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Theorizing Status Distance: Rethinking the Micro Theories of Representation and Diversity in Public Organizations

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Abstract

Through bringing the concept of status distance to representative bureaucracy and diversity management literature, this article develops new hypotheses that can guide future studies on representation and diversity in public organizations. First, including status distance brings consideration of the tensions that minority representation creates between integration within the workforce and the pressures on minority bureaucrats to actively represent clientele. Second, the way status distance plays out in the interaction of bureaucrats with co-workers and citizen-clients depends on characteristics of the national and organizational environment and type of service.

Keywords

representative bureaucracy, diversity management, status distance, organizational context

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Introduction

Both in the empirical literature and in practice, representative bureaucracy (RB) and diversity management (DM) overlap in their advocacy for more diversity in organizations but are distinct in their objectives. RB is concerned about equity and the treatment of disadvantaged clientele. DM, in contrast, is focused on managerial performance criteria, such as efficiency, effectiveness, and creativity. Perhaps as the result of the different outcomes' focus, the literature of RB has generally developed separately from the literature of DM with a few exceptions (Andrews & Ashworth, 2015; Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Groeneveld & Van de Walle, 2010; Pitts, 2005; Selden & Selden, 2001). In addition to a failure to recognize that representation can be instrumental for an organization and contribute to effectiveness and efficiency, the estrangement of the RB and DM literatures might also be attributed to their underlying theories and levels of analysis. Whereas the micro theory of bureaucratic representation centers on the interaction between individual bureaucrats and their citizen-clients, DM literature focuses on intraorganizational processes at the group level, such as the interaction among co-workers within work groups. These intraorganizational processes may be important to explain how bureaucratic representation may work out across the micro, meso, and macro levels, but have not systematically been included in RB studies.

In this article, we argue that status distance may be the missing theoretical link between the two literatures. Status differences between groups in society influence how individuals interact with one another not only within but also across organizational boundaries. However, despite a focus on disadvantaged groups within society, a surprising omission so far in the theory of RB has been the lack of theorizing on status differences between social groups. One could assume, though, that status difference is a precursor to political salience with status difference a necessary condition for sociodemographic characteristics to become politically salient within a bureaucratic context. While political salience that is associated with status differences in society is assumed to be an important condition for demographic characteristics to matter in bureaucratic decision-making, *how* status differences at the societal level of analysis may play out in bureaucratic decision-making is not elaborated upon within RB theory. We, therefore, propose to express the micro theory of RB in terms of the more general theoretical constructs of status characteristics and status distance, and from there elaborate the theory in a more systematic manner.

DM literature has focused on heterogeneity with regard to sociodemographic characteristics (Harrison & Klein, 2007) rather than on representation,¹ and without much theorizing on why some sociodemographic characteristics

would be more salient to some work group processes than others. In fact, the majority of studies in DM literature conceive of advantaged and disadvantaged subgroups in society as “conceptual equivalents” (Leslie, 2017, p. 427). This is most probably due to its managerial focus on the performance outcomes of diversity rather than on equity. However, accounting for status differences between sociodemographic groups could contribute to understanding diversity processes within work groups and hence, to understanding how the interaction between minority and majority bureaucrats may play out.

In this article, we thus argue that bringing the concept of status distance to both literatures may serve as a way to integrate the literatures and bring new research ideas to the research agenda of scholars studying representation and diversity in public organizations. To this purpose, we use the concept of status distance to connect the theoretical arguments in both literatures about how and why sociodemographic characteristics of bureaucrats matter in their interaction with co-workers and citizen-clients. We then elaborate that the way status distance plays out in the interaction of bureaucrats with co-workers and citizen-clients depends on characteristics of the national and organizational environment and type of service. The article formulates hypotheses based on this argumentation and, in so doing, outlines an agenda for future studies on representation and diversity in public organizations.

We will start with a brief overview of the intellectual history of RB and will then explain how the micro theory of RB can be expressed in terms of status distance. We will proceed with a brief description of the foundations of the academic literature on DM and identify aspects of this literature that may complement the micro theory of RB. We will then elaborate on the meaning and implications of status distance to identify mechanisms through which representation and diversity may yield specific outcomes. Thereafter, as the salience and meaning of status distance differ across national and organizational contexts, we point at several potential contextual factors that may affect those processes. In conclusion, the argument and its potential contribution to the literature are briefly discussed.

A Brief Intellectual History of RB

The term *representative bureaucracy* originates with Donald Kingsley (1944) who was concerned that the first Labor government in the United Kingdom faced a civil service that did not share the working-class background of the Labor MPs. His concern was not with the direct representation of the public by the bureaucracy but rather indirect representation based on the political system. Applications of the theory in the United States changed it in two ways. First, American scholars of public administration have generally been

skeptical of the ability of political institutions to fully represent the heterogeneity of the general public. Norton Long (1952) proposed that bureaucracy with its larger size and more diverse social origins could better represent the full range of interests of the general public. A bureaucracy that broadly represented the American public on demographic criteria would likely share similar values with the general public with the result that government would be responsive to the needs and desires of the public.

