

Expectations States Theory, Status Characteristics, and Status Hierarchy:

As it applies to a Task-Orientated Family Group

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Over the years, sociologists and social psychologists have studied the interpersonal behaviors of individuals in a diverse range of situations (Berger & Webster, 2006). In particular, Bales and his contemporaries studied status and affect in interpersonal groups identified as the power and prestige behaviors of these groups. These studied behaviors led to the formation of *Expectation States Theory* (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006).

Expectation States Theory (EST) seeks to explain the processes in which an individual assigns competence levels, or expectations, to others within a group and the result or effect of these expectations on the group's interactions (Berger, Conner, & Fisek, 1974). Additionally, EST seeks to explain how inequitable structures emerge in small, problem-solving groups (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). The initial research of EST was on the development of and the ongoing differences in power that exist in these task-orientated groups (Berger, Wagner, & Zelditch, 1985). Berger, Cohen, Zelditch, and colleagues proposed to account for Bales' observations of status hierarchies in these groups (Ridgeway, 2006). They sought to explain the appearance of group status hierarchies and the types of situations in which they occur (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). Status hierarchies in groups stem from three factors: individual members' evaluation of their own task performance in comparison to other members; influences that any individual member has; and participation from individual members in the group. These are known as the "power and prestige structure" or "status structure" of the group. Member evaluations are not always cognizant and are often implicit summations about a group members' relative competence in addressing the group's task or goal (Ridgeway, 2006). Inequitable group structures occur in any type of task-orientated group, including families. After an overview of EST and a discussion of the dynamics of a particular family group situation, this paper will

analyze EST as it applies to the task-orientated family group that has the undertaking of closing a family estate.

Bales' research on the interactions of homogeneous, leaderless groups led him to believe that status hierarchies are likely to occur in any group. Coupled with earlier studies on the power of status structures on group members' evaluations of one another, including Sharif's research demonstrating how members of a group rate the performance of a higher status member as high and the performance of a lower status member as low (as cited in Ridgeway, 2006) influenced Berger's and his colleagues' EST research. Berger et al. argued that their theory could account for status structure formation in group interactions and the development of status structures in socially homogeneous *and* non-homogeneous groups (Ridgeway, 2006).

The key concepts of EST are *expectations* and the sources of these various expectations (Berger & Webster, 2006). According to the theory there are three specific expectations in task or goal-orientated groups: performance, reward, and value status. *Performance expectations* refer to the anticipations that group members have of themselves and of other members with regard to task capabilities; these expectations shape behavior in a self-fulfilling manner. *Reward expectations* are the anticipations of rewards (or goal objectives) to be acquired by the member or that of other members of the group. The anticipations of status positions that are to be held by the member or other members of the group are the *value status expectations*.

When a small, problem-solving group at the outset is homogeneous, *Power and Prestige Theory* (PPT) claims that individuals determine how they should behave with one another based on the experience that the individuals had in the interactional situation (Wagner & Berger, 2002), which determines the power behaviors or structure of the group. EST looks at how consistent and stable evaluations of singular task performances of an individual will lead to the emergence of

expectation states, or *performance expectations*, of that individual. These expectation states are the direct cause of additional power and prestige behaviors of an individual that continue to reinforce these expectations (Wagner & Berger, 2002). This is also known as a self-fulfilling prophecy, where an individual looks for behaviors that confirm their expectations. The greater the performance expectation is of one individual compared to another, the more likely the individual's ideas will be positively evaluated and the more likely the individual will be to speak up and perform in the group. If an individual's performance expectation is negatively evaluated compared to another individual, the less likely the individual will be to speak up and perform in the group. A status hierarchy of participation, evaluation, and influence of group members is created based on the comparative performance expectations of individuals in this situation (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006).

Status Characteristics Theory (SCT) was originally formulated to investigate how member formation of performance expectations of individuals determined an individual's power and prestige behavior when the group differed in status characteristic distinctions initially (i.e. race, gender, and age). Berger and his colleagues found when members of small task groups are differentiated based on status characteristics that are external to the situational task or job *observable power and prestige order in the group* is determined by this differentiation (Berger & Webster, 2006). The formation of status hierarchies in groups in these types of situations is significantly influenced by social factors. According to Correll & Ridgeway (2006), there are three distinct processes of social influences: first, there are "*socially significant characteristics*," which include occupation, race, gender, and physical attractiveness; second, there are "*social rewards*" that are gained from the interaction, such as attention, praise, or thanks; and three, there are "*patterns of behavior interchange*" between individuals, for example, when one

individual displays assertive, higher status behaviors another individual will respond with deferential, lower status behaviors (pp. 31-32).

