Culture and Inequality: Identity, Ideology, and Difference in "Postascriptive Society"

By
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How have conceptualizations of "culture" been incorporated into sociological studies of class, racial/ethnic, and gender inequality? This article first reviews the development of American scholarship on social inequalities during the past half century and the role of cultural analysis in this development. It goes on to consider culture-related responses to three central questions in the subdiscipline and closes with an examination of currently contentious issues. Likely future developments include movement toward more fluid, contextually contingent conceptualizations of class, race, and gender and an increasing prominence of analyses that explore the dynamic interplay between individual, interactional, and institutional processes of inequality.

Keywords: culture; race; ethnicity; class; gender; inequality

This article considers how notions of culture have influenced American sociological analyses of class, racial/ethnic, and gender inequality since the middle of the twentieth century. Attention is restricted to scholarship that is in some sense culturally informed, even if the term *culture* is not explicitly used. While an appreciation for cultural processes is far from universal among social inequality researchers, theories about the cultural causes and consequences of inequality have strongly influenced development of this subfield.

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An earlier draft was presented at the Second Annual Culture Conference, University of California, San Diego, May 5, 2006. I am grateful to conference organizers, my UCSD friends and colleagues, and especially Mary Blair-Loy and Kwai Ng, for valuable comments.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716208319824

"Cultural arguments" are defined broadly here to reference processes unfolding at different and sometimes multiple levels of analyses. At the micro level, culture refers to deeply internalized personality traits, attitudes, or values, which are invoked to explain differences in economic or social success (Kohn 1977; Wilson 1987; Keister 2008). Other usages refer to broader macro-level phenomena and social processes. For example, some scholars have considered the stratifying or equalizing effects of ideologies and collective representations, such as those that support meritocratic occupational allocation or perpetuate gender- or race-based distinctions in modern societies (Parsons 1970; Bobo 2000). Others have described institutionalized repertoires of action and structures of cognition that may differ across social-group categories (Anderson 1976; Willis 1977; Fenstermaker and West 2002). Increasingly, sociologists of inequality have explored the diverse meanings that persons and groups construct or adopt to interpret their life experiences or to create symbolic or moral boundaries between categories of persons or things (Lamont 1992; Young 2004; Ridgeway 2006). Finally, the term *culture* may refer to "specific institutions of knowledge and creativity such as language, science, religion, film, and literature" (Gusfield 2006, 43), which are of concern to scholars of inequality insofar as their creation, dissemination, or use creates symbolic boundaries, obfuscates inequality, or naturalizes the status quo (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Gans 1999; Perrucci and Wysong 2003). These conceptualizations of culture are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.

This review is organized in three sections. The first offers a summary of developments in U.S. scholarship on inequality (aka, "stratification")[1] since the middle of the twentieth century and the role of cultural analysis in this development. The second section presents culture-related responses to three questions that figure prominently in U.S. scholarship on inequality: (1) How do persons come to occupy unequal social positions? (2) How are social group distinctions generated and maintained? and (3) How is inequality legitimated? The article closes with a brief discussion of contemporary controversies that reflect the influence of cultural sociology in this subfield. These include debates about the ongoing salience of class distinctions in industrial societies, the usefulness of unidimensional distinctions in analyses of social inequality and the stability of class, race, and gender identities across time and space.

Culture in Social Inequality Research

Significant intellectual cleavages exist among scholars of inequality with regard to how they conceptualize the nature and direction of the relationship between culture and society. Whereas functionalists have emphasized broadly beneficial integrative effects of ideology (Parsons 1970), conflict theorists have pointed to culture's role in obscuring and legitimizing exploitation (Mills 1956; Parkin 1979; Wright 1997).[2] Within the conflict-theoretical tradition, a further distinction can be made between neo-Marxists, who (like the functionalists) offer a conceptualization of culture as largely derivative (Perrucci and Wysong 2003), and more Weberian-inspired

scholars, who treat culture as an independent causal force that both reflects and shapes material relations (R. Collins 1979; Esping-Andersen 1999). Even more sharply at odds with materialist views are analyses by postmodernist scholars, who describe values, identities, and ideologies as primary generative forces in modern stratification systems (Hall 1992; Pakulski and Waters 1996).

