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Author(s): Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll
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UNPACKING THE GENDER SYSTEM
A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations

CECILIA L. RIDGEWAY
Stanford University
SHELLEY J. CORRELL
Cornell University

According to the perspective developed in this article, widely shared, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and their impact in what the authors call "social relational" contexts are among the core components that maintain and change the gender system. When gender is salient in these ubiquitous contexts, cultural beliefs about gender function as part of the rules of the game, biasing the behaviors, performances, and evaluations of otherwise similar men and women in systematic ways that the authors specify. While the biasing impact of gender beliefs may be small in any one instance, the consequences cumulate over individuals' lives and result in substantially different outcomes for men and women. After describing this perspective, the authors show how it sheds new light on some defining features of the gender system and illustrate its implications for research into specific questions about gender inequality.

Keywords: *gender stereotypes; gender theory; gender inequality; behavioral effects*

One of the important achievements in gender knowledge in the past decade is the revolution in our theoretical conceptualization of what gender is as a social phenomenon. There is increasing consensus among gender scholars that gender is not primarily an identity or role that is taught in childhood and enacted in family relations. Instead, gender is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories, men and women, and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference (Ferree, Lorber, and Hess 1999; Lorber 1994; Nakano Glenn 1999; Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Risman 1998). Like other multilevel systems of difference and inequality such as those based on race or class, gender involves cultural beliefs and

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REPRINT REQUESTS: *Cecilia L. Ridgeway, Department of Sociology, Stanford University, 450 Serra Mall, Bldg 120, Room 160, Stanford, CA 94305-2047; phone: 650-723-1609; e-mail: ridgeway@stanford.edu.*

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distributions of resources at the macro level, patterns of behavior and organizational practices at the interactional level, and selves and identities at the individual level.

The difficult task before gender scholars now is to develop the implications of this reconceptualization by identifying key components of the gender system and analyzing the processes by which these components maintain or change the gender system (Chafetz 1999). To begin this task, we argue in this article that widely shared, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and their effects in what we call "social relational contexts" are among the core components that maintain and change the gender system. Social relational contexts comprise any situation in which individuals define themselves in relation to others in order to act. While these include interactional situations, social relational contexts include a considerably broader range of contexts than interaction alone, as we explain shortly. We outline a theoretical perspective that specifies the impact of gender beliefs in social relational contexts and analyzes these processes as components of a multilevel gender system.

There are several prima facie reasons for suspecting that both cultural beliefs and social relational contexts play significant roles in the gender system. If gender is a system for constituting difference and organizing inequality on the basis of that difference, then the widely held cultural beliefs that define the distinguishing characteristics of men and women and how they are expected to behave clearly are a central component of that system. These are the core, defining cultural beliefs about gender that we refer to as "gender beliefs" in this article.

Such cultural beliefs have long been studied as widely shared gender stereotypes (Eagly, Wood, and Diekman 2000). Considering these beliefs in the context of the gender system, however, suggests that they are considerably more than that as well. Widely held gender beliefs are in effect cultural rules or instructions for enacting the social structure of difference and inequality that we understand to be gender. A social structure, argued Sewell (1992), can be understood as jointly constituted by the cultural rules or schemas by which it is enacted and the distributions of resources that result. Viewed this way, gender beliefs, as the cultural rules or schemas for enacting gender, are one of the twin pillars (along with resources) on which the gender system rests (Ridgeway and Correll 2000). It is only through the development of such defining cultural beliefs that a system of difference like gender or race becomes constructed as a distinct organizing principle of social relations (Ridgeway 2000). Thus, while cultural beliefs about gender are indeed stereotypes, they have a substantially broader social significance than our common understanding of the phrase suggests.

If cultural beliefs are an important component of the gender system, then social relational contexts—as the arenas where these beliefs or rules are in play—are likely to be important as well. Since social relational contexts include any context in which individuals define themselves in relation to others to comprehend the situation and act, everyday interaction, be it in person, on paper, or through the Internet, is a major source of social relational contexts. Yet as symbolic interactionists have long noted (see Stryker and Vryan 2003 for a review), contexts in which individuals act alone are also social relational if the individuals feel their behavior or its consequences will be socially evaluated. In such situations, individuals still must implicitly define themselves in relation to those others to anticipate and manage the situation.

Social relational contexts are of interest here because, as we shall see, the process of defining self in relation to others evokes hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender. The implicit salience of these beliefs, in turn, acts as a background frame that under specifiable circumstances biases the behavior and evaluations of self and others in gender-consistent directions. We might expect, for instance, that the way the sex composition of a student-teacher interaction implicitly evokes gender beliefs will shape not only the way the individuals enact their roles but also how they evaluate each other's performance in that situation. West and colleagues have described this process in their "doing gender" approach (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987). Our goal is to further specify these processes by which gender inequality is recreated through everyday social relations.

Social relational contexts play a role in all systems of difference and inequality, including race and class, but there are reasons for suspecting that they may be distinctively important in the gender system. Compared to the advantaged and the disadvantaged in systems of race and class, men and women come into contact with one another with greater frequency and often on more intimate terms. Unlike many other social differences, gender goes home with you in that people are more likely to have relatives and share a household with adults or children of the other sex. Gender is involved in reproduction and heterosexual behavior. It also divides the population into two similarly sized groups. All these factors make relating to the other sex a significant feature of nearly everyone's daily experience. That, in turn, reinforces the role of gender as a significant definer of self and other in all social relational contexts. As a consequence, social relational contexts become a significant arena in which the basic rules of the gender system are at play.

