

# RACE, GENDER, AND AUTHORITY IN THE WORKPLACE: Theory and Research

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■ **Abstract** This chapter surveys sociological approaches to the study of job authority, including theoretical foundations, measurement, and emergence as an important dimension of social inequality. The focus here is mainly on studies of race and gender differences in the determinants of authority and the consequences of race and gender differences in authority for income. Despite significant advancements in the overall socioeconomic status of minorities and working women, race and gender remain important impediments to their attainment of authority. This pattern, which is consistent and robust in state-level, national, cross-national, and cross-temporal studies, is sustained net of an incumbent's human capital investments and structural location within and between several economic units. Following a review of the predominant explanations for gender and racial disparities in job authority is the conclusion that the most promising explanations for persistent racial and gender disparities in authority concern the racial and gender demography of the workplace and the tendency on the part of authority elites to reproduce themselves through both exclusionary and inclusionary processes. Suggestions for future research include additional delineation of these processes based on samples of multiple racial/ethnic groups of men and women and studies that synthesize quantitative and qualitative approaches to understanding the effects of employer and employee attitudes/preferences and practices on the authority attainment process.

## INTRODUCTION

The conceptualization of job authority as an important dimension of social inequality may be traced to the early theoretical treatises of Max Weber and Karl Marx. The most direct use of authority in quantitative assessments of work inequality is rooted in Dahrendorf's (1959) critique and extension of Marx's theory of class relations and class conflict. Three consecutive, and sometimes overlapping, developments in the sociological study of job authority may be discerned. First, building on the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber, researchers embarked upon theory development, operationalization, and the measurement of job authority for use in quantitative

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studies of class analysis and status attainment.<sup>1</sup> Next, the Marx and Weber lineages splintered the subsequent conceptualization and measurement of authority into two different but not necessarily mutually exclusive arguments. One is the neo-Marxian argument that job authority is a categorical discrete phenomenon that lends itself to the larger study of class analysis (Wright & Perrone 1977, Lopreato 1967, 1968, Wright 1993). The other argument involves the view that job authority is gradational or scalar, lending itself to the analysis of status groups—which is more in line with the Weberian tradition (Blau 1977, Halaby & Weakliem 1993, Halaby 1993). As a corollary to this debate, some researchers challenged Dahrendorf's original dichotomous formulation of authority, arguing that job authority can also be conceptualized as a polytomous variable—that is, a variable with three or more hierarchical levels (Robinson 1979, Robinson & Kelley 1979).

Finally, embedded in the debate surrounding the relative influence of demand-side versus supply-side explanations of group inequality, the role of race and gender versus achievement-oriented criteria in explaining authority outcomes, has dominated authority research in recent years. Overall, this research echoes earlier claims that authority is a unique and important indicator of workplace stratification comparable to, sometimes more helpful than, or otherwise complementary of traditional indicators of socioeconomic status in explaining both gender and racial inequality at work.

This chapter reviews the sociological literature on race, gender, and job authority. The theoretical foundations of job authority and its emergence as an important indicator of socioeconomic status are discussed. Next, this chapter examines how job authority has been operationalized and measured for use in quantitative assessments of workplace inequality. It then reviews several prominent explanations for race and gender differences in authority, followed by a summary of the dominant literature that describes the causes and financial costs of racial and gender exclusion from job authority. The most promising explanations for persistent racial and gender disparities in authority outcomes concern the racial and gender demography of the workplace and the tendency on the part of authority elites to reproduce themselves through both exclusionary and inclusionary processes. There is a definite need for more studies to further explore these phenomena via quantitative and qualitative strategies designed to yield detailed information on decisions made on the supply-side and demand-side of the authority relationship.

## JOB AUTHORITY AND ITS MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS

### The Importance of Job Authority

According to Max Weber, authority may be defined as the “probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons . . .

<sup>1</sup>A detailed review of the class and status attainment traditions is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Kurz & Muller (1987) for the former and Matras (1980) and Brieger (1995) for the latter.

The important difference between power and authority consists in the fact that whereas power is essentially tied to the personality of individuals, authority is always associated with social positions or roles . . . authority is a legitimate relation of domination and subjection. In this sense, authority can be described as legitimate power” (quoted in Dahrendorf 1959, p. 166). In the last 20 years, the study of the relative distribution of legitimate power (job authority) within the context of the workplace has emerged as an important area of sociological investigation. Job authority is psychologically rewarding; it brings status both inside and outside the workplace; it is related to job satisfaction, autonomy, class consciousness, class position, voting behavior, party identification, and political views (Kluegel 1978, Halaby 1979, Robinson & Kelley 1979, Wright 1979, Roos 1981, Spaeth 1985, Mueller & Parcel 1986, Jaffee 1989, Reskin & Ross 1992, Adler 1993, Reskin & Padavic 1994, Wilson 1997b, Smith 1999). In the sociological literature, however, job authority is perhaps most associated with income. As noted by Wright et al. (1995, p. 407), “job authority is one of the central ways in which the financial rewards of work are allocated.” Elsewhere, Halaby & Weakliem (1993, p. 17) declared the study of job authority to be sociology’s chief contribution to the study of earnings inequality. In short, job authority is a highly coveted workplace resource. As such, it comes as no surprise to learn that it is unequally distributed by race and gender in American society and cross-nationally. Explaining why this is the case is one of the main objectives of this chapter.

### Select Types and Dimensions of Job Authority

Job authority has been conceptualized and subsequently measured in a variety of ways. Two major classifications of authority have dominated sociological literature: control over organizational resources and control over human resources. Within these two possibilities, several types of organizational authority have been identified. *Ownership* in the form of control over the means of production, also known as control over the labor power of others (Wright et al. 1982), is perhaps the ultimate form of authority, but researchers have traditionally conceptualized ownership as something separate from authority—especially in postindustrial societies (Dahrendorf 1959). *Sanctioning authority or span of responsibility*—includes the ability to influence the pay or promotions of others (Mueller et al. 1989, Wright et al. 1995). *Span of control*—denotes the number of people under direct supervision (Mueller et al. 1989). *Decision-making or managerial authority* relates to organizational policy decisions, control over products, services, budgets, or purchases (Rosenfeld et al. 1998). Also, *hierarchical authority position* refers to an individual’s formal location within the structure of organizational hierarchies (Kluegel 1978, Wright et al. 1982, Spaeth 1985, Wright et al. 1995). Finally, measures of *supervisory authority* establish whether an individual “*supervises anyone on the job,*” a query, however, that fails to distinguish nominal supervisory status (relaying information from superiors to subordinates) from the exercise of real authority (Wright et al. 1982, p. 714). Thus, there are multiple types and various dimensions of authority. Because of this, researchers have approached the study

of race and gender disparities in authority from many different angles—a fact that, as discussed below, paints a multidimensional and often ambiguous picture of the extent of racial and gender gaps in authority.

## THEORY AND MEASUREMENT OF AUTHORITY

In his provocative book, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (1959), Ralf Dahrendorf developed a theory detailing the importance of authority, specifically job authority, in postindustrial organizations. He argued that differentials in job authority were critical in understanding the dynamics of class relations and class conflict in modern society. Even though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the debate surrounding the source of class conflict, it is important to pinpoint Dahrendorf's chief departure from Marx. For Dahrendorf, class formation and class conflict ensue not from opposing interests that exist in the relations between those who own the means and production versus those who do not, as Marx would contend. Instead, important societal changes flowing from the onset and development of industrialization have led to the separation of those who *own* the means of production from those who exercise *control* over the means of production in the form of legitimate authority over both organizational resources *and* human resources (Lopreato 1967, 1968, Hazelrigg 1972, Fox et al. 1977, Robinson & Kelley 1979, Vanneman & Cannon 1987). Dahrendorf posits authority as the basic determinant of class division in postindustrial society whereby conflict ensues over the manner in which authority is unequally distributed in society (Lopreato 1967, p. 281). Since conflict necessitates two opposing groups, Dahrendorf conceptualized authority in strict dichotomous terms (i.e., those who exercise authority versus those who are subject to it). Because this construction has important implications for the manner in which authority is measured in quantitative analyses of job inequality, it has met with widespread debate. Some have argued that a more accurate depiction of the postindustrial workplace would lead to an expanded conceptualization of authority based on various hierarchical and multidimensional configurations (Lopreato 1967, 1968, Robinson 1979, Robinson & Kelley 1979). A brief review of this literature follows.

### Dichotomous Versus Polytomous Authority

Presaging a later debate in authority research on whether authority should be conceptualized and measured as a class or status variable (Wright & Perrone 1977, Halaby & Weakliem 1993), Van den Berghe (1963) derided Dahrendorf's tendency to view class conflict in solely dichotomous terms. According to Van den Berghe, "Reducing every conflict situation to a dualist opposition involves straining the facts. Dahrendorf experiences the same difficulty as Marx in handling 'intermediate groups'" (p. 701).

