to-face contacts with 29 other members, fewer than 4 of whom are men. The typical men’s membership produces contacts with 37 other members, 8 of whom are women (because men’s organizations are larger and more likely to be gender integrated) (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1986).

The picture that emerges from the research about social networks is one in which women seldom meet men in status-equal, role-similar interactions (Smith-Lovin & McPherson 1993). Beginning in childhood, much interaction is gender homophilous. Boys and girls develop in gendered subcultures surrounding play activities and, after a brief period of greater interaction as young, unmarried adults, move into highly differentiated adult worlds. Women interact with other women in child-centered or neighborhood settings, keep religious and kinship contacts alive through regular maintenance, and share intimate friendships with other women. Men interact with a wider range of people, including some women, in the context of larger, more heterogeneous groups. The men are drawn temporarily into kinship ties with the birth of a child, but those contacts fade in importance as the child ages and the nuclear family reasserts itself as the primary basis of men’s intimacy and social support.

Men and women meet each other in contexts where institutional roles heavily structure their interaction. Kinship, work, and couple-oriented social events are the primary settings for these interactions. When a woman talks with a man, she is most likely to do so as a mother, a wife, a daughter, an employee, a purchaser of services, or perhaps as the wife of his male friend. Contacts between men and women are most likely to occur in large political or business-
related associations (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1986), where men are more likely to hold higher status positions.

Women’s networks are more likely than men’s to be densely interconnected because of the kinship structures and small groups in which they are generated; the people with whom women interact are more likely to know one another well while the people to whom men are tied are more likely to be disconnected from one another. Therefore, women are less likely to experience the autonomy that comes from conflicting or disconnected affiliations. In a sense, women’s social worlds are more like a small town, where everyone knows everyone else, while men’s are based in a wider variety of disconnected institutional spheres. Men get diverse information from their larger numbers of weak ties (Granovetter 1973, Lin 1999) and have more opportunities to generate power through exclusivity of exchange relations (Molm & Cook 1995) or through brokerage opportunities (Burt 1992).

One special case where we have a great deal of information about the patterns and character of contacts between men and women is the workplace. There are a wealth of studies exploring the social capital that white-collar, managerial-level workers accumulate and its effects on their career advancement. The sex-segregated nature of work creates a biased opportunity structure for work interaction between men and women. Women are found in different, often less attractive, jobs than men (Reskin 1993); this segregation is especially strong at the firm level where workers actually interact (Bielby & Baron 1986). This means that although men and women may interact in the workplace, most of their interactions will be cross-occupation (e.g. nurses with doctors, secretaries with managers), with men occupying the higher paying, higher authority position (South et al 1982).

In the relatively rare instances where men and women are in similar occupations, jobs, and hierarchical levels, they have surprisingly similar networks. In particular, they are equally likely to hold central positions in informal organizational networks (Brass 1985, Miller 1986, Ibarra 1992) and to have similar personal networks (Aldrich et al 1989, Moore 1990, Burt 1992). But since women are much rarer at the higher ranks in most occupations and organizations, organizational demography constrains the pool of potential network contacts that are both gender homophilous and high status for most women workers (Ibarra 1992). High-status women can have supportive contacts with highly placed people (mostly male) or with other women (mostly lower status than themselves), but not both simultaneously (Ibarra 1997).

These subtle network pressures on women in high status positions lead to some interesting differences in the ability of women to translate network characteristics into career advancement. Men are more able to translate educational attainment and external professional contacts into central positions in informal organizational networks (Ibarra 1992, Miller 1986). Furthermore, men are bet-
ter able to use some network structures to their advantage. Burt (1992) found that men’s mobility was enhanced by ties to people who were not directly connected to one another (i.e. bridging ties that crossed structural holes in the network). Women, on the other hand, needed strong ties to strategic partners in the organization to advance quickly. Ibarra (1997) also found that fast-track men advanced most quickly when their networks bridged structural holes, while fast-track women built networks that were higher in both tie strength and range of contacts within and outside the organization. These organizational network findings confirm Granovetter’s (1983, 1985) conclusion that weak ties are less advantageous for people in insecure positions, whether economically or socially. Women’s lower status and legitimacy in the managerial world means that they need strong ties to sponsors and mentors that allow them to “borrow” social capital (to use Burt’s economic language). Men can use the information and structural power that comes from weak, bridging ties, because they do not have the legitimacy problems that women face.

In sum, the literature on work networks tells us two important things. First, managerial women (or women in blue-collar jobs traditionally dominated by men) are less likely than similar men to have ties with same-sex others who are in their same position or who are just above them in the hierarchy. Therefore, they will find it more difficult to find role models or sources of information about how to handle the special problems that they may experience either because of work-family conflicts or because of their less legitimated token status (Ibarra 1996). To have gender-homophilous ties, women must have networks that range further outside their own organization (Ibarra 1992, 1997) or outside their own hierarchical level within the organization. Second, the legitimacy problems that women face lead networks to work differently for them. Close ties to a superior who can sponsor them are more important for women; these ties are often with a man, given the organizational demography of managerial positions. Although these male mentors may not provide solutions to the special problems that women face, they do offer connections that confer status and opportunity.

