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The role of self-evaluations in legitimizing social inequality[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses a long standing puzzle in the social sciences: why are stratified social systems accepted as legitimate (the way things “ought” to be) by those who are advantaged *and* those who are disadvantaged by them? We build on previous studies of self-evaluations to explain the legitimization of inequality. The research consists of two experiments designed to test the self-evaluation theory of legitimacy. The theory proposes that structural inequality becomes legitimated when individuals’ self-evaluations and the level of resources they receive are congruent. Study 1 examines the impact of structural power on self-evaluations. Results show that participants randomly assigned to advantaged positions in power structures earn more rewards and, as a result, develop higher self-evaluations than those randomly assigned to disadvantaged positions. Study 2 addresses the relationship between self-evaluations and legitimated structural inequality by testing competing hypotheses of legitimacy. The results partially support the self-evaluation theory and partially support competing arguments about legitimacy. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our work and suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

How do systems of inequality come to be “legitimated,” or accepted by the majority of society’s citizens as “right” or the way things ought to be? As many scholars have noted, it is not surprising that those who benefit from an unequal distribution of society’s resources come to support it. Less obvious is how stratification comes to be supported by those who are disadvantaged by it (Cohen and Greenberg, 1982; Della Fave, 1980, 1986; Hegtvedt and Johnson, 2000; Jost et al., 2001; Lerner, 1980; Zelditch, 2001).

A wide range of theoretical perspectives in sociology have been used to shed light on why members of a society might accept a system as legitimate, even if it does not benefit them personally. For instance, consensus theorists argue that individuals accept the system because it is the norm (e.g., Parsons, [1952] 1982). Conversely, conflict theorists argue that a dominant ideology is used to reinforce a stratified system. Under the dominant ideology, the disadvantaged members of the society are susceptible to false consciousness, which prevents them from realizing they are being exploited (e.g., Marx, [1845–1846] 1978).¹ Following Jost (1995, p. 400) false consciousness is the “the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one’s own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or group.”

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¹ Parallel lines of theorizing have developed in social psychology. For instance, system justification research addresses the “process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest” (Jost and Banaji, 1994, p.2).

A key explication of the process through which stratification systems come to be legitimated is the self-evaluation theory of legitimacy (Della Fave, 1980, 1986). The theory argues that stratification systems become legitimated when the distribution of citizens' self-evaluations becomes congruent with the distribution of resources (e.g., money or status). Furthermore, the theory argues that self-evaluations develop from the amount of resources members of a society are able to obtain. When self-evaluations are internalized, individuals believe they are responsible for their position, and that belief reinforces existing inequalities and the status quo. Despite a number of attempts to empirically test the self-evaluation theory (Cook et al., 1988; Shepelak, 1987; Stolte, 1983), clear empirical support for the basic theory has not been forthcoming. But we argue below that no previous empirical test has explicitly implemented all fundamental components of the theory.

We begin with a brief discussion of the four key components of the self-evaluation theory: legitimation, distributive justice, referential structures and self-evaluations. We then discuss previous work, focusing on how each study failed to incorporate at least one key aspect of the theory. Thereafter, we report the results of two new experiments designed to test the theory. The goal of Study 1 is to show that inequality structures generate differences in self-evaluations. Study 2 addresses how the alignment of structural inequalities and self-evaluations affects perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Finally, we discuss the broader implications of the research.

2. Theoretical perspective: self-evaluation theory of legitimacy

Central to the self-evaluation theory is an explanation of the process through which unequal distributions of wealth and power “become part of the consciousness of individuals who make up society” (Della Fave, 1980, p. 959). The theory states that inequality becomes legitimated through a circular process: a given distribution of resources produces a parallel distribution of self-evaluations about *abilities* to obtain resources, which, in turn, leads to a normative acceptance of the status quo. Thus, those with high levels of resources develop high self-evaluations and those with low levels of resources develop low self-evaluations. In turn, members of society (both advantaged and disadvantaged) assume those with greater levels of resources have made greater contributions and are therefore worthy of more resources. In contrast, those lacking wealth and power are believed to be deserving of their lower position. Thus, self-evaluations “justify” advantaged or disadvantaged positions in society. Because individuals make internal attributions about their relative position in society, they come to believe the inequality is legitimate and that their position is deserved, thus reinforcing the status quo (Della Fave, 1980). The following is a more detailed explication of the various components of the theory.

2.1. Legitimation

Della Fave (1986, p. 477) defines legitimation as the “normative approval of stratification.” As Zelditch (2001, p. 38) notes, “what is legitimate is accepted as ‘right’ by winners and losers alike – advantaged and disadvantaged accept the same distribution of rewards, the same system of power.” System justification research suggests that legitimacy results from a motivational process whereby (advantaged and disadvantaged) individuals are motivated to accept the fairness of social systems (see, e.g., Jost et al., 2001). In addition, Della Fave (1986) argues that, once established, legitimated social inequality gets socially reproduced: individuals cannot imagine an alternative society and thus do not actively seek ways to change the structure of the society. It is this acceptance of inequality that is at the heart of legitimation and, many theorists argue, the continuation of inequality (Cook, 1975; Della Fave, 1980, 1986; Jost and Burgess, 2000; Lerner, 1980; Zelditch, 2001).

2.2. Distributive justice

Central to the legitimation process is the concept of distributive justice. Cohen and Greenberg (1982, p. 1) define distributive justice as “the application of a normative rule to the allocation of resources to recipients.” Theories of distributive justice attempt to identify the conditions that lead actors to view a given distribution as fair. Perceived justice exists when expected and actual outcomes are congruent (Hegtvedt and Markovsky, 1995).

Previous theory and research has identified several principles actors use to determine what constitutes a just distribution of resources. For instance, along with many others, Blau (1964) argues that individuals believe rewards should be distributed equitably, such that those who contribute more to a society receive more rewards. A related basis for the evaluation of distributions is merit (Cohen and Greenberg, 1982; Rubinstein, 1988), in which the fairness of rewards is determined not by contributions but by talents and abilities. Both equity- and merit-based distribution principles can lead actors to view an unequal distribution of resources as legitimate.

