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Status Decay: The Reverse of Status Construction Theory

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STATUS DECAY: THE REVERSE OF STATUS CONSTRUCTION THEORY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
Applied Sociology

by
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Accepted by:
Dr. Ellen Granberg, Committee Chair
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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the status of African Americans at two points in time (1985 and 2004). Status construction theory would suggest that a group of people who increased their possession of goal objects (like education) would also increase in status. However, this study finds that an increase in education of African Americans has not affected their status from 1985 to 2004. In fact, living in a region with a higher proportion of African Americans with college degrees actually lowers the percentage of African American confidants chosen. The results of this paper do not concur with the predictions of status construction theory and would suggest that more research be done on the topic of the decay of status and status construction theory's ability to explain it.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my late grandmother, Lennie Foster. Her love for all people, sweet soul and caring personality taught me so much in life and will continue to mold the person that I become.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this thesis is by the gracious help of many people. First and foremost I would like to thank my committee chair; Dr. Ellen Granberg who gave a great deal of her time to revisions and endless meetings. Without her help I would never have gotten this far. Secondly, I would like to thank my parents Bobby and Donna Foster, for their continuing support and motivation. Their help throughout my undergraduate and graduate education exceeds any standard put forth by society. I would also like to thank my brother, B.J. Foster, whose educational attainment made my decision to continue my education an easy choice, due to the fear of being over educated by my brother. Finally I would like to thank my soon to be wife, Dorothy Puzio. Her support throughout this process has been the most motivating factor of all. I will always look up to her passion for education and her desire to be the very best at everything she does. All of these people helped in many different ways and at many different times throughout my education. Thank you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Status construction theory (SCT) attempts to explain how a nominal characteristic like race or gender attains status value. According to SCT, status is arbitrary and socially constructed through processes of interaction. Any attribute that a particular society sees as having more worth or value than an opposing characteristic can hold status. Classic examples of this include race (being black has historically been associated with low or bad status vs. being white has historically been associated with good or high status) and gender (being male has historically been associated with good or high status vs. being female has historically been associated with bad or low status). In this paper, I explore the conditions under which a status belief, once established, can change. I use the tenets of status construction theory to guide this analysis.

Status construction theory suggests that strides in the material success of African Americans would potentially result in a change or decay of the negative status that has been historically associated with them. In my analysis, I use status construction theory's ideas to create and test hypotheses regarding the decay of this negative status. This will be measured at two points in time over a nineteen year span (1985-2004), and will focus on the recent educational attainment of African Americans (as the main independent variable), as well as social networking data that collects the race of the respondent's closest confidants (as the dependent variable). By examining the association between educational attainment and friendship nomination over this span I describe how the status

of African Americans in our society has changed and assess the extent to which the association is consistent with status construction theory.

First, I will provide a quick overview of expectation states theory to lay the foundation for an explanation of status construction theory. I then give a detailed discussion of status construction theory followed by a focus on the theory's ability to explain its own reverse process: status decay. I then explore the central question of whether status is capable of changing and what, if any, factors contribute to that change. I will use a brief case study of Irish immigrants to the United States in the 19th Century, to show that status has decayed in our history. After a detail of the methods and data used, I will report and discuss the results of tests of three hypotheses derived from status construction theory.

Expectation States and Status Characteristics Theory

Before we can begin an in-depth discussion of status construction theory we must first look back to its origins. Status characteristics theory describes how certain values of a particular attribute (such as male or female (gender), black or white (race), etc.) affect the levels of influence held by individuals in social groups (Troyer and Younts, 1997). These varieties of attributes are attached with a status and thus create hierarchy in the group. Expectation states theory comes into play when these higher status members are expected to have higher levels of competency based on the kind of attribute that they hold (Troyer and Younts, 1997). For example, if a mixed gender group is given the tools to build a box, it is often assumed that the males in the group would excel at the task

because men are generally thought to be more competent at tasks requiring mechanical abilities. According to expectation states theory, this assumption affects the opportunities given to men to lead the group. Expectation states theory shows that when people are given these opportunities they tend to rise to the top of the status hierarchies within task oriented groups. In short, expectation states theory shows how group hierarchies form when participants associate nominal attributes, such as race and gender, with the ability to complete a task. What expectation states theory doesn't address, however, is the question of how initially unranked kinds of attributes accrue status in the first place; nor does it explain how these beliefs about status spread throughout a society. Status construction theory (Ridgeway, 1991) was developed to fill in these gaps.

Status Construction Theory

Cecilia Ridgeway first suggested status construction theory in “The Social Construction of Status Value: Gender and Other Nominal Characteristics” (Ridgeway, 1991). The theory attempts to explain how nominal characteristics with no inherent value differences (e.g., race or nationality) can be imbued with status. It is useful here to pause and define the term *nominal characteristic*. Ridgeway states that a nominal characteristic is “any socially recognized attribute on which people are perceived to differ in a categorical rather than graduated or ordinal way” (p. 369). The word nominal in itself means that individuals vary in a categorical way and that there is no ranking of these categories (e.g., brown eyes, blue eyes, green eyes, etc.). Ridgeway (1991) adds more depth to the discussion of nominal characteristics by suggesting two facets of all status

characteristics: *independent status value*, and a belief of *greater competence*. Independent status value is the idea that any given characteristic individually or independently affects an actor's status incrementally¹. Greater competence is the idea that more valued nominal characteristics are related to having better proficiency, aptitude, or ability².

Another term used often in status construction theory is a *resource*. A resource is something that a particular society distributes equally or unequally and that has exchangeable value. A resource (for example, wealth) has its own value and will therefore confer status to those who possess it (Brashears, 2008). The impact of resources is one of the missing factors that status construction theory adds to expectation states theory. Exchangeable resources can be thought of as an important subset of the more general category, *goal objects* (GO) (Webster and Hysom, 1998). This term is defined best by Brashears (2008) as being “items or positions that are desirable regardless of how easily they can be exchanged between persons” (p. 73). Some examples of this would be a corner office, education, or beauty. For the remainder of this paper, these two terms will be used interchangeably. Status construction theory argues that the development of status beliefs (e.g., beliefs about competency) arise when nominal characteristics become associated with goal objects (Ridgeway 1991). For example, the

¹ To illustrate this point, Ridgeway (1991) uses the example of a black woman having the least amount of status (or most negative status) relative to white men and women due to the incremental effect that each characteristic has on status. Since she is black (holding less status than white) and a woman (holding less status than a man), the overall status of that actor is decreased by both characteristics, each of which holds negative status. This is important because if certain attributes add to a person's already negative status then many factors must change in order for their negative status to change. However, this thesis will not test the incremental effects of negative status.

² This idea can be exemplified by stereotypical traits that each status characteristic holds. For instance, men are often thought to be more proficient in math-related subjects than women. Therefore, if a mixed gendered group were given a math problem to solve, the men in the room would likely be the first to step forward and attempt to complete the problem. And women would most likely give the men the opportunity to do so, by remaining silent.

historical status belief that African Americans are less competent could be tied to the lack of associations with the goal object of education.

Status Beliefs

Expectation states theory has shown in many experimental tests that beliefs about competency are linked directly to nominal characteristics (Troyer and Younts, 1997). Ridgeway (1991) suggests four structural conditions that create these status beliefs. They are as follows:

The first structural condition is the development of unequal possession of particular resources or goal objects. In other words, some people have resources and others do not. In fact, Ridgeway (1991) explicitly assumes that the population is evenly split among resource rich and resource poor actors. Once it has been seen that there are those, within the population, that have and those that do not, the first structural condition has been satisfied.