THE OVERDETERMINED NATURE OF INEQUALITY IN MALE-FEMALE INTERACTION

**Gender and Positions of Authority**

Network studies show that cross-sex interaction is usually embedded in unequal, institutionalized role relationships. Women are most frequently in the low status position (e.g., mentor and protégé, boss and secretary). Even when women and men appear to occupy the same status position, differences in their legitimacy and the ways in which informal networks work for them may produce interactional effects that have far-reaching implications.
Since cognitive sex categorization makes gender a background identity for actors in these encounters, they experience men in more powerful roles, behaving assertively and agentically, while women act in a more supportive manner in their less powerful roles. Eagly’s (1987, Eagly & Steffen 1984, Eagly & Wood 1991) role theory of gender differences argues that stereotypic beliefs about the agentic versus communal traits of men and women derive from this gendered division of labor. Powerful, high-status roles are disproportionately played by men in society and homemaker roles are played almost entirely by women. The gendered division of labor in society also gives men and women different experiences from which they may acquire different skills and interests.

Role theory argues that interactional behavior is shaped by the most salient role in a setting. In most contexts this is an institutional role such as a job. Thus, role theory predicts that men and women will act similarly in similar formal roles. Gender roles are a primary determinant of behavior only when they are salient in the situation or other roles are ambiguous. When gender roles are salient, stereotypic expectations for agency and communion create gender differences in behavior.

Are the structural constraints of position the primary source of men and women’s behavior in unequal formal roles, as role theory predicts, or is behavior strongly shaped by individuals’ gendered skills and traits? If gendered traits play a large role, they would affect the selection of men and women into powerful versus subordinate roles as well as the way that they act in those roles.

The evidence clearly supports the importance of structural constraints independent of gendered traits. In positions of similar formal authority, few differences appear between men and women in the way they interact with either same- or other-sex subordinates. Johnson (1994) randomly assigned men and women to positions of authority in same- and mixed-sex contexts. She found no gender differences in their managerial behavior. In an extensive meta-analysis of leadership studies, Eagly & Johnson (1990) similarly found no differences in how task directed male and female leaders acted and only very slight differences (effect size $d = 0.04$) in how interpersonally oriented they were.

In a familial context, positions of power or role also shape men and women’s behavior in similar ways. In a study of heterosexual and homosexual couples, Kollock et al (1985) showed that the member a couple rated as more powerful in shared decisions generally talked more and interrupted the partner more than the less powerful member did, regardless of sex or sex of partner. Risman (1998) reports that men cast in the position of primary caretaker for a child adapt to behave similarly to women who mother.

On the other hand, gender-atypical occupants of power positions are sometimes perceived by others as less legitimate in such roles. Problems of legiti-
macy can make it more difficult for women in positions of power to exercise directive power or dominance compared to men in equivalent positions (Butler & Geis 1990, Kanter 1977, Ridgeway & Berger 1986). Eagly et al (1992) found only a slight overall tendency for male leaders to be evaluated more favorably than female leaders in a meta-analytic study. But when leaders behaved in a directive, autocratic style, there was a moderate-sized tendency \( (d = 0.30) \) for women to be evaluated more negatively than men. Perhaps in reaction to such legitimacy pressures, meta-analysis indicates a small tendency \( (d = 0.22) \) for women leaders to be more democratic and participatory than men. Such legitimacy problems suggest that there is a prescriptive edge to expectations created by gender beliefs (Fiske & Stevens 1993). Perhaps this is not surprising given the pressures of maintaining beliefs about difference and inequality in the context of frequent interaction.

The frequency of such power stratified encounters between men and women encourages cultural beliefs about gender differences (Eagly & Steffen 1984). Yet formally stratified roles are not the only factor that produces gender difference and inequality in interaction. Men and women do encounter one another as formal role peers in important contexts, such as educational institutions, some jobs, and romantic contexts. People also have considerable contact with same-sex peers. Widely shared evaluative or status beliefs about gender and people’s gendered identities have their strongest impact on behavior in these less formally stratified interactional contexts. These factors, too, play a critical role in the enactment of difference and inequality.

Differences in legitimacy in work positions mean that even men and women who hold structurally equivalent formal positions are actually operating in different social contexts. Ibarra (1997) has noted that women’s lack of legitimacy in managerial roles (especially in dealing with clients outside the firm) can limit the usefulness of role-modeling from men who act as their mentors.