Prior work shows that these same justice principles may be invoked in order to justify inequalities that result from processes other than equity- or merit-based distributions. For instance, Lerner (1980) argues that actors seek to maintain a belief that the world is “just” (individuals get what they deserve and deserve what they get). In order to maintain that belief in the face of inequality, individuals may interpret the distribution of resources as resulting from deservingness. For instance, they may come to believe that the poor possess less because they deserve less. Such a rationalization permits a continued belief in a just world. The self-evaluation theory argues that an existing (unequal) distribution of wealth and power can become normative through such a process: following Lerner's (1980) reasoning, those who have more (fewer) resources come to be labeled as deserving (undeserving).

2.3. Referential structures

Questions of fairness and justice necessarily involve social comparisons (Cook and Hegtvedt, 1983; Hegtvedt and Johnson, 2000). Thus, actors tend to rely on “referential structures” when making justice evaluations. A referential structure is a generalized comparison group that individuals use to evaluate their level of rewards. Without a standard on which to base their level of rewards, individuals compare themselves to others like themselves (Hegtvedt and Markovsky, 1995). An individual is expected to believe his or her reward-level is just when he or she receives the same levels of rewards as others with similar ability levels (Hegtvedt and Markovsky, 1995; Shepelak and Alwin, 1986). As Hegtvedt and Markovsky (1995, p. 269) put it, distributions are judged fair “when you and I receive what people like us generally get.”

Because referential structures link abilities to rewards, they can provide justification for unequal distributions of resources. For example, an individual with a low level of ability who receives fewer rewards accepts this lower payment as long as others with low levels of ability receive the same amount of rewards. It follows from the above that referential structures help individuals determine what is just and thus provide individuals with information about the level of reward they can legitimately expect to receive (Cook, 1975). These expectations for rewards are influential in the development of the self by forming the basis upon which we evaluate ourselves (Della Fave, 1980).

2.4. Self-evaluations

Self-evaluations are internalized beliefs concerning one’s ability to accumulate wealth and power (Della Fave, 1986). The self-evaluation theory asserts that self-evaluations develop from positions in a stratified system. As noted earlier, individuals develop self-evaluations consistent with the level of resources they acquire. These self-evaluations are, in turn, used to make justice evaluations. Those in advantaged and disadvantaged positions come to believe they are deserving of the level of rewards they receive. Because self-evaluations are aligned with reward levels, the advantaged and disadvantaged view the systems of inequality (and their place in it) as legitimate (Della Fave, 1980, 1986).

Individuals’ attributions about their abilities to acquire resources are therefore central to the legitimation of stratified systems. Cohen (1982) argues that internally based inputs, such as self-evaluations, play a key role in justice evaluations. Similarly, Olson and Hafer (2001) argue that when individuals who are disadvantaged by a system make self-attributions, feelings of deprivation are reduced. It follows that, once the inequality system is internalized, actors should view it as fair.

3. Claims

Based on the forgoing analysis, we can state the self-evaluation theory as a set of three claims.

- *Claim 1:* If actors are in a stratified structure, they will acquire resources consistent with their advantaged or disadvantaged position.
- *Claim 2:* If actors acquire resources consistent with their position, they will develop self-evaluations that are consistent with their advantaged or disadvantaged position in that structure.

Another claim of the self-evaluation theory is as follows: If there is congruence between structural position (advantaged or disadvantaged) and self-evaluations, then actors will view their position in the structure as fair and the structure as legitimate. We doubt that there is much reason to expect to find any empirical support for this “strict” claim, due to the well-known self-interest bias in fairness evaluations (e.g., Molm et al., 1994; Robinson and Bell, 1978). That is, those who are advantaged tend to rate unequal systems as fairer than those who are disadvantaged by them. A more promising version of this claim is that self-evaluations moderate the impact of inequality on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Thus,

- *Claim 3:* If an actor’s self-evaluation is consistent with his/her position in a stratified structure, that actor will view his/her rewards as fairer and the system as more legitimate than an actor whose self-evaluation is inconsistent with his/her position in a stratified structure.

Below we use these claims to generate several hypotheses. Before doing so, we review previous empirical investigations of the self-evaluation theory. As detailed more fully below, we argue that the lack of empirical support for the self-evaluation theory may stem, in part, from the tendency for these prior empirical studies to (implicitly) rely on a “strict” version of Claim 3. Because most of these studies (like our own) use an exchange framework, we briefly discuss research on exchange networks and how that research can be used to investigate the legitimation of inequality structures.

4. Previous research

This section provides a brief review of several prior attempts to test the self-evaluation theory, both of which used an exchange network framework. As detailed below, the research designs of each study left out at least one key component of the self-evaluation theory. We suggest that this may be why prior studies have yet to generate findings that support

the theory. The research design we outline later builds on these important studies but provides more solid ground for the emergence of legitimated inequality by explicitly incorporating each component of the theory discussed earlier. Because these prior studies used an exchange framework, we begin with a discussion of exchange networks.

4.1. Embedding legitimacy in exchange networks

Some of the most active research programs in sociology have been those designed to test and extend exchange network theories (Molm and Cook, 1995). These programs have resulted in a range of theoretical insights into power inequality and well-understood approaches to manipulating wealth and power in controlled laboratory settings. Thus, a number of previous studies of legitimation have been based on an exchange network paradigm (Cook and Hegtvædt, 1986; Cook et al., 1988; Stolte, 1983). We follow the lead of previous work by situating our investigation of legitimacy in an exchange network context. As others have noted (e.g., Willer, 1999), exchange networks can be used as micro-models of the stratified social systems that interested Marx, Weber, and other sociologists of power and inequality processes.

Exchange networks are social networks in which the ties between actors represent exchange opportunities. Most empirical investigations of exchange networks have been laboratory experiments (see Lovaglia, 1999). By convention, in most of these studies, participants do not actually “exchange” anything; rather, they negotiate the division of 24-point resource pool. “Exchange” occurs when two actors connected by an exchange relation agree on how to divide the resource pool.