The following two sections provide brief reviews of influential empirical research on inequalities based on *economic status* and on *other social-group affiliations*, respectively.

Socioeconomic status and class reproduction

During the 1970s and 1980s, preeminent quantitative approaches for studying the transmission of socioeconomic status from parents to their children (aka, "intergenerational social reproduction") were analyses of *occupational class mobility* and path models of *status attainment*. While their considerable descriptive contributions are widely acknowledged, each of these traditions has been criticized for presuming a close correspondence between cultural values, economic requirements, and social rewards. Such a presumption may be rooted in midcentury functionalist accounts of the social stratification system, which hold that core requirements of modern economies give rise to societal value orientations, allocational processes, and reward structures (Davis and Moore 1945; Treiman 1970; Inkeles and Smith 1974).

Historical and comparative analyses of intergenerational mobility, for instance, were strongly influenced by ideas about the egalitarian effects of industrial development. While disagreeing about the precise functional form of the relationship, early mobility-table researchers commonly presumed that economic modernization—at least in its initial phases—leads to egalitarian value changes, specifically rejection of ascriptive allocational criteria in favor of achievement based ones (Lipset and Zetterberg 1959; Blau and Duncan 1967).[3] Although citizens of advanced industrial societies are indeed more likely to express egalitarian cultural views and reject the use of ascribed characteristics as direct bases for discrimination (Inglehart and Norris 2003), there is little evidence that class mobility increases continuously with advancing economic modernization (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993; Osberg and Smeeding 2006).

With regard to status attainment path models, Patrick Horan argued in his 1978 critique that measuring "success" on a unidimensional scale of occupational status or prestige presumes consensual evaluation of the superiority or inferiority (i.e., "functional importance") of occupational roles. A presumed homology of cultural values and socioeconomic outcomes is indeed evident in the early status attainment literature, as exemplified in the following excerpt from *The American Occupational Structure*:

> Society cannot any longer afford the waste of human resources a rigid class structure entails. Universalistic principles have penetrated deep into the fabric of modern society and given rise to high rates of occupational mobility in response to this need. (Blau and Duncan 1967, 431)

Functionalist predilections notwithstanding, Blau and Duncan (1967) did point to the failure of Americans to extend universalistic cultural principles to black citizens. Their linear modeling approaches have, moreover, been applied for many years by inequality scholars strongly critical of the status quo (Fischer et al. 1996; Jencks et al. 1972; Okamoto and England 1999).

A related matter, long pursued through both quantitative and qualitative research, concerns the "cultural" mechanisms by which economic inequality and poverty are reproduced. One influential line of research was carried out by "Wisconsin School" scholars, who demonstrated important mediating effects of parental expectations, peer-group membership, and personal aspirations by introducing social-psychological variables into the basic Blau-Duncan path model (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). Also notable in this regard is a long tradition of qualitative work on the "(sub)culture of poverty," which treats cultural norms and values as characteristic of *groups* rather than individuals. The term was coined by anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959) and was subsequently adopted by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1965 report to President Johnson on the reproduction of poverty in predominantly black urban ghettos. While both Lewis and Moynihan emphasized the structural sources and adaptive qualities of "dysfunctional" norms and attitudes, this nuance was lost on many academics and the public at large, and the Moynihan Report was widely read as a moral indictment of the poor (i.e., "blaming the victims").[4]

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In the furor following publication of the Moynihan Report, some scholars of poverty came to favor more purely structuralist accounts, which turned attention away from internalized norms and values and focused on past and present inequities in housing, employment, and education. Although the correspondence between personal values and economic outcomes continues to be debated,[5] interest has been growing in understanding the dynamic interplay between subcultural traits and structural forces in the generation of economic inequality (Wilson 1987; Portes and Zhou 1993; Mayer 1997; Duneier 1999; MacLeod 2004).