**Gender Status and Behavior in Interaction**

One of the major accounts of gender inequality among formal peers derives from expectation states theory (Berger et al 1977, Carli 1991, Ridgeway 1993, Wagner & Berger 1997). Eagly’s (1987) role theory makes predictions about such settings that are similar to, although less detailed than, those of expectation states theory. Space limitations prevent us from describing them as well (for a comparison of the theories, see Aries 1996, Ridgeway & Diekema 1992).

Expectation states theory argues that actors use cultural beliefs about the status implications of their distinguishing characteristics to organize their interaction in goal-oriented settings (Berger et al 1977). Gender is a status char-
acteristic in many countries in that beliefs that associate higher status and competence with men than with women are widely held (Broverman et al 1972, Williams & Best 1990). As Foschi and colleagues (1994) argue, recent social changes may be weakening gender status beliefs in the United States, especially among college students. Most current research, however, continues to find evidence of gender status effects.

Expectation states theory claims that gender becomes salient in a setting when it either differentiates the actors (a mixed-sex context) or is culturally linked to the task at hand. When gender is salient, gender status beliefs shape the expectations actors form for the competence of men and women in the setting. These often unconscious performance expectations shape behavior in a self-fulfilling way. They affect the likelihood that a man, compared to a woman, will speak up and make suggestions to the group and that others will respond positively to those suggestions, ask for the person’s opinions, and accept influence from the person. In this way, performance expectations, shaped by gender status beliefs, create a power and prestige order among men and women in the setting (Lockheed 1985, Wagner & Berger 1997, Wood & Karten 1986).

In mixed sex groups, then, the theory predicts that men will be more influential, participate more, be more assertive, and be less inclined to agree than similar women. When the task or setting is stereotypically masculine (e.g., car repair), gender’s direct relevance to the setting will exaggerate these behavioral differences, increasing men’s power and prestige advantage over women. When the task is stereotypically feminine (e.g., child care), the theory predicts that women will have a slight power and prestige advantage over men. In same-sex groups, on the other hand, gender status will not be salient unless the task is gender typed. As a result, men’s and women’s participation and assertive, task-oriented behavior should be similar in same-sex groups with a gender-neutral task.

These predictions hold for men and women who are otherwise equals. When other status characteristics (e.g., education, valued skills, occupation, ethnicity) are salient in the situation as well as gender, the theory argues that actors combine the implications of each, weighted by its relevance to the situational goal, to form aggregated performance expectations for each actor compared to another. In some situations, more relevant status characteristics may outweigh the effect of gender status. According to expectation states, then, although sex categorization may occur in all interactions, the impact of gender status on behavior varies greatly. It depends on the salience of gender status beliefs in the situation and their relevance to the task at hand, compared to other status information that is also salient.

Expectation states theory provides a good account of the gender organization of behaviors that are task directed or enact a power and prestige hierarchy. These include participation, influence, emergent leadership, assertive gestures
and gaze, and tentative speech. With the exception of agreement, which is part of the influence process, the theory does not address the supportive, socioemotional aspects of interaction. We review research and associated explanations of socioemotional behavior after a consideration of power and prestige behaviors.

PARTICIPATION, INFLUENCE, AND LEADERSHIP Several studies show that, other things being equal, men in mixed sex groups talk more (James & Drakich 1993, Dovidio et al 1988), make more task suggestions (Wood & Karten 1986), are more influential (Pugh & Wahrman 1983, Lockheed 1985, Wagner et al 1986; but see Stewart 1988), and are more likely to be selected leader than are women (Eagly & Karau 1991, Fleischer & Chertoff 1986, Nyquist & Spence 1986, Wentworth & Anderson 1984). Yet in same-sex groups no differences appear between men and women in participation, task suggestions (Carli 1991, Johnson et al 1996, Wagner & Berger 1997), or willingness to accept influence from others (Pugh & Wahrman 1983). Wood & Karten (1986) demonstrated that men’s tendency to speak more and engage in more active task behaviors in mixed sex discussions was mediated by status-based assumptions that the men were more competent. When performance expectations for men and women in the situation were equalized, gender differences in behavior disappeared.

In a meta-analytic study of emergent leadership in mixed sex contexts, Eagly & Karau (1991) found that the overall tendency for men to become leaders rather than women varied with the gender typing of the leadership and task. As expectation states theory predicts, the likelihood that men became leaders was especially high when the task was culturally masculine, moderate when the task was gender neutral, and low or negative when the task was culturally feminine or leadership was social in nature. Several studies have shown that gender differences in leadership disappear or favor women in mixed sex groups when the task turns to one favoring the interests and expected competence of women (Dovidio et al 1988, Wentworth & Anderson 1984, Yamada et al 1983).