Mosher (1968) distinguished between passive representation (a bureaucracy that looked like the general public) and active representation (a bureaucracy that acted for the public) and defined a key question that dominates the study of RB to this day: Does a passively RB produce outputs that benefit the individuals who are passively represented? Subsequent theoretical and empirical work further refined this question by specifying the conditions under which passive representation would be associated with outcomes benefiting the citizens being represented. Demographic origins translate into bureaucratic actions, the logic goes, because socialization processes generate attitudes that vary across demographic origins. As an example, racial minorities hold different values and policy preferences than do racial majorities in the United States. Not all demographic factors or identities matter, however, only those that become highly salient generally through the political process (Keiser et al., 2002). Another requirement is that the bureaucrat must have discretion to act in an area where the social-identity-based values might be relevant. From a rational choice perspective, any decision maker will seek to make decisions that maximize his or her values. To the extent that bureaucrats possess discretion, one would expect that the decisions would be influenced to some extent by the bureaucrat's values, and some of these values might be linked to highly salient social identities.

The second transformation of the theory of RB by the American context was the focus on salient social identities with political relevance. Initially that meant a focus on race (Meier, 1993) and gender (Keiser et al., 2002), but later also on sexual orientation (Thielemann & Stewart, 1996), veteran's status (Gade & Wilkins, 2013), and recently, lived experiences (Park, 2020; Zamboni, 2020), and other factors. This focus meant that RB concerned groups that were generally disadvantaged by the existing political system, giving the theory a heavily normative component (Keiser, 2010). The logic of the micro theory that values and discretion matter for bureaucratic decisions, however, holds whether the bureaucrats represent the advantaged (see Redford, 1969) or the disadvantaged. The focus on the disadvantaged likely results because one does not expect majoritarian political institutions—bureaucracies are created by political majorities—to benefit those without

political power (Meier, 2019). This implies that power differences between sociodemographic groups in society may infuse the bureaucratic decision-making process.

The Micro Theory of RB

Although the concept of representation, a bureaucrat taking action that affects a client, plays a key role in the theory of RB, for the most part the empirical studies other than Selden (1997) do not focus on representation as a process or activity *per se*.² The predominant empirical question within RB literature is whether there is a statistical relationship between passive representation and organizational outputs that benefit the group of individuals who are passively represented (Kennedy, 2014).³ Recent work has started to elaborate the micro theory behind this linkage (Favero, 2016; Groeneveld et al., 2015; Meier, 2019; Meier & Morton, 2015) to illustrate that active representation is only one possible way this relationship might materialize and that active representation itself may play out in the context of different interactions: between bureaucrat and citizen, between bureaucrat and colleagues, and between bureaucrat and the organization.⁴

First, the correlation between passive representation and outputs that benefit a clientele might result because bureaucrats who share identities with the clients make specific decisions that benefit the individual clients. A minority welfare official, for example, might take more time with a client and show them how to correctly apply for a program benefit or a minority teacher might be more encouraging of a minority student or decide to recommend that the student be assessed for placement in a gifted class (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016). These are classic forms of active representation that operate at the individual level through the interaction of bureaucrats and clients.

Second, the individual bureaucrat might convince other bureaucrats in the organization to change their behaviors in ways that affect the passively represented clients. In this case, the representation process does not take place from bureaucrat to client but rather from one bureaucrat to another. This could occur within the hierarchy of the organization, that is, a passive representative might direct or encourage subordinates to change how they approach minority clients (Carroll et al., 2019), or this may be the result of informal interaction between co-workers, that is, a passive representative on the work floor might influence her colleagues to change their behaviors *vis-à-vis* minority clients. Atkins and Wilkins's (2013) study of teen pregnancy in Georgia schools illustrates how White male teachers learned to team with African American female teachers to positively intervene in the lives of African American female students. This learning process might be about

communication patterns, cultural norms, or different approaches to the same bureaucratic end.

Third, an individual bureaucrat acting as a representative might seek to influence the organization to change policies so that they benefit the individuals who are passively represented (or alternatively harm them less). Roch et al. (2010), for example, find that Georgia schools with more minority teachers are likely to put greater emphasis on ameliorative disciplinary practices (in school suspensions) and less emphasis on punitive disciplinary practices (out-of-school suspensions, expulsions). This is still active representation, but it relies on the organization changing policies and thus does not imply that the bureaucrats are taking any actions that the organization would discourage.

Two other ways passive representation could correlate with outcomes that benefit the represented group do not rely on active representation by the individual bureaucrat either working directly on clients or through other bureaucrats. What has recently been termed “symbolic representation” (Ricucci et al., 2014) involves the client changing his or her attitudes and behavior simply because the bureaucrat or bureaucracy is passively representative. Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006), for example, find that women are more likely to report sexual assaults in cities with more women on the police force (see also Schuck, 2018; Schuck & Rabe-Hemp, 2016). A similar process, but on the individual level, occurs in police stops with minority citizens more likely to perceive they were treated fairly by a police officer if the officer shared their race (Epp et al., 2014). Minority students adopting a minority teacher as a role model would have a similar effect (Dee, 2005). Symbolic representation might also benefit the organization as a whole. The symbolic effect of a more representative work force can lead to greater coproduction on the part of clientele (Vinopal, 2018), better communication between clients and bureaucrats (Meier & Nicholson-Crotty, 2006), or simply a more positive interaction between client and bureaucrat (Epp et al., 2014).

The final way that the presence of minority bureaucrats might influence organizational outputs is if other employees change their behaviors simply because the passive representatives are now part of the organization. This change in the composition of the bureaucracy might have the result that other bureaucrats are more conscious of issues that affect disadvantaged clients or make them more willing to listen to arguments about such. A similar process of representation producing internal contagion effects occurs on appellate courts when the panel of judges contains a Black judge; White judges are more likely to vote for a Black appellant if there is a Black judge on the panel (Kastellec, 2013).