A key goal of exchange network research is to predict how the patterning of exchange ties affects *power*, defined as the structurally determined potential to obtain favorable outcomes in relations where interests are opposed (Waller et al., 1997, p. 573). The power of any given actor (or position) is determined by the shape of the network and the actor's position in that network (Lovaglia, 1999). Previous research identifies three broad classes of exchange networks: those in which all positions have equal power, those in which there are “extreme” power differences between positions (called “strong” power networks) and those in which power differences between positions are subtler (“weak” power networks).

A simple strong power network is the 3-Line (A–B–C), in which each position is limited to one exchange. A and C are not connected and thus cannot negotiate or exchange with each other. Given that each position is limited to one exchange, in strong power networks, like the 3-Line, it is certain that one of the actors will be excluded on any given round of negotiations. Prior research shows that in strong power networks, high power actors (in the 3-Line, B) gain almost all resources in exchange, while low power actors (A and C) gain very little. For instance, resource divisions in the 3-Line can be as extreme as 23:1, favoring B. For A and C, a gain of one resource in the exchange is more beneficial than being excluded from the transaction and not gaining any resources.

Power differences in weak power networks, like the 4-Line (A–B–C–D), are much subtler (Lovaglia, 1999). In weak power networks, there is only the possibility that one or more actors will be excluded from exchange (Markovsky et al., 1993). Previous research shows that, in contrast to the high power position in strong power networks, the high power positions in this network (B and C) exercise power over A and D, but not at the level observed in strong power networks. For instance, B and C can be expected to gain an average of 13 (out of 24) points in exchange with A and D respectively (Lucas et al., 2001; Markovsky et al., 1993).

Because power differences are not as extreme in weak power networks and power development does not happen through explicit bidding wars, the sources of power differences in weak power networks are less transparent than those in strong power networks (see Willer, 1999). Thus, we argue that, compared to strong power networks, power differences in weak power networks are more likely to be attributed to individual talents and abilities (see also Markovsky et al., 1993). Actors in strong power networks are more likely to attribute successes to structural location. Importantly, as detailed below, all previous research on legitimation in exchange networks used strong power networks (Cook and Hegtvædt, 1986; Cook et al., 1988; Stolte, 1983).

4.2. Review of previous research

Stolte (1983) attempted to test the self-evaluation theory of legitimacy by linking structural inequality in exchange networks with self-evaluations.² Specifically, in his experimental study, Stolte randomly assigned participants to a position in one of two exchange structures: a strong or equal power structure. At the conclusion of the exchange period, Stolte (1983, p. 334) measured participants' self-efficacy, which he defined as “the extent to which a person perceives him/herself able to successfully produce reward action-outcomes within a specified action domain.”

As Stolte hypothesized, in strong power networks, exchanges favored participants in structurally advantaged positions, and those in positions of power developed higher self-efficacy relative to those in other positions. But contrary to his hypothesis, perceived fairness varied by positional location. Specifically, participants in powerful positions perceived the exchanges as fair, while those in disadvantaged positions perceived the exchanges as unfair. Stolte pointed to two aspects of his experiment that may have led to the lack of support for the theory of legitimation: the absence of a referential structure and the absence of justification for the inequality in the exchange structure, namely a justification for placement in advantaged or disadvantaged positions in the structure (i.e., an activation of self-evaluations).

² Stolte used the term self-efficacy. But his definition of self-efficacy is similar to Della Fave's (1980) concept of self-evaluation.

A second study by Cook et al. (1988) found similar results. Like Stolte, Cook and colleagues found that both self-evaluations and perceived fairness varied with positional location. As a result, they concluded that the self-evaluation hypothesis applies to power-advantaged but not power-disadvantaged actors. The authors acknowledged that, as in the Stolte experiment, participants were randomly assigned to a position in the structure but that self-evaluations may not have been properly activated. They also suggested that if disadvantaged actors had made internal attributions about their success in exchanges, they may have perceived the structure as fair. We address these and other possible limitations in the studies outlined below.³

5. Revisiting legitimization of inequality in power structures

We have suggested that previous studies have failed to find support for the self-evaluation theory because no prior study incorporated all aspects of the self-evaluation argument. Furthermore, we do not believe that the results from these previous studies are as inconsistent with the theory of self-evaluations as they might appear at first glance. Specifically, we suggest that a fairer test of the theory would fully cross self-evaluations with positional power to address whether (1) occupants of *disadvantaged* positions with low self-evaluations perceive their (low) rewards to be fairer and the stratification system as more legitimate than occupants of disadvantaged positions with high self-evaluations and (2) occupants of *advantaged* positions with high self-evaluations perceive their (high) rewards to be fairer and the stratification system as more legitimate than occupants of advantaged positions with low self-evaluations. Previous experimental studies reviewed above only addressed self-evaluations that resulted from the structure. As a result, following Claim 2 above, self-evaluations were *consistently aligned* with positional advantage. To overcome this limitation in prior designs, our second study explicitly crosses self-evaluations with positional advantage.

We now outline a series of hypotheses to be tested in two experiments. As explained in greater detail below, Study 1 addresses whether actors develop self-evaluations consistent with their structural position.

- *Hypothesis 1:* When placed in a stratified structure, participants will develop self-evaluations consistent with their structural location.

Study 2 addresses how self-evaluations and structural position interact to impact perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. We test two distinct arguments linking structural (dis)advantage and self-evaluations to perceptions of fairness. The self-evaluation theory predicts that self-evaluations moderate the effects of positional power. Thus, compared to high power actors with low self-evaluations, high power actors with high self-evaluations should view the high level of resources they receive as fair. Additionally, low power actors with low self-evaluations should view the low level of resources they receive as fairer than do low power actors with high self-evaluations. Thus, the self-evaluation theory predicts that perceptions of fairness and legitimacy will vary within structural positions, as a function of the position-occupant's self-evaluation.

- *Hypothesis 2a:* When placed in an advantaged position, participants with high self-evaluations will evaluate their rewards as fairer than participants with low self-evaluations.
- *Hypothesis 2b:* When placed in an advantaged position, participants with high self-evaluations will view the structure as more legitimate than participants with low self-evaluations.
- *Hypothesis 3a:* When placed in a disadvantaged position, participants with low self-evaluations will evaluate their rewards as fairer than participants with high self-evaluations.
- *Hypothesis 3b:* When placed in a disadvantaged position, participants with low self-evaluations will view the structure as more legitimate than participants with high self-evaluations.