The gender organization of assertive versus deferential gestures and speech shows a similar pattern. There are gender differences that favor men in mixed sex interaction but these interact with the gender typing of the task or setting, giving men a stronger advantage in masculine tasks and a weak disadvantage in feminine tasks. In same-sex groups there are few differences between men’s and women’s assertive gestures and speech.

GAZE AND GESTURES A large body of research on gaze, reviewed by Ellyson et al (1992), indicates that, other factors being equal, men show more visual dominance in mixed sex interaction than do women. Visual dominance is a
pattern of looking at the other more while speaking than while listening. It is associated with perceived competence and influence. In same-sex groups men and women differ little in visual dominance. They both show similarly greater visual dominance when in high-status rather than low-status positions in the interaction (Ellyson et al 1992).

The relevance of gender to the setting affects gaze and gestures as well. Dovidio et al (1998) found that when mixed sex dyads turned from a gender neutral task to a masculine task, men’s greater visual dominance and rate of gesturing became exaggerated, but when the dyad shifted to discuss a feminine task, women displayed more visual dominance and gestured more than men. These shifts in gaze and gesture patterns accompanied corresponding changes in participation rates and speech initiations, indicating changes in the behavioral power and prestige orders of the dyads.

TENTATIVE SPEECH Lakoff (1975) has suggested that women, due to their lower status, use more tentative, deferential speech forms, especially with men, and that these forms make the speaker appear less convincing. Studies do show that women are more likely to use tag questions (Brouwer et al 1979, Crosby & Nyquist 1977, Eakins & Eakins 1978, McMillan et al 1977), hedges, and disclaimers (Bradley 1981, Crosby & Nyquist 1977, Eakins & Eakins 1978), and hypercorrect, “superpolite” grammatical constructions (Crosby & Nyquist 1977, Lakoff 1975, McMillan et al 1977). Although tag questions may convey uncertainty in task-oriented contexts, subsequent studies show that they may also be used to support the speech of another (see Aries 1996 for a review).

Maltz & Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990) have argued that women learn more supportive, less dominance oriented speech styles in childhood peer groups that are sex segregated. In mixed sex contexts, according to this view, women’s more supportive speech style is misinterpreted as tentative and deferential. This “gendered subcultures” argument, in contrast to that of Lakoff (1975) and expectation states theory, predicts greater gender differences in tentative speech forms between men and women in same-sex groups than in mixed sex groups. In task directed settings, however, research does not support this prediction. In a well designed study, Carli (1990) has shown that women use more hedges, disclaimers, and tag questions than similar men in mixed sex task discussion, but there are no gender differences in these speech forms in same-sex discussions.

INTERUPTIONS In an influential early study, Zimmerman & West (1975) reported that whereas interruptions are rare in same-sex contexts, men interrupt women in mixed-sex interaction as an assertion of power over the conversation. More powerful actors do tend to interrupt more (Drass 1986, Kollock et al
GENDER AND INTERACTION 203

1985, Roger & Nesshoever 1987, Roger & Schumaker 1983). As subsequent evidence has accumulated, however, it is less clear that there are gender differences in overall interruption rates (James & Clarke 1993). The matter is complicated by the fact that some interruptions express active listenership rather than disrupt the other’s speech. The evidence suggests that men more often disruptively interrupt women than other men, whereas women do not discriminate in whom they interrupt (Smith-Lovin & Brody 1989).

CREDIT FOR PERFORMANCE In addition to shaping patterns of participation, influence, gaze, and tentative versus assertive speech, scholars have shown that the activation of gender status beliefs in mixed sex interaction can affect the credit women receive for their performances compared to similar men. Gender status beliefs evoke double standards for judging competence, so that a performance of the same quality is seen as less indicative of ability in a woman than a man (Biernat & Kobrynowicz 1997, Foschi 1996). Similarly, LaFrance et al (1997) show that women’s actions in mixed-sex pairs are depicted in less causal language than men’s actions are.

COUNTERVEILING EVIDENCE There is one set of evidence that contradicts the broad pattern of support for gender status as the primary cause of gender differences in assertive, task directed behaviors and influence among formal peers. These are studies that use Bales’ (1970) Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) to code the percentages of each person’s behavior in an encounter that are task-oriented and instrumental versus supportive and socioemotional. Such studies generally find that men in task groups have higher percentages of task behavior and women have somewhat higher percentages of socioemotional behavior. In conflict with the expectation states account, these differences are marginally larger between men and women in same-sex groups than in mixed sex groups (Anderson & Blanchard 1982, Carli 1989, Piliavin & Martin 1978, Strodtbeck & Mann 1956).