The second structural condition is *homophily*. Homophily is the idea that people with similar characteristics will naturally interact with one another at many different levels. Simply put, people interact with people that are like themselves. In the case of status construction, people of similar resource levels will tend to gravitate toward one another. Many reasons are behind why people interact like this. For example, if two people have the same socioeconomic class, they are likely to live in a particular type of house. This type of house is most likely the neighbor of a similar household which might cause interaction between people with a similar socioeconomic class. Further examples

could be that an education level is required to get a job and thus those with similar levels of education might end up working together, causing interaction. In terms of this study, when the amount of goal objects that an actor possesses becomes *socially meaningful* actors will then tend to interact with other actors that possess the same levels of goal objects. As explained above, an unequal distribution of goal objects will most likely initiate the second condition of homophily or sameness among interactants.

The co-existence of the first and second structural condition makes it possible for the next conditions to occur: the grouping of individuals into categories based upon nominal characteristics that don't yet have any rank or order. For example the color of someone's eyes does not immediately suggest a status difference. IQ, on the other hand, would give someone information about the actor's abilities, so it is not considered a nominal characteristic. In other words, blue eyed people have no biological or physical advantage over brown eyed people and so on. However, people can still see the variation that some people have brown eyes and some have blue eyes and can therefore place them in a category together (e.g. blue eyed people, brown eyed people). This gives actors the ability to form the fourth structural condition: association between a characteristic and goal objects. Just as the other structural conditions, all preceding conditions must be met in order for the next condition to take place.

In order for a status belief to develop, people must notice a correlation between attributes on nominal variables and the distribution of goal objects (Ridgeway, 1991). This identification does not have to be seen in all of the actors that hold the same nominal characteristic. An actor can encounter other actors that do not meet the stereotype, as

long as the majority of actors act in accord with the stereotype, the status belief should develop. This can be illustrated by the use of a two-by-two table where the x-axis would contain the nominal characteristic and the y-axis would contain the goal object. As an example, the status belief that immigrants are incompetent could develop by an actor identifying immigrants with poverty where the population is distributed as follows:

Table 1.1: Example of the fourth structural condition

Poor?	Immigrant?	
	Yes	No
Yes	80%	20%
No	20%	80%

It can be seen, in this (factually incorrect) table, that twenty percent of those that are immigrants are not poor, but that eighty percent of immigrants are poor; thus there is evidence of a correlation that does exist in the population. This is the final structural condition that permits a status belief to form (in this case the idea that a lower level of competency is attached with being an immigrant).

These four structural conditions are the foundation that permits a status belief to form and diffuse. Ridgeway refers back to expectation states theory by stating that when these conditions are in place, assumptions about competence can be made based on nominal characteristics; these expectations then influence “attention, positive evaluation and acceptance” in groups that are given a task to complete (Ridgeway, 1991: 374). When attention, positive evaluation, and acceptance are influenced, they begin to shape further interactions. Using our hypothetical example above, if the status belief that

immigrants are less competent had developed, then the immigrants in a task oriented group would be treated in line with expectations of poor people and would therefore have lower attention devoted to them, receive less positive evaluation and overall, be less influential on the group.

Diffusion of a status belief

As stated above, expectations for performance by members of a social group (e.g., women, men, etc.) are influenced by a created and confirmed status belief. These performance expectations then shape social structures within groups (i.e. group hierarchy). Any subsequent encounters involving people with similar nominal characteristics are affected by the status belief. For example, a person who forms status expectations about immigrants will then carry this to other interactions and treat all immigrants as lower status. If everyone in a group makes the same association and takes the status belief with them, the belief can diffuse through the social structure “like ripples in a lake” (Ridgeway, 1991, p. 376). The diffusion of these beliefs and expectations relies on the sustained structural conditions mentioned above. If the correlation did exist (as in Table 1.1) and most of the encounters a person have with an immigrant who also seemed to be incapable, then others will also associate the same amount of competency to the characteristic. Accordingly, a person (who holds the status belief) will expect an actor with that status to perform in accordance with that status. These expectations not only impact that actor but also inform everyone else that is involved with the interaction of the actor’s status. Further, status construction theory argues, a person carrying a

devalued status characteristic (e.g., being an immigrant) will begin to realize the perceived competence that the group has associated with him/her and will begin to participate less and accept a lower status position in the group. Meanwhile, the other actors in the group who are not immigrants will act in accord with the status belief that immigrants are less competent and participate more.

The following example will be used to help explain the diffusion process of status beliefs. In order to fully explain the diffusion, background information about the creation of the status belief must be mentioned as well: A group of females are assembled to work on a task. The group consists of females that are immigrants and native born citizens that do not differ on any other characteristic (age, race, religion, etc.). A native born actor was seen as the main contributor to the first task. Since all group participants are females and only differ in citizenship status, other native born actors begin to be more active and prominent in the second task. After several subsequent tasks are completed in a common manner (native born actors dominating the leadership roles) the immigrant actors begin to see themselves as lower status to the native born actors. In this situation the goal object would be the leadership roles that are dominated by actors with a particular nominal characteristic of citizenship (native born). This association is seen and confirmed in the multiple tasks that the group was assigned, thus forming the status belief. Additionally, the hierarchy of the group is created, in a way that immigrant actors oblige their native born counterparts and give them the attention and opportunities to lead. The group continues to work together with the belief that native born actors are more competent and worthy of leadership roles than immigrant actors thus creating

performance expectations. Immigrant actors act in accordance with this belief and allow the native born actors to take the lead. Since the belief is confirmed and all of the structural conditions are met, the information about the belief will begin to diffuse. If the group were to separate and mix with another group similar in composition but different in actors, the belief would carry over and be shown to the new group. These expectations and actions prompted by the status belief would then spread to many new people, causing them to believe that the immigrant characteristic is associated with the resource of being a good leader. This example shows how initially, meaningless characteristics can produce a status belief and can then be spread throughout a population.

In sum, status construction theory adds to the ideas of expectation states theory and status characteristics theory regarding how certain socially recognized attributes, such as nominal characteristics, obtain status. Whereas expectation states theory links such characteristics directly to beliefs about competency within task oriented groups, status construction theory argues that where nominal characteristics and beliefs about competency are related, resources and/or goal objects help create the link between nominal characteristics and competency. This link is enhanced and guided by four structural conditions: 1. there is an unequal distribution of resources within a population; 2. the distribution is socially meaningful such that actors tend to interact with other actors that are roughly equal in resources (homophily); 3. individuals differ categorically in terms of nominal characteristics; and 4. a correlation exists between the nominal characteristic and goal objects. This association allows a status belief to develop which then produces expectations about performance or behavior. These expectations about the

belief will then spread to other groups causing diffusion of the belief that an actor with a particular characteristic is of a certain status.

Status Decay

Now that status construction theory has been explained, we can move on to the central issue of this thesis, status decay. Status decay is a term that is focused around the idea that status beliefs are amenable to change and can, in fact, decay over a period of time. Although Ridgeway only discusses the decay of status briefly, the theory that she developed can be used to explain how the decay of a status would occur. Status construction theory would suggest that a decay in status would involve one or more of the structural constraints mentioned above being negated, which would then weaken the association between a nominal characteristic and a goal object. Few articles discuss the idea of status decay but many articles suggest that it is an avenue for further research (Ridgeway, 1991; Webster and Hysom, 1998).