A related trend, likely reflecting the strong influence of Pierre Bourdieu in the field, is a decreased tendency for analysts to presume an inherent functionality of elite cultural dispositions (and an inherent inferiority of lower-class culture). While scholars generally agree that middle- and upper-class cultural capital confers competitive advantages, the productivity-enhancing effects of such capital are today less often taken for granted. This distinction is evident in Annette Lareau's (2003) description of class-specific childrearing practices:

> Both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth offer intrinsic benefits (and burdens) for parents and their children. Nevertheless, these practices are accorded different social values by important social institutions. There are signs that some family cultural practices, notably those associated with concerted cultivation, give children advantages that other cultural practices do not. (P. 241)

Bourdieu's depiction of elite values and dispositions as arbitrary, exclusionary, and unrelated to economic productivity has spawned a large body of research on the nature, origins, and effects of "cultural capital" (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Kingston 2001; Dumais 2002).

Some long-standing theoretical debates in the sociological literature on economic inequality concern whether clear dividing lines exist between "classes" and, if so, where such boundaries are located. Justification for categorical treatments (i.e., "relational" as opposed to "gradational" conceptualizations) often hinges upon the degree of articulation between economic class location and cultural practices (e.g., the extent to which "class" predicts lifestyle, tastes, and/or consumption) and upon whether these group affiliations are meaningful to individuals involved (e.g., whether they generate class awareness or class action).

Gender, race, and ethnic inequalities

Because sociologists of race, ethnicity, and gender inequality rarely dispute the fundamentally categorical nature of these sociocultural distinctions,[6] it is not surprising that they are less concerned than are class scholars with demonstrating the existence of "real" social-group boundaries. Much scholarly attention is instead directed toward understanding the historical construction and maintenance of race, gender, and ethnic boundaries and documenting the distinctive subcultures that arise within these categories (or at their intersections).

Scholarship on ascriptive inequalities has nonetheless undergone some historical developments similar to those characterizing research on class and socioeconomic inequality. Again, the earlier work focused more often on the direct stratifying effects of static group differences in personal attributes (Child 1943; Rossi 1984). Recognition of the adaptive, even strategic nature of group identities and subcultural traits then grew (Patterson 1975; C. Epstein 1988; Waldinger 1996), as did attention to the dynamic interplay between structural and cultural processes (Hochschild 1989; Waters 1999; Xie and Shauman 2003) and to the multiplicity of ascriptive identities (P. Collins 2000; Harris and Sim 2002).

Attention to processes of discrimination, cultural devaluation, and stereotyping has also been increasing of late (Ridgeway 2006; Hunt 2007).[7] The renewed interest, manifested in theories of "new prejudice" and a recent wave of laboratory, audit, and attitudinal studies, has been sparked by scholarly arguments positing a "declining significance" of race and gender under advanced industrialism (Wilson 1978; Jackson 1998) and by public perceptions that discrimination is largely a thing of the past.[8] Research findings suggest that stereotyping and discrimination based on race, gender, and sexuality continue to be major social forces, even while most Americans express strong support for liberal principles of procedural equality.

More deeply cultural accounts of ascriptive inequalities blur the conventional distinction between micro- and macro-causal processes by positing effects of cultural stereotypes on individual identities and dispositions. By these accounts, *beliefs* about essential group differences themselves perpetuate and legitimate inequality by creating interactional expectations and by shaping actions, aspirations, and even bodies (Goffman 1963; Steele 2003; Ridgeway 2006). The following classic description of "doing gender" exemplifies this integrative multilevel approach:

> It is not simply that household labor is designated as "women's work," but that for a woman to engage in it and a man not to engage in it is to draw on and exhibit the "essential nature" of each. What is produced and reproduced is not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles. . . . What are also frequently produced and reproduced are the dominant and subordinate statuses of the sex categories. (West and Zimmerman 1987, 144)