Socially significant characteristics, also called *status characteristics*, help individuals differentiate performance expectations of others and, in turn, they know how to behave in the group situation, like when to speak up or when to refrain from speaking (Ridgeway, 2006). A status characteristic represents another's evaluation of an individual; status characteristics "are associated with differences in honor, life-chances, special privileges and immunities, rights before the law, styles of life" (Berger, et al., 1966, p. 31). Status characteristics are the qualities in which people differ and the culture that associates social esteem and competence (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). A status characteristic can be either *specific* or *diffuse*. Specific status characteristics are tied to expectations that apply to a clearly defined situation (e.g., mathematical ability for a group solving a math problem). Diffuse or general characteristics were the key to the original concept of SCT. Diffuse characteristics are not specific to any one situation, but can be applied to any range of situations, such as characteristics associated with general expectations about individuals (i.e. intelligence). For an example, if an individual believes that a male is more highly valued than a female, then gender is a diffuse status characteristic (Wagner & Berger, 2002). Because diffuse status beliefs are socially constructed, they are not necessarily accurate or objective. They are often a part of an individual's cultural belief that has been built over time. Diffuse characteristics determine group expectations and once expectations are assigned, the power and prestige order determines group members' behavior toward each other. The observed power and prestige behaviors are a direct function of the difference of performance expectations. The relationship between differences in performance evaluations, status characteristics, or participation and power and prestige behaviors is definite (Wagner & Berger, 2002).

Decades of research have empirically supported EST, generally, and the development of status hierarchies when groups are working toward a shared goal or task, specifically (Ridgeway, 2006). Additional evidence shows that the observable differences among members of these groups reflect what is assumed to be an underlying status structure of expectation states, which have developed through the various group interaction processes (Berger, et al., 1974). Because the concepts of EST have received strong empirical support, several elaborations and proliferations of the theory have been developed. Typically, EST research has focused on small task groups who do not know each other initially, but has not been applied to family groups. After describing the task and the background of the cast of characters of the task-orientated family group for this paper, the expectation states theory will be evaluated as it pertains to this family group situation.

The task situation for the family group is the closing of the estate after the death of both parents of a family of eight children. The patriarch of the family died eighteen years ago, and the matriarch died three and a half years ago. The estate is located in Fox River Grove (FRG), Illinois. It is a modest estate that includes a home with unassuming furnishings, a minivan, a dog, a few pieces of jewelry, and some minimal monetary assets (cash, stocks, and bonds). In the state of Illinois, an estate must enter probate after an estate owner dies. Probate is a legal process that transfers assets from an estate to the legal heirs of the estate. The best-case scenario is that the heirs work together gathering assets to make this legal transition as smooth as possible. With this family group, this entails emptying the house, getting the van ready to sell, finding a home for the dog, and locating the various financial institutions tied to the estate. Group members communicate face-to-face, over the telephone, and through texting, but primarily via email.

The individuals that are involved in this estate are the eight children. Bob, the eldest, has an undergraduate accounting degree and has lived and worked as a township assessor for forty years in FRG. Martin was the second oldest, but he died several years ago and is represented by his children Maureen and Alan. Martin was divorced and left his home and his life insurance policy to his children. Maureen is the oldest of Martin's children and has a doctorate in hydrology and lives in California. Alan lived in Japan for several years after his father's death studying linguistics, but he recently returned to the United States and is currently pursuing his doctorate in speech in Nebraska. Mike is the third oldest, he never went to college and has held blue-collar type jobs most of his life. Mike lives in FRG. The fourth child is Karen, an operating room nurse for a VA hospital who lives in California. Pete, the fifth child has an undergraduate degree in finance and works as a high paid insurance salesman, he is the wealthiest of the children. Pete lives in the next town over from FRG. The sixth child is Tom, who owns a plumbing business in FRG. Tom recently moved to Wyoming and works as a building inspector, he has an associate degree in this field. The seventh child is Dan, who has been unemployed for a number of years and works odd jobs for minimum wage. He never pursued a college degree and still lives in Illinois. The eighth and youngest child is Monica, who has an associate degree in math and science and worked as a freelance graphic and web designer until she recently went back to school to pursue her college degree. Monica lives in California. Most of the children are close in age, but Dan (#7) and Monica (#8) are five years apart and there is a fifteen year gap between Bob (#1) and Monica.

Often times, when an executor is chosen, the job goes to the spouse, adult children, other relatives, business associates, lawyers, or financial institutions. The person chosen as executor should be responsible, well-organized, good at managing records and accounts, and good at

conflict management. The will of the matriarch was presented to the children upon the matriarch's death and in it she designated the fifth child, Pete, as executor. According to EST, Pete's *specific external status characteristic* of having a finance degree fulfilled what the matriarch believed to be the right skill for the job as executor. Additionally, Pete's *diffuse external status characteristic* of wealth played a role in his appointment as executor. Wealth is oftentimes equated with a higher status, known as a *socially significant characteristic*. With his accounting/mathematical background, Bob also has a specific external status characteristic that could be considered the right skill for an executor. Bob's diffuse external status characteristic is his age or birth order. Age and birth order are social characteristics that can be differentially evaluated in terms of social worth and expected performance evaluation. In a large family, birth order plays a significant role in determining a person's status in the family. Some siblings felt that Bob, as the eldest, should have been designated executor, known as *value status expectations* and Pete's appointment as executor upended some sibling's expectations.