An Alternative Argument: We test the self-evaluation theory against a different line of reasoning about legitimacy, which predicts a “main effect” of structural position. That is, a number of studies in a variety of contexts (e.g., Molm et al., 1994; Robinson and Bell, 1978) have found that individuals who benefit from inequality are more likely to define those inequalities as just, compared to those who are disadvantaged by inequality systems. From this line of reasoning, we might expect that structural advantage (disadvantage) will overwhelm any effect of self-evaluations. This would be consistent with the results of previous studies of legitimacy in exchange structures reviewed above. However, because we explicitly manipulate self-evaluations, in contrast to those previous studies, we will be able to determine whether self-evaluations moderate the relationship between structural advantage and perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Thus, we test the following non-rival hypotheses:

³ In addition to these experimental studies of “micro” social structures, survey researchers have attempted to test the self-evaluation theory of legitimacy at a more macroscopic level. For instance, using surveys, Shepelak (1987) found those in disadvantaged positions view themselves as unjustly rewarded. However, her measures (e.g. “I have a positive attitude”) were more closely aligned with *self-esteem* than self-evaluations. Distinct from self-evaluations, self-esteem is favorable or unfavorable attitudes an individual has towards him/herself (Rosenberg, 1965, p. 15). According to the self-evaluation theory, individuals with low self-evaluations (based on structural location) are able to maintain high self-esteem (based on other aspects of their lives) and a sense of self-efficacy (Della Fave, 1986). In any case, because she examined self-esteem rather than self-evaluations, Shepelak's analysis is not a proper test of the self-evaluation theory of legitimacy.

- *Hypothesis 4a*: Participants in advantaged positions will evaluate their rewards as fairer than participants in disadvantaged positions.
- *Hypothesis 4b*: Participants in advantaged positions will view the structure as more legitimate than participants in disadvantaged positions.

The “strong” version of Hypothesis 4, which does compete with the self-evaluation theory, predicts that self-evaluations will not impact perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.

We now turn to the experiments designed to test these hypotheses. Study 1 was designed to test Hypothesis 1; Study 2 tests Hypotheses 2–4. As explained in greater detail below, we test Hypothesis 1 using two different networks: a weak power network (4-Line) and a strong power network (a branch network). As noted earlier, all previous exchange network approaches to legitimacy have used strong power networks. However, Study 2 will cross self-evaluations with location (advantaged or disadvantaged position) in an exchange structure. We therefore want to use a structure that does not mitigate our self-evaluation manipulation. Because previous work has shown that power inequalities in weak power networks are subtler than those in strong power networks (Markovsky et al., 1993), we suspect that the differences in self-evaluations that emerge in weak power networks will be subtler than those that emerge in strong power networks. If so, we can more confidently employ a weak power network in Study 2 without worrying that that power differences (and thus self-evaluation differences) will affect our self-evaluation manipulation. Using a strong and weak power network in Study 1 will allow us to ensure that the differences in self-evaluations that result from weak power networks are, in fact, subtler than those that results from strong power networks. A fortunate byproduct of having two structures is that we get multiple tests of Hypothesis 1.

6. Study 1

6.1. Procedure

Male and female participants were recruited from introductory classrooms at a large public university in the southeastern U.S. for the opportunity to earn money. A total of 121 students (79 females) participated.⁴ Participants were scheduled in same-gender groups of four. Upon arrival, each participant was escorted to a private computer terminal. After reading and signing the consent form, each participant completed a brief computerized tutorial that explained how to make exchanges. The instructions explained that they would be negotiating for profit points and the more profit points they earned, the higher their payment would be at the end of the study. After completing the tutorial, participants were given a brief quiz to make sure they understood the procedures. Finally, participants completed a three-item questionnaire designed to measure their self-evaluations prior to negotiations. These questions are given in [Appendix A](#). When all participants in a group completed the tutorial, quiz and questionnaire, the bargaining began.

6.2. The networks

Following previous work in this area, ties represented the opportunity to negotiate the division of a pool of 24 valued resources. Negotiations could only occur between participants who were connected. Participants negotiated by sending offers and counter-offers to each other. Exchange occurred when two potential trading partners agreed on how to divide the resources. Unequal divisions indicated power exercise. The negotiations consisted of 15 rounds with each round lasting one minute or until no more exchanges were possible. Participants could not see the shape of the network in either condition so they were unaware that they were in an advantaged or disadvantaged position. Each participant in the [Stolte \(1983\)](#) experiment described above knew his or her location in the network. Because this type of information can lead to equity concerns (see [Cook et al., 1983](#)), we restricted the network information to facilitate participants attributing their level of success to ability rather than structural location.

For the strong power network, we used a network with one central position (A) connected to three peripheral positions (B, C and D), none of whom was connected to any other. Although the occupant of a given position could negotiate with any others to whom he or she was connected, each position was limited to a single exchange per round. As a result, following previous work ([Willer, 1999](#)), we should expect to see bidding wars between the peripheral actors, such that exchanges come to strongly favor A.

We used the 4-Line network (A–B–C–D) for the weak power network. In this network, the participant in position A could only negotiate with the participant in position B, but the participant in position B could also negotiate with C. Thus, in the weak power network, if B and C exchanged on any given round, A and D would be excluded and earn nothing. Previous work shows that the 4-Line generates subtle or “weak” power differences favoring B and C over A and D ([Markovsky et al., 1993](#)).

⁴ All participants negotiated in 4-position networks in Studies 1 and 2. Because there was one too few participants in three experimental groups, a research assistant occupied the vacant position. The assistant was instructed to act like real participants in similar positions. No information from the assistant was used in the analyses.

Table 1

Average points by position in all rounds of negotiations.