The Micro Theory of RB and Status Distance

The theoretical processes elaborated above explain how passive representation may affect organizational outputs that benefit the group of individuals who are passively represented. This is either through the effect of minority bureaucrats acting upon their minority representative role or through the symbolic effect of the mere presence of minority bureaucrats on perceptions and behavior of co-workers or clients. The theory also suggests that these effects are stronger if the demographic factors have high political salience. Political salience as a condition that influences the effects of an RB has been associated with demographic factors that define inequality in society. For that reason, the majority of studies in RB center on race, ethnic background, and gender, and examine whether and to what extent representation of women, racial, or ethnic minority groups affects bureaucratic benefits for these groups (Bishu & Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy, 2014).

Starting point for the argument in this article is social identity theory that assumes that individuals use sociodemographic characteristics to categorize one another, including oneself (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brown, 2000). This categorization is not only necessary to make sense of one's social environment but also to define one's own identity in relation to others. An individual's social identity is thus jointly constructed by the individual and also others who interact with the individual. In addition, an individual's social identity is multidimensional, and hence, an individual may identify with different types of social groups simultaneously. Which dimensions are salient to one's social identity at any particular time and place is dependent on the social context (Thurlow Brenner, 2009). From this theoretical perspective, a minority representative role behavior is, therefore, expected to occur in situations where a bureaucrat's minority status is salient.

Status characteristics are salient social identity dimensions in many human interactions. Status characteristics are evaluative beliefs about social differences and affect who is being socially valued (Ridgeway, 2014). If advantaged groups in society share sociodemographic characteristics, these characteristics become indicators of social status. Power differences in society are thus consolidated through their associations with a categorical difference between people based on sociodemographic dimensions, such as race or gender. Both advantaged and disadvantaged groups will develop such associations between power over resources and other characteristics. These status beliefs shape social relations and in doing so they are reinforced by the social relations.

Status beliefs affect interactions among people. Generally speaking, individuals prefer to interact with others similar to themselves, also known as the

homophily principle (M. McPherson et al., 2001). In contrast, dissimilarity between groups generally reduces the likelihood of interaction and the quality of that interaction (Blau, 1977a; 1977b). One possible explanation is that dissimilarity increases the transaction costs of an interaction as there are possibilities of miscommunication. An alternative explanation would be that this process of attraction and selection of similar others to interact with occurs through affective social processes that are more unconscious and implicit. Either way, status differences will reinforce perceptions of dissimilarity; hence, status distance, the status differential between members of social groups, reduces the likelihood of high-quality interaction (Blau, 1977a; 1977b). Status distance, as result, may affect how individual bureaucrats and citizen-clients perceive each other, which may in turn affect their behavior vis-à-vis each other.

Studies on street-level bureaucracy have shown that status characteristics may serve as salient classifications used by street-level bureaucrats to categorize their clients (Soss et al., 2011). These studies show how citizen-clients from minority groups are evaluated more negatively and/or treated more harshly than citizen-clients from majority groups. Explanations generally focus on how street-level bureaucrats—in general—classify and treat citizen-clients from different backgrounds. How status distance between bureaucrat and citizen-clients plays out in bureaucratic processes has hardly been scrutinized (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019).

Departing from Bourdieu's intellectual heritage, Harrits and Møller (2014) explain how distance matters to how bureaucrats classify their clients and, hence, how they perceive and treat them. Following this logic, they expect

the distance between FLWs [Front Line Workers] social positions and lifestyles and the social positions and lifestyles of the citizens . . . to matter for discretion and categorization of citizens, meaning that worries (and possibly interventions) will tend to increase with the increasing social distance between FLWs and citizens. (p. 452)

This work assumes that bureaucrats share a middle-class norm because of their social position (as a bureaucrat), a status characteristic that is assumed to dominate the bureaucrat–client interaction. While this study is one of few studies that focus on status differences between bureaucrats and citizen-clients, whether and how status differences between minority and majority social groups may play a role in these bureaucratic interactions remains unexplored (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). In the following, we take a status distance perspective on representation and apply this perspective to the

interaction between bureaucrat and citizen-client and to the interaction between bureaucrats.

Interaction Between Bureaucrat and Citizen-Client

The general argument would become that similarity in minority background characteristics between individual bureaucrats and citizens will be associated with perceptions of lower status distance which facilitates interaction between bureaucrat and client, enhances the quality of interaction, and, hence, effective service delivery. Minority clients change their behavior because they experience smaller status distance to a bureaucrat of similar background. The client experiences higher quality interaction and as a result becomes more cooperative, or the relationship changes from adversarial to cooperative.⁵ For instance, the previously cited studies of Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006) and Epp et al. (2014) do find evidence for higher quality interaction between minority bureaucrats and minority clients. On the organizational level, this likely works either through coproduction or simply cooperation as the result of perceived commonalities or smaller status distance. For instance, Vinopal (2018) shows how minority parents participate more in school activities (coproduction) when there are minority teachers. This leads to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Lower status distance between bureaucrat and citizen-client enhances the quality of their interaction and, hence, the effectiveness of service delivery.