Webster and Hysom (1998) suggest that there are two main ways in which status decay may occur: “mortality (death and emigration of individuals holding the status beliefs) and conversion (individuals coming to realize that the performance connotations of the characteristic are not accurate)” (p. 372). That is, the death or emigration of people who believe that a characteristic holds a particular status could change the way that the belief is diffused and could slowly decay the status. They also suggest that if the correlation between the goal object and the nominal characteristic changes, then the status of that belief should decay. In this thesis, I will not differentiate between

conversion and mortality as causes of status decay. Rather, I assume both processes likely contribute to the decline of the status characteristics I will be examining.

Although status decay has not yet been the focus of much research, some studies have shown that status characteristics are amenable to change and are not fixed. Cohen and Roper (1972), for example, experimentally tested whether status beliefs associated with race could be altered. Mixed race groups were given two tasks to complete, one of which the subjects of lower status (black) were given task specific instructions before hand on how to complete the task and also how to teach someone else how to complete the task. This gave the lower status actors an advantage in terms of competence which they expected would allow the lower status group members to assume a leadership role in the group. The authors found that the status could not be modified by only changing the competency level of the lower status participants. Instead they found “one must also treat the expectations for his [the lower status individual’s] performance held by the high status member” (Cohen and Roper, 1972, p.656). Only altering of the higher status actor’s perceptions of the lower status actors allowed the black participants to carry out a leadership role in the group.

Ridgeway (1991) suggests that the idea of status decay is possible but increasingly difficult. “The distribution of resources is often justified in terms of differences in perceived competence, [thus] the difficulty of weakening the status value of a nominal characteristic increases” (Ridgeway, 1991, p. 382). For example, a black woman acquires a certain amount of resources based on the status value of her characteristics, thus making it difficult to change that status value unless her resources

increase to equal that of others. This suggests some type of perpetual cycle that will be difficult to overcome. As one can see and as Ridgeway (1991) suggests, in order for the status of a characteristic to change, the differences in resources must be eliminated. In her final statement, Ridgeway (1991) states that, “these undermining effects can begin to accumulate and, over time, significantly erode, if not eliminate, the strength and consensus of status beliefs about a nominal characteristic” (p. 382). So Ridgeway (1991) suggests that the differences in resources must be eliminated in order for a particular status to decay.

As discussed above, the weakening of the association between a goal object and a value of a nominal characteristic should mark the start of the status decay process. For example, if a status exists then all of the above mentioned structural conditions must be met; however, if a change in the final condition (see Table 1.1) is experienced then the construction of a new status could begin. This construction process would follow the same path that any other new status does. For example, a person might hold the status belief that African Americans are of lower status due to the historical correlation between African Americans and the poor. However, if African Americans begin to gain wealth, then a new belief about the status of African Americans could start to diffuse through social interaction. Status construction theory would suggest that this diffusion would begin with members of a group noticing that the African American participants within that group are more competent. Then those that saw the correlation would see in the next group encounter that the correlation is also true. Then the status belief would begin to develop in other participants, who would then take the belief to others in their new group

and therefore spread the belief rapidly, thus decaying or changing the status of African Americans throughout a population.

Even though Ridgeway (1991) warns that historical accounts may or may not confirm the accuracy of status construction theory, history shows us that status can change in a dramatic way. A look at earlier accounts of the negative status of Irish immigrants will illustrate this idea, much like the articles above did. Though I am not using these historical accounts to test status construction theory, it will be useful for the reader to see a “real world” example of status decay to help transition from an experimentally tested theory to a more generalized study such as this one.

Historical Status Change

Irish immigrants of the late 18th Century and early 19th Century were treated very poorly upon their arrival into the United States. There are many historical accounts (Ignatiev, 1997; Miller, 1985; Adams, 1932; Baba, 1990; Beisel and Kay, 2004) of the negative attitudes toward the Irish immigrants. These attitudes suggest some type of inferior status was associated with them. However, today, very few people associate Irish as incompetent (Ignatiev, 1995). It is difficult to prove what exactly caused this status decay, instead it will be my goal to simply show that status is amenable to change and can in fact decay over time.

The emigration from Ireland was due to the poverty-like conditions and the rise of the Industrial Revolution in North America. In 1845 a fungus swept across the island, destroying its main food staple, potato, and thereby killing 2.5 million people (Baba,

1990). Needless to say, times were difficult in Ireland. But because of the booming economy in America, people began to immigrate there. The 1.8 million Irish that immigrated into the United States immediately after 1845 (from approximately 1845 to 1855) were much poorer than those who came earlier and most of the males were unskilled workers (e.g. temporarily employed as “canal, railroad, building-construction, or dock laborers”) (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 39).

The low status of Irish immigrants resulted in very harsh treatment in their new home. Baba (1990), states that many Irish were cheated before they could even get off of the boat. If the trip across the Atlantic Ocean was not bad enough, due to slave-like ship conditions, it was not uncommon for ten thousand or more immigrants to wait on the ship for a few days once docked, since Ellis Island³ could only accommodate five thousand at a time. Further degradation of the Irish immigrants took place with medical examinations and the testing of their ability to read and write, as well as interrogations about their final destination and how much money they had. Many were held for further questioning and were not allowed to consult a lawyer nor communicate with friends and family with whom they arrived (Baba, 1990). This treatment of people with a specific characteristic, Irish heritage, produced certain expectations which caused the development of a status belief. These expectations were most likely based upon the association of the 1.8 million earlier arrivers (1845-1855) and their minimal abilities and resources as well as their tendencies to stay close to people that are like themselves (homophily). This produced vast areas of slum like conditions in large cities where the availability of jobs was best.

³ In 1887, the federal government took over immigration regulation and Ellis Island was selected to be the site for all immigrant holding ships to enter the United States.

these deplorable living conditions⁴ as well as their close proximity to black neighborhoods, all helped to develop the idea that Irish immigrants were of lower status (Ignatiev, 1995).

Much like that of the African American, the Irish people saw discrimination against them in many places. It became common for signs to be hung in windows stating “No Irish Need Apply” and “No Irish Permitted in this Establishment.” Knowing this the reader can see many striking similarities between the discrimination against the Irish in the 19th Century and the subsequent discrimination against blacks in 20th Century America. However, as we move forward in history our perceptions changed and eventually lessened the negative status associated with being Irish (Ignatiev, 1995). In terms of this study it is not necessary to go into detail⁵ as to why or how the Irish Americans lost the negative status with which they were associated. Instead the important fact is that the experience of the Irish illustrates that status can change. In fact, Beisel and Kay (2004) argue that the Irish were not the only ethnicity to undergo a

⁴ Whole families often took up one room in boarding houses that were next door to other boarding houses that did the same thing. Rent for these living conditions equaled a whole week’s pay. Plumbing was a rarity and sewage and waste collected in outhouses which increased the rat population and spread diseases throughout the slum areas.