	Advantaged positions	Disadvantaged positions
Strong power network	13.91 (3.07) <i>N</i> = 14	3.36 (1.02) <i>N</i> = 39
Weak power network	10.49 (2.84) <i>N</i> = 34	7.76 (5.08) <i>N</i> = 34

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

6.3. Measuring self-evaluations

Immediately after the last of 15 rounds of negotiation, participants completed a questionnaire that included items designed to measure self-evaluations. The self-evaluation items were intended to measure the impact of occupying an advantaged or disadvantaged position on participants' perceived ability to accumulate resources (i.e., their self-evaluations). Previous experimental research (Stolte, 1983) used semantic differential procedures to measure self-evaluations. Stolte (1983, p. 337) measured self-evaluations via responses to a series of bipolar adjective scales (e.g., weak-strong); higher responses indicated higher perceived self-evaluation. Thus, to measure self-evaluations, we created the scale given in Appendix B. The scale is comprised of three questions that ask participants to rate their success at obtaining profit points, their perceived ability to obtain points based on their position and their level of confidence about their ability to obtain points ($\alpha = .87$).⁵ Following Hypothesis 1, we expected occupants of advantaged positions to report higher self-evaluations than those in disadvantaged positions. Following the completion of the post-experimental questionnaire, participants were paid and debriefed.

7. Study 1 results

We analyzed the average number of points participants earned in all 15 rounds of negotiations. Research on exchange networks sometimes excludes those who do not exchange in a given round from analysis in order to measure the impact of structure on *exchange-ratios*. Our primary goal is different: to measure the impact of power inequalities (and self-evaluations) on perceptions of fairness. Because exclusion in exchange is a key component of low-power, we include failures to exchange in our analyses. Table 1 gives these results.⁶ (Participants did not exchange in all rounds, and failure to exchange results in a payoff of zero for that round. Thus, the averages do not sum to 24 points.)

Consistent with previous work, the power differences are subtler in the weak power network ($p < .01$), as indicated by the greater profit differentials in the strong power network ($p < .001$). As explained below, this provides our rationale for manipulating self-evaluations in the weak power network in the second study. Since there is a smaller point differential, the self-evaluation manipulation should not be overwhelmed by structural power effects. We now turn to our tests of Hypothesis 1.

7.1. Effect of position on self-evaluations

We conducted a one-way ANOVA to address the impact of position (advantaged or disadvantaged) on self-evaluations. The results, given in Table 2, show that those in advantaged positions developed significantly higher self-evaluations than those in disadvantaged positions ($F(1, 51) = 79.78, p = .001$ for the strong power network; $F(1, 66) = 9.61, p = .003$ for the weak power network). These results are consistent with Hypothesis 1, which predicts that self-evaluations result from positions of power in stratification systems.⁷

The results in Table 2 also demonstrate the impact of strong vs. weak power structures on self-evaluations. Because the strong power structure creates larger point differences, it also generates larger differences in self-evaluations. Thus, as explained in greater detail below, to minimize the likelihood that structure would overwhelm our self-evaluation manipulation, we used the weak power structure in Study 2.

7.2. Conclusion and motivation for Study 2

Summing up, the results of Study 1 strongly support Hypothesis 1: self-evaluations vary by position in power structures. This effect held for both the strong and weak power network. We now turn to the question of whether self-evaluations interact with positional power to influence perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. To address this question, Study 2 manipulates self-evaluations (which are expected to lead to variations in feelings of deservingness) and then places participants in stratified structures that are either consistent with those self-evaluations (such that participants should judge that structure as

⁵ Participants responded to Items 1 and 3 on 7-point scales and Item 2 on a 5-point scale. We therefore standardized responses to all three questions over seven. Our analyses are based on the resulting aggregation.

⁶ We found no effects of gender and thus collapsed data from males and females.

⁷ As discussed earlier, previous work (Della Fave, 1986) suggests that power should be related to self-evaluations but not necessarily to self-esteem. Consistent with this reasoning, our measure of self-esteem did not vary with position in either network. A more detailed explication of the results is available upon request from the first author.

Table 2

Analysis of variance of self-evaluation by network position.

	Advantaged position(s)/disadvantaged positions	F	p-Value
Strong power structure	5.69 (1.05) > 3.02 (.93)	79.78	0.001
Weak power structure	4.73 (1.26) > 3.92 (.86)	9.61	0.003

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

relatively fair) or inconsistent with those evaluations (in which case, they should view the structure as relatively unfair). However, so that structural location does not overwhelm the effects of the self-evaluation manipulation, we need a structure that generates “subtle” power inequalities. We therefore use the weak power network from Study 1. Unlike strong power networks, weak power networks do not contain explicit bidding wars (Markovsky et al., 1993). Thus, the source of power inequalities is less obvious in weak power networks. We believe this type of network is more akin to real-world power structures in one important way: the “source” of power inequalities is not immediately transparent. That is, in real-world power structures, people often attribute their outcomes to talents and abilities rather than social structures (see, e.g., Mills, 1959).

8. Study 2

Study 2 builds on the findings of Study 1 to address whether and how self-evaluations moderate the impact of positional power in a stratified structure on position-occupants’ perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. To do so, Study 2 crossed self-evaluations with structural advantage in an exchange network. To manipulate self-evaluations, participants were given false feedback on an ostensible test of bargaining and negotiation ability. Participants then negotiated in a structural position either consistent or inconsistent with their self-evaluations. The self-evaluation theory states that self-evaluations will moderate the effects of positional power such that participants in advantaged (disadvantaged) positions with high (low) self-evaluations will view their outcomes as fairer than participants in advantaged (disadvantaged) positions with low (high) self-evaluations (see Hypotheses 2 and 3). In addition to the self-evaluation theory hypotheses, Study 2 also tests an alternative line of reasoning (Hypotheses 4a and b), which predicts that perceptions of fairness and legitimacy will be determined solely by position, i.e., that there will be no effect of the self-evaluation manipulation.

8.1. Procedure

As in the first study, upon arrival, participants were taken to a private computer terminal where they first read and signed a consent form. Like Study 1, participants were in same gender groups. 242 participants (76 males) participated in Study 2. Immediately after signing the consent form, each participant was assigned an identification number. (The reasons for the ID number are explained in the following sections.) After being assigned an ID number, each participant completed the same computerized tutorial used in Study 1.