As several scholars point out, however, the contradiction is an artifact of the IPA coding scheme (Aries 1996, Carli 1991, Wheelan & Verdi 1992). IPA records relative percentages rather than absolute numbers of task-directed behaviors and classifies as socioemotional all acts that contain any socioemotional element. Thus, a task suggestion accompanied by a smile or laugh is coded as a socioemotional behavior. In fact, studies show no differences in the total number of task behaviors that men and women produce in same-sex groups (Johnson et al 1996, Wagner & Berger 1997).

SOCIOEMOTIONAL BEHAVIOR The likely explanation for the IPA results is that women display more socioemotional behaviors than men, especially in same-sex groups. Research shows that women use verbal forms that support the speech of others more than men and engage in more backchanneling (i.e.,
simultaneous speech that supports the other’s speech) (Eakins & Eakins 1978, Johnson et al 1996, McLaughlin et al 1981). Women also use more expressive intensifiers than men (Carli 1990) and are nonverbally warmer (Hall 1984, Wood & Rhodes 1992). These gender differences are often strongest in same-sex groups (Carli 1990).

Women’s higher rate of socioemotional behaviors in interaction is attributed to several sources. When gender status is salient (in mixed-sex or gender-relevant settings), women face legitimacy problems when they seek to be highly influential. Accompanying their assertive efforts with socioemotional “softeners” assuages resistance and increases their influence in the group, as research shows (Carli 1990, Carli et al 1995, Ridgeway 1982, Shackleford et al 1996). Also, simply being in a lower status position casts a person, regardless of sex, in a supportive, agreeing role (Gerber 1996).

Status factors alone, however, do not explain women’s increased socioemotional behaviors in female groups. In a modification of the gendered subcultures argument, Carli (1990) suggests that people have gendered schemas for socioemotional behavior in same-sex interaction. Whether or not this is the case, it appears that people signal or mark gender identity and, thus, gender difference across interaction contexts primarily through behaviors in the socioemotional realm. It is interesting that the identity marked by socioemotional behavior is female or not: Adding socioemotional behaviors is distinctively female, but a socioemotionally neutral style is not definitively male. As linguists note, it is the exception to the dominant form that is marked in language (e.g., woman doctor).

In sum, gender status beliefs become salient in mixed sex or gender relevant situations and create unequal competence expectations for similar men and women. These expectations organize a broad array of assertive, goal-oriented behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, creating a gender hierarchy of influence and esteem among the actors. Men’s advantage in this behavioral hierarchy is moderate in gender-neutral settings but becomes stronger when the task is masculine typed. When the task is culturally feminine, women have a slight advantage over men in the behavioral hierarchy. Because gender status combines with other salient status distinctions to affect behavior, gender status effects can be overwhelmed by other, counteracting status characteristics (e.g., woman computer whiz) that are more relevant in the situation than gender is.

The evidence shows that gender inequality in male-female interaction is created primarily by situational factors. These include unequal formal roles and salient gender status beliefs. As a result, behavioral difference and inequality are quite sensitive to changes in the structure of situations and vary across contexts. A general pattern of inequality in male-female interaction only occurs because it is overdetermined by situational factors. Gender status beliefs support the assignment and enactment of unequal formal roles between
men and women. Unequal roles, in turn, create interactional experiences that sustain status beliefs. Status beliefs themselves import inequality into interactions between men and women who are formal peers.

Cultural gender beliefs imply difference as well as inequality. Across mixed- and same-sex contexts, gender difference and identity, rather than status in the situation, seem to be marked most consistently by socioemotional behaviors rather than task-directed behaviors.

**Gender Identities in Interaction**

In the sections above, we reviewed how status and power structures associated with gender create inequality in interaction. Another central theme in the literature involves the meanings associated with gender identities and how they are expressed in interaction. Two traditions share this emphasis on meaning: the “doing gender” perspective (West & Fenstemaker 1995, West & Zimmerman 1987) and the structural symbolic interactionist perspectives (Stryker 1980, Burke & Tully 1977). The two perspectives differ dramatically in their typical methods and language, but they share some important insights about the ubiquitous character of gender in interaction.

In particular, both perspectives focus on how gender and its cultural meanings are expressed in a large variety of institutional contexts, across different situations, embedded in different role relationships. They suggest how gender can flavor the expression of power- and status-unequal relationships, as well as shaping the character of peer, status-equal interactions.