⁵ Ignatiev’s (1995) argues that politics had a large impact on the transformation of the once negative status of Irish immigrants to the normal perception that the Irish are just *white*. Ignatiev states that this transformation began with the “Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which restricted naturalization, and hence voting rights, of immigrants” (p.65). These acts were caused by the members of the Federalist Party. Ignatiev (1995) argues that this was a just concern since seventy-three percent of the Pennsylvania gubernatorial election of 1799 was cast in favor of the Jeffersonian party in the city of Southwark, which was an Irish stronghold. Furthermore, during that time in our history, the idea of slavery was an important issue on many voters’ minds. “The truth is not, as some historians would have it, that slavery made it possible to extend to the Irish the privileges of citizenship, by providing another group for them to stand on, but the reverse, that the assimilation of the Irish into the white race made it possible to maintain slavery” (Ignatiev, 1995, p. 69). This suggests that the Democratic Party, mostly Southerners, would reject “nativism” (Ignatiev, 1995, p.69). This term is used to describe the idea that early settlers were the native people of America and everyone else was of some type of lower status (slaves and immigrants). So with the Democrats rejecting this idea, they gained the votes of the Irish immigrants, and they also gained enough votes to maintain the legality of slavery. The importance of slavery to the South’s large farming population made the Irish people’s vote important. This suggests that the resources of attention and acceptance into society that were awarded to Irish immigrants in exchange for their votes for slavery allowed for the elimination of a status belief that Irish were unimportant and a hindrance on society.

transformation. She discusses how early 20th Century “anti-miscegenation” statutes were enacted to criminalize the intermarrying of whites and non-whites (Beisel, 2004, p. 501). Beisel (2004) states that the definition of non-whites is not what it would be today but rather would include: “Poles, Slavs, Chinese, Mexicans, and others, as well as persons of African descent” (p. 501). Though Beisel’s (2004) article only gives limited insight into the negative status of Irish-immigrants, it adds many other ethnicities and races into the picture. Some of these ethnicities and races (like Mexicans) still hold negative status today, while others (like Poles) at one time held a lower status have now mixed into the *white* race much like the Irish did in our history.

This historical review demonstrates that status is amenable to change and can, in fact, decay over time. The question now is whether or not this is occurring with the status of African Americans. The remaining portion of this paper is designed to fully express the reasons in which the status should be changing, as well as the ways in which I can quantitatively measure the decay of status of African-Americans through survey data covering a nineteen year span in our recent history.

My Study

Matthew Brashears recently used status construction theory in a macro analysis to predict the “amount of status attached to a diffuse status characteristic” (Brashears, 2008, p.72). He used the proportion of women that held supervisory positions within a specific country as the indicator of women’s status in the country. He hypothesized, based on status construction theory, that in countries with more females in supervisory positions

(which provide greater resources), women hold a higher status. In order to test this, he used the 2001 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) for his data set in order to gain information on the types of people that the respondents communicate and confide in the most. Brashears (2008) takes the demographics (mainly gender) of the respondent's closest confidants and the cross-national data on the distribution of resources to confirm his hypothesis that countries with more females in supervisory positions the less influential gender is as a status characteristic within those countries. This hypothesis tests the validity of status construction theory by analyzing how a country with higher proportion of goal objects (measured by women in supervisory positions) is correlated with the status of a particular characteristic (measured by women as confidants). Though Brashears was not interested in the decay of status, he did show that the goal object of supervisory positions is associated with the selection of females as confidants thus validating an association hypothesized by status construction theory.

I used Brashears' (2008) study as a model to examine race as a status characteristic in American. I use social network survey data similar to Brashears (2008) – the General Social Survey from 1985 and 2004. Both these surveys asked respondents to describe their closest friends, including each friend's racial group membership. I use the proportion of confidant choices that are African American as a status indicator (dependant variable) by assuming that a higher the proportion of confidants who are African American reflects a higher status for African Americans. Brashears (2008) argues that the use of confidant choice is a reliable measure of status and also mentions Laumann (1956, 1966) that suggests that while people do use “homophily” when

selecting confidants (that is selecting a person of equal status), they also prefer friends of fairly high status. The use of social network data is useful because of the idea that higher status individuals have an increased access to resources making them more desirable as a friend (Moody, 1999). I use both of the years (1985 and 2004) in my analysis.

Whereas Brashears (2008) uses authority positions as the goal object, I chose to use the percent of African Americans who hold college degrees within a particular region. As mentioned earlier, a goal object is something that is desired and/or earned. Higher education obviously satisfies these criteria, making it a good example of a goal object. Education increases the quality of life of most individuals who obtain it. Higher education gives someone the opportunities for better jobs (professional jobs instead of skilled trades), and with better jobs comes better pay, better insurance, and other benefits increasing the quality of life of a person who obtains higher education. Therefore, education as will be used in this study as the primary goal object that reflects the status of African Americans, and my main independent variable.

A thorough hunt for 1985 educational attainment data by region and race found no results, so, I averaged the 1980 and 1990 population survey data on the educational attainment by region of African Americans for the median year of 1985. As for 2004 data, I use another source which collects data on the educational attainment by region and race during the specific year. The American Community Survey published data that indicates in 1985 and 2004 that the proportion of African Americans with a college degree has increased from 11.1% to 17.6% respectively.

In Brashears' (2008) study he compares nation-states. I, however, will be comparing nine geographical regions within the United States that are identified in the GSS data. Each region will be measured at two points in time, 1985 and 2004, making eighteen total region/time combinations. State level data cannot be obtained from the GSS due to the risk that respondents can be identified.

If status construction theory operates at the macro level, then the proportion of African Americans with a college degree should positively affect the proportion of confidants who are African American. If the association is weakened between the goal object and the nominal characteristic then the (negative) status associated with the nominal characteristic should also be weakened. Thus, my first hypothesis is that the percentage of African Americans who have attained a college degree (within a given region) should positively affect the proportion of confidants of a respondent (within the same region) that are African American. I use the proportion of African Americans with a college degree as the goal object and the proportion of African American confidants as an indicator of status. This leads to Hypothesis 1:

Hypothesis 1:

The association between the proportion of African Americans with a college degree and the proportion of nominated confidants who are African American will be positive.

Hypothesis 1, consistent with status construction theory, assumes that conversion (changes in the attitudes of other) is the primary vehicle through which a status belief can

change. However, I recognize the potential effects of mortality (Webster and Hysom, 1998). The mortality explanation suggests that the death of older people influences the creation and sustaining of status beliefs. This view assumes that older respondents grew up in a time when integration was far less common than it is today and that older persons may be less exposed to changes in status, limiting the likelihood that changes in resource distribution would lead to changes in status beliefs. If this is true, then being older should make respondents in this study more likely to hold the status belief and therefore less likely nominate African Americans than younger respondents. Thus, my second hypothesis suggests that an increase in a respondent's age will be negatively associated with the choice of African American confidants.

Hypothesis 2:

An increase in a respondent's age will have a negative association with the percent of African Americans chosen as confidants by the respondent.

Before a new status belief can form completely and then diffuse through the population, the actors with a lower status must cooperate with their rank as the lower status, thus confirming that the higher status actors are in fact of greater status. In her discussion of status beliefs, Ridgeway (2006) mentions social identity theory and the idea of "in-group favoritism" (p. 302), the social psychological phenomenon that people feel that the group in which they belong is better than an opposing group. This is useful because if every person within a group held the opinion that their group (that all hold the same nominal characteristic) is better, they would differ about which group holds the

higher status. Instead, Ridgeway (2006) argues that the formation of status beliefs overcome in-group biases and actors of lower status know and act in accord with their role as the lower status participant. The third hypothesis tests this supposition. If the in-group biases are overcome, then both blacks and whites should respond to the change in African Americans' status and both blacks and whites should be more likely to nominate African Americans as friends when they live in regions where the proportion of college educated African Americans is relatively high. This will be tested by examining the interaction between the proportion of African Americans with a college degree within a region and the race of the respondent. If status construction theory is correct, then both blacks and whites should be affected by variation in the proportion of African Americans with college degrees.

Hypothesis 3:

The interaction between respondent race and proportion of African Americans with college degrees should not be significantly associated with respondent confidant choices.