Insofar as cultural beliefs about difference are presumed to influence individuals' dispositions, moral evaluations, and cognitions, these accounts also blur distinctions between cultural and structural effects. Culture becomes "structural," as illustrated in Stephen Cornell's (2000) analysis:

> Panethnic identities often are discovered identities in just this sense, occasioned by the classificatory schemes and actions of others. . . . This fact [of classification by others] typically has consequences because the new category usually becomes an active component of the categorizers' worldview. It organizes their actions. Consequently . . . it begins to organize the experience of category members as well. (P. 99)

It should be noted that similar blurring of the micro-macro divide and of structural and cultural processes can be found (albeit less frequently) in the contemporary literature on *class* formation and identity (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992; Sayer 2005).

Three Sociological Questions

The following paragraphs present responses to three key questions in the contemporary literature on social inequality. Although the questions and responses

are not exhaustive, this exercise should give some sense as to the range of cultural influences within the subfield.

1. How do persons come to occupy unequal social positions?

The process by which social positions are allocated has long been of interest to inequality scholars. The following analytical frameworks draw upon different notions of culture.

(a) The most common approach to understanding allocational inequality focuses on personal attitudes and aptitudes that are presumed to make persons or social groups differentially equipped for success and differentially status worthy. Scholars have thus described processes of individual "status attainment" (Blau and Duncan 1967) and effects of class subcultures (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003), urban ghetto subcultures (Rainwater 1968; Wilson 1987), and socialized masculinity and femininity (Parsons and Bales 1955; Williams 1989). A prominent account of class-specific socialization is offered by Melvin Kohn (1977), who argued that the nature of their work leads working-class parents to value conformity in their children and middle-class parents to value self-direction:

> The family, then, functions as a mechanism for perpetuating inequality. At lower levels of the stratification order, parents are likely to be ill-equipped and often will be ill-disposed to train their children in the skills needed at higher class levels. Other social institutions—notably, formal educational institutions—can counteract this influence, but they do so to only a small extent. (Pp. 200-1)

Along similar lines, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton (1993) described the effects of residential segregation on the behavior and attitudes of urban blacks. They argued that ghetto dwellers, in attempting to adapt to the poverty and isolation of their social environments, are likely to develop an "oppositional" culture that is sharply at odds with the values of middle-class society.

Group-specific aggregations of personal traits have also been invoked in studies of gender inequality. Nancy Chodorow (1978), for example, suggested that girls' early identification with their mothers has enduring effects on personality that equip and dispose women for caretaking:

> Women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. . . . By contrast, women as mothers . . . produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systematically curtailed and repressed. This prepares men for their less affective later family role, and for primary participation in the impersonal extra-familial world of work and public life. (P. 7)

These analyses share a tendency to describe the relevant traits as deeply internalized and enduring. Structures of inequality are presumed to influence the nature of interactions and opportunities, which in turn generate stable group-specific outlooks and attitudes. Reciprocal feedback loops between individual dispositions and socioeconomic outcomes then result in the perpetuation of

inequality across generations and individual lifetimes. Accounts differ, however, in how the link between subcultural traits and socioeconomic outcomes is conceptualized. While some scholars treat the relationship as a natural outgrowth of the technical requirements of jobs (Kohn 1977; Kingston 2001), others describe differential valuation of cultural traits as arbitrary biases of the dominant class (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970; Perrucci and Wysong 2003).