“Doing gender” is an ethnomethodological approach that argues gender is an interactional accomplishment, something that must be continually enacted in local situations to persist as a social phenomenon. Cultural norms dictate that there are two and only two sexes, each with inherent natures that justify male dominance. However, these norms cannot be maintained unless people present themselves in ways that allow others to categorize them as male or female. Gender, in this perspective, is the local management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate behavior and attitudes for one’s sex category (West & Zimmerman 1987). Thus, gender is an adverb rather than a noun—something that modifies the ways that role behaviors are enacted, rather than a personal characteristic. Gender qualifies how a person carries out any behavior in any situation, so that the behavior can be recognized as a culturally competent gender performance by others. The concept of gender as something that one “does” has been very influential as a theoretical point, but researchers have been slow to operationalize this insight to orient empirical work on interaction (see Brines 1994 for a notable exception). The structural symbolic interactionists have been much more explicit about how cultural meanings associated with gender get transformed into behaviors specific to institutional situations.
Modern structural symbolic interactionists see identities as a set of cultural meanings that are learned through a variety of mechanisms, including interaction behaviors, people’s emotional reactions, material culture, and other institutional arrangements (Heise 1979). These meanings then act as a reference point for interpreting events that occur and for guiding behavior (Heise 1979, Smith-Lovin & Heise 1988, Burke & Reitzes 1981, Burke 1991). In other words, structural symbolic interactionists now view identity and behavior as a control system, such that identity meanings disturbed by interpersonal interaction are restored by new behaviors and cognitions that are produced in response to the disturbance.

Gender is often viewed as a “master identity” because it is evoked across a large variety of contexts, rather than being associated with specific institutional roles (Stets & Burke 1996). It serves as a background personal identity, based on one’s sex category, even while more specific roles are being enacted. Feminine identities like female, woman, lady, wife, and mother are more positively evaluated, less powerful, and a bit more expressive than their male counterparts (male, man, gentleman, husband, and father) (Kroska 1997). Institutional roles that require or strongly suggest a particular gender (e.g., family roles like son and daughter, or gender-segregated occupational roles like secretary and welder) will incorporate these gender meanings as part of the role-identity’s connotation. When someone is a gender-atypical occupant of a role-identity, the gender marks and modifies the meaning of the identity in systematic ways (Averett & Heise 1988). While a “female judge” is a very powerful, grave person, the addition of the modifier “female” will make her seem a little more positive, less powerful, and more expressive than her male counterparts who occupy the unmarked identity (“judge,” because we assume “male”) (Averett & Heise 1988).

The gendered meanings of identities shape behavior. In general, we expect women to behave in a more positive, less powerful, more expressive way. In this sense, the structural symbolic interactionists’ view is closely related to traditional socialization approaches to gender: People learn meanings about what it is to be masculine or feminine and then enact those meanings across a variety of situations. The control system introduces a crucial difference, however, because it explains how situational factors can have such an important impact on the way in which gender meanings are played out. For example, we see how situational role-identities can powerfully shape or even overwhelm gender. A woman acting as a mother may show strongly feminine behavior (because gendered meanings are so central to the meaning of “mother”), but when she goes to a business meeting to enact the role-identity of boss, the fact that she is a “female boss” may only slightly modify the manner in which she carries out that role. Most importantly, the control perspective illustrates how recent events can shape what behaviors are needed to maintain meanings. If an
interaction is making one seem more feminine than one's fundamentally held gender identity, then more assertive behavior might result, even if the identity standard were quite feminine. On the other hand, a woman who has had to engage in a nasty fight with a service person to carry out some household task may respond by being unusually unassertive and emotional to her husband a few moments later; the traditional femininity in the latter encounter helps to restore meanings that were upset in the former confrontation. In this way, the control system view of the structural symbolic interactionist mirrors the basic insight of the "doing gender" perspective. Different actions will serve to express and maintain gender identities within different situational contexts.

Researchers have applied the new control theories to the dynamics of conversation. Robinson & Smith-Lovin (1992) looked at how gender identities shaped discussions among male and female students in six-person task groups. Since common conversational behaviors like "interrupt" and "talk to" have meanings that shape impressions of the speaker and the recipient, men and women respond somewhat differently in such discussions. Stets & Burke (1996) used the same logic to study how married couples discussed disagreements. They found that spouses with a more masculine identity used more negative behavior in the marital interactions, while those with a feminine identity used more positive behavior. This finding echoes an earlier result from Drass (1986), who showed that self-meanings of masculinity and femininity could shape conversational dynamics even in same-sex discussions. Burke et al (1988) applied the perspective to more powerful behaviors: physical and sexual abuse during dating relationships.

The fact that identity meanings are controlled in interaction does not mean that they cannot change. Persistent disconfirmations of our self-relevant meanings can lead us to adjust so that our identities better fit the impressions being produced in actual experiences. Burke & Cast (1997) explored how the gender identities of newly married couples shifted over a three-year period that included the birth of their first child. The interactions surrounding the birth led to an increase in gender identity differences, as the new mother and father played out their parental roles. However, role-taking processes in which a spouse takes his or her partner's perspective on the interactions served to create convergence in gender identities. Verta Taylor (1999) showed how social movements purposefully create new identity meanings. In an ethnographic study of a post-partum self-help group, Taylor followed how new mothers' identities were transformed to create a more positive, assertive emotional state.

