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Author(s): Patrick M. Horan

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IS STATUS ATTAINMENT RESEARCH ATHEORETICAL?*

PATRICK M. HORAN

University of Georgia

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Recent critiques of status attainment research have emphasized the atheoretical character of that research. This paper develops an opposing view, based on the premise that status attainment research is theory-laden. The distinctive characteristics of status attainment research which have provoked outside criticism are shown to be derivative of a neoclassical, functionalist conception of social structure.

Two recent critiques (Coser, 1975; Burawoy, 1977) of status attainment have based their criticisms of the direction and substantive content of status attainment research on the premise that this research tradition is atheoretical, or as Coser (1975:691) puts it, a "method in search of substance." I wish to suggest that in treating status attainment as an atheoretical product of mindless methodology, these critics have reduced the effectiveness of their critique of status attainment. By failing to identify the theoretical model underlying status attainment research, they have put undue emphasis on the methodological differences between status attainment and other research traditions in stratification and have ignored important theoretical differences.

Status attainment is not atheoretical. Quite the contrary, it is heavily theory-laden (Hanson, 1972). And it is this theory-laden character which lies at the root both of the notable successes of status attainment research at solving problems which it defines, and the striking failures of status attainment research to address problems which are substantively interesting to proponents of other theoretical perspectives.

Before attempting to use Hanson's concept of "theory-laden" to interpret the status attainment research tradition, it should be noted that Hanson's view of the role of observations in empirical research

differs from the positivist conception which dominates the sociological literature. In the latter, theory is represented as a set of propositions which may be tested against a body of theoretically neutral empirical observations or facts. In contrast Hanson maintains that systematic empirical observations are conditional on an interpretational framework which attaches meaning to, and thus legitimates, these observations as "facts." This unavoidable use of theory to organize and direct our empirical inquiry leads to a situation in which research based on such observations can be seen as theory-laden. Gordon (1972:27) has taken a similar position. He suggests that interpretation of an empirical literature be approached by a procedure of "revealed theoretical preference" in which "manifest 'bundles' of empirical analysis help 'reveal' the application of a set of theoretical assumptions. . . ."

THEORY AND OCCUPATIONS

Most conceptions of industrial society give occupation a major role in the social organization of society. Let us presume a primitive definition of occupation: a distinct social position defined in terms of characteristic activities in the socioeconomic realm. This primitive representation will play the same role in my argument as the lines of a Gestalt drawing play in Hanson's. That is, it provides a "neutral" benchmark against which distinct theoretical observations or measurements of occupation may be seen. Such neutral observational schemes are, of course, purely fictional, but have some utility in

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introducing Hanson's concept of theory-laden observations to the analysis of stratification research.

There is another, historical, justification for using a categorical occupational scheme as a point of reference in the discussion here. The mobility table research tradition which preceded status attainment employed categorical occupational schemes, and thus much of the explicit discussion of the representation of occupation in status attainment research involves comparisons with such categorical schemes. Given a primitive, categorical occupation classification, the introduction of theoretical considerations must serve to organize our observation and classification (i.e., measurement) of occupations according to theoretical criteria. For example, a Marxist application might represent occupational differences in terms of categories reflecting relations to the means of production and then use this measurement of occupation in analysis of the relationship between occupational position and selected individual behaviors (e.g., Wright and Perrone, 1977). Likewise, in status attainment research the measurement of occupations provides a key to the underlying theoretical model.

While the measurement operation provides an important key to understanding the theoretical foundations of a research program, we need not expect any widespread consciousness among researchers of explicit links between measurement operations and theoretical foundations. A researcher in an ongoing research tradition typically will not be called upon to think through the fundamental measurement operations and to justify them in theoretical terms. Indeed, Kuhn (1970:193) argues that just the opposite is the case:

One of the fundamental techniques by which members of a group . . . learn to see the same things when confronted with the same stimuli is by being shown examples of situations that their predecessors in the group have already learned to see as like each other and as different from other sorts of situations.

Thus among the practitioners in a research tradition, measurement typically is seen as the problem of extracting the "right"

piece of reality; less often is it seen as the imposition of a theoretical perspective.

