

Review of *Status, Power and Ritual Interaction: A Relational Reading of Durkheim, Goffman and Collins* by Theodore D. Kemper. Ashgate Publishing, Hardcover: ISBN 978-1-4094-2736-0

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Status, Power and Ritual Interaction, is one of the most ambitious entries into the sociological study of emotions and micro-interaction since Randall Collins' *Interaction Ritual Chains*. The main achievement in the book is to shed light on a staggeringly wide set of empirical phenomena from what at first sight appears to be a deceptively simple set of principles (p. 27). An additional (as given by the book's subtitle), but equally impressive, accomplishment of the book is to show that the model can be used to both build analytical theory, and also for the work of theoretical clarification of extant theoretical systems. The book is thus structured as both a (re)introduction to the basic status-power model that Kemper has been developing and refining for the better part of three decades (chapters 2 and 3) and a detailed polemic against what is arguably the most influential model for the study of micro-interaction in contemporary sociology. Namely, the Durkheimian model of interaction-as-ritual (IR) as it comes to us via the fateful reinterpretation of the Durkheimian tradition in the work of Goffman and Collins. Chapters 4 and 5 take on the master himself, and attempt a (generally fruitful) reconsideration of Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence from Kemper's relational perspective. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 engage in an ambitious critical re-reading of Goffman's dramaturgical cum ritualistic model of interaction in the situation; the bulk of the book (chapters 9 through 13) consists of a detailed critique and reconstruction of Collins' IR model in status-power terms.

According to Kemper, actors come into interactional settings with the goal of navigating and manipulating an interactional order arranged according to two primary relational dimensions: status and power. Kemper relies on a maximal definitional strategy in defining these two terms: status and power are conceived as covering a wide range of interactional strategies, patterns of behavioral comportment, cognitive assessments, and emotional responses (p. 17 - 25). An impatient critic might at this point dismiss the book for defining the two main terms in such a vague and ambiguous fashion. But the fact that Kemper succeeds in shedding light on (sometimes exceedingly detailed) descriptions of natural social situations (including conversational strips, historical episodes and ethnological data) while maintaining an impressive amount of conceptual consistency in the analytical distinction between status and power throughout, tells me that in spite of some slippage here and there, these two dimensions are carving the nature of social nature at the joints. The reader is bound to never look at his own (or other people's) interaction life and history in the same way again.

What then is the difference between status and power? Status refers to the extent that a person may be able to extract recognition, prestige, honor, privilege, and (voluntary) compliance in interaction from others who confer these benefits willingly onto others. Thus, behaviorally, status has a dual dimension since at the level of interaction a status order consists of persons either conferring status on others that they believe deserve it, or claiming status for themselves (that they believe is owed to them). Abstracting from concrete interaction settings, status then may appear as a "scalar" quantity providing a summary scan of the extent to which a person is

accorded or may claim status benefits given the position that he or she occupies in the social order.

Power differs from status in one key respect. While the use of power may also be used to obtain benefits for the individual or group, power use is distinctive in that it must conquer the active (or potential) *resistance* of other persons. Thus, an actor has power to the extent that s/he can claim access to resources (which may include other persons and their interactional submission) against their will and possible resistance. Power thus attaches to both persons and positions in “imperatively coordinated associations” where persons may be coerced to follow orders or else face punishment.

The relational part of the status-power model links to both a theory of motivation, and via this channel to a sociological theory of emotions. Motivation links to emotion in the sense that persons are motivated to regulate their emotions by enhancing positive experiences and avoiding negative ones. The theory of motivation is simple; in interaction, persons seek to either keep the status that they already have (more accurately, the status that they are *accustomed* to receiving given their medium-term history) or enhance it, while at the same time avoiding episodes of status loss or withdrawal. Thus, status confirmation and status enhancement lead to positive emotions (contentment, pride, happiness), while status loss leads to negative emotions and moods (sadness, depression when nothing can be done about it or anger when power can be used to recoup the lost status). In general, persons are loss-averse in the sense that a loss is more poignantly felt than a corresponding gain and in the sense that they would rather not resort to power use to meet their status need. According to Kemper, persons also seem to have (rough) motivations for consistency across different statuses. Importantly, persons are also motivated to accord status to those who they feel deserve it (building an altruistic foundation into the theory). Thus, persons experience positive emotions when they confer status on worthy others and experience negative emotions (anger, embarrassment) when persons whom they perceive should be accorded status are denied that privilege.

As already intimated, for Kemper, there is no autonomous motivation for power-use; instead, the primary motivation for using power (at a relational level) is to compel others to bestow status when others resist doing so. Power contests (especially across groups) lead to “arms races” and mutual escalation effects that do not settle until one side is able to defeat the other and extract the appropriate (interactional, material, symbolic, etc.) concessions. Power links to emotions by exploiting the safety/security system: when persons are faced with others with the potential to use overwhelming power against them, the resulting emotion is fear/anxiety; thus persons are motivated to avoid situations where they are relatively powerless in relation to their interaction partners (unless trust is present). When persons feel that they have enough power to extract concessions from others (and are thus not under threat) they feel content and secure. In this manner, fear and anxiety (or radical shifts in the distribution of power) may motivate persons (via security and existential threat motivators) to attempt to increase their own power. The primary social mechanism for power enhancement is coalition formation (strength in numbers).