In sum, this study will attempt to test whether a macrosociological application of status construction theory produces results consistent with the idea of status decay. It is my purpose to test the sociological constructs of the status of race through the aforementioned hypotheses. I will now move on to a more in depth discussion of the data and methods of statistical analysis used in this study.

CHAPTER TWO

DATA AND METHODS

The following section describes in detail all three sets of the data used in this study (General Social Survey, American Community Survey, and Census) and discusses the measures chosen for each variable.

Data Description

American Community Survey and the Census

Data on the proportion of African Americans with college degrees will be drawn from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Census Bureau. The ACS is a nationally representative survey that is used to supplement the Census during the years in between the decennial census. The ACS has undergone a strict assessment of its methods of data collection since the early 1990s. The complete history of the ACS is not needed here; however, it is useful to mention that a full implementation of the ACS did not occur until the year 2006. This means that from the year 2000 (the “demonstration stage,” (American Community Survey, 2006)) until 2006 the ACS was gaining funds and increasing its sample size. This in no way suggests that the data is unreliable; in fact, reviews of the 2000 form of this survey (then called the Census 2000 Supplemental Survey (C2SS)) as well as subsequent reviews of later years deemed the ACS reliable and comparable to the 2000 Census long form (Diffendal et al, 2004; Bench, 2004). The present study will make use of ACS data collected in 2004. During that year, 474,395 households were sent questionnaires. Of those that replied the survey collected data on

approximately 838,000 individuals living within those households. Through statistical methods and probability sampling, state-level data was derived in a way that makes this survey comparable to a population count like the Census and thus generalizable to a large group of people. The response rate published by the U.S. Census Bureau is 93.1 percent. This is a weighted figure that takes into account estimates of population and factors of non-response.

When ACS data is unavailable, I will estimate the proportion of African Americans with college degrees using data from the 1980 and 1990 decennial censuses. The Census is the official count of the population of the United States. Information is collected in the form of a questionnaire, which is administered wherever possible by the government through mail or by census takers who travel around in a given area, stopping at households to give out the questionnaire. The Census is required by law to be completed, yet some respondents are still difficult to reach. The government first sends out the Census through the mail hoping that most will respond. After the initial wave of mail-back responses the government sends Census workers to every home site that did not return a questionnaire. The Census Bureau estimates that the “undercount,” or the percent of the population that does not respond, was 1.2% for 1980 and 1.6% for 1990.

General Social Survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a survey that is used as a social indicator of current trends and social characteristics in the American society. The basic template of GSS questions have been practically unchanged since its initial survey in 1972. However, each GSS wave also includes topical modules that explore important issues in

greater depth. The goal of the GSS is to make available a data source for social researchers to conceptualize trends in our society. The main portion of the survey that I will be using is drawn from a topical module on intimate conversational networks asked in 1985 and again in 2004. Even though this group of questions was asked in completely different years, the questions remained exactly the same. This study also makes use of GSS variables assessing the race, age, sex, and educational attainment level of both respondents their confidants.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Status

The General Social Survey asked its respondents in 1985 and 2004 to name the people whom they discussed important matters with the most in the past six months. The distribution of confidants reported in each year is shown in Table 2.1; this table also illustrates the dramatic decrease in the total number of confidants listed, as reported by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears (2006).

Table 2.1: Initial number of confidants selected by respondents by year.

<i>NUMBER OF CONFIDANTS NAMED</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>2004</i>
0	8.9	27.1
1	14.9	19.2
2	15.3	17.9
3	21.0	15.8
4	15.2	8.7
5	19.2	6.5
6	5.5	4.8

Source: General Social Survey 1985 and 2004.

Although respondents were allowed to mention six confidants, the demographics are only collected for the first five confidants. In constructing this measure, I recoded those respondents that listed six confidants into having only listed five. This took 70 respondents (or 5.4%) in 1985 and 54 respondents (or 5.7%) in 2004 that listed six confidants and merged them with respondents who listed five confidants. Each respondent was also asked to identify the race of his or her confidants. This allowed me to determine the proportion of the respondent's confidants that are African American (i.e.: $2/5$, $1/3$, etc.) which I will use as the dependent variable. This variable is constructed by dividing the number of African American confidants nominated by a given respondent by the total number of confidants he or she nominated. The resulting proportion functions as the dependent variable.

Respondent's race

GSS respondents are asked to identify their racial group membership which is coded into three values: black, white, and other. In this analysis, the race measure will be recoded into two dichotomous variables: "black" and "other." White respondents will be the reference group.

Respondent's educational attainment

A respondent's educational attainment will only be used as a control variable in the model. Educational attainment will be measured using a question that asks the respondent to identify his or her highest educational credential. This variable is coded as

a five-item categorical variable with the following values: less than high school as zero; high school diploma as one; junior college as two; bachelor's degree as three; and graduate degree as four.

Respondent's gender

The respondent's gender is also used as a control variable and is coded dichotomously. The question asked of the respondents only allows for two possible answers, male or female. I code male as zero and female as one.

Percent African Americans with a college degree

The main effect variable in this study is the percent of African Americans who have obtained a college degree. This variable is constructed from data collected from the two sources mentioned above (American Community Survey 2004; The decennial Census of 1980 and 1990). For each state, the proportion of African Americans aged 25 or older with a college degree is calculated. The measure of the proportion of African Americans with a college degree in 2004 is drawn directly from the ACS data; the measure for 1985 is calculated by taking the mean of the proportion of African Americans with a college degree reported in the 1980 and 1990 censuses. In order to match the GSS nine region structure, I used the data drawn from ACS and the census to calculate weighted averages for states found in each region (e.g., the New England Region includes Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island). The averages are weighted based on the relative population of each state;

this way, more populous states in a region will be a greater influence on the size of the independent variable. The computation of these numbers results in an estimated educational attainment figure by region and race for 1985 and for 2004 which serves as the main independent variable.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS

For statistical purposes it is valuable to discuss the descriptive statistics and other basic data associated with this analysis. In 1985, 1,534 questionnaires were completed by GSS respondents; and in 2004, 2,812 questionnaires were completed. However, only 1,393 respondents from the 1985 survey are used in this analysis and only 1,069 from 2004. Most of these respondents were lost because topical module variables, such as those used to collect the data used here, are typically implemented with only a subset of respondents in each year. Further, for theoretical reasons, I limited my sample only to those respondents who nominated at least one confidants; this deletion reduced the sample by 397 respondents in 2004 and 136 respondents in 1985. The remaining decrease in numbers was due to the respondents not answering one or more of the control variables. It is statistically important to initially take out the respondents who did not answer control variables so that the N remains constant throughout the entire study. This narrowed the total sample in all of the models to 2,462. Table 3.1 lists the percentages of respondents for each value of all variable crosstabulated by year in order to show the change in the demographics of the sample.

Table 3.1: Descriptives of all control variables by year.

Variable	1985	2004	Total	Mean	Std Dev
SEX				1.56	.496
Male	44.6	42.8	1078		
Female	55.4	57.2	1384		
RACE				1.180	.483
White	88.8	82.7	2121		
Black	8.3	11.2	236		
Other	2.9	6.1	105		
Number of AA CONFIDANTS CHOSEN				.241	.799
0	89.7	86.8	2178		
1	4.4	6.5	131		
2	2.4	3.4	69		
3	1.3	1.4	33		
4	1.1	1.3	29		
5	1.1	.6	22		
TOTAL NUMBER OF CONFIDANTS GIVEN				2.972	1.434
1	16.4	26.3	509		
2	16.8	24.6	497		
3	23.0	21.7	553		
4	16.7	12.0	360		
5	27.1	15.4	543		
HIGHEST DEGREE				2.972	1.434
Less than High School	24.3	11.2	458		
High School	52.9	48.2	1252		
Junior College	4.2	7.6	140		
Bachelor's	12.2	21.9	404		
Graduate	6.4	11.1	208		

N =2462. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

In order to see how the variables in this study initially relate to one another a correlation matrix was produced. Table 3.2 shows the matrix of the correlations between all of the variables used in the analysis.