8.2. Self-evaluation manipulation

Following the completion of the tutorial, participants were asked to complete a test ostensibly designed to measure bargaining and negotiation ability. Participants were told that those who perform better on the test tend to earn more profit points (and thus more money) than those who do not perform as well. Once all participants were finished, the experimenter collected the completed forms and told each participant that his/her and others’ tests were being evaluated. In reality, depending on the condition, each participant was assigned either a high or low score on the test. Participants who were informed they did really well on the test were expected to develop high self-evaluations while participants who were informed they performed really poorly were expected to develop low self-evaluations.

8.3. Referential structures

Study 2 also incorporated an ability-based referential structure in order to make the link between level of success on the test and expected outcomes in negotiations more salient to participants.⁸ Similar to a method used by Ridgeway et al. (1998) to create referential information, the referential structure in this study allowed participants to compare their rewards to others with similar levels of ability. To create the referential structure, each computer terminal contained a posted pay record with test outcomes, number of profit points accumulated and pay levels ostensibly recorded by previous participants. Each participant was asked to indicate on the record his or her ID number and whether he or she was “Successful” or “Unsuccessful” on the bargaining and negotiating test. The experimenter also directed the participant to the number of points and pay recorded by osten-

⁸ Previous work (Berger et al., 1972) addresses other types of referential structures, such as outcome- and categorical referential structures. Because our research addresses the impact of perceived abilities (i.e., self-evaluations) on fairness evaluations, we focus on ability-based referential structures. Future work should address the role of other types of referential structures in the legitimization of unequal power structures.

sible other participants and told the participant that she would record her own information at the end of the negotiations. Participants could see that previous participants who were successful on the test earned between 230 and 300 profit points and averaged a reward of \$15–\$17 and participants who were unsuccessful on the test earned between 115 and 140 profit points and averaged a reward of \$8–\$10.

After recording their ID numbers and success level on the pay sheet, the participants completed the manipulation check designed to ensure that feedback on the test and the referential structures created high or low self-evaluations (see Appendix C). Participants were asked how they felt about their ability to acquire points, how many points they thought they would be able to obtain and about their ability to obtain profit points compared to other participants. This scale was reliable ($\alpha = .88$). Thereafter, the negotiations began.

8.4. *The network*

As in Study 1, we used the 4-Line (A–B–C–D) network. In contrast to the previously discussed studies, which employed strong power networks, we expected that participants in the weak power network would attribute accumulation of resources to their own abilities instead of their network position. The study consisted of two conditions. In the “fair” condition, participants who were told they were successful on the test were placed in positions B and C (the powerful positions) and participants who were told they were unsuccessful on the test were placed in the lower power positions (A and D). In the “unfair” condition, participants who were told they were successful on the test were placed in the less powerful positions, while participants who were told they were unsuccessful on the test were placed in the more powerful positions.

Participants negotiated for 15 rounds. Each round of exchanges lasted one minute, or until all possible exchanges were completed. Additionally, each position was limited to one exchange per round. As in Study 1, participants could not see the shape of the network. Because participants were unaware they were in an advantaged (or disadvantaged) position, they were able to attribute their high (low) levels of rewards to their ability, which had been activated via the self-evaluation manipulation.

8.5. *Dependent measures*

After 15 rounds of negotiations, participants were given false feedback about the number of points they earned and the amount of pay they could expect to receive.⁹ They were instructed to write this information on the pay record next to their ID number and test score. Participants then completed questionnaires consisting of items designed to measure self-evaluations, the fairness of the resources they obtained during the exchanges and the perceived legitimacy of the overall structure (see Appendix D).

The self-evaluation questions administered after the negotiations were designed to determine whether self-evaluations were consistent with positional power and/or the reported test outcome. Participants were asked how successful they felt they were at negotiating profit points, how successful they felt they were in the negotiations compared to other participants and how they felt about their ability to obtain profit points. This scale was reliable ($\alpha = .84$).

We created a fairness scale to determine participants’ perceptions of the fairness of the rewards they received in exchanges (according to the false feedback given at the end of the study). Participants were asked about the fairness of the number of profit points they received, the number of profit points they received based on their level of success on the test and whether or not they earned more or less profit points than expected given their test results. The last item was intended to capture aspects of being over-rewarded or under-rewarded in relation to level of ability. This scale was reliable ($\alpha = .75$).

In addition to viewing the level of resources he or she received as fairer, when self-evaluations and positional power are aligned, the participant should also view the structure as a whole as more legitimate. The final questionnaire revealed the network to the participants, including each position’s location in the overall network (who was able to negotiate with whom), each position-occupant’s test outcome (successful or unsuccessful) and the projected payment for each position-occupant, ranging from \$8 to \$17. Specifically, the questionnaire indicated that participants in the advantaged positions (B and C) earned between 250 and 280 points and \$15–\$17 dollars. Participants in the disadvantaged positions (A and D) earned between 120 and 135 points and \$8–\$10 dollars. Each participant received the same network information.

Participants were asked the extent to which they felt the structure was as it should be, meaning that each participant was to receive the appropriate payment for their position in the structure and test outcome. Previous studies (Cook et al., 1988; Stolte, 1983) measured ideas about fairness of personal outcomes but none of the studies has addressed the fairness and legitimacy of the overall inequality structure. Legitimacy, as defined by Della Fave (1986), involves approval of stratification. To measure this concept, we asked the participants to evaluate an unequal payment structure, which was based on the ability-level and outcomes of each participants. After completing the post-negotiation questionnaires, participants were paid and fully debriefed.

⁹ Participants were aware of the number of profit points they earned each round but the computer did not provide them with a cumulative amount at the end of all rounds. No participants indicated that they kept a tally of points earned during the experiment.

Table 3

Average points by position in all rounds of negotiations.

	Fair condition	Unfair condition
Advantaged positions	10.45 (3.08) <i>N</i> = 54	10.62 (2.93) <i>N</i> = 63
Disadvantaged positions	7.93 (5.41) <i>N</i> = 54	8.18 (4.81) <i>N</i> = 63

Note: Standard deviations are given in parentheses.