In focusing on cultural beliefs about gender and their connection to contexts in which people define themselves in relation to others, we do not mean to privilege these processes as the only central components of the gender system. On the contrary, the evidence so far indicates that the most obdurate features of our current gender system, such as the household division of labor, the sex segregation of jobs, or gender differences in status and authority are overdetermined in the gender system (Reskin, Branch McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Risman 1998). That is, they are created and maintained by multiple, complementary processes acting simultaneously, often at different levels of analysis, such that the elimination of any single process will not be sufficient to eliminate the phenomenon. Rather than claiming primacy, our purpose is to shine a light on one important sector of the interdependent gender system and suggest what analytic purchase may be gained by doing so.

We begin by discussing cultural beliefs about gender in greater detail. Then, we turn to the involvement of these beliefs in social relational contexts and describe the nature of their impact on behavior and evaluations. With this outline of our theoretical perspective in hand, we examine the insights it can offer into certain defining features of the gender system. Next, we develop the perspective's implications for research, highlighting new strategies for research into specific questions about gender inequality. Finally, we address the issue of changing gender beliefs and their implications for maintaining or reducing gender inequality.

CULTURAL BELIEFS AND SOCIAL RELATIONAL CONTEXTS

Cultural Beliefs about Gender

Studies show that widely held gender beliefs do exist in the contemporary United States (Fiske et al. 2002; Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, and Lueptow 2001; Spence and Buckner 2000). In general, contemporary stereotypes describe women as more communal and men as more agentic and instrumental (Eagly, Wood, and Diekman 2000). In addition to this horizontal dimension of difference, gender beliefs have a hierarchical dimension of status inequality. Men are viewed as more status worthy and competent overall and more competent at the things that "count most" (e.g., instrumental rationality). Women are seen as less competent in general but "nicer" and better at communal tasks even though these tasks themselves are less valued (Conway, Pizzamiglio, and Mount 1996; Fiske et al. 2002).

As these descriptions make clear, gender beliefs represent themselves as universal depictions of women and men defined by a narrow set of features. This is, in itself, odd since no one ever has the experience of interacting with a concrete person who is just a man or just a woman in a way that is not affected by a host of other attributes such as the person's race or level of education. The deeply held cultural belief in the inherent difference between men and women appears to somehow disaggregate the concrete experience of interacting with real men and women into simpler, abstract categories. Given the cultural resources and power available to members of dominant groups, the descriptions of men and women that become inscribed in these simple, abstract, cultural categories are ones that most closely describe white, middle-class, heterosexual men and women, if anyone. These gender beliefs are hegemonic in that the descriptions of women and men they contain are institutionalized in the media, government policy, normative images of the family, and so on.

These abstracted, hegemonic understandings of men and women are roughly consensual in that virtually everyone in the society knows what they are (Eagly, Wood, and Diekman 2000; Fiske et al. 2002) and likely expects that most others hold these beliefs. Therefore, as individuals enter public settings that require them to define themselves in relation to others, their default expectation is that others will treat them according to hegemonic gender beliefs. In this way, these hegemonic beliefs act as the implicit rules of the gender game in public contexts. Given the status distinction contained in hegemonic gender beliefs, then, men and women enter most social relational contexts expecting that others believe that men are generally more competent than women. As we will describe in detail below, people's sense of what others expect of them affects behavior and biases judgments (Correll 2001; Foschi 2000; Ridgeway 1997).

Alternative gender belief systems exist in the culture along with hegemonic beliefs. The modern-day girl power movement is one example of an attempt to present a stronger image of girls, thereby reducing the differentiation between girls and boys. Also, some communities in the United States have gender beliefs that are less strongly differentiated than the hegemonic form. For example, women are seen as more competent relative to men in the African American community (Dugger 1988; Collins 1991). In a setting where people know they are around likeminded others, such as in a gathering of feminist friends or African American colleagues, their shared alternative gender beliefs, rather than hegemonic gender beliefs, are likely to be evoked in the situation and shape their behaviors and evaluations.

Given the wide availability of hegemonic beliefs, however, even individuals who live in a community that shares alternative gender beliefs and/or who are personally committed to alternative gender beliefs are still likely to be aware of the hegemonic beliefs. They are also likely to expect to be treated according to those hegemonic beliefs as they move into more public or more uncertain settings. Even for these people, then, hegemonic gender beliefs are a stubborn part of social reality that must be dealt with or accommodated in many contexts, even if they are not personally endorsed.

As this discussion suggests, hegemonic cultural beliefs provide a blueprint for doing gender in most settings where individuals consider themselves relative to others. In the next section, we describe the gender processes such settings invoke.

Social Relational Contexts

Sex categorization. If cultural beliefs about gender are the rules for enacting the gender system, social relational contexts are the arenas in which these rules are brought to bear on the behavior and evaluations of individuals. The process that links gender beliefs and social relational contexts is automatic sex categorization. Sex categorization is the sociocognitive process by which we label another as male or female. As we sex categorize another, by implication, we sex categorize ourselves as either similar or different from that other.