Table 3.2: Correlations of dependent, independent, and control variables

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. %AA Confidant Choice	1						
2. %AA College Degree	-.011	1					
3. Age	-.046*	.031	1				
4. Degree (centered)	-.075**	.160**	-.023	1			
5. Black (centered)	.902**	-.009	-.042*	-.088**	1		
6. Other (centered)	-.026	.121**	-.073**	.032	-.069**	1	
7. Year (centered)	.051**	.866**	.026	.165**	.049*	.079**	1
Mean	9.293	-.006	44.930	.006	-.000	.000	-.213
Standard Deviation	27.612	4.071	17.009	.432	.294	.202	.494

N =2462, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

As Table 3.2 shows, the initial hypothesis that the percentage of African Americans with a college degree would have a positive relationship with the percentage of African Americans chosen as confidants, does not seem to be the case. In fact, the correlation matrix shows a negative (insignificant) association with the dependent variable. This table also reports that the highest correlation to the dependant variable is the dummy variable of being black. This correlation is understandable because of homophily. African Americans are predictably more likely to nominate other African Americans as confidants because they more commonly associate with other African-Americans.

It is useful here to pause and review the constructed variables in order to ensure that the reader has a complete understanding of their composition. The main effect that this study is concerned with is the percent of African American with a college degree. Since the state level data from the GSS could not be obtained, the independent variable was constructed by region, following the procedures described above. In order to make this data useable in SPSS the percentage of African American with a college degree was assigned to each respondent based upon the region in which they were located and the year in which they participated in the GSS. In doing this computation, the researcher learned that the American Community Survey (2004 educational attainment estimates) does not survey respondents in every state, thus some states are reported as missing data. Since the 1980 and 1990 Censuses record every state, 1985 percentages leave out those states⁶ for which the ACS did not collect data. Table 3.3 shows an increase in the percent of African Americans with a college degree in every region. In every region, the number of African Americans that have a college degree has increased substantially from 1985 to 2004.

⁶ The removed states were: Idaho, Maine, Montana, North Dakota, and Vermont.

Table 3.3: Percent African American with a College Degree by year, and region.

REGION	1985	2004
New England	14.9	20.7
Middle Atlantic	10.0	18.2
East North Central	8.6	14.3
West North Central	13.6	17.3
South Atlantic	10.0	17.8
East South Central	8.1	14.2
West South Central	9.2	15.7
Mountain	12.2	16.8
Pacific	13.5	21.5
United States Total	11.2	17.4

Source: 1980 Census, 1990 Census, and 2004 American Community Survey

Hypothesis One

I first hypothesized that the association between the two above mentioned variables (percent African Americans with a college degree, and percent African American confidant choice) would be positive. Status construction theory would suggest that if the negative status associated with African Americans has decayed then there should be a positive association between the distribution of goal objects (education) and a value of a nominal characteristic (being black). However, as Table 3.4 points out, and Table 3.1 hinted towards; this association is not significant.

Table 3.4: OLS regression on percent African American Confidant Choice by percent African American with a College Degree.

Variable	Unstandardized Beta
Constant	10.348**
% AA with College Degree	-.076
R ²	.000

N = 2462, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

Table 3.4 shows that the percent of African Americans with a college degree is not a good predictor of the percent of confidants that are African American. Without controlling for any other factors, this regression shows that the proportion of African Americans with a college degree does not affect the proportion of African Americans nominated as confidants in that region. In this case, hypothesis one is not supported because there is no significant positive association between proportion of African Americans with a college degree and the proportion of nominated confidants who are African American.

Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis states that an increase in respondents' age will be negatively associated with the proportion of African American confidants s/he nominated. Table 3.5 shows the test of this association.

Table 3.5: OLS regression of the percent of African American confidant choice by percent African American with a college degree and age.

Variable	Unstandardized Beta
Constant	12.651**
Age of Respondent	-.075*
R ²	.002

N =2462, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

Without controlling for any other factors we find support for the hypothesis that respondent age has a negative effect on the percentage of African Americans that are nominated as respondent's confidants. Table 3.5 shows that the age coefficient is significant at the .05 level; the direction of the results show that being older significantly is associated with a decrease in the nominated confidants who are African American.

Control Variables

As mentioned above, control variables will be used in order to explain some of the variance while also creating a regression equation that allows the model to predict the percentages of confidants that are African American for many different kinds of people. The first control that was used was a dummy variable that was created from the respondent's educational attainment. Respondents who listed that they had a college degree or a master's degree were all coded as one and those who responded that they had less than a college degree were coded as zero. This variable was then centered and placed in the regression model.

Since homophily is present in most all social situations, a race variable was created in order to control for the influence of racial homophily on friendship choices. Respondents who stated that they were “black” were coded as one and those who responded as “white” or “other” were coded as zero. Similarly, in another race control variable, respondents who selected “other” were coded as one and everyone else as zero. Both of these race variables were centered and placed in the model. These two dummy variable’s results signify their difference from the reference category, white.

The final control variable created was based on the year in which the respondent completed the GSS interview. Respondents who were interviewed in 2004 were coded as one and those who were interviewed in 1985 were coded as zero. This dichotomous variable was centered and placed in the regression model with the other control variables. Table 3.6 shows the regression results.

Table 3.6: OLS regression of the percent of African American confidant choice by percent African American with a college degree, respondent's educational attainment, race, year in which the interview was completed, and age.

Variable	Beta Model 1	Beta Model 2	Beta Model 3	Beta Model 4	Beta Model 5
Constant	9.292**	9.323**	9.310**	9.815**	10.207**
% AA with College Degree (centered)	-.076	.005	-.057	-.307*†	-.305*†
Degree (centered)	----	-4.781**	.340	.249	.238
Black (centered)	----	----	84.851**	84.619**	84.594**
Other (centered)	----	----	5.022**	5.154**	5.094**
Year (centered)	----	----	----	2.377*	2.378*
Age	----	----	----	----	-.009
R ²	.000	.006	.815	.815	.815

N =2462, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

Table 3.6 shows how adding control variables to our regression improved the model dramatically. The R squared shows that 81% of the variance is explained by adding in the control variables. However, most of the variance is explained by race alone. This is expected due to the homophily phenomenon. One of the most interesting finding of this regression is that when the dichotomous year variable is added, the percentage of African Americans with a college degree has a significant effect on the percentage of African American confidants chosen. However, this is significant in a negative direction, which contradicts the status construction theory argument. Since this is in the negative direction we still do not find support for hypothesis one.

Model 5 in Table 3.6 indicates that when race, education, and year are controlled for, the age of the respondent no longer has a significant effect on the model. In this

case, we would no longer support the hypothesis (two) that age has a negative effect on the percentage of African Americans chosen as confidants. These results imply that the control variables may act as moderators in the regression, and lessen the impact level that age has on the percentage of African American confidant choice. This moderating effect can be seen by comparing the difference between Table 3.5 and Table 3.6. Year, and race obviously effect the significance of age on the dependant variable but being black has the largest effect on the entire model making it the most moderating variable. When these variables are controlled for, an adjustment for the initial decision to support hypothesis two is in order; thus, we find no support of hypothesis two.