(b) A second response to question 1 considers effects of prejudice and cultural devaluation, which create unlevel playing fields in competition for jobs and other social resources. In a newly invigorated stream of research, persistent allocational inequalities have been linked to widespread practices of discrimination, stigmatization, and stereotyping of women, gays and lesbians, and racial/ethnic minorities. Through a series of laboratory experiments, Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007), for example, documented what appears to be widespread wage discrimination against mothers, but not fathers. Results from recent audit studies and survey analyses point, moreover, to ongoing racial prejudice (Pager and Quillian 2005) and persistent stereotyping of gays and lesbians (Loftus 2001), despite professed adherence to egalitarian principles and a growing public reluctance to restrict civil liberties of these groups. Lawrence Bobo (2000) described wide-ranging effects of racial prejudice in America:

> There are strong reasons to believe that the modern-day disadvantages of African Americans in the labor market, in the housing market, in politics, in the educational arena and in myriad forms of interpersonal social interaction with whites are strongly linked to modern forms of racial prejudice. (P. 196)

2. How are social group distinctions generated and maintained?

Attention to processes by which social boundaries are defined and reproduced has been growing, especially with respect to ascriptive distinctions that were previously taken for granted as naturally ordained.

(a) An expanding literature focuses on the significance of common life experiences, historical power relations, and collective acts of resistance in the generation of social-group categories. Analysts describe the emergence of class-specific cultural practices (Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1973) and the formation of identities based on race/ethnicity (Omi and Winant 1994; Cornell 2000), gender and sexuality (Kimmel 2006; Bourdieu 2001), and intersecting categories of difference (Pakulski and Waters 1996; P. Collins 2000). Howard Winant (2004), for example, described the construction of racial identities in the United States as an historical process by which subordinate groups have "banded together" to defend their interests in the face of exclusion, discrimination, and "even outright extermination." A similar process is depicted by Mary Waters (1999) in her account of how the experience of being "black" in America transforms identities of Caribbean immigrants:

> Black immigrants from the Caribbean come to the United States with a particular identity/culture/worldview. . . . Ultimately, however, the structural realities of American race relations begin to swamp the culture of the West Indians. . . . Race as a master status in the United States soon overwhelms the identities of the immigrants and their children, and they are seen as black Americans. (P. 8)

The construction and reproduction of group distinctions in organizations and institutions, including families, schools, workplaces, states, and social movements, have been widely studied as well (Grusky and Sørensen 1998; Taylor 1999; Karabel 2005; Skrentny 2006; S. Epstein 2007). Julie Bettie (2003), for example, explored the formation of multidimensional, situational identities in high schools. She found that girls increasingly sort themselves along race/ethnicity and class lines and that their expectations, attitudes, and behavior in school depend in large part upon what they see as normative for "girls like them." Charles Tilly (1998) made a more general argument about the incorporation of exterior group distinctions into organizations:

> However they are institutionalized, exterior categories such as race, gender, and ethnicity become interior to the extent that members of organizations create widely recognized names for the boundaries and actors, enact defining rituals, and represent the categories by symbolically explicit devices. (P. 80)

(b) A closely related line of research considers the role of consumption in the construction of symbolic socioeconomic class boundaries (DiMaggio and Ostrower 1990; Peterson and Simkus 1992). These analyses, strongly influenced by the writings of Thornstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu, describe stratifying effects of differential consumption practices, manners, and/or command of high culture.

> A class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*, by its consumption . . . as much as by its position in the relations of production (even if it is true that the latter governs the former). (Bourdieu 1984, 483)

But the degree of articulation between objective class location and consumption is a matter of ongoing debate, as is the distinctiveness of consumption practices within social groups that are not defined entirely in economic terms (e.g., race, gender, nationality).[9] Michèle Lamont (1992), for instance, found that the strength of cultural boundaries varies cross-nationally—in particular, that they are much weaker in the United States than in France.