Research by cognitive psychologists has demonstrated that we unconsciously and automatically sex categorize any person to whom we cast ourselves in relation (Blair and Banaji 1996; Brewer and Lui 1989; Stangor et al. 1992). This research demonstrates that male or female is usually the first category that people sort self and other into in social relational contexts, possibly because it is a simple, binary classification while other classifications are usually more complex. Subsequent categorizations according to other social dimensions such as age or occupation are nested within people's prior understanding the other and self as male or female

(Brewer and Lui 1989; Stangor et al. 1992). As we shall see, this does not mean that gender is necessarily a primary aspect of a person's identity in a given context or the most powerful determinant of his or her behavior there compared to other identities on which the person has also been categorized. On the contrary, other identities such as race/ethnicity may be personally more relevant to individuals than gender. However, it is a testimony to the importance of sex/gender as an organizing principle of social relations that we must first classify others as male or female to render them sufficiently comprehensible for us to understand ourselves in relation to them in any way.

The process of sex categorization in the routine activity of defining self in relation to another is so automatic and taken for granted that it is often assumed to be natural. However, as ethnomethodologists have clearly demonstrated, in everyday contexts, sex categorization is heavily socially constructed (Kessler and McKenna 1978; West and Zimmerman 1987). It involves the application of those widely shared cultural beliefs about gender that we have referred to as the instructions for the gender system.

In our gender belief system, physical sex differences are presumed to be the basis for sex categorization. Yet in everyday social relational contexts, we sex categorize others based on appearance and behavioral cues (e.g., dress, hairstyles, voice tone) that are culturally presumed to stand for physical sex differences (West and Zimmerman 1987). Knowing that they will be categorized in this way, most people carefully construct their appearance according to cultural gender rules to ensure that others reliably categorize them as belonging to the sex category they claim for themselves. Clearly, then, the unconscious and automatic process of sex categorization in social relational contexts relies on the use of widely shared cultural beliefs about sex/gender to classify self in relation to others in an initial way to begin the process of understanding of one's situation and possibilities for action.

Since cultural beliefs about gender are involved in the initial process of sex categorization, we should expect that the behavioral expectations for men and women that are contained within gender beliefs also will be implicitly evoked for individuals in social relational contexts. Indeed, social cognition experiments demonstrate that sex categorization automatically activates gender stereotypes, including gender status distinctions, and primes them to affect judgments and behavior (Blair and Banaji 1996). This means that gender beliefs are always implicitly available to shape individuals' evaluations and behavior. West and colleagues make this point when they argue that gender is something that people can always be called to account for, no matter what else they are doing (West and Fenstermaker 1995; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Gender as a background identity. As a cultural dichotomy that can be applied to anyone of any age, race, or class, sex categorization offers a quick cognitive start to making sense of another in relation to self. By the same token, however, the cultural category of men or women is too general, diffuse, and abstract to take an individual very far in the process of figuring out who self and other are in any concrete context in order to manage that situation and act. Studies of person perception show that people virtually always go on to categorize self and other in multiple other ways according to culturally important and situationally relevant identities and roles (Fiske, Lin, and Neuberg 1999). In the United States, race and age are also primary categories for making sense of self and other in that individuals automatically define one another in terms of those categories, as well as sex/gender, in almost all social relational contexts (Fiske 1998). In many contexts, these other primary identities are more important definitions of self and other in that they have more specific implications for behavior in the context than male/female does. In addition, most social relational contexts involve specific roles for self and other, such as boss and employee, that carry detailed expectations for behavior that are centrally relevant to the situation.

These institutional and culturally more specific roles and identities (e.g., clerk and customer) are usually in the foreground of individuals' contextual definitions of who self and other are and what that implies in terms of behavior, while gender is almost always a *background identity* in social relational contexts. It operates as an implicit, cultural/cognitive presence that colors people's activities in varying degrees but that is rarely the ostensible focus of what is going on in the situation. As a result, although gender beliefs are cognitively primed for individuals in virtually all social relational contexts, the impact of those beliefs on behavior and evaluations is not invariant across such contexts. This is a central point of our argument. Instead, the implications of gender beliefs combine with those of other salient identities and roles, the impact of each weighted by its situational relevance, to shape behavior and evaluations in a context (Wagner and Berger 1997). Consequently, as we shall see, the impact of gender beliefs on behavior is highly responsive to the structure of the context and can vary from imperceptible to substantial (Deaux and LaFrance 1998; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

Since gender usually functions as a background identity, the effects of cultural beliefs about gender in social relational contexts are most often to moderate or exaggerate (i.e., to bias in gendered directions) behaviors and evaluations that are largely determined by more context-relevant identities and roles. Thus, in most contexts, gender becomes a bias in the way one enacts the role of manager, clerk, flight attendant, or student rather than a coherent and independent set of behaviors in itself. This is another way of understanding the insight that gender is something one "does" rather than "is" (West and Zimmerman 1987). As we shall see, the fact that gender is present in the background while other activities are performed in the foreground in social relational contexts has implications for understanding certain characteristic features of the gender system.

Specifying Gender's Impact on Behavior and Evaluations

Although gender is usually a background identity and the effects of gender beliefs on behavior and evaluations are contextually variable, we argue that it is nevertheless possible to systematically specify how certain key effects of gender vary with the context. This is our next task.

There is considerable evidence that the extent to which gender, as a background identity, biases the performance and evaluation of contextually central behaviors depends on gender's salience in the situation (Deaux and LaFrance 1998; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Salience, in turn, depends on the structure of the social relational context.

The salience of gender in a setting probably varies continuously from being nearly negligible to being a central focus. However, the empirical evidence indicates that gender is *effectively salient*, that is, sufficiently salient for gender beliefs to measurably affect behavior and evaluations, in at least two types of social relational contexts (Deaux and LaFrance 1998; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Wagner and Berger 1997). Gender becomes effectively salient in contexts where real or implied actors differ in sex category. This includes mixed-sex settings but also contexts in which individuals act alone but define themselves in contrast to an implied other of the opposite sex. Gender also becomes effectively salient in contexts that are gender typed in that the stereotypic traits and abilities of one gender or the other are culturally linked to the activities that are central to the context. Thus, if math is culturally defined as masculine, then cultural beliefs about gender will be effectively salient even in a same-sex math class (Correll 2001).