The debate over whether job authority is better conceived as a dichotomous variable (having authority or not) or polytomous variable (no, low, and high

authority, etc.) marks an important chapter in the annals of authority research. While some evidence supports Dahrendorf's original two-category construction of authority (Jackman & Jackman 1983, Vanneman & Cannon 1987), strong empirical evidence points to important differences between incumbents of low and high positions of authority not only in income (Lopreato 1968, Kluegel 1978, Smith 1997), but in subjective class identification and sociopolitical attitudes (Robinson & Kelley 1979). Robinson & Kelley (1979), who conducted the most extensive examination of this issue, remarked: "The authority component of the class system is, we suggest, best viewed not as a simple dichotomy, as Dahrendorf would have it, but as a continuum . . . . Our continuous version of authority explains significantly more variance in income than Dahrendorf's dichotomy, indicating that there are important income differences within the command class" (p. 54).

When removed from larger sociological concerns of how best to characterize the stratification order, the mode of operationalizing workplace authority has largely depended on the kinds of research questions being asked. In cases where researchers are simply interested in the question of who has authority versus who does not, a simple dichotomous measure of authority has sufficed (Bridges & Miller 1979, p. 678, Hill & Morgan 1979, Wolf & Fligstein 1979a,b, Hill 1980, Halaby 1986, Vanneman & Canon 1987). However, in other cases, the relative distribution of authority may be measured according to the *amount* of authority (i.e., mean levels) that an individual or group has, or perhaps one's location within hierarchical authority structures. In either case, both scalar and polytomous measures of authority are appropriate (Kluegel 1978, Robinson & Kelley 1979, Kalleberg & Griffin 1980, Wright et al. 1982, Spaeth 1985, Mueller et al. 1989). As discussed below, group differences in both access to job authority and its effects on workplace outcomes significantly vary depending on how authority is measured.

The debate over whether to operationalize authority as a dichotomous or polytomous variable is very much linked to theoretical and empirical debates over the quantitative use of class typologies versus status scales in social stratification studies. A survey of this literature reveals three important foci linked to the development of authority research: the synthesis of opposing theories of social stratification, the operationalization and measurement of job authority for predictions of earnings inequality, and the assessment of race and sex differences in access to and income returns for authority. These three areas of study are addressed in sequence below.

## Authority as Class Typologies or Status Scales

The origins of the class versus status debate in authority research may be traced to Wright & Perrone's (1977) attempt to link Marxist theory with quantitative assessments of social inequality. Two sources of class differentiation characterized their model: ownership of the means of production and the availability of control by respondents over the labor power of others. Here the focus is on the latter. Respondents from ISR's *Survey of Working Conditions* (1969) were asked, "Do you supervise anyone as part of your job?" (p. 36). Individuals answering yes to this

question were placed in the manager category, which aptly describes an individual who has authority over subordinates in the workplace but is also dominated by the owners of the means of production—the “intermediate” or “ambiguous” category described by Van den Berghe. While this is a difficult category to classify within a traditional Marxian framework (Parcel & Mueller 1983), it represents an important extension of Marx’s traditional class model for use in quantitative research.

As with Wright and his colleagues, Robinson & Kelley (1979) and Kalleberg & Griffin (1980) viewed social stratification research as one dominated by the status attainment tradition, which proponents of the conflict approach saw as obscuring an analysis of the inequality flowing from contradictory classes within hierarchical work structures. Robinson & Kelley took themselves to be bridging the gap between the Blau & Duncan (1967) paradigm (e.g., status attainment/American tradition) and the class conflict/European theories offered by Karl Marx and Ralf Dahrendorf. The former, which grew out of a Weberian tradition of class inequality (Blau 1977), stressed the importance of individual life chances as a function of market relations. Key indicators like education, training, and work experience not only dominated this perspective, but such measures were particularly amenable to operationalization along a continuous scale.

The conflict approach, in contrast, emphasized discrete classifications involving individuals or groups located within the relational structure of ownership and control of production and was far less the subject of quantitative research prior to Wright’s construction. In fact, Dahrendorf’s (1959, p. 171) argument that authority does not permit the construction of a scale denotes the reluctance on the part of European conflict theorists to see beyond discrete class categories—a myopia that was as severe as American sociologists’ inability to see beyond status scales. While there were deeper theoretical and empirical rifts between American and European sociologists (e.g., different ways of conceptualizing and verifying social inequality), Wright’s contribution, and more explicitly, Robinson & Kelley’s work, served a deliberate unifying purpose. Before such efforts, it would be difficult to argue with Robinson & Kelley’s assertion that “the Blau-Duncan and conflict traditions tend to deal only with their school’s model of stratification and to ignore other models” (p. 42).

Drawing on the strengths of the status attainment and conflict traditions, Robinson & Kelley showed that a synthesis of Marx and Dahrendorf variables produced statistically significant effects on income in the United States and Great Britain. Specifically, once the synthesized variables (i.e., control over the means of production *and* the exercise of authority) are included in models predicting income, the amount of variance explained increases by nearly 50% over and above the Blau & Duncan status model for men but not women. Robinson & Kelley concluded that two stratification systems existed—one based on Marx’s means of production and Dahrendorf’s job authority and the other based on status as indicated by educational and occupational position (p. 54). Interestingly enough, the two systems are said to be theoretically distinct and without overlap in regard to the different mechanisms by which class and status are passed down from one generation to another.

Going a step further in their evaluation, Kalleberg & Griffin (1980) argued that conflict models actually perform better than Duncan's socioeconomic index (SEI) in predicting income. Like Robinson & Kelley, Kalleberg & Griffin capitalized on Wright's typology. Their study underscored three emerging ideas: Class as defined by ownership and supervisory control is an important source of income inequality; class and occupational status are distinct entities that must be conceptualized and empirically examined independently, and Duncan's SEI does not adequately explain inequality in job rewards.

While the class typology versus status scales debate would continue for another decade, some researchers found the need to unify rather than choose between the dominant strains of stratification research (Spaeth 1985). Although other efforts to synthesize some aspects of this literature were already under way, Spaeth's unique approach, based on a "resource control perspective"—the idea that organizational power in control over monetary resources and control over personnel had important implications for earnings disparities—represented an important advancement in authority research.

It is important to note the key distinction between Spaeth's contribution to the authority literature relative to that of Robinson & Kelley's (1979). Both attempted to unify important aspects of the stratification literature, yet Spaeth's analysis is arguably more extensive in that he assesses the effects of four types of stratification variables on income: Wright's class categories, Duncan's Socioeconomic Index, Robinson & Kelley's measures of organizational level, and Kluegel's scalar measure of supervisory authority. Robinson & Kelley, on the other hand, assess the effects of only two types of stratification variables on income: class variables drawn from concepts developed by Marx, Dahrendorf, and Wright, and traditional status attainment variables (father's and respondent's education and occupation) as offered by Blau & Duncan. The empirical question addressed by Spaeth, Robinson & Kelley, Kalleberg & Griffin, and later Halaby & Weakliem is whether continuous/status variables are better at predicting income/earnings than are discrete/class variables.

In determining which set of stratification variables are better predictors of earnings, Spaeth shows that measures of control over personnel and monetary resources are not only strong determinants of earnings, but they reduce to nonsignificance the effects of both status attainment variables *and* general measures of authority (i.e., whether or not a respondent has supervisory status). Halaby & Weakliem (1993) argued that, when it came to predicting earnings inequality, Wright's discrete class categories were not as elegant and parsimonious as continuous (scalar) measures of social status such as those offered by Robinson & Kelley (1979) and Spaeth (1985). At this juncture, authority research underwent an important shift from an emphasis on whether class or status models were better at predicting income to the practical perils of linking general theory to the narrower question of variable measurement.

In offering a more simplified conceptualization and subsequent measurement of the control sources of earnings inequality, Halaby & Weakliem challenged Wright's

class model on the grounds that it lacked conceptual and operational coherence and because it was not as parsimonious as models offered by others. They argued that “Wright introduced two different, even competing, class typologies, but no empirical grounds to choose between them” (p. 17).

In response, Wright (1993) argued that, at best, the question of whether to use scales or typologies to predict earnings depended on the research questions and the theoretical paradigm on which they are based. Wright contended that the kinds of questions he was asking, rooted as they were in the theoretical bases of contradictory class locations, were particularly suitable for hypothesizing about the causal mechanism that led to earnings inequality based on discrete class categories.<sup>2</sup> Constructed on an eight-point continuous scale, Halaby & Weakliem’s authority measure—Wright would contend—fundamentally obscured the underlying logic of contradictory class analysis, which, in Wright’s typology, included the nominal categories of capitalist, workers, and the difficult to classify categories of managers and supervisors (p. 34).