Although they arise from very different intellectual traditions, both the doing-gender perspective and the structural symbolic interaction theories stress similar changes to the traditional gender role socialization perspective. They both emphasize that gender is accomplished in a situational context.
Which behaviors support gender conceptions vary from one interaction to another, depending on the institutional background, the recent history of the interaction, and the roles occupied by the participants. Both perspectives stress the meanings associated with behaviors as well as identities. Behaviors in interaction provide social confirmation or disconfirmation of gendered identities because they have cultural meanings that interactants share.

The primary difference between the two perspectives is the degree of specificity about these cultural meanings and how they are assessed in empirical work. The original proponents of the doing gender perspective, West & Zimmerman (1987:127), defined gender as “the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category,” placing the emphasis squarely on the behavioral accomplishment of gendered meanings. But, as Kroska (1998:307) pointed out, advocates of the doing gender perspective rarely measure these normative conceptions, but rather infer them from differences in behavior by sex category. Kroska showed how combining the basic insight of the doing gender perspective with the greater formalism of the identity control theories can produce theoretical progress. She examined how the meanings associated with common household tasks (e.g. cleaning a kitchen, feeding a baby) might produce the extraordinarily stable division of labor in the home. Viewing gender ideology as an identity to which people are committed in varying degrees helped to explain the sometimes weak correlations that have been observed between these attitudes and actual household behavior. Blending the doing gender and identity control ideas helps us introduce a dynamic, situational aspect to the basic insight of traditional socialization theory, that people learn cultural meanings about what it is to be a man or woman that shape their behavior in a wide variety of situations. It refocuses our attention on the meanings of social actions as well as identities. It also helps us cope with the empirical fact that gender behavior looks very different in different institutional contexts (and sometimes appears to disappear altogether, when institutional roles are dominant and gender is not salient).

THE ROLE OF UNEQUAL INTERACTION IN MEDIATING BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER

Gendered identity meanings develop in response to widely shared cultural beliefs about men and women. Several scholars have noted the striking correspondence between such beliefs about men and women and stereotypes of high- and low-status people more generally (i.e., respected, competent, leader-like versus supportive, less competent, and followerlike) (Conway et al 1996, Geis et al 1984, Gerber 1996). Given sex categorization in interaction and male-female interaction that is most often status ordered, men and women
commonly experience one another as acting in high- and low-status ways. It is reasonable to expect that these repeated experiences would affect widely shared beliefs about men’s and women’s attributes.

Research suggests that interactional experiences can induce people to take on status beliefs about their distinguishing characteristics. After repeated encounters between people who differed in resources that led to influence, such as pay, as well as a distinguishing characteristic, actors believed that most people see those in the advantaged category of the characteristic as more respected and competent than, but not as nice as, those in the disadvantaged category (Ridgeway et al 1998). Once created, actors can spread status beliefs to others by treating them according to the beliefs (Ridgeway & Glasgow 1996).

Since men and women interact frequently, but usually under conditions where men have more resources (e.g., pay, formal position, contacts, information) that advantage them in the influence hierarchies that develop, mixed-sex interaction continually refreshes gender status beliefs (Ridgeway 1991). It reinforces them as social facts for individuals and maintains their effective consensuality. Because widespread status beliefs change more slowly than material conditions (Ridgeway 1997), men and women, implicitly acting on gender status beliefs, rewrite gender inequality into new conditions and organizational forms. Thus, interaction can conserve gender inequality, in modified form, over changes in the social structure of society (Ridgeway 1997).

Besides fostering gender status beliefs, constant sex categorization and frequent cross-sex interaction raise the salience of gender as a personal identity both for individuals and in cultural beliefs. A person’s multiple identities can be thought of as hierarchically arranged in terms of commitment or embeddedness within social networks (Ibarra & Smith-Lovin 1997, Stryker & Serpe 1982). Enactments of gender as a background, modifying identity across a wide variety of social contexts, embed it within a broad range of personal networks, heightening its salience and affective importance for the individual. At the same time, such extensive expressions of gender identity reinforce the importance of cultural beliefs associated with gender and imbue them with diffuse relevance to diverse activities. Thus, interaction helps produce gender identity and gender status beliefs as well as being shaped by them.

INTERACTION PROCESSES AFFECT NETWORK STRUCTURES

In the section above, we reviewed how ubiquitous sex categorization and the structural inequality of men and women lead to unequal interaction and the formation of beliefs about essential differences between men and women. Now we turn to the reciprocal effect: how interactional processes, sex categorization, and gender beliefs shape the degree to which men and women inter-
act. Since most network research has focused on the outcomes of networks rather than their sources, this topic reveals fewer empirical studies.