Table 3.6 also interestingly shows that the addition of race control variables changed the direction on the effect that the percent African American college degree had in the model. Although the results are not significant, such a directional change justifies further analysis. In order to examine this, white and black respondents were each run in the models separately and the results are shown in Table 3.7. These regressions show us what effect race has on each individual variable, thus allowing the researcher the ability to explore further the above changes (in Table 3.6). Since the largest explanations of variance (being black and being of another race) were no longer variables, the R squared dropped considerably. Table 3.7 helps the reader visualize the differences between white and black respondents and the effect that each control variable has on whites selecting African American confidants and blacks selecting African American confidants.

Table 3.7: OLS regression of the percent of African American confidant choice by percent African American with a college degree, respondent's age, educational attainment, race and year in which the interview was completed, selecting only whites and blacks.

Variable	Beta Model 1		Beta Model 2		Beta Model 3		Beta Model 4	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Constant	85.676**	.957**	85.618**	.950**	88.094**	1.300**	79.799**	2.426**
% AA with College Degree (centered)	-.728	.030	-.724	.023	-2.970*	-.145*	-2.928*	-.139
Degree (centered)	----	----	-.522	.415	-.236	.345	.300	.309
Year (centered)	----	----	----	----	19.571*	1.595**	19.809*	1.603**
Age	----	----	----	----	----	----	.196	-.025**
R ²	.010	.000	.010	.001	.026	.004	.037	.008

N =2121 (whites only), N= 236 (blacks only), * p < .05, ** p < .01. Source: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

Model one in Table 3.7 shows that the percentage of African Americans with college degrees does not have a significant effect on the percentage of African American confidants in either racial group. Model two shows that controlling for whether a respondent has a degree does not change the significance of the main effect variable. However, in model three, when the year is controlled for, the percentage of African Americans with college degrees has a significant effect on African American confidant choice for black respondents. Contrary to expectations though, this is significant in the negative direction. This implies that, among African Americans, living in a region where a higher percentage of African Americans hold a college degree actually decreases the percentage of African American confidants chosen. Also in model three, it is seen that a

respondent in 2004 shows a significant increase in the percent of African American confidants chosen in comparison to 1985. This result and its inferences about status construction theory will be discussed in the following section.

Among white respondents, the proportion of African Americans with a college degree was not associated with the proportion of African Americans nominated as confidants. Instead, age and year showed significant association. In the case of age, older white respondents were significantly less likely to nominate African Americans as confidants; (in contrast, older black respondents were more likely to nominate an African American as a confidant). This is directly related to hypothesis two. Table 3.6 showed us that age overall does not have a significant effect on African American confidant choice, however, when broken down by race, older white respondents nominate African American confidants significantly less. Although we found no support for hypothesis two above, the age of the respondent effects the nomination of confidants significantly for white respondents but not for black respondents.

Hypothesis Three

The final hypothesis suggests that the interaction between a respondent's race and the percentage of African Americans with a college degree would have a significant effect on the percent of African American confidants chosen. Since the only addition to the above regression (Table 3.6) was the interaction, it would be repetitive to list all of the models again. Thus, Table 3.8 only reports the final model with the addition of the interaction term.

Table 3.8: Final model of the OLS regression of the percent of African American confidant choice by percent African American with a college degree, respondent's age, educational attainment, race, year in which the interview was completed, and interaction terms.

Variable	Beta Model 6
Constant	10.355**
% AA with College Degree (centered)	-.320**
Degree (centered)	.174
Being Black (centered)	84.472**
Being Other (centered)	5.199**
Year (centered)	2.535**
Age of Respondent	-.011
Interaction term (% AA with College Degree and being other)	-.134
Interaction term (% AA with College Degree and being black)	-.786**
R ²	.816

N =2462, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Sources: General Social Survey 1985 & 2004 Topical Module- Social Networks; 1980 Census; 1990 Census; 2004 American Community Survey.

Table 3.8 shows the impact of the interaction terms discussed in the final hypothesis. Roughly the same effects reported in Table 3.6 are reported in Table 3.8. The interaction itself had a significant effect on the percentage of African Americans chosen as confidants. This effect was not in the expected direction. In order to better visualize the effect that this interaction had on our dependent variable, Figure 1.1 was computed using the ModGraph application from Victoria University of Wellington (Jose, 2008).

Figure 3.1: Percent African American College Degree * Black Respondents

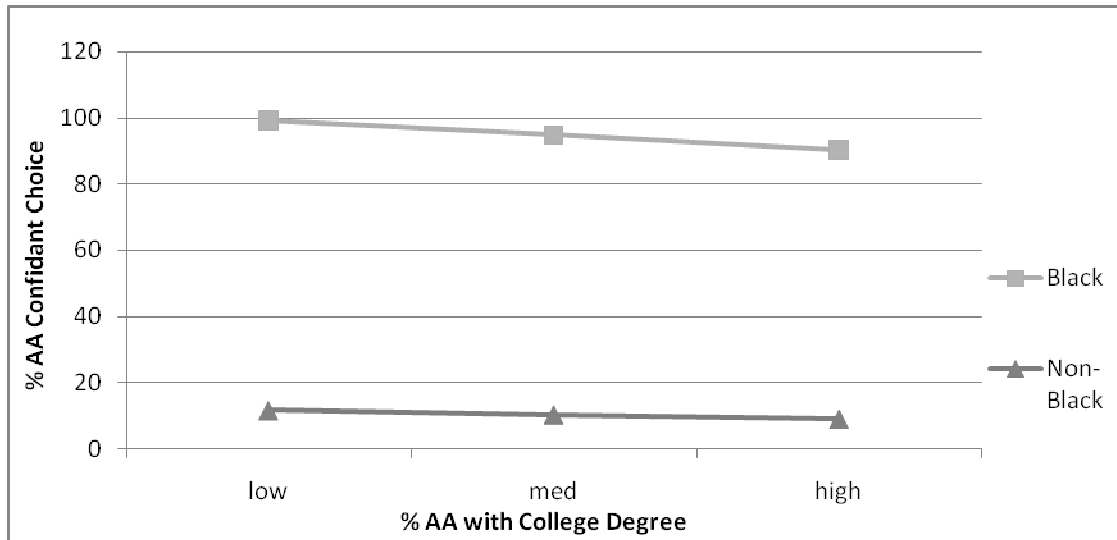


Figure 1.1 shows that being black in a region where a high percent of African Americans have obtained a college degree actually slightly lowers the percent of confidants that are African American. Status construction theory would suggest that this graph shows that no new status belief is being constructed since neither African Americans nor non-African Americans show a positive association between proportion of African Americans with a college degree and friendship choices. If race were decaying as a status characteristic, the graph should show an increase in percent confidants that are African American among both Blacks and Non-Blacks. Although we do find support for hypothesis three, the results do not support the expectations of status construction theory, since the findings are in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The findings reported in the Results section are quite different from what status construction theory suggested. Table 3.3 shows an increase in the percentage of African Americans who have obtained a college degree in each geographical region. Status construction theory would argue that this increase should be consistent with a change in the status of African Americans. Since education is a fairly common variable used to determine socioeconomic status, one would think that an increase in college degrees earned by members of a low status group would allow the groups' status to increase. However, our results painted a different picture. Status in this study is based around the likelihood one is chosen as a confidant, as it is in Brashears' (2008) article. Brashears (2008) found that countries with a higher proportion of women in supervisory positions were positively correlated with the nomination of women as confidants within those countries. Since this study replicates the framework of Brashears (2008) similar results were hypothesized here. However, this study found that respondents living in regions with a higher proportion of African Americans with college degrees were less likely to nominate African Americans as confidants and that whites living in those regions were statistically no more likely (than whites living elsewhere) to nominate African Americans as confidants. This contradicts status construction theory which states that a weakened association between goal object and nominal characteristic should also weaken the status attached to a group of people. Since the status associated with African Americans has

been negative for many years, the attainment of the goal object of education by African Americans was expected to result in a weakening of the negative status associated with them. However, our results suggest that this increase in education has the opposite effect on all respondents' confidant choices (Table 3.6).