The impact of hegemonic gender beliefs. When gender is effectively salient, it is usually the hegemonic form of gender beliefs that are implicitly activated. This is because hegemonic gender beliefs are institutionalized in the norms and structures of public settings and established private institutions such as the nuclear family. And hegemonic beliefs are also the ones most likely to be enforced by socially advantaged actors and are the default beliefs that individuals presume to prevail in any setting in which the precise gender beliefs of relevant others are uncertain. Such settings include many contexts, such as work and educational settings that have important consequences for gender inequality. As we will see, the great bulk of systematic, empirical studies of the impact of gender beliefs on behavior and evaluations have been conducted in such circumstances where hegemonic gender beliefs are likely to prevail. Later, we will return to contexts in which nonhegemonic gender beliefs have an effect.

When hegemonic gender beliefs are effectively salient in a situation, hierarchical presumptions about men's greater status and competence become salient for participants, along with assumptions about men's and women's different traits and skills. While all components of gender beliefs shape behavior and serve to differentiate men and women (Eagly, Wood, and Diekman 2000), the hierarchical dimension does so in a manner that is particularly consequential for gender inequality. As a result, we will focus on the impact of the status and competence components of gender beliefs. Expectation states theory has developed a well-documented account of the impact of gender status and competence beliefs in social relational contexts that we draw on for our account (Wagner and Berger 1997).

Expectation states theory focuses on social relational contexts in which individuals are oriented toward accomplishing a shared and/or socially valued task or goal (Correll 2004; Wagner and Berger 1997). These include most work and educational contexts but also many informal and personal goal-oriented contexts. When gender is effectively salient in such settings, the theory argues that beliefs about men's greater status and competence implicitly shape the expectations that participants form for their own competence and performance in the setting compared to others in the context.

The trouble with these status-shaped expectations for competence is that they affect people's behaviors and evaluations in self-fulfilling ways (see Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Wagner and Berger 1997). Self-other competence expectations affect the likelihood that an individual will speak up with confidence in the setting or hesitate and wait for another to act. Competence expectations affect whose input others solicit. When someone speaks up, these expectations affect whether others ignore or listen to what is said. Thus, self-other competence expectations affect the extent to which men and women assert themselves, whether their ideas and points of view are heard, and whether they become influential in the context.

Besides affecting participation and influence, self-other competence expectations, which are shaped by gender status beliefs, also bias evaluations of performance. Extensive research has shown that exactly the same performance, idea, or product seems better to people when it comes from someone who is higher status rather than lower status in the context. Not surprisingly, then, a meta-analysis of studies in which the same gender-neutral product is labeled as produced by a man or a woman shows a modest but significant tendency for the product to be evaluated as better if produced by a man (Swim and Sanna 1996). When the product is associated with a domain that is culturally defined as masculine, such as engineering or the military, but also management (Heilman, Block, and Martell 1995), the evaluative bias in favor of men is stronger (Swim and Sanna 1996). This is because men are advantaged in such contexts not only by assumptions about their general competence but also by presumptions about their specific gender skills. When the product is associated with a stereotypically feminine domain (e.g., caretaking), the gender bias in evaluations disappears or weakly favors women (Swim and Sanna 1996). In these contexts, the general presumption of men's greater competence is counterbalanced and sometimes overweighted by assumptions about women's special, gender-typed skills. This pattern of effects is typical of the impact of hegemonic gender beliefs on behaviors as well as evaluations when such beliefs are effectively salient in a context (Ridgeway 2001; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999).

In addition to biasing evaluations of performance, self-other competence expectations also can affect people's actual performances independent of skills. For example, exposing African Americans or Asian and white women to stereotypic beliefs that members of their category are thought to be less competent in a given domain has been show to raise anxiety and actually lead to lower performances in that domain (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady 1999; Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999). On the other side, when individuals are exposed to beliefs that members of their category have superior task ability, their performance improves, much like with a home team advantage (Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady 1999).

Finally, self-other competence expectations, shaped by gender beliefs, also bias the extent to which individuals are willing to attribute ability to themselves or others on the basis of a given quality performance. In other words, when effectively salient in a context, gender beliefs create a double standard for judging ability, or lack thereof, from performance (Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1999; Correll 2004; Foschi 2000). Consequently, even when men and women perform objectively similarly in contexts in which hegemonic beliefs are salient, the men are likely to be judged by themselves and others as having somewhat more ability at the task than the women (Correll 2004; Foschi 2000). To be judged equally able, the women may actually have to perform better than the men (Pugh and Wahrman 1983).

At this point, we should pause to consider the effects of individual resistance on these multiple, self-fulfilling effects of self-other competence expectations that are biased by gender status beliefs. While virtually everyone is aware of hegemonic gender beliefs and implicitly recognizes such beliefs as a force to be contended with in social contexts, many people do not fully endorse these beliefs. Some people, when they are consciously aware of the pressure of hegemonic gender beliefs, act to resist their effects on their self-expectations and intentionally behave in a manner that challenges the beliefs. It is relatively rare, however, for most people to be fully aware of the way their behavior in a given context is being shaped by self-other competence expectations because gender is such a taken-for-granted background identity (Rudman and Kilianski 2000). As a result, in most situations, it is difficult for people to effectively resist the constraints on them created by gender beliefs. Furthermore, since hegemonic beliefs are institutionalized in many settings, there are often real social costs to behaviorally challenging them. Consequently, while many occasionally resist in small to large ways, most people most of the time largely and often unwittingly comply with the pressure of gender-based expectations in the bulk of their behavior.