Homophily on gender operates both through the opportunities that are presented for men and women to interact (induced homophily) and through the choice to interact with others who view the world in the same way (choice homophily) (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1987). People select to interact with those who confirm their own view of the world, especially their self-views (Swann et al 1987, Robinson & Smith-Lovin 1992a). To the extent that men and women occupy “different worlds” because of their structural positions, they will be more likely to form gender-homophilious friendships and other peer relations (Carley 1986, 1991). To the extent that people enjoy interacting with those who accord them status or power (Kemper 1978, Heise 1999), we would expect men to seek out women for intimate friendships more often than women seek out men. Women, on the other hand, can operate in the absence of some constraints by interacting in all-female groups. Robinson & Smith-Lovin (1992b) find, for example, that men have higher success than women in getting a laugh for a joke when they are in mixed sex groups but that women make more jokes than men in same-sex groups.

Individuals vary, of course, in how central gender identity is in their self structure. A social identity perspective may help to explain the considerable variability in the extent to which people in the same structural position construct ego networks that are gender homophilous (Ibarra 1995, Chatman & Brown 1996, Ely 1994, Wharton 1992). The salience of gender identity is likely to vary depending on factors such as personal history, organizational context, exposure to social movement activities, parents’ ideologies, and other factors. The extent to which people select for gender-homophilious networks also is determined by the legitimacy of men and women within a particular position. Ibarra (1996) showed how the legitimacy problems that women faced as they were promoted into a role requiring interaction with clients led them to seek out female mentors who had faced similar problems.

In sum, interaction processes affect with whom one interacts in several interrelated ways. First, since men and women often occupy different structural positions, they come to know different things, view the world in different ways, and prefer gender-homophilious friendships. Second, since women are often structurally disadvantaged in interactions with men, sex category is likely to remain socially constructed as a salient difference. Third, gender identity salience will vary across individuals in predictable ways, based on personal biography and structural context, producing concomitant variations in the gender homophily of ego networks. Finally, the special legitimacy and interactional problems that women face may lead them to seek out other women as appropriate role models, mentors, and friends. As we note above, most of these observations apply equally to any other social category that is
ordered by status, power, and prestige. The unique features of gender are that it involves two roughly equal-sized populations, increasing the potential role of choice homophily, and that it is spread more evenly across many other structural and geographic divides, decreasing its strong correlation with other salient factors that might reinforce interactional differences.

CONCLUSION

Any theory of gender difference and inequality must accommodate three basic findings from research on interaction. 1. People perceive gender differences to be pervasive in interaction. 2. Actual studies of interaction among equal-status, equal-power peers indicate relatively few gender differences in behavior. Those that occur are concentrated in the socio-emotional, nonverbal domains that are commonly considered to be less central to instrumental outcomes. Equal status/power contacts between men and women may be the most problematic for the gender system, since they undermine both difference and inequality (Reskin 1988). 3. Most interactions between men and women occur within the structural context of role or status relationships that are unequal. Unequal role/status relationships between men and women produce many differences in interactional behavior that are commonly associated with gender.

Together, these findings point to a process by which cultural conceptions of gender that justify inequality are constructed from the way gender is enmeshed in the conduct of other roles/identities across diverse structural contexts. Additional research is needed on several aspects of this process. 1. We need a better understanding of the way gender combines with other identities/roles/statuses and shapes the way they are played. This research could focus on how statuses combine to create expectations in a group, on how less legitimate authority figures play out their roles, on how multiple identities combine in situated action, or on how people “do” gender in different institutional domains. 2. We need further investigation of the structural sources of interactional differences between men and women and the processes by which these differences are incorporated into our cultural meanings of what it is to be a man or woman. 3. We have reasonably effective theories and evidence on how status, power, and identity shape interaction and on how interaction affects beliefs about identity and status. We are especially lacking, however, in investigations of how these cultural beliefs and interactional patterns help form and perpetuate network structures that provide the contexts of cross-sex and same-sex interaction. Such research is needed to close the circle of causality between structure and interaction out of which gender appears to emerge.

Literature Cited


Chatman JA, Brown RA. 1996. It takes two to tango: demographic similarity, social identity and friendship. Presented at Stanford Conf. on Power, Politics and Influence, Stanford, CA

Conway M, Pizzamiglio MT, Mount M. 1996. Status, communality, and agency: implica-
tions for stereotypes of gender and other groups. J. Pers. Soc. Psychol. 71:25–38
Fischer C. 1982. To Dwell Among Friends. Chicago: Univ. Chicago


Lakoff R. 1975. Language and women’s place. Lang. Soc. 2:45–79


Pugh M, Wahrman R. 1983. Neutralizing sexism in mixed-sex groups: Do women have to be better than men? Am. J. Sociol. 88: 746–62


Ridgeway CL. 1993. Gender, status, and the social psychology of expectations. In The-
Wharton AS. 1992. The social construction of gender and race in organizations: a social identity and group mobilization perspec-