The Wright/Halaby exchange is important beyond what it reveals about the dialectical manner in which authority research has developed in the last two decades. On a deeper level, the debate highlights the chasm between theory development and theory testing. The gap between the two is often wide and only infrequently and rather imperfectly bridged. While theories may be well developed, ways of accurately testing them may be less so. By the same token, variables that are indicators of some social phenomena may be appropriately measured, but their link to well-developed theories may be tenuous at best.

Nearly a decade after the Wright/Halaby exchange, the question of whether to use continuous scales versus categorical typologies to track the processes that lead to earnings inequality in returns to authority may very well remain a moot issue. Students of stratification have benefited from this debate. Wright’s refrain that “it all depends on the research question” cannot be disputed, and Halaby’s call for more parsimonious and coherent operationalizations of key explanatory variables across studies is as poignant today as it was nearly a decade ago. Perhaps what we learned most from the aforementioned debates is that any attempt to conceptualize

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<sup>2</sup>It is interesting to note that Wright anticipated his critics, non-Marxian and Marxian alike, at the very inception of his comparative project but thought it, nonetheless, a worthy endeavor to pursue. As he noted: “‘Multivariate Marxism’ runs a number of significant risks. By proposing to operationalize and measure a range of central concepts within the Marxian tradition, it risks reducing the complexity of those concepts to a few simple empirical categories. By deploying these empirical measures in statistical models, it risks losing the ‘dialectical’ and dynamic character of the explanations Marxists generally advocate. And by suggesting that Marxian arguments can be formulated as ‘testable hypotheses’ within multivariate equations, it encourages empiricist attacks which may frequently do more to confuse than clarify issues. The underlying assumption of the Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness has been that these risks are worth taking” (Wright 1989, p. 16).



or operationalize the stratification order based on a single variable is bound to offer a mere partial glimpse of society at any given point in time. Otis Dudley Duncan made the point this way:

There is no such thing as a single index of socioeconomic status suitable for all purposes of social research in a modern, complex society. Even in small and static communities of the United States, it is a patent oversimplification of the facts to suppose that the whole population may be placed unambiguously in intervals of a single scale of "class" or "status." Given the actual complexity and multidimensionality of the stratification structure, any particular variable or index can at best reflect a selected aspect of a structure that may be strategic from a certain point of view. (Duncan 1961, p. 139; quoted in Wolf & Fligstein 1979a, p. 104.)

This suggests that prior syntheses of multiple conceptualizations of society (class and status viewpoints), and multiple operationalizations of stratification measures and indices (dichotomous, polytomous, *and* scalar approaches), represent the first best steps to approximating a more complete picture of the stratification order (Robinson & Kelley 1979, Spaeth 1985).

In a roundabout way, it would be the lack of such a synthetic approach that would give rise to studies of race and gender differences in authority at work. Important research from the status attainment tradition would produce findings that appeared incongruent with what was known at the time about the distribution of minorities (mainly blacks) and women in the stratification order. When compared to earlier time periods, key indicators of stratification (education, occupational status, and income) showed significant improvements for blacks in absolute terms and relative to whites during the 1970s (Featherman & Hauser 1978, Hout 1984). Similarly, gender studies of status attainment reported that men and women had similar levels of occupational status and very few differences in the processes that led to occupational attainment (Featherman & Hauser 1976, Treiman & Terrell 1975). Both sets of findings seemed counterintuitive and raised questions about whether status attainment indicators were indeed capable of fully capturing the contours of race and gender inequality. Such suspicions gave rise to empirical assessments of different (i.e., smaller) units of analyses such as the characteristics of the types of jobs that blacks and whites and men and women occupy. With this backdrop, the study of the "job" and specifically "job power" in the form of legitimate authority emerged as an important focus in studies of race and gender stratification. Two broad research questions would come to frame the literature on race, gender, and authority at work. Are there net racial and gender differences in authority attainment? Are there race and gender differences in the amount of income received for occupying similar positions of authority at work? When considering the sheer number of studies attempting to answer these two questions, it is clear that the study of ascriptive differences is the single most important research focus among authority researchers in the last two decades. Before summarizing the main findings from this literature, a brief

discussion of selective theories of race and gender differences in authority is worth reviewing.

## EXPLANATIONS FOR RACE AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN JOB AUTHORITY

Explanations for the processes that produce and sustain race and gender differences in the determinants and consequences of job authority may be loosely categorized as either supply-side or demand-side explanations aimed at the level of individuals (micro-level theories), society at large (macro-structural level theories), or jobs, organizations, occupations, and industries (meso-level theories).

### Micro Theories (Individual Level)

Early attempts to explain race and gender differences in job authority relied on theories popular in occupational segregation and wage discrimination literature (Hill 1980). Human capital and status attainment explanations, drawn from neo-classical economics (Becker 1964, Thurow 1969) and sociology (Blau & Duncan 1967, Sewell & Hauser 1972, Featherman & Hauser 1978), respectively, provided a set of assumptions that pointed to the behaviors and characteristics of individuals in the form of investments in the attributes that were thought to lead to authority. According to this view, women and minorities may have less authority than white men because they have lower investments in factors such as training, education, and experience, or because they have less seniority or intermittent labor force attachment. Such factors may increase the likelihood of attaining authority while simultaneously serving as forces that legitimize the authority structure (Wright & Perrone 1977).

Moreover, both human capital and status attainment approaches assume that strategic decisions or aspirations may drive the career choices of individuals. Within the context of authority research, these approaches suggest that women more so than men may opt out of contention for positions of authority because they place less value on workplace authority (see England 1992, p. 19 and Reskin & Padavic 1994, pp. 77–78 for a discussion), or because women are more likely than men to assume family responsibilities (Wolf & Fligstein's 1979a, D'Amico's 1986, Jaffee 1989, Wright et al. 1995, Hopcraft 1996, Baxter 1997). Phrases such as *compensating differentials* (Filer 1985, Jacobs & Steinberg 1990) and *mommy track* (Ehrlich 1989) denote the idea that women's *preferences*, either because of gender-role socialization (Reskin & Padavic 1994, p. 41) or rational choices, may prompt them to *self-select* themselves out of contention for positions of authority due to family responsibilities (Baron 1987, Wadman 1992). However, despite its potential importance, the association between family status and job authority has not been fully explored.

Even though race and gender differences in human capital attributes do not fully explain race and gender gaps in authority, studies show that investments in human capital significantly increase the odds of gaining access to authority

(Kluegel 1978, Halaby 1979, Hill 1980, Jacobs 1992, Smith 1997, Wilson 1997b, Ross & Reskin 1992). However, the presence and magnitude of such effects may depend on how authority is measured. Some research shows that when authority is measured according to the number of subordinates supervised (span of control), there is no effect of education on the authority attainment of blacks and whites (Mueller et al. 1989), but hierarchical authority measures show that unit increases in education facilitate the movement of both black and white employees into both lower and higher levels of authority (Smith 1997, Wilson 1997b).

In race and gender studies, most attention given to the hypothesized effects of human capital variables on authority assesses whether or not minorities and women are required to have higher levels of human capital investments than their white male counterparts to reach similar levels of authority. Clear evidence supports this contention. The effects of human capital variables on authority are more pronounced among blacks than whites (Kluegel 1978, Mueller et al. 1989, Wilson 1997b, Smith 2001). Women in Sweden have to have more work experience than men to receive similar authority rewards (Hutlin 1996, 1998, p. 107), and women in the United States achieved much less authority than men with similar schooling and experience (Wolf & Fligstein 1979a,b, Halaby 1979, McGuire & Reskin 1993, p. 494).

In summary, human capital investments are vitally important for ushering workers into positions of authority, regardless of race or gender. The relative effects of such variables on authority, while generally positive, appear to vary depending on the manner in which authority is measured. Moreover, the rates of return in authority to human capital investments vary significantly by race and gender, with blacks and women receiving less authority than whites and men, respectively, for similar levels of human capital investments. But as important as human capital variables are (especially at the entry ports of the authority distribution), their effects often disappear or are significantly diminished once structural-related variables are taken into account (Kluegel 1978, Smith 1997).