However, it may be questioned whether and to what extent a minority bureaucrat feels an incentive to identify with a minority client, as status beliefs create incentives for individuals from both majority and minority groups to associate with higher status others (Ridgeway, 2014). Status enhancement is an important motive underlying social identity theory, assuming that individuals are motivated to achieve and maintain a favorable social identity and, hence, will be inclined to identify with those groups they perceive as increasing their status (Chattopadhyay et al., 2004). As a position in the bureaucracy by definition changes one's status, this professional status affects status differences between individuals. Being a bureaucrat frames the status distance in the interaction with the client, as the minority bureaucrat is now different from the minority client and may actually reject their commonality (Van Gool, 2008). The bureaucratic status may thus negatively affect the positive effect of low status distance between minority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients. It may also reinforce the detrimental effects of status

distance on the interaction between majority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients. This effect is likely to be greater in the presence of strong organizational socialization that seeks to create a cadre of special public servants (elite administrative services, paramilitary organizations, etc.). This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: The bureaucratic status negatively affects the positive effect of low status distance between minority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients.

Hypothesis 2b: The bureaucratic status reinforces the detrimental effects of status distance on the interaction between majority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients.

Hypothesis 2c: The effect of bureaucratic status is greater in the presence of strong organizational socialization.

Interaction Between Majority and Minority Bureaucrats

A status distance perspective on the interaction between majority and minority bureaucrats within the work-setting predicts that if status distance between majority and minority bureaucrats is high, it is less likely that high-quality interactions within the work-setting will develop. However, it can be expected that decision-making by majority group bureaucrats may be affected by a raised awareness of status differences through the interaction with colleagues from minority groups with lower social status. This may be the underlying mechanism that explains that on appellate courts White judges are more likely to vote for a Black appellant if there is a Black judge on the panel, as was found in the previously cited study by Kastlelec (2013). This echoes the contact hypothesis formulated within social psychology that predicts that contact between minority and majority groups will reduce perceptions of dissimilarity and stereotyping (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). One could expect that this effect would be particularly strong if minority and majority groups hold positions of similar professional status. For that reason, we expect the probability of this effect occurring to be higher in the interaction among majority and minority bureaucrats than in the interaction between majority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients, as there is an inherent status distance between bureaucrats and citizen-clients (as we have explained above).

Following this line of argument that social distance affects the benefits from greater contact between groups, the interaction between minority and majority bureaucrats may change attitudes of majority bureaucrats and in turn lower perceived status distance between majority bureaucrats and

minority clients, and vice versa. This could also bring a better understanding of the needs of majority clients to minority bureaucrats and thus facilitate service delivery to both majority and minority status clients. For instance, Hong (2017b), in his study on the link between representation and police misconduct, suggests that minority bureaucrats could have a transformative influence on the actions of majority colleagues. By increasing representativeness, feelings of responsibility of all organizational members for fair treatment of minority citizen-clients could increase (Hong, 2017a). This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Interaction between minority and majority bureaucrats lowers perceived status distance between majority bureaucrats and minority clients and vice versa, which facilitates service delivery to both majority and minority status clients.

Hypothesis 3b: This effect is particularly strong if minority and majority bureaucrats hold positions of similar professional status.

Hypothesis 3c: Status within the bureaucracy between managers and street-level bureaucrats can negatively affect the low status distance between minority managers and minority street-level bureaucrats.

These hypotheses about the interactions among majority and minority bureaucrats link to the DM literature to which we turn in the next section.

A Brief Intellectual History of DM

In the recent years, RB has received increasing attention from public management scholars who added a stronger focus on organizational performance to the studies of RB. Because representative bureaucracies are generally more diverse, albeit not necessarily so, insights from DM literature could contribute to the RB literature, and they increasingly are referred to in studies on RB (Groeneveld & Van de Walle, 2010). So far, though, this has not led to systematic theorizing. In our view, RB studies could particularly benefit from DM literature as to the elaboration of possible processes explaining the linkage between passive representation and organizational performance. More specifically, DM literature provides theoretical explanations for how the interaction between bureaucrats within the organization develops. These interactions are characterized by different processes, and there are different mechanisms that drive these processes.

Several theoretical and review studies published in the last two decades have shown that, from a managerial perspective, work group diversity may have both positive and negative outcomes. Milliken and Martins's (1996)

review article identifies possible mediating factors between different types of diversity and individual-level, group-level, and organizational-level outcomes. Their study identifies four common consequences of diversity that affect diversity outcomes: cognitive consequences, affective consequences, symbolic consequences, and communication-related consequences. The authors further stipulate that diversity may be beneficial to work group outcomes due to cognitive and symbolic effects, while it may also involve costs due to affective and communication-related consequences. By distinguishing between different mediating factors and their outcomes, this much-cited review article offers a first explanation for previous inconsistent findings on the diversity and performance relationship.

Van Knippenberg et al. (2004) amended this study by identifying two dominant perspectives in the diversity and performance literature, highlighting *positive cognitive* processes related to diversity and *negative affective* processes, respectively. Their categorization and elaboration model (CEM) integrates an information and decision-making perspective and a social categorization perspective on work group diversity. The model articulates two types of processes simultaneously at play in diverse work groups: diversity-related cognitive processes that positively influence information elaboration among group members and affective processes reducing the degree of social integration. Diverse social groups may contribute to organizational performance because of an increase in information exchange, creativity, and innovativeness, the model shows, but *only if* social categorization processes are being countered (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004).⁶

What both these two key articles have in common is that they point at the underlying mechanisms through which diversity outcomes come about. Following these two studies, many empirical studies have been conducted focusing on one or more factors making up or influencing these processes and amending previous studies on direct effects. Within these studies, the work group is the primary level of analysis with a focus on social-psychological processes within work groups affecting collective decision-making. The majority of studies have been conducted in private-sector companies, but that being said, organizational context is generally not part of the consideration in the existing research. For the purposes of this article, we delve deeper into the mechanisms of elaboration and social categorization to amend the micro theory of RB.