9. Study 2 results

Because gender did not significantly affect the results, we collapsed the data from males and females.

9.1. Self-evaluation manipulation check and power differences

We conducted a one-way ANOVA to assess the pre-negotiation self-evaluation manipulation. The results indicate that the manipulation significantly affected self-evaluations prior to the negotiations ($F(1, 239) = 17.45, p < .001$). That is, participants who received a successful test result reported significantly higher self-evaluations ($m = 5.14, sd = .83$) than those who received an unsuccessful result ($m = 4.65, sd = .98$).

We also conducted paired samples *t*-tests to examine how reported self-evaluations were affected by position. The results showed a negative effect of occupying a disadvantaged position on self-evaluations, including those with low ($p = .001$) and high ($p < .001$) manipulated self-evaluations. While occupying an advantaged position increased self-evaluations, the effect was not significant for those with high manipulated self-evaluations ($p = .15$) and had only a marginal effect for those with low manipulated self-evaluations ($p < .1$).

The average number of profit points for all rounds of negotiations, by position and self-evaluation condition, are given in Table 3. As in Study 1, because we include rounds in which a participant failed to exchange (and thus earned zero), the points do not sum to 24. Similar to the weak power network in Study 1, the Study 2 network generated “weak power” differences ($p < .01$ for the fair condition; $p < .001$ for the unfair condition). We now turn to tests of Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 for the fairness and legitimacy measures.

9.2. Effect of position and manipulated self-evaluations on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy

The descriptive statistics for fairness and legitimacy perceptions are given in Table 4.

Table 5 reports the results of a series of one-way ANOVAs with the two independent variables (positional power and self-evaluation). The first analysis shows a significant impact of position ($F(3, 238) = 261.65, p < .001$) and post-negotiation self-evaluations $F(3, 238) = 4.87, p < .05$) on perceptions of fairness. The second shows that position ($F(3, 238) = 35.64, p < .001$) and self-evaluations ($F(3, 238) = 8.25, p < .01$) have a significant effect on perceptions of legitimacy.

Hypothesis 2a predicts that, among participants who occupy advantaged positions, those with high self-evaluations will evaluate their rewards as fairer than will participants with low self-evaluations in advantaged positions. In contrast to this hypothesis, the Table 4 results show no difference in perceptions of fairness for advantaged positions with high versus low

Table 4

Effect of position and self-evaluation on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.

Position	Manipulated self-evaluation	Fairness scale	Legitimacy
Advantaged	High	5.23 (.60)	5.07 (1.16)
	Low	5.33 (.82)	4.41 (1.18)
Disadvantaged	High	3.52 (.87)	3.92 (1.30)
	Low	3.81 (.76)	3.71 (1.12)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Table 5

F-ratios of analysis of variance on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.

	Fairness	Legitimacy
Position	261.65***	35.64***
Self-evaluation	4.87*	8.25**
Position × self-evaluation	.47	2.20

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

self-evaluations ($p = .22$, one-tailed test). This absence of an effect is significant because previous research (Cook et al., 1988) has suggested that the self-evaluation theory is only applicable to advantaged actors.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3a, however, participants in disadvantaged positions with low manipulated self-evaluations believed their rewards to be significantly fairer than participants in the same position with high self-evaluations ($p < .05$, one-tailed test). This is the first empirical support, to our knowledge, for the prediction that occupants of disadvantaged positions with low self-evaluations come to view their lower level of rewards as relatively fair.

Finally, we tested an alternative argument which proposed a main effect of position on perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. As predicted by Hypothesis 4a, participants in advantaged positions believed their rewards to be fairer than participants in disadvantaged positions when controlling for self-evaluations ($p < .001$, one-tailed test). As previously stated, it is not surprising that those who benefit from the system define the system as just, regardless of their self-evaluation.

Turning to the impact of position and self-evaluations on participants' beliefs about the legitimacy of inequality: Following Hypothesis 2b, participants with high manipulated self-evaluations in advantaged positions believed the structure to be more legitimate than those with low self-evaluations in the same position ($p < .001$, one-tailed test). These results are consistent with the self-evaluation theory.

In contrast to Hypothesis 3b, self-evaluations did not affect disadvantaged position-occupants' perceptions of legitimacy, $p = .17$. In fact, the trend is in the opposite direction than predicted by the hypothesis, with those with high self-evaluations rating the structure as (non-significantly) more legitimate.

Finally, consistent with the results for fairness, which predicted a main effect of power, Hypothesis 4b was supported for legitimacy. Participants in advantaged positions reported the structure to be more legitimate than those in disadvantaged positions, net of self-evaluations ($p < .001$, one-tailed test).

9.3. Discussion

Study 2 provided an empirical test of the hypotheses linking self-evaluations and positions in stratified power structures to perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. The self-evaluation theory hypotheses predict that self-evaluations moderate the effect of positional power to influence perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.

Consider first the results for occupants of advantaged positions. Hypothesis 2 was supported for perceptions of legitimacy (Hypothesis 2b) but not fairness (2a). Consistent with the self-evaluation theory, occupants of advantaged positions with high self-evaluations saw the structure as more legitimate than did those with low self-evaluations. Contrary to the self-evaluation theory, participants in advantaged positions with low self-evaluations did not see their rewards as less fair than did those with high self-evaluations. That is, low self-evaluators did not feel they were "over-rewarded."

The pattern of support for the self-evaluation theory was reversed for occupants of disadvantaged positions: Hypothesis 3 was supported for fairness (Hypothesis 3a), but not legitimacy (3b). Consider fairness first. Consistent with the self-evaluation theory, those with low self-evaluations in disadvantaged positions saw their rewards as fairer than those with high self-evaluations in that position. To our knowledge, this result provides the first evidence that a disadvantaged actor's self-evaluation would lead him or her to perceive unfavorable outcomes as relatively fair.