The present inquiry into the theory-laden character of status attainment research will require answers to the following sorts of questions: Does status attainment research rest on an empirical base provided by a distinctive measurement operation? If so, what is the nature of that representation, and what basic theoretical perspective is required to justify such a representation? In general *what would our basic conception of stratification have to be in order for the status attainment model to be appropriate?*

STATUS ATTAINMENT AND OCCUPATIONS

What is the measurement operation which differentiates status attainment from the earlier mobility table research? It is the replacement of discrete occupational categories with numerical scores derived from the aggregate evaluations of those occupations by a set of sample respondents (Reiss, 1961). These evaluations have been projected from the original limited NORC sample of occupations to the census detailed occupational classification by Duncan (1961) and have been revised and updated by Siegel (1971). Thus in place of discrete occupational positions as measures of occupation, there are numerical levels of evaluation used to represent the positions of occupations in the social order. In this way our basic representation of occupations in the social order is changed from that of a set of discrete social positions to that of a continuum of presumably consensual popular evaluation in which differences between occupations can only be matters of degree. This implies that the important differences between occupations are differences in superiority/inferiority, and that such differences between occupations can be readily assessed by any and all participants in the society.

What an interesting conception of social structure, characterized by a popular consensus on the evaluation of occupations, by a unidimensional system of evaluation, and by numerical measures of occupational superiority/inferiority. On the one hand, how strange it is to have social

structure reduced to shared values among individuals. On the other hand, there is a certain familiar ring to this portrayal. In his "An Analytical Approach to the Theory of Social Stratification," Talcott Parsons (1940:841-4) writes:

Social stratification is regarded here as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior relative to one another in certain socially important respects . . . It is only in so far as differences are treated as involving or related to particular kinds of social superiority and inferiority that they are relevant to the theory of social stratification. . . . Consideration of certain aspects of social systems described in terms of the theory of action shows readily why stratification is a fundamental phenomenon. In the first place, moral evaluation is a crucial aspect of action in social systems. . . . The second crucial fact is the importance of the human individual as a unit of concrete social systems. If both human individuals as units and moral evaluation are essential to social systems it follows that these individuals will be evaluated as units and not merely with respect to their particular qualities, acts, etc. . . . Unless there is to be a functionally impossible state of lack of integration of the social system, the evaluations by A and B of their associate C must come somewhere near agreeing; and their relative ranking of C and D must broadly agree where the necessity for comparison arises. . . . There is in any given social system, an actual system of ranking in terms of moral evaluation. But this implies in some sense an integrated set of standards according to which the evaluations are, or are supposed to be made. . . . The actual system of effective superiority and inferiority relationships . . . will hence be called the system of social stratification.

This statement of the functionalist conception of social stratification, a conception on which the more familiar Davis and Moore (1945) presentation rests, indicates with remarkable clarity the correspondence between the functionalist theoretical framework and the status attainment representation of occupational structure. The status attainment measurement model represents occupational differentiation as functionalism tells us it must be. This is not to say that this empirical measurement operation validates the

functionalist conception of a unidimensional, consensual evaluation of occupations. Reiss (1961) and Goldthorpe and Hope (1974) have demonstrated both the multiplicity of evaluation criteria which respondents use in rating occupations and the multidimensional character of the ratings obtained from respondents. Thus the occupational prestige scales on which status attainment rests are unidimensional *by construction*.

Few would deny that the measurement of occupation in terms of prestige (or status) constitutes a major change in the representation of occupational differentiation. It is one thing to note that prestige (or status) is one of several important aspects of occupational differentiation underlying, say, occupational mobility patterns between fathers and sons. It is quite another thing to say that henceforth, in the study of mobility, occupations will be represented as prestige units and nothing else. In presenting the basic regression application which lies at the heart of the methodology of status attainment, Duncan and Hodge (1963:630) argue that this application:

requires one fundamental assumption that is not intrinsic to several of the other techniques commonly used in studying occupational mobility. It must be assumed that occupations can be assigned values on the scale of a single quantitative variable. In point of fact, occupations differ in a number of ways, and the great variety of differences among kinds of work can by no means be reduced to variation along a single dimension.