In sum, when hegemonic gender beliefs are effectively salient in a social relational context, they bias the extent to which a woman, compared to a similar man, asserts herself in the situation, the attention she receives, her influence, the quality of her performances, the way she is evaluated, and her own and others' inferences about her abilities at the tasks that are central to the context. Since gender is usually a background identity in such contexts, the effect of other individual differences in identities, skills, and abilities will almost always outweigh the impact of gender on these behaviors and evaluations. Consequently, the range of behavior among people of the same sex will usually be greater than the average differences between men and women. Yet cultural beliefs about gender will bias self-other expectations sufficiently to produce measurable average differences between the behavior and evaluations of men and women acting in equivalent positions in such contexts.

In contexts that are not culturally linked to one gender or the other, gender beliefs, when effectively salient, should offer men a modest average advantage over women in competence-related activities and evaluations. In contexts that are culturally typed as masculine, men's average advantage should be larger. However, in contexts culturally typed as feminine, men should enjoy no advantage on average and may even suffer a small disadvantage compared to women.

In the many contexts where gender is effectively salient, then, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender act like a weight on the scale that modestly but systematically differentiates the behavior and evaluations of otherwise similar men and women. While the biasing impact of gender beliefs on the outcomes of men and women in any one situation may be small, individual lives are lived through multiple, repeating, social relational contexts. Hegemonic gender beliefs are not effectively salient in all these contexts, but they are so in many of them. As a result, the small biasing effects accumulate over careers and lifetimes to result in substantially different behavioral paths and social outcomes for men and women who are otherwise similar in social background.

Nonhegemonic gender beliefs. Despite the situational prevalence of hegemonic beliefs, some people personally hold alternative gender beliefs. Our argument suggests that there will be at least some contexts in which these alternative beliefs are salient. In contexts where people know or have good reason to presume that the others present share their alternative gender beliefs, we theorize that it is these alternative gender beliefs that are cognitively primed by sex categorization. This might occur, for instance, in a meeting of like-minded friends or in a gathering among members of a racial or ethnic group that has its own alternative gender beliefs. When these contexts are mixed-sex or gender-relevant ones, we expect that it will be the shared alternative gender beliefs, rather than the hegemonic form, that will become sufficiently salient to measurably affect participants' self-other expectations and thus their behavior and evaluations in the situation.

There is some evidence to support this argument. We have noted that African Americans tend to have alternative gender beliefs that ascribe fewer competence differences to men and women than do hegemonic beliefs (Dugger 1988; Collins 1991). To examine the impact of these belief differences, Filardo (1996) observed African American and white junior high school students of similar social class who worked on a group task in same-race, mixed-sex groups. Given the mixed-sex context, gender beliefs should have been salient in both the white and African American groups. In the white groups, it is likely that hegemonic beliefs were activated and, as predicted, the familiar pattern emerged in which girls spoke less and agreed with others more than did boys. Since the African American students were in groups composed entirely of their peers, Filardo expected their behavior to be shaped by more moderate alternative gender beliefs, and in these groups, gender differences in behavior were much smaller and generally did not reach significance. Interestingly, the differences between white and African American groups were due to differences in the girls' behavior (i.e., more passive or assertive) rather than the boys' behavior.

In another study relevant to our argument, Milkie (1999) studied white and African American high school girls' reactions to hegemonic beauty standards in popular magazines. The girls of both races were equally familiar with the beauty standards depicted and, interestingly, equally likely to personally reject them as "unreal." Yet the white girls reported comparing themselves to these beauty images more often and believed that boys would judge them by those images. Given the contextual salience of these hegemonic standards for the white girls, it is not surprising that the white girls' self-esteem was correlated with the extent to which they felt they met these standards. In contrast, the African American girls thought that the boys they were interested in, largely African American boys, would not judge them by white hegemonic standards but by alternative beauty standards. These girls' self-esteem levels were not correlated with the extent to which they felt they met hegemonic beauty standards.

These studies offer initial evidence of the distinctive effects of alternative gender beliefs on behavior in contexts where gender is effectively salient. In so doing, they lend credence to our general arguments about the importance of gender beliefs for behavior in social relational contexts. They also underscore the importance of taking a systematic contextual approach to specifying the nature of the effects gender beliefs will have on behavior and evaluations.

FEATURES OF THE GENDER SYSTEM

We began this article by arguing that cultural beliefs about gender and the social relational contexts in which they are enacted are among the core components that maintain and change the gender system. We have described some of the ways in which gender beliefs and social relational contexts help maintain the gender system by modestly, but systematically and repeatedly, biasing men's and women's behaviors and evaluations in ways that reenact and confirm beliefs about men's greater status and competence. Now we would like to suggest how the perspective we have outlined offers some additional insights into certain distinctive features of our current gender system. While we certainly do not claim that this perspective can fully explain these features, it can deepen our understanding of them.

Why Is Gender Everywhere?

From the sex segregation of jobs (Reskin and Roos 1990) to the gender differentiation of voluntary organizations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986), gender acts as a fundamental principle for organizing social relations in virtually all spheres of social life. The enormous reach of the gender system is so taken for granted that we rarely question it. Yet why doesn't gender stay home with heterosexual relations and reproduction? Why does it end up an organizing principle in such apparently distant activities as electronic assembly?