The status-power model analytically decomposes every episode of micro-interaction (from an individual’s “internal conversation” to large-scale collective action involving thousands of actors) into the thicket of perceived status obligations and power considerations that each

individual (or group) has to take into account at a given moment. In this sense the status-power model follows a strategy of “decomposition” (into relational commitments) without reduction which is the hallmark of sound theorizing in social psychology. Given the dogged emphasis of relational considerations as the primary drivers of behavior (via the emotions-motivation link), the status power model is (deservedly) suspicious of the Durkheimian penchant to short-circuit *from* some structural feature of the situation (e.g. co-presence, rhythmic attunement, amassment, mutual awareness) *to* some affective and cognitive outcome (e.g. commitment to the interaction order, collective effervescence, social solidarity, increase/decrease in emotional energy).

One way to (simplistically) summarize the extended (and highly nuanced) argument laid out in the core sections of the book is that the interaction-as-ritual model fails to the extent that it invokes either such direct effects of the situation---or in the case of Collins, sub-situational factors operating at very short time-scales---upon individual cognitive affective outcomes. In addition, the interaction-as-ritual models errs in postulating that individuals are motivated primarily by a commitment to sustain the integrity of abstract interactional entities (e.g. Goffman’s “situation”) rather than by concrete commitments to their status obligations and power considerations of either co-present or implied others (whether individual or collectives). For Kemper, rather than bottoming out at solidarity, interaction bottoms out at the level of *the status/power relation*. This happens both in terms of the individual’s assessment that she has complied with the (culturally specified) status obligations and has adequately navigated around the other’s power *and* that others have done the same in relation to her (accorded the status that she deserves and taken into consideration the power that she wields). It is not that ritual does not exist or is not an important mechanism in the status-power model, it is just that it is not the *sine qua non* of social interaction.

In my view, Kemper’s most devastating attack upon the IR model consists of showing how the model systematically fails to specify what a “successful” interaction is (and thus fails to theorize the relational sources of both positive and negative emotions) by taking a criterion for success from the ritual arena and over-generalizing it to all interaction. Kemper shows in a convincing way that this can only get us so far. In particular, it is easy to come up with countless examples of situations that would be classified as failures from the IR stance (because they do not result in increased emotional energy, solidarity bonding across the parties, or an increase in commitment to the social order) but are perfectly “successful” (because they balance the relevant relational books) in the status-power sense. Embarrassingly, this happen to constitute the *great majority* of interactional situations, rendering the IR model (when all is said and done) a *special* theory that seems to apply only to a highly delimited (and increasingly exceptional in post-traditional societies) range of interactions.

For instance, it is precisely because the micro-foundations of IR theory rely on a mechanism designed to explain why persons will *willingly* (and in many ways automatically and unconsciously) bestow status on an object or person (the Charisma of the Durkheimian sacred), Kemper can argue that when dealing with situations of power use, the IR model can only retain its coherence by (incoherently) re-describing power-use situations as themselves an example of ritual. But if power use is also ritual, then the status and power dimensions collapse upon one another, robbing the theorist of any leverage for explaining why a person that is the subject of another’s power may want to escape their grip. Not only that, because status and power are

collapsed, predictions that pertain to status effects on emotions are mistakenly attached to episodes of power use (and vice versa). This includes, for instance, the (absurd) IR claim that persons experience a perverse---essentially masochistic---pleasure and connection with their superiors when subject to the power of another, or that persons in power experience a strange sort of Durkheimian solidarity with those subject to their commands (in addition to fouling up the sociological theory of anger by creating spurious categories that mix anger due to status loss with anger connected to power use). Even the treatment of such relatively simple relational matters such as sex and love (chapter 14) are seen in a new (and more convincing light) when we shake off the conceptual shackles of the IR model and delve into it with an eye towards paying attention to the relational dynamics of status and power.

A book of such scope and ambition is of course bound to have its flaws; this book is no exception. While Kemper does a great job of connecting the so-called “basic” emotions (fear, anger, happiness, pride, sadness) to the relational theory, the treatment of what have recently been dubbed the “self-conscious” emotions (in particular shame, embarrassment, and guilt) is not as effective. For instance, shame is at one point curiously theorized as occurring “when an actor accepts more status than he [sic] feels he deserves” (p. 249). This is inconsistent with what is known about the cognitive (self-denigrating talk) and behavioral (social withdrawal, self-damaging acts) dynamics of shame. Feelings of shame are likely to arise from negative beliefs about the *core self* that render it *undeserving* (because of an appraisal of the self as *inherently* defective) of *any* status considerations of the part of others. Shame thus has to do with an inability to see the self as worthy of status (and thus a refusal to accept it even when it is accorded)—and not with the receipt of more status than one deserves. The failure to theorize shame in an effective way might be connected to Kemper’s socio-centric, and somewhat dogmatic, argument against the existence of such a core self -- an argument that is inconsistent with the relevant neurobiological and phenomenological evidence.

Kemper treats guilt (Pp. 249-250) in an equally narrow way, essentially as the result of using “excess power in a social relationship.” This is on the right track but incomplete; evidence dealing with recalls of guilt inducing episodes suggests that persons typically feel guilty when they threaten an existing *significant* (in status terms) relationship by engaging in actions that lead that person to experience negative emotions (e.g. hurt feelings, sadness, embarrassment, shame). In Kemper’s own terms, it is more accurate *we feel guilty when we hurt a person (reference group) to whom we also accord status (care about)*. This *may* happen (as Kemper notes) via excessive power use; however, it may also happen via a status withdrawal behavior that causes our relationship partners to be hurt. In this respect, status dynamics may be more significant in the production of guilt than power use.

These are, however, relatively minor blemishes on what is overall a first rate intellectual effort. This book is highly recommended for anybody interested in cutting-edge theorizing on the dynamics of emotions, motivation, and micro-interaction. Most importantly, this is a substantively fruitful theoretical proposal, with myriad of empirical applications across a wide range of fields in the social sciences.