## Macro Structural Theories (Societal Level)

Structural explanations for ascriptive inequality in the distribution of authority and in earnings returns to authority represent an important counterweight to individual-level attainment models. From the very beginning, authority researchers surmised that apart from the unequal distribution of human capital endowments, minorities and women had differential access to positions of authority in the workplace because they were disproportionately located in the most marginalized structures of the economy.<sup>3</sup> The macro structural indicators typically used to explain ascriptive differences in authority are region (Mueller et al. 1989, Smith 1997, 1999), city

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<sup>3</sup>It is important to note that both race and sex may be viewed as a dimension of social structure (Blau 1977). At the same time, positions within and between authority hierarchies constitute the structural entities within which race and sex groups are unequally distributed—ostensibly, as discussed below, because of the status associated with minority and female identity.

size (Smith 1999), industrial sector (Mueller et al. 1989), and employment sector (Wilson 1997b). Other structural predictors of authority have been classified according to union versus non-union status (Kluegel 1978, Mueller et al. 1989, Smith 2001), and more recently, race/ethnic concentration of workers operationalized at the level of the workplace, local industrial sectors, and local occupational groupings (Elliott & Smith 2001, Smith & Elliott, forthcoming). Along these lines, minorities and women are more likely to have authority in economic structures where they exist in large concentrations like the South, the public sector, within coethnic enclaves, and in industries or locales more susceptible to economic downturns (Mueller et al. 1989, McGuire & Reskin 1993, Wilson 1997b, Smith 1999, Smith & Elliott forthcoming).

Additionally, it stands to reason that neo-institutional dynamics influence the authority attainment of women and minorities. Factors such as the outside influence of periodic organizational review, government policy, and both the size and age of an organization may make it more or less amenable to the inclusion of women and minorities in its managerial and authority ranks (Baron et al. 1991, Marsden et al. 1996, Huffman 1995, 1999, Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs 1999). Both gender and racial equality at work appear to be more pronounced in large organizations, in the public sector, in newer rather than older organizations, in organizations subject to periodic review, during periods of EEO enforcement, and in organizations that have formalized personnel policy (Baron et al. 1991, Wilson 1997b, Huffman 1999, 1995). However, save for a few studies that control for public sector employment and establishment size, authority research has not specifically taken into account the direct effects of governmental policies on authority outcomes. Instead, public sector employment and large establishments are often treated as proxies for antidiscrimination policies because public sector employers and employers of large organizations are more susceptible than private sector and small organizations to government influence.

By and large, neither the separate nor the additive effects of structural *and* human capital factors explain race and gender differences in authority or ascriptive disparities in the economic rewards that flow from authority. For this reason, researchers have considered the role of employer discrimination in the authority attainment process. Two employer-side explanations of race and gender discrimination in authority have dominated the literature in recent years, including social closure/segregation and homosocial reproduction. These factors are loosely described below as meso-level theories of discrimination because majority-group gatekeepers positioned at the entry ports and promotional ladders of jobs/organizations or establishments are typically charged with the responsibility of making the kinds of decisions that often lead to the exclusion of some minorities and women.

## Meso-Level Theories of Discrimination

**SOCIAL CLOSURE** Meso-level theories of discrimination are rooted in the idea that majority group members who occupy positions of authority at work have a vested

interest in maintaining their hegemony over such positions and do so by excluding candidates who differ from them in racial and gender identity. Exclusionary theories allow for both conscious and not-so-conscious acts of discrimination. Max Weber's (1968) idea of "social closure," its recent application to analyses of race and sex job/occupational segregation (Tomaskovic-Devey 1993a,b, Reskin 1993), the concept of "statistical discrimination," and class conflict (Dahrendorf 1959, Wright & Perrone 1977) approaches, may each be classified as a conscious act of exclusion on the part of authority elites. On the societal level, social closure underscores the idea that political and social elites preserve power and privileges by limiting opportunities for mobility to themselves or similar others. Social closure may assume two additional processes of exclusion: Minorities and women are likely to be segregated into the kinds of jobs, work settings, and industries that do not confer authority, but even when such factors are taken into account, they are still less likely than their white male counterparts to exercise authority (Tomaskovic-Devey 1991, 1993, Reskin & Padavic 1994, p. 96, Elliott & Smith 2001). In a similar vein, statistical discrimination denotes the idea that gatekeepers use race and gender as a proxy for likely productivity when they make hiring and promotion decisions—especially when other personal information about the candidate is lacking.

**HOMOSOCIAL REPRODUCTION** The general lack of personal information and the infrequent opportunities to build trust and mentorship relationships between authority elites and female and minority subordinates is also the basis of Rosabeth Moss Kanter's idea of "homosocial reproduction" (see Reskin et al. 1999 for a summary). Except, unlike social closure, the motivations behind homosocial reproduction may be a bit less conscious and overt. Although primarily aimed at explaining gender differences in managerial attainment, Kanter's (1977) idea of homosocial reproduction has garnered a significant amount of attention among researchers studying race and gender differences in job authority, promotional status, and promotional aspirations (Kluegel 1978, Mueller et al. 1989, Baldi & McBrier 1997, Pfeffer & Davis-Blake 1987, Wilson 1997b, Smith 1999, Cassirer & Reskin 2000). Kanter pointed to the inherent uncertainty involved in making decisions to promote subordinates into higher managerial ranks. Such uncertainty encourages authority elites to develop management enclaves composed of individuals who share a common set of social and demographic characteristics. Importantly, the higher up the organizational chain of command, the more unstructured, nonroutine, and subjective are the criteria for authority attainment. In this context, shared understanding, solidarity, commitment, and trust are better facilitated in settings where gender homogeneity exists (Elliott & Smith 2001, p. 260). Beyond the implication that men in positions of authority have a tendency to promote subordinate men, researchers have argued that this idea partially explains racial differences in promotion rates (Baldi & McBrier 1997) and authority attainment (Mueller et al. 1989, Reskin et al. 1999, Smith & Elliott forthcoming, Elliott & Smith 2001).

The effects of homosocial reproduction can apparently be mitigated as the proportion of women and minorities in an organization increases. According to Kanter,

as the proportion increases so does the likelihood of available mentors, political allies, and role models—factors that increase the likelihood of managerial attainment and commensurate financial rewards. Dubbed the strength-in-numbers hypothesis (Jacobs 1992), this idea runs counter to predictions drawn from Blalock's (1967) analysis of racial segregation. According to Blalock, increasing numbers of blacks moving into white neighborhoods heighten white resistance. Thus, within the context of organizational theory, the so-called resistance-to-threat hypothesis suggests that as the proportion of women and minorities increases in an organization, so does white, male resistance (Pfeffer & Davis-Blake 1987, Jacobs 1992). Adjudicating between the two hypotheses has been difficult due to the lack of firm-level analyses.

### Bottom-Up Ascription

Recent research on race- and sex-based description in the authority attainment process stresses the tendency on the part of authority elites to match subordinates and supervisors on the basis of race and sex (Tsui & O'Reilly 1989, Elliott & Smith 2001). Whereas homosocial reproduction and social closure denote top-down exclusionary processes on the part of authority elites, bottom-up ascription has been described as an attenuating strategy whereby, at the bottom of organizational hierarchies, employers actively seek to match subordinate/superordinate groups on the basis of race and ethnicity as a means of reducing perceptions of discrimination on the part of subordinate racial/ethnic minorities (Elliott & Smith 2001). According to Elliott & Smith (2001, p. 261), "bottom-up pressures for ethnic matching, regardless of the source, push against top-down pressures of homosocial reproduction to influence when and where members of particular minority groups are likely to gain access to positions of authority."<sup>4</sup> To the extent that minorities have authority at all, at least one of three patterns is nearly always present: Racial minorities are more likely to have authority over other racial minorities; subordinate racial minorities are more likely than majority group members to have minority superiors; and minorities are more likely than majority group members to exercise authority at the bottom of organizational hierarchies—where, not surprisingly, racial minorities tend to be disproportionately represented. Not only is more research needed in this area to more precisely delineate the mechanisms that propel these processes, but we also need a deeper understanding of the consequences of such patterns for minority perceptions of workplace discrimination.

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<sup>4</sup>Bottom-up ascription partially denotes the idea that subordinate groups and their champions are not completely powerless and passive agents in the authority attainment process. Endogenous influence on the part of subordinate groups (or their agents) pressing for change from within organizations (i.e., diversity councils/teams) and exogenous forces operating at local, state, and federal levels (i.e., affirmative action and EEO laws) may serve to mitigate what would otherwise be complete ascriptive reproduction on the part of authority elites. More targeted research in this area is needed.