Social Categorization, Elaboration, and Status Distance

We take the CEM model as a point of reference which hypothesizes that work group diversity increases work group performance through an increase of

task-relevant information. Social categorization may have a negative impact on this process through eliciting intergroup biases that result in rejecting information that would be a valuable input to organization decisions.

This social categorization process can be disentangled further. Work group diversity leads to social categorization to the extent that the social categorizations of minority and majority groups exist within the organizational setting (Van Knippenberg et al., 2004, p. 1014). These existing social categorizations within the organization might be directly meaningful to the task at hand (e.g., how to serve different clientele) or might simply be imported from society and create communication barriers even if the social categorizations are not meaningful to the task at hand (racial tension in an office that produces communication barriers in the execution of tasks that do not have a racial component). Social categorization results in intergroup biases to the extent the social identities implied by the categorization are threatened, both as to their distinctiveness and their status. Threats to distinctiveness may be experienced when the identity of the group as different from other groups is denied or suppressed (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). This may result from strong organizational socialization processes in which a shared organizational identity is emphasized. Interaction with lower status groups may also be experienced as a direct threat to the higher status of higher status groups which they respond to by protecting it and pushing lower status others away. Such intergroup biases within the organization may thus reinforce the perceived distance between majority and minority groups which may reduce the frequency and quality of interaction between individuals from majority and minority social groups and, hence, according to the CEM model, the elaboration of task-relevant information required for diversity to contribute to work group performance.

Greater social distance within the organization, however, may also lead to a stronger identification of minority bureaucrats with minority group citizen-clients and a higher perceived salience of one's minority representative role, which will enhance the interaction between minority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients. The inability to get the organization to respond to systemic discrimination would motivate bureaucrats to exercise more discretion in this area at the street level. The increased motivation to representation, however, must be qualified by the risks that a bureaucrat who represent takes to act outside the norms of the organization (see Meier, 2019)—a risk that would increase as the status difference between majority and minority bureaucrats increases. These risks are likely to increase as the number of minority bureaucrats declines and the organization lacks a critical mass of minority bureaucrats to support representative action.

The interaction between minority bureaucrats and minority clients could also affect intraorganizational relationships in a different way by inducing a higher perceived salience of a bureaucrat's minority representative role. This possibility suggests that the organizational costs associated with greater social distance in regard to within-bureaucracy relationships might be offset to a certain degree by greater benefits to the organization through more beneficial interrelationships between minority bureaucrats and minority clientele. At a higher level of aggregation, this could cumulate in greater organizational benefits, dependent on the degree to which equity is important to organizational performance and on the extent to which the organization depends on bureaucrat–client interaction and communication relative to intraorganizational cooperation and information sharing. This leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4a: Greater status distance between bureaucrats from majority and minority social groups reduces the frequency and quality of their interaction and, hence, work group performance.

Hypothesis 4b: Greater status distance between bureaucrats from majority and minority social groups leads to a stronger identification of minority bureaucrats with minority group citizen-clients and a higher perceived salience of one's minority representative role. This will enhance the interaction between minority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients, which may contribute to work group performance.

Hypothesis 4c: The accumulation of the above processes in organizational benefits is dependent on the degree to which equity is important to organizational performance and on the extent to which the organization depends on bureaucrat–client interaction and communication relative to intraorganizational cooperation and information sharing.

The above processes are stronger if status distance is higher (Brown, 2000). Intersectionality should be considered to be a condition that may deepen status distance and hence may reinforce social categorization processes and intergroup biases. It also makes clear that social distance is inherently a multidimensional concept where all observed differences are framed in terms of distance. Intersectionality is thus inherent in social distance not only because it simply just adds additional distance dimensions to race, gender, or other identities, but also because those dimensions may interact with implications for the salience and meaning of multidimensionally defined social categories (Choo & Ferree, 2010). That means the theory needs to note that one can operate in a single dimension of social distance (e.g., race) or multiple dimensions (race, class, gender, social status, profession, etc.). The

logic holds in one dimension or in multiple, the only difference is that studies will need to consider the various dimensions and their interactions, and perhaps weight them differently, dependent on their salience within the bureaucratic setting. This applies both at a single time and also over time or space as the weights on the dimensions might change. Based on the above, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 5: Intersectionality deepens status distance and, in so doing, reinforces the above processes.

The occurrence of social categorization processes is furthermore dependent on the numeric distribution of majority and minority groups within the workgroup (Blau, 1977a; Kanter, 1977; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). If the minority group is relatively small in number, their token situation will induce processes that will emphasize the differences with the majority group and, hence, intergroup biases will be stronger (Kanter, 1977). This will lead to lower probabilities of high-quality interactions between majority and minority bureaucrats to develop. Instead, it may be expected that minority bureaucrats feel an incentive to emphasize their social identity as distinct from that of the majority, leading them to focus on the interaction with minority clients. On the contrary, though, RB literature suggests that a critical mass is needed in some cases for minority bureaucrats to feel the support to use their discretion to help minority clients (Meier, 2019). The following hypothesis can be formulated:

Hypothesis 6: The occurrence of the above processes is dependent on the numeric distribution of majority and minority groups within the workgroup.