In their presentation of the basic model of status attainment, Blau and Duncan (1967:117) provide a more positive view of the measurement model.

If the focus on vertical mobility, therefore, involves a simplification of the actual process by which individuals find their way into occupational roles, it is nonetheless a justifiable simplification. To study one aspect of a complex phenomenon is not to deny that other aspects exist.

But the effect of the growth of the status attainment research program has in fact been to ignore the existence of nonprestige dimensions of occupational differentiation and stratification. How could it

be otherwise? The transformation from occupational categories to prestige levels cannot be reversed. There is no way to transform occupational prestige scores into measures of relations to the means of production, or any other "structural" conception of occupational differentiation. Therefore it is difficult to interpret status attainment results in terms of alternative theoretical models of social structure or occupational differentiation. Similarly, there is no way for status attainment research to directly address issues of interest to those who do not accept the basic premise that occupational prestige is the only relevant aspect of occupational differentiation.

This is not a situation which is unique to the status attainment research. All theory-laden research areas will exhibit some such isolation from alternative theories. Indeed, Kuhn (1970) has argued that it is precisely such applied theoretical myopia which differentiates successful areas of scientific research from those which are less successful. In the present context I am more concerned with identifying the theoretical content of status attainment research than I am with evaluating that theoretical content. However, to the extent that such an identification requires a consideration of competing theories, some critical emphases may be unavoidable.

THE PROCESS OF STATUS ATTAINMENT

A major theme in the comments of status attainment critics and supporters alike is the concern with status attainment as a process model. What is the theory of social process implied by status attainment research? I have focused above on the measurement of occupations which define the origin and destination in the simple status attainment model. The concern with process requires attention to the set of intervening variables used to explain the transition from occupational origins to destinations. While there is a broad range of variables which have been included in status attainment models, the vast majority have been measured as and interpreted as individual characteristics. Be it parental expectations, IQ, educa-

tion, or personal aspirations, the variables in a status attainment model have been interpreted in terms of individual resources or liabilities which contribute to the individual attainment process.

Following Davis and Moore (1945), status attainment researchers are inclined to represent the process by which individuals are placed within the social and economic structure as that of recruitment of individuals to positions by way of the differential distribution of rewards across the positions. Duncan (1968:681-2), for example, identifies two processes which underlie stratification:

The first is the process of social metabolism, the recruitment of personnel to roles in a division of labor and the turnover of personnel in such roles. . . . The second process linked to differentiation is that of the allocation of rewards.

Such a representation serves to reinforce the individualist and voluntarist tendencies noted above by invoking a neo-classical, free market conception of occupational placement.

How can we explain the limited concern in the status attainment literature for extraindividual or structural constraints such as class barriers or between-group differences in opportunity structures? To do so, we must look to the theoretical heritage of functionalist theory in neo-classical conceptions of the socioeconomic order (Stolzenberg, 1975). Only if we assume an open, fully competitive market process in which individual characteristics are identified and rewarded according to their societal value can we justify ignoring market (structural) characteristics in the analysis of individual attainment. The competitive market situation assumed by neoclassical economic theories *guarantees* that the differential placement of individuals in the socioeconomic order is a reflection of the individual characteristics brought into the marketplace by the worker. Conversely, the interpretation of status attainment findings in terms of occupational attainment processes *requires* the assumption of market homogeneity for the population under study. (See Kerckhoff, 1976, for a discussion of problems and prospects of

nonindividualistic interpretations of status attainment research.)

METHOD OR THEORY

Status attainment findings, like any research findings, are conditional on the conceptual/theoretical assumptions imposed in undertaking analysis. While these assumptions have implications for the choice of methodological procedures to be employed in the analysis, they are not themselves methodological assumptions nor can they be justified in terms of methodological criteria. It is this point which Coser (1975) and Burawoy (1977) have failed to recognize, and it is this failure which serves to blunt the force of their criticisms of status attainment. Let us then consider how the characterization of status attainment as a theory-laden research tradition relates to such criticism.