As noted earlier, previous work did not manipulate self-evaluations. As a result, they only found a "main effect" of power on perceptions of fairness: disadvantaged positions rated their outcomes as unfair, compared to those in advantaged positions (Cook et al., 1988; Stolte, 1983). This led Cook et al. (1988) to suggest that the self-evaluation theory may apply only to power-advantaged actors. This suggestion leaves unanswered the question of why anyone who was disadvantaged would see unfavorable rewards as fair. In contrast to previous designs, Study 2 explicitly manipulated self-evaluations. As a result, we were able to establish empirical support for a key theoretical prediction linking self-evaluation to perceptions of fairness.

Now consider perceptions of legitimacy. Disadvantaged high self-evaluators did not view the structure as less legitimate than did those with low self-evaluations. In fact, although not significant, the trend was in the opposite direction (see Table 4). The question thus becomes: Why might we observe support for the legitimacy component of the self-evaluation theory for occupants of *advantaged* positions, and the fairness component of the theory for occupants of *disadvantaged* positions?

Consider again the results from occupants of advantaged positions. We know from research reviewed earlier (Molm et al., 1994; Robinson and Bell, 1978), as well as our findings relevant to Hypothesis 4, that there is a strong self-interest bias in evaluations of fairness. Furthermore, this bias may be strengthened by a dissonance-reducing mechanism. That is, dissonance is avoided only if one's high payoffs are seen as fair – and thus deserved. On the other hand, it may not be dissonance-inducing for advantaged participants to see the *overall* structure as illegitimate. This is because, when rating the legitimacy of the structure, participants were also rating *others'* unequal outcomes. Rating inequalities between others as unfair, undeserved, or improper should not trigger dissonance. This may explain why we found the predicted effect of self-evaluations on high-power participants' perceptions of legitimacy but not fairness.

Now reconsider the results from disadvantaged participants. Why did those with high self-evaluations rate their rewards as less fair but (non-significantly) more legitimate than those with low self-evaluations? When coupled with the findings from advantaged actors' perceptions of legitimacy (that those with high self-evaluations rated the structure as more legitimate), we suggest the following possibility: High self-evaluators are more approving of inequality, in general, than low self-evaluators, regardless of the standing of either in the structure.

To our knowledge, this question has not been considered in previous work. Nevertheless, the relation seems reasonable because those with high self-evaluations should be generally optimistic about their overall chances for success, even if they

are not successful at one particular point in time. Such an effect would explain the positive effect of self-evaluations on perceptions of legitimacy. Future research should address this argument. If supported, it would yield new insights into the justification of social inequalities by showing that self-evaluations have positive effects on the acceptance of unequal systems, even for those not advantaged by these inequalities.

10. Conclusion

This research builds on previous work in social psychology and social inequality to address the conditions under which disadvantaged members of groups and societies accept or approve of the status quo. We used a series of controlled laboratory experiments to test the argument that individuals develop self-evaluations consistent with their positions in stratification structures and these self-evaluations, in turn, are used as a basis for judging the fairness of reward distributions and the legitimacy of the stratification system (Della Fave, 1980).

The first empirical study reported in this paper was designed to demonstrate that occupying (advantaged or disadvantaged) positions, even when they are in short-term micro-structures, affects self-evaluations. This “internalization” of the stratified structure, in turn, is expected to affect position-occupants’ beliefs about whether their rewards are just and whether the structure as a whole is legitimate. The second study, designed to address a number of these claims from self-evaluation theory and related theories of legitimacy, supported the argument that occupants of low-power positions with low self-evaluations view their unfavorable outcomes as relatively fair. This is an important result because, when individuals accept their position in the structure as justly deserved, they are less likely to attempt to change it (Cook, 1975; Della Fave, 1980, 1986; Lerner, 1980; Zelditch, 2001).

The research presented in this manuscript opens up an array of new questions to be investigated in future work. Given the ubiquity and social costs of stratification systems, and the need for a social psychological understanding of these systems (Hollander and Howard, 2000), we believe that further work along these lines is well-warranted. Like others (Cook et al., 1988; Della Fave, 1980, 1986; Shepelak, 1987; Stolte, 1983), we believe that a better understanding of the process through which stratification systems become “legitimated” will yield crucial insights into how and why social inequalities persist and how they might be disestablished.

Appendix A

Study 1: pre negotiations self-evaluation scale ($\alpha = .73$)

1. How do you feel about your ability to negotiate profit points? (1 = Not confident to 7 = Confident).
2. How many profit points do you think you will be able to obtain? (1 = A few to 5 = A lot).
3. How do you think you will be at negotiating profit points compared to the other participants? (1 = Much worse to 5 = Much better).

Appendix B

Study 1: post negotiations self-evaluation scale ($\alpha = .87$)

1. In the exchanges, how would you rate your success at obtaining profit points? (1 = Very unsuccessful to 7 = Very successful).
2. In the exchanges, my ability to obtain profit points based on my position was: (1 = Weak to 5 = Strong).
3. How did you feel about your ability to obtain profit points? (1 = Not confident to 7 = Confident).

Appendix C

Study 2: pre negotiations self-evaluation scale ($\alpha = .88$)

1. How do you feel about your ability to acquire profit points? (1 = Not confident to 7 = Confident).
2. Compared to the other participants, how many profit points do you think you will be able to obtain? (1 = A few to 5 = A lot).
3. How do you think you will be at acquiring profit points compared to the other participants? (1 = Much worse to 5 = Much better).

Appendix D

Study 2: post negotiations self-evaluation scale ($\alpha = .84$)

1. Regardless of the profit points you received, how successful do you think you were at negotiating profit points overall? (1 = Very unsuccessful to 7 = Very successful).

2. In the exchanges, how would you rate your success at obtaining profit points compared to other participants? (1 = Very unsuccessful to 7 = Very successful).
3. In the exchanges, my ability to obtain profit points was: (1 = Weak to 5 = Strong).

Study 2: fairness scale ($\alpha = .75$)

1. Overall, how fair were the number of profit points you received? (1 = Very unfair to 7 = Very fair).
2. Based on my ability on the test, the number of profit points I received was _____ compared to other participants: (1 = Very unfair to 7 = Very Fair).
3. Based on my ability on the test, in the exchanges I earned _____ profit points than expected: (1 = Less to 5 = More).

Study 2: legitimacy measure

1. The projected payment, as written above, is fair. (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree).

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