Part of the answer lies, we argue, in the way the need to define self and other in social relational contexts evokes automatic sex categorization, which in turn activates gender as a background identity in virtually all such contexts. Social relational contexts bring sex categorization into every activity and sphere of life in which one person casts himself or herself in relation to a real or imagined other, be it in person, on paper, or through the Internet. In so doing, social relational contexts make gender a persistently available social difference around which to structure the activities and relationships that are enacted through such contexts and shape the meanings participants attach to those activities and relationships. In effect, social relational contexts are Typhoid Marys of the gender system that infect in some degree virtually all aspects of society with gender.

The Entwining of Gender and Other Differences

Gender scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that gender is always inextricably bound with other societal systems of difference and inequality (Collins 1991; Nakano Glenn 1999; Romero 1992). In some degree, these multiple systems of difference are defined out of one another and take their meanings from one another. A white authority figure might be called "the man," for instance.

Our perspective adds details about the processes through which this cultural entwining of social differences occurs. As we have described, automatic sex categorization in social relational contexts makes gender present as a kind of ghost in the background while other identities and activities are performed in the foreground of people's attention in the context. Yet race and age are also primary cultural identities on which people in the United States categorize each other in almost all social relational contexts. The simultaneous availability of race, age, and gender as background identities means that although the relative salience for participants of these identities will vary with the social composition and institutional frame of the context, all three identities will be implicitly present in some degree and primed to become an axis of meaning. As a result, social relational contexts continually expose the cultural meanings of gender, race, and age to one another and encourage actors to define distinctions from one identity in terms of another. Because these multiple differences are inherently entwined with one another as people make sense of self and other in social relational contexts, the shared cultural meanings people attach to them can never be entirely independent, even when they are culturally presented as being so.

The Persistence of Gender Hierarchy

What is interesting about the age old gender system in Western society is not that it never changes but that it sustains itself by continually redefining who men and women are and what they do while preserving the fundamental assumption that whatever the differences are, on balance, they imply that men are rightly more powerful. The essential form of gender hierarchy—that is, the cultural assumption that men have more status and authority than do women—has persisted during major socioeconomic transformations such as industrialization, the movement of women into the paid labor force, and more recently, the movement of women into maledominated occupations such as law or medicine (Ridgeway 1997). While a complex of social and historical processes has been responsible, we suggest that the interplay of gender beliefs and social relational contexts has played an important part in this persistence.

If the structural terms on which people who are classified as men and women are allowed to encounter one another do not repeatedly enact power and influence relations that predominantly favor men in people's everyday experience, then the cultural beliefs that create gender as a distinct system of difference and inequality will become unsustainable. The fact that gender is present in virtually all social relational contexts but is always enmeshed in other identities and activities suggests that these contexts are an arena where cultural beliefs about what gender is and what it means at any given point in a society are potentially subject to redefinition or change. Yet as we have seen, social relational contexts evoke preexisting gender beliefs that modestly but persistently bias people's behavior and their evaluations of self and other in gender-typical ways. Although these biasing effects are contextually variable and often subtle, they are widespread across the many social relational contexts through which people enact society and shape the course of their lives. The cumulative consequence, cross-sectionally between aggregates of men and women and longitudinally over the lives of individuals, is to reproduce patterns of behaviors that appear to confirm the basic structure of gender beliefs. Thus, although gender beliefs are at play in social relational contexts, their self-fulfilling effects there give the basic hierarchical structure of these beliefs a devilish resilience.

The resilience of gender hierarchy is further reinforced by the way social relational contexts carry preexisting gender beliefs into new activities at the leading edge of social change in society (Ridgeway 1997). These contexts, where individuals take the first steps that lead to a new type of industry, occupation, or social organization, are not well structured by established institutional rules and organizational procedures and, consequently, are particularly affected by the interpersonal relations that develop among the participants. These interpersonal relations, however, usually will be shaped in some degree by the implicit activation of gender beliefs in the contexts through which they develop. As gender beliefs write gender hierarchy into the interpersonal relations through which people create new social forms, the people in effect rewrite gender hierarchy into the new social practices that develop to define the new occupation or industry. In this way, gender beliefs and social relational contexts conserve gender hierarchy in the structure of society and cultural beliefs themselves despite ongoing economic and technological change.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Gender inequality in the workplace and in the household division of labor is sometimes described as having a demand and a supply aspect. Gender discrimination in the labor market and institutional supports for family structure fall into the demand side of the processes that produce gender inequality. Gender differences in the behavioral choices made by women and men in the labor market and at home constitute the supply side of the problem. While a great deal of feminist scholarship has addressed the discriminatory demand side processes (England 1992; Jacobs 1995; Reskin and Roos 1990), feminists have been less comfortable with the supply side processes because these processes seem to blame the victim by suggesting that gender inequality results from women's own "voluntary" choices. Instead, feminists have argued that women's (and men's) voluntary choices, although agentic, are nevertheless socially constructed by the gender system and must be analyzed as such (Jackman 1994; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998).

The theoretical perspective we have outlined follows in this tradition by showing how key, inequality-relevant behaviors of individual men and women are socially constructed and constrained, although not fully determined, by gender beliefs. The perspective adds to earlier contributions in two ways. First, it offers a systematic theoretical specification of how apparently voluntary individual behaviors are shaped by gender beliefs in social relational contexts. Second, this theoretical specification allows us to analyze both aspects of demand side discrimination and supply side individual behavior from the same perspective. Indeed, the effects of gender beliefs in social relational contexts illustrate how discriminatory actions and individual choices are reciprocally entwined and only analytically separable.