Both Coser (1975) and Burawoy (1977) emphasize the homogeneous, individualistic orientation of the status attainment research in contrast to a preferred "structuralist" orientation:

The focus is predominantly on the impact on individual careers of differences in parental resources, access to educational institutions and the like, or they center attention upon individual characteristics of people variously placed in the class structure. There is no concern here with the ways in which differential class power and social advantage operate in predictable and routine ways, through specifiable social interactions between classes or interest groups, to give shape to determine social structures and to create differential life chances. (Coser, 1975:694)

These critics also concur in attributing the individualistic orientation to methodological considerations (Burawoy, 1977:1031; Coser, 1975:694) and contrasting this with their own theoretically-based concern with social structure. But with this juxtaposition several important questions are left unanswered. How is it that methods determine substance? In particular, why should methodological considerations lead to individualistic research? Will this always be the case, or is this a peculiarity of "linear statistics," as Burawoy (1977:1037) suggests?

The present exploration of the theory-

laden character of status attainment research suggests a different explanation for its individualistic orientation. Status attainment rests on a functionalist conception of social structure in which social positions are conceived of as levels of performance, which are differentially evaluated and rewarded within a competitive market situation. Given this conceptual framework, it is quite appropriate to represent occupational positions in terms of the evaluations of the general population:

Suffice to say here that people perceive rather accurately that professional and administrative occupations, by their very definition or organization, call for the exercise of greater authority and control and apparently require for their exercise, native and trained capacities and personality traits which craft or operative occupations, by their organization, do not (in degree or kind). (Featherman et al., 1975:333)

Similarly within the neoclassical theoretical heritage of functionalist theory, the assumption of fully open and competitive allocation of individuals to jobs (i.e., of market homogeneity) provides a source of justification for restricting attention to the individual characteristics of job-holders.

But once these basic theoretical assumptions have been used to structure the analysis—to decide what variables will be excluded from the analysis and how included variables will be measured—the choice of methodological procedures will have little impact on the basic focus and content of research. The homogeneity noted by critics derives from theoretical assumptions embedded in the research, not from the decision to employ regression analysis or some other procedure. Given these theoretical assumptions, stratification research becomes status attainment research, an inquiry into factors affecting the success/failure of individuals with different resources and abilities competing within an open opportunity structure. The basic orientation of status attainment research has nothing to do with quantitative methods, with path analysis, or with linear models. That orientation derives from the theory-laden character of status attainment research, not from the methodological procedures employed in that research.

One can interpret analyses of status attainment as analyses of social structure if and only if one assumes that occupational differentiation can best be represented as a single dimension of superiority/inferiority and that the allocation process by which individuals are placed in occupations is open and competitive across all individuals and occupations. But such a representation cannot be justified empirically. Status attainment proponents (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Klatzky and Hodge, 1971) and critics (Horan, 1974) alike have reported that intergenerational occupational mobility behavior cannot be reduced to a single (prestige/status) dimension of occupational differentiation. Likewise, analyses of the market structure of industrial societies are beginning to document the segmentation by which individuals from different social positions face different opportunity and reward structures (Bonacich, 1975; Beck et al., 1978a).

Thus the differences between the status attainment approach and a concern with class or structural factors as advocated by Coser and Burawoy is due not to methodology or to fact, but to theory. Status attainment research rests on a conception of occupational differentiation which denies the existence of the very aspects of occupational differentiation which are of essential interest from a structural orientation.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The characterization of status attainment by its critics is important because it has implications for the research activities of those critics. If we attribute the theoretically unsatisfactory (from the perspective of critics) character of status attainment research to the use of quantitative methods, as Coser (1975) and Burawoy (1977) have suggested, then we are placed in the position of rejecting quantitative methods on the grounds that such methods lead to theoretically unsatisfactory results. This would tend to encourage sociologists with structural (as opposed to individualistic) orientations to avoid quantitative empirical research.

I have argued that this causal linkage

proposed by critics between methods and findings is nonexistent and that the individualistic character of status attainment research can be attributed to theoretical premises which are embedded in the basic conceptualization and measurement operations upon which the status attainment research program builds. This position has several implications for those favoring a structural orientation to stratification. First, structural researchers should realize the importance of linking *their* basic theoretical orientations to concrete conceptualization and measurement operations which can be employed in the analysis of survey data. Such activities are a prerequisite to the growth of a useful, nonindividualistic research program in social structure and social stratification. Second, structural theorists and researchers should learn to approach the results of status attainment research with considerable caution, and to recognize the extent to which such results are conditional upon theoretical assumptions antithetical to their own theoretical orientations.