## Relational/Organizational Demography

The racial and gender composition of organizations and the impact that such composition has on organizational outcomes is an important area of investigation among sociologists (Baron & Bielby 1980, Pfeffer 1983).<sup>5</sup> This approach argues that one's demographic characteristics in relation to others influence interaction between co-workers and supervisors in a manner that mediates a variety of individual-level and organizational-level outcomes at work (Tsui & O'Reilly 1989, Tsui et al. 1992, Tsui & Gutek 1999)—including job authority. Similarities or differences in the race/ethnic and gender characteristics of one's co-workers and superiors may either enhance or decrease one's workplace experiences. A finding in the organizational demography literature provides some justification for why white men might want to exclude minorities and women from positions of authority. Studies show that heterogeneous group interaction increases negative workplace experiences and decreased mobility chances for white men (Tsui & O'Reilly 1989, Tsui et al. 1992, Smith 2001), but white men benefit most from working in coethnic occupational structures (Smith & Elliott, forthcoming). In this context, the inclusionary/exclusionary properties of homosocial reproduction may be seen as more a matter of self-preservation and less a matter of benign or proximate discrimination.

The next section presents a review of the causes and economic consequences of race and gender differences in job authority. Major findings are presented separately for race and gender groups for two non-ideological reasons. First, save for a few exceptions, race and gender studies of authority have developed independently of each other. Second, while there is some overlap, the factors that facilitate and constrain the authority experiences of women relative to men are largely different from those that structure the authority outcomes of racial minorities relative to whites (Paracel & Mueller 1983, p. 158). I begin with a review of the major findings from the race and authority literature followed by a review of the research on gender and authority.

## THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF RACE DIFFERENCES IN AUTHORITY

Amid the backdrop of the civil rights movement, studies documenting the causes and economic consequences of racial differences in socioeconomic status became popular among status attainment and social class researchers (Wright & Perrone 1977, Featherman & Hauser 1978, Kluegel 1978, Wright 1979, Hout 1984). Status attainment and human capital approaches to understanding patterns of socioeconomic progress noted that the early to mid-1970s ushered in a

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<sup>5</sup>See Reskin et al. (1999) for a recent review of this literature. Here the theory is presented as a precursor to a discussion of relevant findings in the authority literature.

period of unprecedented black mobility. The racial gap between blacks and whites along key individual-level indicators of attainment (education, occupational status, and income) significantly narrowed throughout the 1970s (Farley & Allen 1987). Despite this progress, significant racial differences in socioeconomic achievement remained firmly intact, and researchers were interested in finding out why. In this context, the study of race differences in the determinants and consequences of job authority for income emerged as an important area of sociological investigation. Several important research questions frame the literature on race and job authority: (a) What is the extent of both racial (Kluegel 1978, Parcel & Mueller 1983, Mueller et al. 1989, G. Wilson 1997a, Smith 2001) and ethnic differences in authority (England et al. 1999, Smith 2001, Elliott & Smith 2001, Smith & Elliott forthcoming); (b) do the processes that lead to authority differ for blacks and whites (Kluegel 1978, Parcel & Mueller 1983, Mueller et al. 1989, G. Wilson 1997a, Smith 2001); (c) what is the financial cost of racial exclusion from authority (Kluegel 1978, Parcel & Mueller 1983, Smith 1997, Wilson 1997b); and (d) to what extent does the racial demography of the workplace influence the authority attainment process of black, white, Asian, and Latino men and women (Smith 2001, Elliott & Smith 2001, Smith & Elliott, forthcoming)?

## The Extent of Racial/Ethnic Differences in Job Authority

The race and authority literature has largely been restricted to studies of blacks and whites, perhaps because these groups were at the center of civil rights struggles during the 1960s and 1970s. The major findings from this literature extended what was known about consistent patterns of racial disparities along key socioeconomic indicators. Regardless of the data source or the measure of authority under consideration, a clear and consistent finding may be gleaned from the literature on race/ethnicity and authority. Namely, blacks are less likely than whites to exercise authority in the workplace, and the authority gap is not fully explained by race differences in human capital investments, parental background, or where blacks are located in the labor market (Kluegel 1978, Wright 1979, Parcel & Mueller 1983, Mueller et al. 1989, McGuire & Reskin 1993, Smith 1997, Smith 1999, Wilson 1997b). Moreover, the largest racial disparity occurs at higher levels of occupational status where the criteria for promotion are often vague relative to lower occupational levels (Kanter 1977, Kluegel 1978, Smith 1999, Wilson 1997a).

Because authority measures vary from one study to another, a clear understanding of the overarching magnitude of the racial/ethnic gap in job authority is difficult to ascertain. Studies based on continuous measures of authority may provide an average racial difference in the distribution of authority (Kluegel 1978), the mean number of subordinates an individual supervises (Mueller et al. 1989), or the proportion of individuals who have say over the pay, promotion, hiring, and firing, or broad supervisory or managerial control over others (Parcel & Mueller 1983, Mueller et al. 1989, England et al. 1999, Smith 2001). Still other measures, whether continuous or categorical, combine multiple types of authority indicators



to form hierarchical trichotomies (high, low, no authority) (Wilson 1997a, Smith 1997, 1999, Smith & Elliott), or composite linear dichotomies (Parcel & Mueller 1983, McGuire & Reskin 1993). Regardless of the way authority is measured, one consistent finding seems clear: Minorities are less likely than whites to exercise authority at work even when all known determinants of authority are taken into account.

Findings based on a Wisconsin sample show that the authority rank of black men is about half that of white men (Kluegel 1978, p. 290), while national studies report that white men's authority scores range from 10% to 30% higher than those of blacks depending on the authority measure under consideration (Parcel & Mueller 1983, Mueller et al. 1989). Concerning the more coveted positions of authority, such as the exercise of high authority (having say over the pay and promotions of others *and* say over hiring and firing), white men are nearly twice as likely as blacks and Hispanics to hold such positions (Smith 2001, Smith & Elliott forthcoming), while Asian men appear to be as likely as white men to have such authority (Smith & Elliott forthcoming). Data from the 1993 wave of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth show greater parity between white men and Latino men when authority is measured as a dichotomous variable based on a whether a respondent's census occupation included the title "manager" or "supervisor" (England et al. 1999). Using this procedure, England and associates (1999) also showed that both white women and Latina women have more authority than black men, and the gender gap in authority among blacks was virtually non-existent (see England et al. 1999, Table 4.1).

Race differences in authority attainment also vary by time period. Analyses of repeated cross sections of General Social Survey data (1972–1994) and data from two waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (1976 and 1985) show that the racial gap among men in accessing positions of high authority (Smith 1999) and authority to hire/fire and influence the pay and promotions of subordinates (Wilson 1997b) has actually increased from the 1970s to mid-1990s—with the 1980s constituting the greatest era of inequality among the three decades in question. This pattern is noteworthy in its own right, but it is particularly significant when one considers the relative deterioration of black gains during the 1980s along other key indicators of socioeconomic status including employment, earnings, managerial attainment, and broad occupational mobility (Jaynes & Williams 1989, Leonard 1990, Nkomo & Cox 1990, Burstein & Edwards 1994, Bell & Nkomo 1994, Cancio et al. 1996, Bound & Freeman 1992, Bound & Dresser 1999).<sup>6</sup>

No shortage of explanations exists for the widening racial gap in authority (and other socioeconomic indicators) during the 1980s. In addition to major shifts in the structure of the economy from a goods-producing to a service-oriented economy, a pattern that led to increased black unemployment, the 1980s ushered in a period of intense white opposition to affirmative action (Bobo & Smith 1994), a reduction

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<sup>6</sup>The pace of occupational sex integration also slowed during the 1980s when compared to previous decades (Reskin 1993; Adler 1993).

or complete elimination of affirmative action practices on the part of many firms (Kelly & Dobbin 1998), and noticeably weaker enforcement of equal employment opportunity laws (Leonard 1990, pp. 58–59). While the association between these factors and declines in black authority attainment is more than plausible, more research, in line with neo-institutional approaches (Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs 1999), is needed to draw a tighter link between external environmental influences and ascriptive differences in authority outcomes.

### Race Differences in the Processes that Lead to Authority

Many of the important determinants of authority differ for blacks and whites either because employers reward the credentials of one group more than the other, or because the variables that improve or detract from the authority chances of one group have no observable impact on the other group. In either case, when this occurs in a quantitative framework, it provides strong evidence that the races reach authority through demonstrably different means. The finding that there are important differences between blacks and whites in the processes that usher workers into authority has not been contradicted since it was first observed by Kluegel (1978).

Race differences in educational attainment (Kluegel 1978) and in the amount of authority returns to some human capital factors are important but not dominant sources of racial disparities in authority. Black women receive a lower return than white women for similar investments in firm tenure (McGuire & Reskin 1993, p. 495–96). Structural factors play a more important role than human capital factors in differentially distributing the races, but the combined effects of both human capital and structural determinants still leave much of the racial gap in authority unexplained (Smith 1999). Race differences in the additive effects of human capital credentials and a variety of structural indicators help to explain race differences in the distribution of authority. Regardless of the manner in which economic structures are operationalized, blacks and Latinos tend to be at the bottom of such structures, which tends to decrease their chances of gaining authority relative to whites.