One explanation for these unexpected results could be the possibility that there is a lag in the association of African Americans to education. Even though statistics tell us that African Americans have increased their education levels quite considerably, this does not mean that everyone sees this increase in education yet. As discussed above, the fourth structural condition (a correlation exists between the nominal characteristic and goal objects) is reliant on large amounts of people noticing the association between a characteristic and a goal object. Therefore, if enough people have not yet noticed that African Americans are increasing their education levels then the status cannot decay. This lag may be due to the fact that a person's level of education is not as noticeable as other status characteristics; therefore, decreasing the chance that people associate African Americans with this goal object.

Another possible reason for these unexpected results could be due to population distribution of race. Brashears' (2008) study focuses on gender, a status characteristic which is comparatively integrated throughout all of society, and which has two conditions of roughly equal size. The races, on the other hand, are segregated and are composed of marked minorities and a large majority. This difference could explain why we did not see the changes in the status of African Americans that Brashears saw in women in his study.

When controls were added to the model we saw a change in the effect that age had on predicting the percentage of African American confidants. Table 3.6 reports that a one year increase in the respondent's age only decreases percentage of confidants that are African American by 0.009% (which is not a significant decrease). Table 3.5 however, reports a significant decrease in the percentage of African American confidants as age increases when no control variables are included. The former table (Table 3.6) shows that the initial finding that age was significant in predicting the percentage of African American confidants could be spurious. This means that some antecedent third factor could be causing a significant result when control variables are not added into the model. However, when control variables are added (Table 3.6), we see the third factor (race) moderate or decrease the effect that age has on the dependant variable. In order to further visualize this moderating effect that race has on age, Table 3.7 was constructed in a way that the reader could compare white respondents to black respondents. In this table (Table 3.7), white respondent's age seems to have a significant effect, whereas black respondent's confidant choices are not affected by age. This is an understandable result, since more African Americans are expected to nominate other African Americans regardless of other factors. But this result does suggest that younger white respondents have a higher percentage of African American confidants. This could be linked to the decay of status. As mentioned above, Weber and Hysom suggest that mortality and conversion are the key elements in status decay. If younger people are beginning to nominate confidants of a different race, then mortality, the dying off or emigration of

people who believe and spread the status belief that African Americans have a negative status, could be a factor and would therefore suggest a status decay.

The results reported in Table 3.6 show a negative effect that living in an area with a higher proportion of African Americans with college degrees has on the proportion of confidants that are African American. Similarly, Table 3.7 shows that this effect is strongest among African Americans; black respondents who live in an area with a higher percentage of African Americans that hold college degrees report a *lower* percentage of African American confidants. This finding does not coincide with the explanation that status construct theory would suggest. Instead status construction theory would suggest that all respondents (regardless of race) should be more likely to nominate African Americans as confidants. As discussed earlier, Brashears discusses Laumann's idea that people not only will befriend people of equal status but will gravitate toward people of greater status as a way of increasing their own status. Brashears' and Laumann's explanation could be transferred to this study as a way of explaining why African Americans are more inclined to nominate friends of a different race as opposed to white respondents.

Although the other results from this analysis seem to contradict status construction theory, the addition of the year variable in Table 3.7 does show significant results that are at least consistent with status construction theory. Both whites and blacks nominate significantly more African Americans as confidants in 2004 than in 1985. At the same time, the education of African Americans has also increased dramatically. Although I have not demonstrated the theoretically expected causal link between these

two happy facts, other methods and other data could still do so. In sum, the results of the regressions run on the dependent variable of percent African American confidant choice are not consistent with the implications of status construction theory. As Ridgeway (1991) suggests, a weakening association between goal object and nominal characteristic should also weaken the negative status associated with a group of people and should begin to construct a new status at a higher level. However, improvements in completing higher education seems to separate the respondents more than Ridgeway and status construction theory would predict. Age initially had a significant impact on the percentage of African American confidants chosen, but when control variables were added no such significance prevailed. However, the regressions run only selecting whites reported significant results of age as a predictor of African American confidant choice. This section has discussed the results further in detail comparing them to expected results that status construction theory would predict. The remainder of this section will list the limitations of this study as well as avenues for further research in this area.

Limitations exist in all studies and this one is no different. As mentioned earlier, the availability of state level data would have been a positive note in terms of data collection. I suspect that the variation of the education variable that was constructed would have been much greater had state level data been utilized in this study. Brashears suggests that, although his purpose was not to test the validity of status construction theory, the results he found closely resembled the expected results if the theory were true. Brashears cautions that his data are insufficient to test the validity of status construction theory, and I make no claim that the data in the present study are more sufficient.

Another limitation to consider in this study is the use of education as the main independent variable. Ridgeway's original argument uses wealth as a goal object in examples; however, finding a true and sufficient measure of wealth is very difficult (that is, if it exists).

This study has tried to shed some light onto the idea of status construction theory's ability to explain the decay of status. Very little research has been done in this field, especially outside a controlled laboratory setting. Although this thesis was not devoted to explaining how African Americans would gain a higher status, further research could inform readers of the possibility of this happening.

Recently the United States elected its first African American President. To many African Americans this brings relief and a sense of empowerment, but to researchers like myself, it also opens new doors to study the sociological processes of racial status change. Related to this thesis is the question about whether the election of Barack Obama will allow all people to realize that African Americans are no longer the lower status that they were once perceived. Future research similar to this study, with the most recent year's data may show significantly different results. The implications of such research could be meaningful to a larger number of people outside of academia.

Conclusion

This study tested the applicability of status construction theory to a status characteristic measure through survey data. Most of the results of this study did not concur with status construction theory and its idea that a weakening of the association

between a goal object and a nominal characteristic should result in a new or improved status. Instead, this study found that the regions of higher percentage of African Americans with college degree actually lowered the percentage of confidants that are African American.

This study began with an in depth review of the literature of status construction theory, first by focusing on the foundation which it was developed (expectation states theory) and then moving to a detailed discussion of the theory itself. After the theory was fully explained, a discussion of status decay followed by a small review of historical examples of status decay was introduced. A discussion of Brashears' 2008 SPQ article was put forth as well as the use of its framework as a blue print in this study. The three hypotheses were then stated, followed by a detail of the methods and data that would be used. After the statistical tests were run, the results from these tests were reported in the subsequent chapter. The implications and discussion of these results followed as well as the limitation and opportunities for further researcher on this topic.

Status construction theory was developed to help explain how a nominal characteristic could attain status. Status decay is the idea that a particular status is amenable to change. This study tested status construction theory's ability to explain the reverse of itself and the decay of status in relation to the status of African American throughout a nineteen year span. Although these data yielded unexpected results, continued research on this topic is needed. As noted earlier, the results of such research could develop more reliable methods as well as impact many people outside of the academic community.

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