In a work group setting, interaction is often a requirement and not something that can be avoided. For this reason, based on the contact hypothesis, one would predict that intergroup contact, as necessarily occurs in a work group setting, albeit to varying degrees, ultimately reduces intergroup biases. Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) identify three mediational processes that may explain why intergroup contact would reduce intergroup biases. First, intergroup contact facilitates a learning process, and this accrued knowledge about minority groups reduces prejudice. Second, interaction with minority groups reduces intergroup threat and anxiety; and, third, intergroup contact enables majority group members to empathize with and take the perspective of the minority group. In all, intergroup contact is expected to reduce perceptions of status distance. As this effect would be particularly strong if minority and majority groups hold positions of similar professional status, we predicted the probability of this effect occurring to be higher in the interaction

among majority and minority bureaucrats than in the interaction between majority bureaucrats and minority citizen-clients. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: The occurrence of the above processes is dependent on the frequency of interaction between majority and minority group bureaucrats.

Based on the above divergent insights, we see two processes emerging which are interrelated. The first process is based on strong social categorizations and intergroup biases and leads to *differentiation* between social categories within the organization as well as in their interaction with their clientele. If this process is dominant, high-quality interactions between minority bureaucrats and minority clients may develop, but at the cost of intraorganizational interaction between minority and majority bureaucrats, as status distance between minority and majority social groups is reinforced rather than reduced. Another process is based on strong learning and synergy effects that may emanate from actual interactions between minority and majority bureaucrats and leads to *integration*. If this process is dominant, social distance between minority and majority groups within and across organizational boundaries may decrease. We may assume a negative association between differentiation and integration. The question is which of the two processes will be dominant and in which social and organizational contexts, a question to which we will turn in the next section.

Status Distance and National and Organizational Context

Status distance is a societal construction. This implies that the study of representation and diversity from a status perspective should consider the broader community where the bureaucracy is embedded. Status distance, and hence the salience of sociodemographic characteristics, and how status distance may affect organizational outcomes depend on context.

National Context

National contexts play a role in shaping the status hierarchies within a country and thus the underlying structure that affects intraorganizational processes. At the most basic level, countries vary in terms of population heterogeneity. Political science has long relied on measures of ethnolinguistic fractionalization (Alesina et al., 2003) to classify countries that range from

very homogeneous (e.g., South Korea, Japan) to extremely heterogeneous (sub-Saharan African countries). Such measures can be combined with measures of political power to create essentially measures of political hierarchy where small minorities dominate political and economic life to the exclusion of the majority (Cederman & Girardin, 2007). Organizations as open systems quite logically bring this societal heterogeneity and the accompanying status distances into the organization and thus organizational micropolitics can resemble the micropolitics of the nation.

An organization in a highly fractionated nation is likely to face major status distances as it seeks to design and implement programs. This does not mean that organizations in highly homogeneous countries (low levels of ethno-linguistic fractionalization) do not have to deal with status distance; only that, the dimensions for status distance shift from race and ethnicity to other factors such as language, income, education, and gender. A highly homogeneous society such as South Korea that further homogenizes its government bureaucracy with Confucian style recruitment and socialization buttressed by gate keeping educational institutions (e.g., Seoul National University) still grapples with status differences and conflict arising from gender, disability, and new immigrant populations.

Hypothesis 8: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process is dependent on the fractionalization of society.

Salient political identities are created and honed in the political system as it emphasizes some identities and seeks to deemphasize others. This means that race can have a much different meaning for the same people in Puerto Rico than in the mainland United States despite the various ties between the two nations (Rodríguez-Silva, 2012). In similar ways, characteristics that exist in all countries (e.g., gender) vary in meaning across countries and over time as the political system defines issues that are gendered and those that are not (Keiser et al., 2002).

The political system can, in fact, reify social distances or at least recognize the group basis as a core element in society as Canada, Belgium, and Lebanon do with language and religion. The religious and ethnic quota system for bureaucracy in Lebanon is a classic example (Krislov, 1974). The political origins of social differentiation and social distances should not be taken to mean that political systems are omnipotent in defining identities; that is not the case. However, much the French government decrees that all citizens are French and ethnicity has no meaning is contraindicated by the political demands of French citizens who have immigrated from Africa. In many countries as a result, there is a politics of recognition whereby groups seek recognition from the state that they have specific status that allows some type

of access or recognition (e.g., the recognition of indigenous people in New Zealand, Canada, or Australia or the recognition of specific tribes in the United States).

Hypothesis 9: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process are dependent on the salience of social identities in the political system.

Regardless of the meaning and salience of the status distance between specific social categories, countries may also differ as to the level of inequality and, hence, status distance in society. Hofstede's power distance concept could be used as an indicator of overall status distance in society regardless of specific social categories (Hofstede, 2001). In fact, Hofstede's work directly links power distance in society with power distance and status hierarchies in organizations, such that the higher the power distance in a society, the more salient status distance becomes to intraorganizational processes. For instance, the hypothesized association between lower status distance between bureaucrat and citizen-client and higher quality of their interaction may breathe Western cultural norms. In contrast, this may work in the opposite way in a hierarchical Confucian society—lowering the status distance between bureaucrat and citizen-client would reduce client deference and likely cooperation.

Hypothesis 10: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process are dependent on the power distance in a society.