Assessments of whether the processes that lead to authority differ for minorities and whites are often based on observations of race/ethnic specific regression results for minorities and whites. After establishing a basis for comparing coefficients across race-specific models, differences and similarities in the number of statistically significant determinants of authority are observed. Since human capital and structural indicators significantly impact the authority attainment of minorities more than whites, researchers have concluded that the authority attainment process of minorities is more circumscribed and governed by a tighter set of rules than that of their white counterparts (Mueller et al. 1989, Wilson 1997a, Smith 2001).

### The Consequences of Race Differences in Authority Attainment for Income

The first studies to link job authority to race and income sought to shed further light on the sources of black-white differences in socioeconomic status using

positions within authority structures as an indicator of earnings inequality (Wright & Perrone 1977, Kluegel 1978). Wright's work in this area represents one of the first examinations of race differences regarding the consequences of authority (as class position) for group disparities in income (Wright & Perrone 1977; Wright 1978, 1979). An important finding in this research revealed no discernable race differences in income returns to education within class/authority categories—a finding that suggested class was more important than race as a factor that determines the life chances of blacks relative to whites.<sup>7</sup>

Wright's research added an important wrinkle absent in status attainment studies of race differences in educational returns to income. According to Wright, the effects of race on income, while important in their own right, operate through the positions that racial groups occupy within and between workplace structures (what Wright refers to as the "social relations of production"). Because black men occupied the lowest positions in the managerial hierarchy, they received comparatively less economic payoff than their white male counterparts for becoming a manager (Wright & Perrone 1977, p. 52). The dominance of class effects over racial effects on income in Wright's research did not mean that race was not an important factor that determined the life chance of blacks. Wright cautioned against this interpretation noting that it would be erroneous to assume that "all racial discrimination is really disguised class oppression" (1979, p. 197).<sup>8</sup> Instead, he speculated that racial discrimination may in fact take place during the prelabor market and promotional stages of the employment process. In fact, we now know that race differences in prelabor market factors do not account for much of the net disparities in authority or income. Instead, as much as we can discern, racial disparities in income accrue because blacks receive comparatively lower returns than whites to their human capital investments, even when they occupy similar levels of authority and are located in the same industries (Kluegel 1978, McGuire & Reskin 1993). McGuire & Reskin found that a full 55% of the earnings gap between white men and black men, and 62% of the earnings gap between black women and white men was accounted for by the comparatively lower returns that blacks receive for occupying similar authority levels and industrial locations as whites and having similar levels of human capital (p. 499). However, data based on young cohorts of black, white, and Latino men and women suggest that authority only explains about 2% of the pay differences between ethnic and gender groups, but the authors speculate that this finding may be attributed to the way they measured authority (England et al. 1999, p. 166, fn 16).

In addition, evidence suggests that racial discrimination is more likely to take place at higher levels of the authority structure (Kluegel 1978). Kluegel's work showed that black men receive a lower income return to authority than do whites—with the income disparity more pronounced at higher authority levels. Kluegel

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<sup>7</sup>As discussed below, Wright also examined whether there were interactions between class and sex. Explicit testing of the significance of race *and* sex would later emerge as a central focus of several authority studies (Reskin & Ross 1992; Wilson 1997a,b; Smith 1997, 1999).

<sup>8</sup>See Wright (1979, pp. 197–207) for a detailed discussion of racism and class domination.

calculated the cost of black men's exclusion from positions of authority to be about one third of the total black/white income gap.

Longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (1975, 1976) further underscore two previous findings based on cross-sectional data: Race (and sex) differences in earnings are partly due to differential access to span of control and span of responsibility; and class and/or authority will have a substantial effect on earnings net of human capital and labor market characteristics (Parcel & Mueller 1983). According to Parcel & Mueller, racial disparities in earnings are a function of the different labor market positions blacks and whites occupy in addition to the fact that blacks receive unequal rates of return for occupying similar positions of authority.

Studies of change over time in the authority attainment process and income returns to authority reveal that the racial gap in authority *and* in the amount of income returns to authority or managerial positions has either increased (Wilson 1997a,b) or remained constant over time (Jacobs 1992, p. 293; Smith 1997, 1999). As noted earlier, these patterns are associated with changes in the structure of the economy, increases in black unemployment, and growing opposition toward antidiscrimination legislation and social policies designed to improve economic life chances.

## Racial Demography and the Authority Attainment Process

Although researchers have long held that the racial and gender composition of organizations affects organizational outcomes (Baron & Bielby 1980, Pfeffer 1983, Pfeffer & Davis-Blake 1987), authority analysts have only recently begun to deal with this issue across race, ethnic, and gender categories. One study has examined whether the ethnic concentrations of establishments, occupations, and industries influence the authority attainment of white, black, Hispanic, and Asian men and women (Elliott & Smith 2001). Using data from the Multi City Survey of Urban Inequality and 1990 decennial census occupational codes, Elliott & Smith 2001 find that racial/ethnic concentration among roughly equivalent coworkers at the level of work groups, industries, and occupational sectors has little effect on the chances of minorities accessing positions of authority. However, concentration in the form of racial/ethnic matching of supervisors to subordinate work groups exerted a strong and consistent effect among all groups, implying that, for some groups, authority attainment depends a great deal on the opportunity to supervise largely coethnic work groups (cf. Mueller et al. 1989). Elsewhere, an extended analysis suggested that only white men benefit from homogenous occupational niche employment (Smith & Elliott forthcoming), but unlike other groups, white men's authority attainment is decreased if they have a female supervisor (Smith 2001).

To sum, the race and authority literature documents important racial differences in the authority attainment of the two groups most studied—blacks and whites. Major conclusions point to systematic discriminatory practices in the processes

that lead to authority and in the amount of financial returns that blacks receive for occupying positions of authority similar to those of whites. Indeed, large-scale quantitative assessments based on secondary survey data provide only a partial glimpse of the mechanisms that generate and sustain racial inequality in authority outcomes. We know very little about the authority of racial and ethnic groups beyond blacks and whites. The few investigations that offer analyses that include the authority experiences of Latino and Latina Americans (England et al. 1999, Smith 2001) and of Latino and Asian Americans (Smith & Elliott forthcoming) reveal a racial/ethnic authority hierarchy with white and Asians on top and with blacks and Latinos on the bottom. Further clarification of this hierarchy is needed along with extensive delineation of the economic consequences that it produces. Moreover, very little is known about trends in the absolute and relative authority outcomes of racial/ethnic groups. What little we do know is cause for some alarm because, despite political pressure and the implementation of important antidiscrimination legislation over the last 20 years, the racial gap in authority *and* in the amount of income returns to authority has either increased (Wilson 1997b) or remained constant over time (Smith 1997, 1999). Indirect tests of discrimination find consistent support for the theory that racial/ethnic differences in the processes that lead to authority are characterized by closer scrutiny of the formal labor market credentials of black men (Mueller et al. 1989, Wilson 1997, Smith 2001) and Latino men (Smith 2001) compared with the scrutiny of their white counterparts. Finally, a new line of authority research that emphasizes the impact of workplace diversity on authority outcomes shows that only white men benefit from homogeneous occupational niche employment (Smith & Elliott forthcoming), but unlike other groups, white men's authority attainment is lessened if they have a female supervisor (Smith 2001). Finally, employers appear to match supervisors and subordinates by race and ethnicity, which leads to lower perceptions of discrimination (Elliott & Smith 2001). While an important advance, additional quantitative data coupled with qualitative approaches are needed to tap into the direct actions, sentiments, and motives of employers and workers.

## THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF GENDER DIFFERENCES AUTHORITY

The fact of important gender differences in the processes that lead to job authority and in the proportions of men and women who occupy positions of authority have been well documented (Wolf & Fligstein 1979a,b, Hill & Morgan 1979, Halaby 1979, Spaeth 1985, Jacobs 1992, McGuire & Reskin 1993). As with studies of race and authority, gender and authority studies offered a new way of assessing the role of ascription in determining the life chances of individuals and groups. The finding that men and women had similar mean levels of occupational attainment and ascended the occupational hierarchy through similar processes (Treiman & Terrell 1975, Featherman & Hauser 1976) caused many to question whether occupational

status measures of attainment were precise enough to capture the full extent of gender inequality (Wolf & Fligstein 1979a,b, Hill 1980, D'Amico 1986). In this context, the characteristics of jobs, and in particular the authority associated with jobs, became an important unit of analysis in studies of gender stratification. A summary of findings from the gender and authority literature reveals that the study of social stratification has been advanced by authority studies in two important ways. First, gender differences in workplace authority, and in the processes that lead to authority, constitute an important source of gender inequality that is obscured when traditional indicators of occupational status are used to measure inequality. Second, earnings models that do not include measures of job authority are apt to significantly underestimate the gender gap in earnings.