While status attainment research may be expected to continue to hold a dominant position in American stratification research for some time, there are several promising alternatives for researchers who do not accept the theoretical premises of the status attainment model. One alternative is the development and use of a neo-Marxist classification of occupational data—an old ideal given new impetus by the work of Wright and Perrone (1977). These authors argue that the conventional occupational information available from most survey data is an inadequate basis for identifying Marxist class positions—i.e., “positions within the social relations of production” (Wright and Perrone, 1977:35). Using information on ownership of means of production, purchase/sale of labor power, and control of labor power, they distinguish four class categories (employers, managers, workers, petty bourgeoisie) and examine the effects of the first three on income attainment and inequality. Their analysis identifies not only substantial net class effects on income but also some interesting class effects on the income returns to education.

Another promising alternative to the status attainment research tradition derives from the dual economy literature (Averitt, 1968; Bluestone et al., 1973). This literature introduces the concept of economic sectors—structural entities which derive from the nature of modern industrial capitalism—as an important factor in the income determination process. Distinguishing between a core industrial sector dominated by monopolistic capitalist firms and a periphery sector characterized by competitive capitalism, the dual economy literature suggests that the sectoral placement of a worker may condition the income returns to individual characteristics such as education. Bibb and Form (1977) demonstrate that for blue-collar workers, industrial sector and other structural characteristics such as firm size, occupational skill level, and SMSA residence provide substantial increments in income variance-accounted-for over models including only individual characteristics. Beck et al. (1978a) find that sectoral differences in earnings cannot be explained away by differential labor force composition and that the financial returns to individual characteristics such as schooling, sex, race and age are substantially different in the core and periphery sectors.

These new directions in American stratification research are important for several reasons. First, they provide negative empirical evidence concerning certain critical assumptions of status attainment research: the adequacy of occupational prestige as a measure of social position and the adequacy of social process models which include only individual characteristics. Second, each provides a nonindividualistic theoretical foundation for the quantitative analysis of survey data, and uses the same basic set of methodological procedures (regression and covariance analysis) as status attainment research. Third, each of these new approaches to stratification research has important implications both for the analysis of mobility and for the analysis of racial and sexual discrimination in the economic sphere. The pursuit of these implications will be an important focus for research deriving from both the neo-

Marxist and the dual economy theoretical perspectives during the next decade (see, e.g., Beck et al., 1978b).

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NONRECURSIVE MODELS OF LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION, FERTILITY BEHAVIOR AND SEX ROLE ATTITUDES*

LYNN SMITH-LOVIN AND ANN R. TICKAMYER
University of North Carolina

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Studies of female labor force participation and fertility have established a negative relationship between the two; however, there has been much debate over the direction and causes of this relationship. In this paper, two causal models of the actual fertility and work behavior of a national sample of married women, aged 30 in 1970, are examined using the two-stage least-squares technique to disentangle reciprocal effects. Included are a two-variable feedback loop incorporating only fertility and labor force participation and a three-variable model which adds sex role attitudes to the endogenous variables. Most of the work-fertility relationship can be accounted for by controlling background variables such as education and marital duration. A negative effect from fertility to labor force participation remains, however. Adding sex role attitudes to the model as a potential source and consequence of fertility and work behavior slightly reduces the size of this effect.

General reviews of the microlevel research on fertility and female labor force participation usually agree that there is an inverse relationship between childbearing and work outside the home (Germain, 1975; Piepmeier and Adkins, 1973; Lowenthal and David, 1972). There is less

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agreement, however, on the direction of causal influence. Depending upon the interests and initial assumptions of the investigators, either work or fertility has been used as the dependent variable and the findings are presented accordingly (Sastry, 1975; Bumpass and Westoff, 1970; Ridley, 1959; 1969; Pratt and Whelpton, 1958).

Understanding this relationship is important for two distinct but related reasons: for more extensive knowledge of basic demographic processes and for information necessary for policy formula-