Organizational Context

Both the organizational environment and characteristics of the internal organization may influence to what extent and how status distance may play out in the interactions among bureaucrats as well as the interaction between bureaucrats and citizen-clients. The salience and meaning of status distance between social groups at the national level will infuse the interaction between bureaucrats and clients more strongly, if the organization's target population is more diverse. In contrast, higher levels of social capital in the community the organization is embedded in may lead to lower perceived status distance between advantaged and disadvantaged groups within that community through creating higher degrees of social connectedness and levels of interpersonal trust. This may even be stronger, if through high levels of social capital that coproduction between bureaucrats and citizens is being encouraged. Social capital is not equally distributed among social groups, though, and in the bureaucratic process, can

actually create inequities in service outcomes (Meier et al., 2016). As such, it may deepen existing power differentials and reinforce status distance within the community:

Hypothesis 11: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process are dependent on the diversity of an organization's clientele.

Hypothesis 12: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process are dependent on the levels of social cohesion and mutual trust in a community.

An important organizational factor central to the RB literature is organizational socialization. Organizational socialization is assumed to increase uniformity in values, attitudes, and behaviors within the organization and to diminish the dissimilarity between individuals. In doing so, organizational socialization may influence the salience of social categorizations within the work-setting. Through socialization, organizational and professional identities may become more dominant compared with social identities based on sociodemographic status characteristics (for instance, all police are blue), and as a result, status distance between minority and majority bureaucrats becomes less salient. For this reason, it is generally assumed that organizational socialization will decrease social categorization processes within work groups. However, by emphasizing professional identities, organizational socialization may also lead to social groups experiencing their identity is being denied or even suppressed (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). This becomes the more salient if the intersection between the professional identity and social status of a specific social group is rejected, such as for higher ranking female officers in the military, due to implicit associations between specific professional roles and social status groups.⁷ As we have shown, such social identity threats may lead to stronger social identities and, hence, status distance becoming more salient within the work group rather than less so:

Hypothesis 13: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process is dependent on professional and organizational socialization.

In addition, organizational socialization may work to socialize minority bureaucrats into dominant values and cultural beliefs that mirror those in society and as such may reinforce existing status beliefs more generally (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). In contrast, organizational socialization may also, though, change cultural beliefs about the status of social groups

and transform both minority and majority bureaucrats by socializing members into the value of diversity (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). If the value of diversity is an important part of an organization's culture, it is probably transmitted also through organizational socialization processes. This is another way of saying that the content of organizational socialization is crucial for how it ultimately affects the role of status distance in intraorganizational processes.

Diversity can not only be valued to different extents, but also for different reasons. Ely and Thomas (2001) distinguish three diversity perspectives that comprise different motivations of work groups or organizations for valuing diversity. The Discrimination & Fairness perspective posits that diversity should be valued for reasons of social justice and equality. This perspective focuses on equal opportunities in the hiring and selection process (Selden & Selden, 2001). The Access & Legitimacy perspective assumes that diversity should be valued because it enables the organization to improve the services to their diverse clientele. It is based on differentiation, assuming that a workforce that is representative of the social composition of the clientele will improve service delivery to different social groups. This mirrors the dominant logic in RB literature. The Integration & Learning perspective posits that diversity should be valued as it may bring different perspectives to problem-solving and may boost learning processes within work groups. It is based on potential synergy effects of diversity, such that a diverse workforce increases its human capital through social learning (Dwertmann et al., 2016). This focus on work group diversity processes is dominant in DM literature. These different diversity perspectives, as aspects of an organization's culture, may have divergent influences on the diversity processes of differentiation and integration we discussed in the previous sections. One could expect that if an Access & Legitimacy perspective is dominant within an organization, a process of differentiation is reinforced, whereas if an Integration & Learning perspective is dominant within an organization, a process of integration is reinforced:

Hypothesis 14: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process is dependent on diversity perspectives dominant in an organization's culture.

Another organizational factor that influences the way status distance plays out in organizations is the type of service and how this defines the organization–client relationship. For instance, the professional status of the bureaucrat may more strongly define the status distance between bureaucrats and clients, if clients are being regulated rather than served or helped (see Wilson, 1989). Law enforcement agencies, for example, are paramilitary organizations and seek a sharp distinction between members of the bureaucracy and

individuals that they regulate (criminals). This lowers status distinctions within the bureaucracy but can increase them between bureaucrats and those they regulate. Alternatively, helping bureaucracies such as school systems or some social welfare agencies often have socialization processes that encourage the representation of clientele and thus encourage a reduction in status differences between bureaucrats and clients.

The variation in social distance influenced by type of agency can be linked to the social construction of identities that plays a role in designing a public policy and, thus, creating a public bureaucracy. Schneider and Ingram (1997) argue that policies classify clientele as deserving versus undeserving and powerful versus weak with accompanying rules and processes to reinforce these distinctions. Such classifications, in turn, motivate bureaucrats to represent clients or reject the representation role and see their position as regulators. Within an organization, this orientation can even be changed over time. The extensive work on welfare reform in the United States by Soss et al. (2011) illustrates how U.S. welfare bureaucracies were transformed from helping organizations to regulatory organizations via a market-oriented welfare reform in the 1990s.

This may be linked to the distinction between the state-agent and the citizen-agent (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000) and suggests that if one defines her professional identity primarily as being a citizen-agent, one could assume that the relationship with the citizen-client is more salient to the work than the relationship with co-workers. Simon Rosenthal and Cohen Bell (2003), in their study on women congressional staff, point at identity salience to be dependent on perceived role expectations that are shaped in the interaction with others, including clients:

Hypothesis 15: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process is dependent on the way the organization-client relationship is defined in policy design.