One of the first issues of the will was the matriarch's removal of Martin's children, Maureen and Alan, as heirs. She did this without getting the will notarized, which made the removal of Martin's children from the will legally invalid. This issue sparked the first performance evaluation of Pete as executor. Pete did not place Martin's children in the family status hierarchy because they were not siblings and he believed that they should give up their legal right as heirs because the matriarch's intention was to remove them. Pete believed that Martin's children would not accept being removed from the will because they were greedy. Even though they were legal heirs, Pete asked them to voluntarily remove themselves from the will. Martin's children declined to have their names removed. To Pete, Martin's children not adhering to the intended wishes of their grandmother lowered their status in the family hierarchy further

from their original placement, to the point of near nonexistence. Maureen and Alan were no longer included in any form of correspondence that the executor initiated from that point forward. Pete's performance evaluation from some of his siblings on this task was positive because they believed that Martin's children did not deserve to be in the will and although Pete was not successful in their removal, his actions as executor confirmed, in many of the siblings minds, that the grandchildren were greedy and because of their greed, Pete was unable to have them removed. The positive feedback, or *social rewards*, Pete received, elevated his feelings of status in the expectation states hierarchy and this elevated status continued to present itself throughout the handling of the estate.

Some weeks after the matriarch's death, Karen said she would like to take care of the matriarch's dog and drive the dog to California in the matriarch's van. Although Karen is older than Pete, he does not think she is of higher status. Pete's evaluation of Karen's external diffuse status characteristics is low. He judges her gender (female), location (California), and sexual preference (bisexual) as marks against her performance expectations. In fact, he specifically told her he does not like her because she lives in California. Karen's request for the dog was initially denied, but because no one else wanted the dog, she got the dog. Her request to buy the van was denied because she was told that nothing was going to be done with the estate for six months after the matriarch's death. Pete denied Karen any action-opportunities within the group, and, subsequently, the power and prestige behavior of Pete caused some siblings to give him a low performance evaluation and, in turn, his status in the group was lowered.

Two months after the matriarch died, Pete sent an email to the siblings notifying them that the house was going up for sale at the end of the month. He stated that if anyone wanted anything from the house they had thirty days to submit requests to the group by email. Several

siblings were upset by this turn of events; especially considering nothing was to happen with the estate for six months, but some siblings acquiesced, even if they did not agree with Pete, confirming to Pete a positive performance evaluation on the decision. Monica and Tom tried to appeal to Pete's better senses on this decision, but his evaluation of their diffuse status characteristics was low. Monica's gender (female), birth order (youngest), and location (California) put her just above Maureen and Alan in the family status hierarchy. Tom was younger than Pete and Pete had labeled him a troublemaker from the outset. Pete expected Tom would only cause him trouble because Pete believed Tom was angry that the matriarch did not choose Tom as executor of the estate. There were other members of the family that felt similar as Pete. Tom questioning Pete on the sudden sale of the house without an opportunity for family members to go through the house together fulfilled Pete's prediction of Tom being a troublemaker. Pete looked for behaviors that confirmed his expectations. Tom could not avoid this self-fulfilling prophecy. Because Pete was not alone in his low performance evaluation of Monica and Tom, and his high performance evaluation of himself; because of his diffuse status characteristic of wealth, several other siblings placed Pete above most of the other siblings in the performance and status hierarchy.

Mike and Dan gave Pete a positive performance evaluation. Mike and Dan's status in the family hierarchy is relatively low because they are not college graduates, they have low-paying jobs, and they are over-weight. Because Mike and Dan have high performance of expectations of Pete, they positively evaluate his ideas, which confirm Pete's status in the family and results in his power and prestige behaviors in the group.

For three and a half years, the interactions and behaviors of the family members have continued in this way, and the estate is still not closed. If any of the lower status members

question or disagree with Pete they are shunned and brought down by him; these are examples of his power and prestige behaviors. The same people continue to question him, but Pete considers them to be lower status and does not care, because those siblings are performing as he expected them to perform. Pete's power is further elevated by his behavior, because some siblings who are of lower status are afraid to question him. Pete had already felt elevated in the status hierarchy because of his extreme wealth, but the matriarch's designation of him as executor made it impossible to lower his status.

According to EST, status characteristics and performance expectations are key components of explaining how hierarchical structures develop in problem-solving groups. When individuals within these groups receive evaluations based on these components, the individual comes to believe ideas about their abilities based on these evaluations. If an individual receives a large proportion of positive performance evaluations, the individual has high expectations of their abilities and if the individual receives negative performance evaluations, their behavior reflects this (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1966). Hierarchical structures emerge from these behaviors and this is reflected in the evaluation of the family task group. As demonstrated by the expectation evaluations of Pete's performance as executor, enough siblings have given Pete positive evaluations of his performance that he has come to believe he is doing an exemplary job as executor and he is deserving of his status in the hierarchy. Lower status siblings are the only negative performance evaluations that Pete receives, and as EST states, individuals look for behaviors that confirm expected behavior. Individuals develop from others and themselves performance expectations of themselves and others and they make implicit comparisons between the two to better understand their roles in the group (Wagner & Berger, 2002). This has been clearly shown in the task-orientated family group example.

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