In what follows, we give examples of the distinctive strategies for research that are suggested by our theoretical perspective in regard to both demand and supply side processes that produce specific aspects of gender inequality. We focus our examples on discriminatory actions and individual behaviors that are relevant for workplace outcomes because such outcomes are critical to inequality and because the impact of gender beliefs on behavior within the family is better known (Fenstermaker Berk 1985; Risman 1998).

Discriminatory Actions

It is well established that the framing assumptions about women, men, and the work for which they are suited that are contained in hegemonic gender beliefs can become embedded in the organizational structures, authority lines, job classifications, institutional rules, and administrative procedures of employment firms (Acker 1990; Baron, Devereaux Jennings, and Dobbin 1988; Nelson and Bridges 1999; Reskin and McBrier 2000). When this occurs, the implicit biases of gender beliefs acquire a solidity and institutional force that shapes the work process and acts as an agent of inequality (Ridgeway 1997). However, certain organizational procedures, such as bureaucratic accountability for equity, formalized personnel practices, and open information about reward structures, can also suppress the biasing effects of gender beliefs on the behaviors and evaluations of actors in firms (Bielby 2000; Reskin and McBrier 2000; Ridgeway and Correll 2000).

In this context, our perspective directs us to an additional source of discriminatory behavior in the workplace that is relatively shielded from the reinforcing or suppressing effects of administrative structures and procedures. Specifically, the perspective points to social relational sites in work processes that are less bureaucratically scripted and more open to subjective interpretation and spontaneous response. Examples are interviews in the hiring process, decision making in staff meetings, and the evaluation of performances or resumes on the basis of individual judgment. Other examples include start-up firms that are not yet highly structured or types of work that are interpersonally rather than bureaucratically organized, such as screen writing. When gender is salient in these work sites, as it often will be, these sites are likely to be persistent sources of implicit discrimination in the evaluation of ability and performance, the accordance of influence and status, and the distribution of commensurate rewards (Ridgeway 1997). Evidence suggests that judgments made in such sites can contribute as well to the gendering of jobs by biasing the decisions through which employers steer women (or men) toward some jobs rather than others (Fernandez and Sosa 2003). Our perspective suggests, then, that the full dynamics of gender discrimination in the workplace will not be understood until detailed data are collected on less scripted social relational processes in addition to formal organizational or labor market processes.

Two specific examples of the way gender beliefs acting in such social relational contexts contribute to gender inequality in the workplace can be seen in the role these processes play in the glass ceiling problem for women managers and in the disadvantages faced by workers who are mothers of dependent children (Budig and England 2001).

The glass ceiling problem. Women are increasingly common as midlevel managers in the workplace but rarely reach positions of highest authority (Eagly and Karau 2002; Reskin and Ross 1995). Heilman and colleagues (1995) have shown that the manager role itself is culturally linked with men in our society. The gender typing of the role, our perspective argues, will cause gender beliefs to be salient in almost all social relational contexts in which women managers work, although the effects of these beliefs will be strongest in work more closely associated with men (e.g., engineering or the military). In social relational contexts, the status and competence implications of gender beliefs will implicitly bias coworkers', subordinates', and superiors' perceptions of women managers' competence and their legitimacy in the manager role compared to similar men. When a woman manager acts highly agentically or asserts directive authority, as the manager role often requires, these implicit biases lead others to react with resistance and hostility (Eagly and Karau 2002; Heilman, Block, and Martell 1995; Rudman and Kilianski 2000). Managing such backlash reactions adds to the difficulties of women managers' jobs and is among the processes that constitute the glass ceiling they face.

Disadvantages for mothers in the workplace. There is growing evidence that women who are mothers of dependent children face special disadvantages in the labor force even compared to other women (Budig and England 2001). While these disadvantages are a product of many institutional arrangements both at work and in the family (Budig and England 2001; Williams 2000), our perspective suggests that implicit bias acting in social relational work sites is also likely to play a role. Evidence suggests that widely shared stereotypes of mothers are a more extreme version of the stereotype of women in general (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick forthcoming; Ridgeway and Correll forthcoming). If women in general are seen as more communal than instrumentally agentic, mothers are seen as much more communal than agentic.

Given the association of instrumental agency with competence in the workplace, our perspective suggests that when a woman's status as mother is salient in social relational work sites, cultural beliefs will bias expectations for her ability, performance, and appropriateness for authority even more strongly than for a woman who is not a mother. The impact of this bias should be especially strong since the cultural expectation that mothers are always there for their children creates a cultural contradiction with expectations for the ideal worker, thereby making motherhood appear more directly related to workplace performances than is gender alone (Hays 1996; Ridgeway and Correll forthcoming; Williams 2000). In support of this analysis, recent experiments have shown that simply adding a phrase such as "has a two-year-old child" to a woman's resume reduces evaluators' estimates of her competence, her suitability for hiring and promotion, and the wages she should be paid. It does not have this effect on evaluations of a man's resume (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick forthcoming; Fuegen, Biernat, and Deaux forthcoming).

Critical Choices

In addition to illuminating discriminatory bias in social relational contexts, our theoretical perspective alerts us to the pressures in such contexts that constrain the voluntary choices individuals make to pursue various workplace outcomes. The perspective suggests that social relational training and work contexts are strategic sites for understanding the supply side of gender inequality as well.