Finally, the processes of differentiation and integration may have different implications at different levels of aggregation and for different types of outcomes and the degree of intra- and extraorganizational interactions required for effective service delivery determines their relevance. For instance, the effect of status distance in the bureaucrat–client relationship on outcomes will be stronger if communication and collaboration between bureaucrat and citizen-client are important aspects of service delivery. The effect of status distance in the relationship among bureaucrats on outcomes will be stronger if service delivery is more strongly dependent on communication and collaboration among bureaucrats.

Hypothesis 16: The meaning and significance of status distance in the bureaucratic process is dependent on the extent to which service delivery requires intraorganizational and bureaucrat–client interaction and communication.

Conclusion and Future Research

This article outlined an argument that the literature on RB and DM can be combined for the mutual benefit of the research agendas in both fields. The RB literature has focused on disadvantaged groups and how passive representative of such groups might benefit clientele who share social identities with those bureaucrats. The DM literature in contrast is concerned with diversity per se, not the representation of specific groups and has overall organizational performance as its dependent variable rather than benefits targeted to disadvantaged groups. Despite these different orientations, the literatures share numerous commonalities, including the central role of social identities, the conflict between organizations and individual social identities, and the policy and program outputs of public bureaucracies. We argued that bringing the concept of status distance to both literatures served as a way to both integrate the literatures and bring new research ideas to the study of representation and diversity in public organizations.

The DM literature treats all social identities as equal and thus does not ostensibly take notice of the status distances that exist within the organization and between the organization and its clientele. This position is similar to the comparative political economy concerns with ethnolinguistic fractionalization before Cederman and Girardin (2007) developed more nuanced measures that included the power differences (read status distances) between groups. Including status distance within the DM literature brings consideration of the tensions that minority representation creates between integration within the workforce and the pressures on minority bureaucrats to actively represent clientele.

Within the RB literature, our arguments have been foreshadowed by a growing literature that seeks to determine whether RB has distributional consequences (that is, if the benefits to minority clientele come at the expense of majority clientele (see Hong, 2016; Meier et al., 1999, among others). At the same time that literature would be greatly informed by incorporating status distance given the multiple identities of both bureaucrats and clients, the role that processes within the organization can play in enhancing bureaucratic representation, and the need to understand why representation at times does

not materialize in organizations that appear conducive to it. The hypotheses developed in this article may thus serve as a route for future studies on diversity and representation in public organizations.

For the inclusion of status distance in the empirical examination of diversity and representation in public organizations, its conceptualization and measurement need fuller attention. First, we have conceptualized status distance at the dyadic level of analysis: the interaction between a bureaucrat and a citizen-client or between two co-workers. Dyadic status distance measures the (perceived) status distance of one person vis-à-vis another person. We have theorized on how status distance as a characteristic of dyadic relationships plays out in the interaction of bureaucrats with co-workers and citizen-clients and how this depends on characteristics of the national and organizational environment and type of service. Moreover, we explained how the overall status distance a bureaucrat experiences within a specific organizational setting is dependent on the multiple dyadic relationships that individual engages in, with co-workers and with citizen-clients. This also raises questions about the role of status distance at different levels of aggregation (Phillips et al., 2009).

Second, status distance is potentially a multidimensional construct. As dimensions of diversity accumulate, that is in case of intersectionality, it may be expected that status distance deepens. It is therefore important to consider not only to what extent distinct diversity dimensions can be conceived of as status characteristics, but also to what extent this may be reinforced for some intersections and less so for other. Third, the question is to what extent status distance should be seen as a “difference between statuses” or as a “perceived distance” construct. Status distance is commonly measured as the difference between the ascribed statuses of diverse social groups according to one or more dimensions, such as educational level or socioeconomic status (J. M. McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987). As an alternative, status distance can be conceived of as “in the eye of the beholder.” Perceptions of status distance will probably have stronger effects on behavior.

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Notes

1. Heterogeneity and representation are overlapping but distinct phenomena that do not necessarily coincide in practice. For instance, a bureaucratic workforce can be representative of the population at large with regard to a specific ethnic-cultural minority, but if this is a small minority in the population, it will be also relatively small in the workforce and, hence, hardly increase workforce diversity.
2. Selden examines the probability that bureaucrats take on the “role of the representative” but does not study the process of representation specifically. She does demonstrate, however, that this role is correlated with social origins but not completely determined by them.
3. In the literature, active representation is not so clearly conceptualized. It refers to *outcomes* beneficial to the citizens being represented and *behavior* of bureaucrats who take on a minority representative role. In this article, active representation is defined as representative role-taking behavior.
4. It can be problematized whether or not active representation should be understood as intentional behavior. This issue is outside the scope of this article. We assume that active representation may be both intentional and unintentional and that this distinction does not predict a different outcome.
5. The quality of the interaction includes such elements as a greater willingness to be cooperative versus conflictual, the ability to lower the costs of information, and openness to the exchange of ideas. Such processes might be either conscious or unconscious.
6. A distinct literature in foreign policy and executive decision-making also stresses the diversity of inputs and opinions as beneficial but does not consider identities and social distance as sources of this diversity (Janis, 1973; Tetlock, 1979).
7. The logic may also have applications to other relationships such as those between professions such as between lawyers and economists in U.S. antitrust and regulatory policy (Eisner, 1991) or between elite administrative services and bureaucrats who operate at the street level (Ferguson & Hasan, 2013).

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