### Gender Differences in Authority and Its Causes

Heralded as a path-breaking contribution to the study of social stratification (Hill 1980, p. 110), Wolf & Fligstein (1979b) were among the first to examine the mechanisms that generate gender differences in authority. Their study, based on a sample of men and women from Wisconsin, showed that women have less authority than men (even net of human capital, occupational status, and self-employment status), and the processes that lead to authority differ for men and women in two respects: (a) Women receive lower authority returns than men for similar human capital and occupational investments, and (b) the processes that lead to supervisory authority are more egalitarian than the processes that usher men and women into positions that grant them the ability to hire and fire and influence the pay of others. The latter finding confirmed expectations that employer discrimination was more pronounced at higher than at lower levels of the authority hierarchy. While Wolf & Fligstein's findings offered a new way of conceptualizing gender inequality, the conclusion that the behaviors and policies of employers are most responsible for restricting the authority chances of women was met with criticism (Bridges & Miller 1979). The chief critics, Bridges & Miller, agreed with the basic finding that women have less authority than men, but questioned the manner in which Wolf & Fligstein arrived at that result because their data were restricted to high school graduates, age 35 (mid-life), who resided in Wisconsin.<sup>9</sup>

In a replication using national data from the 1976 Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Bridges & Miller avoided those restrictions and, in contrast to Wolf & Fligstein, found, among other things, that having children below age sixteen significantly limited the authority chances of women. This result prompted Bridges & Miller to offer a different (albeit untested) interpretation of the authority experiences of women whereby the behavior of women themselves, the desires of co-workers, and even prelabor market forms of discrimination are placed on par with the actions of employers as plausible explanations for women's lower authority attainment. Even though authority researchers have embraced one explanation

<sup>9</sup>See Fligstein et al.'s (1981) response to Bridges & Miller.

or another, empirically choosing between these alternative explanations has been more art than science. As noted earlier, absent direct information from workers about their motivations and direct information about what drives employer decisions, authority researchers have complied with what has become fashionable in all inferential statistics—that is, they have assumed facts that, while extremely plausible, provide incomplete evidence of discrimination.

## Gender Differences in the Effects of Human Capital Investments on Authority

The human capital prediction that gender differences in authority are a function of differential investments in education, work experience, training, and hours worked per week is generally not supported in authority research. By and large, individual investments in human capital attributes appear to enhance the authority chances of both men and women, but men receive a much higher authority return than women for possessing similar levels of human capital. For example, education has a much stronger effect on the authority chances of men than women (Wolf & Fligstein 1979a, Halaby 1979a, Hill 1980); each additional year of education has upwards of two to three times the effect for men as for women on authority outcomes (Hill & Morgan 1979, p. 14, McGuire & Reskin 1993, p. 494). Importantly, the effects of human capital variables on the authority chances of women and men depend on whether observations are made at the lower or upper end of the authority hierarchy. At the low end, where an individual may have the title of supervisor but lack the ability to make decisions, education and continuous work experience are more important for the authority attainment of women than men (Jaffee 1989). At the high end, where supervisors have decision-making authority over the pay or promotion of workers, the effect of education is stronger for men (Hill & Morgan 1979). But according to Reskin & Ross's (1992, p. 356) study of Illinois managers, there are no significant gender differences in human capital returns to decision-making authority.

Bridges & Miller's finding regarding the role of family status in structuring differential authority outcomes between men and women marked an important precedent in authority research. It stands to reason that the unequal division of labor within the household may prevent women from seeking positions of authority. Indeed, the neoclassical arguments, now popularized in phrases such as *compensating differentials*<sup>10</sup> (Filer 1985, Jacobs & Steinberg 1990) and *mommy track* (Ehrlich 1989), denotes the idea that women's *preferences*, because of either socialization or

<sup>10</sup>In its most popular formulation, the idea of "compensating differentials" was promoted by Filer (1985:427) to explain the sex gap in wages. Essentially, Filer argued that the sex gap in wages was a function of the differential job choices women made relative to men—with women opting for more pleasant and flexible jobs, which supposedly pay less than the kinds of jobs valued by men, which, *ceteris paribus*, are less pleasant than the jobs valued by women but bring with them higher wages and better benefits. Suffice it to say, there is little evidence to support this contention.

rational choices, may prompt them to *self-select* themselves out of contention for positions of authority due to family responsibilities (Baron 1987, Wadman 1992). While there is some support for this proposition, the vast majority of evidence argues against it. On the one hand, research based on national and cross-national data provides little or no evidence that women (relative to men) chose not to seek authority because of housework and/or family responsibilities (Wolf & Fligstein 1979a, D'Amico 1986, Jaffee 1989, Wright et al. 1995, Hopcraft 1996, Baxter 1997). On the other hand, Wright et al.'s (1995) comparative study of seven countries found some support for the self-selection hypothesis among women living in Canada—but the other six countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, Norway, Japan) showed no evidence of self-selection. D'Amico's (1986, p. 46) analysis of National Longitudinal Data revealed that women who received assistance at home with household chores were more likely to have say over the pay and promotion of others relative to women who did not, while other studies found that having children under the age of six has a negative impact on the earnings of female managers but has no effect on male managers (Jacobs 1992, p. 296). Additional research in this area is sorely needed in order to reconcile these opposing findings and to sort out the causal ordering of the association between family status and job authority. In the meantime, it's worth emphasizing that there is very little evidence that women opt out of contention for authority positions due to family responsibilities—a finding consistent with gender studies of job segregation (Glass 1990) and wage differentials (England et al. 1988, Jacobs & Steinberg 1990). Moreover, because gender differences in such outcomes depend on whether observations are made at the lower or upper end of the authority hierarchy, future assessments at various levels of authority are required. In addition, family status measures that point to the mere presence of children in the household or the use of dichotomous measures of marital status (married or not) may obscure important gender differences in the effects that flow from the interaction of child and marital status.

## Gender Differences in the Effects of Structural and Compositional Factors on Authority

The relative location of men and women within the structure of the economy, and their proportional representation within such structures, account for more of the gender gap in authority than the human capital attributes of workers. With regard to structural effects, findings show that women are less likely than men to have authority because they are disproportionately located in the kinds of jobs (Halaby 1979a, Hill & Morgan 1979, Roos 1981, Tomaskovic-Devey 1993), occupations (Robinson & Kelley 1979, Jaffee 1989, Reskin & Ross 1992), and economic sectors (Hill & Morgan 1979) that are comparatively less likely than those of men to offer authority.

Support for various theories concerning the effects of the *gender composition* of economic units on men's and women's authority outcomes depends on two



factors, the level of authority under consideration and whether data are drawn from national samples or samples based on state-level data. For example, findings based on analyses of national samples are more supportive of Blalock's resistance-to-threat hypothesis. A significant portion of the gender gap in authority is explained by the presence of women in female-dominated occupations (Jaffee 1989)—an outcome that varies depending on the level of authority under consideration. That is, men in female-dominated occupations appear to do better than women in the same occupations when it comes to attaining *decision-making authority*. However, in the case of *supervisory authority*, both men and women are less likely to possess authority as the female composition of the occupation increases. This means that at lower levels of authority, the femaleness of the occupation works against the authority attainment of both men and women (Jaffee 1989, p. 387).

In contrast, there is sufficient evidence in support of Kanter's strength-in-numbers hypothesis. According to Reskin & Ross (1992), while men were far more likely than women to have final decision-making authority at work, "the more female the census occupation in which managers worked, the more extensive their authority," (pp. 354–55). Further support for the strength-in-numbers hypothesis comes from in-depth studies of specialized jobs such as college administrators (Konrad & Pfeffer 1991, Kulis 1997), managerial and professional jobs (Jolly et al. 1990), bank tellers (Strober & Arnold 1987), and California state-level establishments (Baron et al. 1991). In each case, the increasing presence of women led to increases in the proportions of women in the organization. However, the relationship described here is not necessarily a linear one throughout all levels of economic units. Mounting evidence suggests threshold effects whereby the presence of many women only enhances the inclusion of other women at *certain* levels of the organizational hierarchy (Cohen et al. 1998, Reskin & McBrier 2000).

