Pathways in the Workplace

The Effects of Gender and Race on Access to Organizational Resources

Jon Miller

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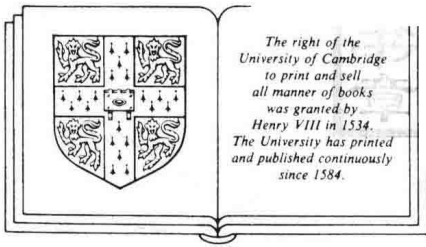
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Rationalistic theories of the workplace and the claims typically made by organizations stress that an individual's access to the resources and advantages of an organization are determined by his or her qualifications and contributions to the collective enterprise, and that the payoffs for effort are essentially the same for all those doing similar work. However, as Jon Miller shows in this book, negotiating for workplace rewards is actually far more complicated than this model allows, and he demonstrates that access to networks of organizational communication is in fact fundamentally influenced by race and gender.

Drawing on his study of American public service organizations, Professor Miller compares patterns of access to informal colleague networks and relations to the decision-making apparatus for white and nonwhite men and women. He shows that although no group monopolized the advantages of the workplace, and none was disadvantaged on all dimensions of work, no two race–gender groups faced the same set of reward allocation rules. Only white males experienced a fairly close correspondence between their bureaucratic "investments" and their workplace rewards, whereas for others more particularistic factors, such as age and ties to the external community, came to the fore.

This revealing demonstration of the systematic and potentially divisive variations that exist in the ways in which qualifications and accomplishments are linked to the rewards enjoyed by individuals within the workplace will appeal to sociologists and other social scientists interested in formal organizations, as well as in the study of gender and race. It will also be of interest to readers concerned with organizational psychology and management studies.

**The Arnold and Caroline Rose Monograph Series
of the American Sociological Association**

Pathways in the workplace

For
Bob Hagedorn,
Dick Ogles,
and, of course,
Sandy Labovitz

Preface

My ambition in this work has been to give some preliminary but suggestive answers to the problem of internal organizational stratification. The questions that I have raised about race and gender differentiation and the tentative answers that I have offered should ramify in interesting directions; obviously, however, no single study can claim to resolve such a complex problem.

In the analysis, I have concentrated most of my attention on the statistically detectable traces of organizational stratification. The measurement decisions that I have made, if not always optimal, are fairly straightforward; as a consequence, the results should be easily replicated. At the same time, I am very much aware that what people do with, to, and in spite of each other in organizations and how all of this relates to ascribed status differences must at some point be examined interpretively in order to place it in the context of a system of emergent intersubjective meaning. My hope is that the findings that I offer, and especially the gaps and uncertainties in the findings, will point to the kinds of questions that need to be asked in more fine-grained, qualitative studies in the future.

On a more macro level, I have also been attentive to the community ties of the organizations and respondents in the study, and I have taken into account the broader features of the external labor market. In fact, such considerations provide the theoretical leverage for some of the interpretations that I have advanced. However, I have not directly addressed in any comprehensive way either the origins of human service organizations or the functions they serve for the larger structures in which they are embedded. Again, my hope is that what the findings show as well as what they are unable to show will provide some direction for other investigators. What is clearly needed is to connect the dynamics of internal stratification more systematically than I have been able to do to the larger political-economic realities in which organizations are embedded.

In short, because of its objectives and its particular focus, this study should be seen as one that, more than anything else, calls for comparison, correc-

tion, and extension, both downward to the level of intersubjectivity and upward and outward to larger institutional structures.

Two comments that reveal my personal biases are also in order in these opening remarks. First, I am concerned with the practical message, if any, that is taken from the results of this study. One important finding that I report is that access to a variety of interpersonal, informal network resources was roughly equal for white men, white women, nonwhite men, and nonwhite women, but that quite distinct pathways provided this access. It involves a judgment call that goes beyond what the data directly show, but my assessment is that such findings, and the explanations of them that I offer, reveal some of the things that traditionally excluded groups are able to do, or must do, in order to deal with the institutional obstacles they face in the world of work. The message is *not* that informal organizational mechanisms compensate for or neutralize these institutional limitations. Rather, I take the data as indicating that every category of organizational participants has a range of strategic options, including the use they make of their external attachments, with which to confront the internal system of reward and resource allocation. How rationally or equitably the *organization* behaves is in large part determined by where the *organizational member* is located in the larger ascribed social system outside the organization. Put simply, the more favorably the individual is placed externally, the stronger is his or her internal claim to rational or equitable treatment.

Second, because of the topic I chose to address in this monograph, I have said next to nothing substantive about the clients who were "served" or "processed" or "treated" (the agency term is "deinstitutionalized") by the human service organizations in the survey. I am, in fact, acutely aware that many middle-class professionals – sometimes including social researchers – owe their employment and a large part of their occupational privileges to what society elects to do with various stigmatized groups. To me it is axiomatic that what happens to the people in people-processing organizations is of first importance, and this research should not be seen as elevating the problems of human service practitioners to a status above the problems of clients.

Los Angeles   Jon Miller

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Two broad questions guided this part of the investigation:

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

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

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

Research setting

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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