When salient in a training or work context, gender beliefs can bias individuals' expectations for their own competence in the situation independently of their underlying abilities. As we noted, such gender-biased self-expectations can affect performance and, even more insidiously, bias the ability individuals attribute to themselves based on a given performance (Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1999; Correll 2004; Foschi 2000; Spencer, Steele, and Quinn 1999). Gender-biased self-estimates of ability in turn can affect individuals' willingness, compared to otherwise similar people of the other sex, to pursue a particular career or line of training and to persist at it in the face of difficulties. It can also affect the assertiveness with which individuals conduct themselves in the workplace and the level of compensation that they demand (Major 1989).

Correll (2001) used an analysis based on this perspective to help explain why so few women compared to men choose to pursue highly rewarded scientific and technical careers. Such careers require training in mathematics, which is widely seen as a valued but male-typed task (Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald 2002). The gender relevance of the task makes gender beliefs salient in math testing situations in a way that disadvantages women compared to equally able men. Using longitudinal data from a representative sample of junior and senior high school students, Correll showed, as this analysis predicts, that girls attributed less math ability to themselves than did boys with the same math test scores and grades. The math ability students attributed to themselves in turn affected the likelihood that they went on to advanced study in math, science, and engineering.

In sum, then, the theoretical perspective we have described directs our attention to social relational contexts as strategic sites in which gender inequality is continually produced through both demand and supply processes. Although such sites are not the only sources of gender inequality, inequality cannot be overcome until the consequences of gender beliefs in social relational contexts are understood.

CHANGING CULTURAL BELIEFS AND DECLINING INEQUALITY?

Although inequality persists, recent decades have brought significant improvements in women's position in the public sphere, as reflected in indices such as the wage gap between men and women and women's representation in high-status occupations (Padovic and Reskin 2002). Such changes have caused some to argue that gender inequality in the public worlds of work and education is largely "over" or at least on a course of inevitable decline (Jackson 1998; Petersen, Saporta, and Seidel 2000). In this context, our perspective cautions that while progress toward gender equity has been made and, we hope, will continue, there is nothing inevitable about this process. Hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender act as the rules of the gender system, and these beliefs have self-fulfilling effects on perceptions and behaviors that give them a remarkable ability to persist in the face of social change that might undermine them.

The core aspects of gender beliefs consist of both a hierarchical dimension that associates men with greater status and instrumental competence and a horizontal dimension of fundamental difference that associates each sex with what the other is not. Consistent with our analysis of the resilience of gender beliefs, current and longitudinal studies of gender stereotypes show that the core structure of these beliefs has not yet been dismantled by progress toward gender equity. Descriptive beliefs about the attributes of the "typical" man or woman are still largely shared and largely unchanged since the 1970s (Fiske et al. 2002; Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, and Lueptow 2001; Spence and Buckner 2000).

People's self-reports of their own instrumental and communal traits are usually less gender typed than are their estimates of the "typical" person. These self-reports, while also largely stable over the years, have changed more than have views of what is gender typical (Spence and Buckner 2000). Perhaps reflecting women's greater labor force involvement, women now describe themselves (but men do not describe them) as significantly more instrumental than did earlier cohorts, narrowing the gender gap in self-descriptions of instrumental competence. On the other hand, consistent with the relative stability in the household division of labor, women's tendencies to report much stronger communal traits than do men have not changed in recent decades.

Since, as we have seen, beliefs about status and competence differences between men and women are especially important for gender inequality, it is heartening to see some narrowing in women's (if not men's) perceptions of the magnitude of the gender gap in instrumental competence (Spence and Buckner 2000). Yet the hierarchical dimension of gender beliefs and the fundamental difference dimension support one another in a dynamic manner, suggesting that it may not be easy to eliminate the remaining competence gap altogether and, with it, the inequality it produces. To the extent that people continue to deeply hold beliefs that men and women are essentially different, separate categories of people, they will likely resist beliefs that there are absolutely no instrumental differences between men and women in the "things that count," even in the face of clear displays of competence by women. This tension between the belief that men and women are fundamentally different and the displays of similar levels of competence between men and women may facilitate some cultural redefinition in what counts at a given period of history. For instance, it used to count to be a pediatrician, but it no longer counts as much now that many women are clearly competent pediatricians.

Whatever the source, anything that preserves a belief in some difference in men's and women's instrumental competence, no matter how narrowed the gap, preserves the fundamental hierarchical character of gender beliefs. This in turn, we argue, ensures that the taken for granted rules for the gender system are also rules for inequality as well as difference.

Our analysis suggests, then, that although changing socioeconomic conditions and personal and collective resistance do gradually modify cultural beliefs about gender, the core structure of the beliefs are not easy to erode. Despite some narrowing of the gap in women's reports of their own instrumental traits compared to men's, it is unwise to be sanguine about the inevitable decline of gender inequality. The gender system will only be undermined through the long-term, persistent accumulation of everyday challenges to the system resulting from socioeconomic change and individual resistance.

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Cecilia L. Ridgeway is a professor of sociology at Stanford University. Her research addresses the role that social hierarchies in everyday interaction play in stratification and social inequality, especially in regard to gender. She also studies the way interactional contexts create and spread status beliefs about social differences.

Shelley J. Correll is an assistant professor of sociology at Cornell University. Her research explores how social psychological processes reproduce structures of gender inequality, especially in schools and labor markets. A current project evaluates how cultural understandings of the motherhood role create subtle discriminatory barriers for employed women who are mothers.