Trend studies documenting change over time in the net gender gap in managerial status are opposite from what has been learned about trends in the gender gap in supervisory positions (D'Amico 1986, Jacobs 1992, Reskin & Padavic 1994). With regard to managerial status, some studies show a clear narrowing of the gender gap, while the gender gap in supervisory authority has remained constant for much of the 1970s and 1980s (Jacobs 1992, p. 295).

## The Consequences of Gender Differences in Authority for Income

The exclusion of women from job authority, their restriction to entry-level authority positions, and the comparatively lower income returns they receive for occupying levels of authority similar to those of men contribute to their overall lower earnings. Assessing the role that authority plays in explaining the gender gap in income is a tricky proposition because the magnitude of gender disparities is a function of whether observations are made at the lower or higher end of the authority distribution. More generic measures of authority, such as supervisory status, only exhibit modest effects on the gender gap in income. In contrast, the

unequal distribution of men and women in authority positions that grant them control over monetary resources and control over personnel does produce larger income differences between men and women (Spaeth 1979, Halaby 1979). Both Spaeth (1985) and McGuire & Reskin (1983) found that men receive twice the economic payoff that women receive for possessing authority that allows them to control monetary resources even when gender differences in education and experience are considered. In Spaeth's study, a one-unit increase along an authority scale representing control over monetary resources increased men's net earnings by \$383 (in 1981 dollars) compared to \$192 for women (p. 612). Notwithstanding the complexities, gender differences in job authority account for a large fraction of the pay gap among men and women with similar occupations (Hill & Morgan 1979), jobs (Halaby 1979a), and equivalent human capital investments (Parcel & Mueller 1983). Men and women who work in the same occupations for the same employer receive different salaries—with hierarchical differences accounting for 65% of the gap (Halaby 1979). Direct gender wage discrimination in returns to human capital and hierarchical rank ("unequal pay for equal work") and "rank segregation" in the form of restricting women to low-paying jobs accounts for much of the gender gap in salaries, but the latter appears to be more important (Halaby 1979a, Roos 1980). While the exercise of authority at work enhances the earnings of most workers, one study shows that the earnings of white female heads of households are not increased if they exercise authority at work (Parcel & Mueller 1983, p. 195).

To sum, men are more likely than women to have authority, and employer behaviors and organizational policies are more important than women's attitudes and behaviors in explaining the gender gap in authority. Education and job tenure exert a stronger effect on the authority attainment of men than women—especially at high levels of authority. Family ties improve men's, but not women's, chances to gain authority, and to the extent that women occupy managerial positions, they tend to be located at the bottom of the command chain—largely supervising other women and receiving lower earnings than men who occupy similar positions. In fact, gender differences in authority attainment account for much of the pay differences between men and women at high levels of authority (Halaby 1979, Hill 1980, McGuire & Reskin 1993) but have a modest effect at lower levels (i.e., supervisory authority) (Jacobs 1992, p. 296).

## CONCLUSION

Job authority is an important dimension of socioeconomic status that remains a coveted workplace resource. Its emergence may be traced to the founding fathers of modern sociology—with its operationalization as class categories or scalar gradations demarcating the theoretical lineages of Marx and Weber, respectively. The pattern of authority's emergence as an important indicator of socioeconomic status marks a social scientific sequence of development from theory building to

measurement to hypothesis testing. At least three overlapping generations can be discerned: first generation—theory builders; second generation—operationalization and measurement issues; and third generation—hypothesis testing, including assessments of the relative effects of ascription versus achievement and human capital versus the structural determinants of authority based on samples stratified by class, gender, and race. Job authority is one of the few stratification variables the theoretical and empirical linkages of which remain strong regardless of whether it is conceived as an indicator of class or status, whether it is operationalized as a discrete or gradational measure, or whether it takes the form of a dependent or an independent variable. Far from being *the* alpha dimension of social stratification, as a measure of legitimate power, job authority in all its manifestations has proven to be quite a useful lens by which to observe the contours of ascription-based work inequality. Through such observations, the last 25 years of authority research has produced two overarching conclusions. First, race and gender differences in authority constitute one of the chief sources of race and gender inequality in workplace outcomes. To paraphrase Wright et al. (1995, p. 407), the under-representation of women, and I would add, racial minorities, in positions of authority, especially high levels of management, is not simply an *instance* of gender (and racial) inequality; it is probably a significant cause of inequality. Second, as arguably sociology's principal contribution to the study of earnings inequality (Halaby 1979), job authority is one of the primary ways in which the financial rewards of work are distributed. Minorities and women receive a lower income return than do whites and men for occupying similar positions of authority, and such disparities are more acute at high levels of authority and among those who exercise control over monetary resources and control over personnel.

The debate over authority as class or status shaped the subsequent operationalization and measurement of authority for analyses of racial and gender stratification at work. The sheer quantity of research on gender and authority far exceeds the research on race and authority, and there have been precious few attempts to unravel the dual effects of race and gender on the authority chances of minority women (see McGuire & Reskin 1993, England et al. 1999).

The study of ascriptive differences in authority, along with the processes that generate such differences, has been the primary concern of authority researchers over the last 20 years. In this line of research, two consistent findings transcend authority measures, data, and research foci: Women have less authority than men, *and* minorities have less authority than whites. Moreover, when minorities and women do have authority, it is largely at lower levels of authority and mainly when they supervise the work of other minorities and women. Despite important social, economic, political, and legislative achievements in the last 20 years, these results remain robust and consistent in regional, national, and cross-national studies at single points in time and cross-temporally. In fact, what little we know about change over time in authority outcomes reveals that the decade of the 1980s represented an era of stagnation for blacks and women—a pattern that is also evident along other status indicators.

Finally, theories aimed at the micro, meso, and macro levels of analyses do not fully account for race and gender differences in authority. This is partially a reflection of workplace discrimination and the inherent limitations of measuring discrimination within a quantitative framework.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

The collective limitations of authority research portend new and exciting areas of future research. One promising area concerns the manner in which the organizational demography of the workplace impacts the authority attainment of groups. Not only does this research require the use of data based on samples of multiple racial/ethnic groups of men and women, researchers will also have to focus on approaches that seek to deepen our understanding of the effects of employer and employee attitudes/preferences on the authority attainment process. In this vein, Reskin (2000, p. 707–8) has called for in-depth organizational case studies designed in a manner that will allow comparative analyses across studies. Recent case studies by Bell & Nkomo (2001) and Thomas & Gabarro (1999) are particularly illuminating, but they are limited to the work experiences of blacks and whites only. When considering the fact that the number of Latinos will soon equal or eclipse that of blacks, and firm-level analyses of Asian Americans are at a premium, broader qualitative analyses are needed.

The challenges posed by case studies analyses are often difficult to overcome. Despite promises of anonymity, employers remain very reluctant to release information to researchers about the racial or gender make-up of their authority structure—especially if such information can be used against them in a discrimination lawsuit. For the same reasons, organizational leaders are reluctant to measure the effectiveness of their diversity programs (Comer & Soliman 1996, p. 478–79).

Additional future research would benefit from a longitudinally designed study. Very little is known about the manner in which racial/ethnic and gender cohorts traverse the authority attainment process over the course of their work lives. Most of what we know about change over time in authority attainment involves data from annual repeated cross-sections, which are important but not ideal for the study of change over time. It stands to reason that there are significant variations in the authority experiences of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups—and these patterns are likely to fluctuate over time. Within this context, the likely association between job authority and change in the relative adherents to neo-institutional factors (i.e., state policies, organizational age, the relative size of internal interest groups, and EEO enforcement) requires more detailed examinations (DiPrete & Grusky 1990, Baron et al. 1991, Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs 1999).

Research on the dual impact of race and gender on the authority chances of minority women is sorely needed, as is a clearer specification of the impact of family structure and the household division of labor in explaining the gender gap in authority. More sophisticated approaches may consider quantitative, multilevel

analyses at the individual, group, firm, and societal levels, coupled with qualitative approaches that utilize in-depth interviews tapping employer/employee attitudes, preferences, expectations, and workplace experiences.

In addition, authority research can benefit from additional cross-national studies (Kalleberg 1988, Wright et al. 1995, Baxter & Wright 1999) including a comparison of European and non-European countries (Robinson 1984, Rosenfeld et al. 1998, Tannenbaum & Rozgonyi 1986)—a precedent begun nearly 20 years ago but rarely extended.

Finally, there are a variety of paradigms associated with authority research that share common theoretical and empirical insights. Extrapolating from Haveman (2000), authority studies could be significantly improved if researchers considered what has been learned from different paradigms including: studies of organizational ecology, neo-institutional research, resource dependence and social network research, human capital and social capital research, organizational demography, and studies of social mobility and status attainment aimed at the level of organizations. Each of these lines of research is important in its own right, but all could be substantially improved through liberal cross-pollination.

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