(c) A third response to question 2 focuses on the self-fulfilling effects of *beliefs* about group difference (or similarity). By this account, ideologies of difference create expectations of self and others that shape interactions and behavior even in the absence of any immediate structural constraints or direct individual-level socialization. This process has been described in research on "chartering" effects of educational credentials (Meyer 1977); on effects of gender scripts and stereotypes (Thorne 1994; Blair-Loy 2003; Ridgeway and Correll 2004); and on "stereotype threat," stigma, and the reproduction of racial inequalities (Goffman 1963;

Ogbu 1994; Steele 2003). Examples of such self-fulfilling prophesies are offered by several Berkeley sociologists in their collective response to Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994):

> Young people understand their positions in the racial caste system, irrespective of their families' education or wealth. Some adopt the resigned stance expected of them, some rebel against it, all probably worry about it. One result is the same whatever the reaction: Poorer than expected performance on tests in school. (Fischer et al. 1996, 199, 201)

Cecelia Ridgeway (2006) made a similar argument with respect to gender, arguing that beliefs in fundamental and innate gender difference cause confirmatory shifts in self-assessments and task performance, which in turn reinforce societal expectations and reproduce essentialist gender ideologies.

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3. How is inequality legitimated?

The mechanisms by which social inequalities come to be taken for granted as natural or just are also a central concern of inequality scholars, who have long recognized the importance of this process to the long-term stability of stratification systems.

(a) From one scholarly perspective, this stability—and sometimes the complicity of social subordinates in their own domination—reflects power differentials and uneven capacities for persons and social groups to impose their preferred definitions of social reality (R. Collins 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron 1970). Such a perspective is exemplified in a neo-Marxist account by Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong (2003), who argued that the consciousness of average citizens is "colonized" by a culture industry that disseminates ideas promoting elite class interests and thus perpetuating their domination. Bourdieu's (2001) analysis of the legitimation of the gender order also points to a process of "symbolic violence," by which arbitrary social structures—in this case male domination—come to be perceived as natural:

> Far from the necessities of biological reproduction determining the symbolic organization of the sexual division of labour . . . , it is an arbitrary construction of the male and female body, of its uses and functions, especially in biological reproduction, which gives an apparently natural foundation to the androcentric view of the division of sexual labour and the sexual division of labour and so of the whole cosmos. (P. 23)

(b) The legitimacy of the modern stratification system is also commonly attributed to persons' differential contributions to the collective welfare—either real or presumed. From a functionalist perspective, a consensual, meritocratic value system grows out of the exigencies of industrial production (Parsons 1970). Treiman (1977), for example, argued that worldwide similarity in occupational prestige rankings arises out of functional imperatives shared by all complex societies—namely, that persons be rationally allocated to a common set of intrinsically hierarchical occupational roles. Daniel Bell (1973) made similar claims with respect to the rising social standing of knowledge workers in postindustrial societies.

Neoinstitutionalists take these arguments one step further by treating egalitarian value systems as cultural constructions rather than responses to the exigencies of modern industrial production (Meyer 1977, 2001; Ramirez, Soysal, and Shanahan 1997). Credential-based discrimination is legitimate, according to John Meyer (2001), because of deeply institutionalized cultural ideologies about the productivity-enhancing effects of formal education and because of taken-for-granted beliefs about the collective interest in rewarding persons for educational investments. Functional theories are in this sense cultural paradigms:

> The high status and importance of many groups, such as the schooled professions, in modern stratification systems arise from cultural ideologies (which in the modern world commonly take the form of functional theories) as much as from "real" interactive dominance and dependence. (P. 883)

(c) A third line of scholarship considers how abstract liberalism and allusions to "individual choice," "effort," and "equal opportunity" help legitimate persistent ascriptive inequalities (Orloff 1993; Bobo 2000; Feagin and McKinney 2003). By these accounts, liberal egalitarian principles are easily reconciled with beliefs about essential differences in skills, attitudes, and interests. Group-differentiated outcomes are deemed legitimate as long as these are understood to reflect free choices by autonomous agents. In *Occupational Ghettos*, Charles and Grusky (2004) described the role of "different but equal" cultural principles in the legitimation of occupational sex segregation:

> In the contemporary context, men and women are presumed to have rather different tastes and aptitudes, and liberal egalitarianism works merely to ensure that such differences, however they might be generated, can then be pursued or expressed in a fair (gender-neutral) contest. . . . In this regard, gender inequality is not just another form of ascription destined to wither away . . . , but a very special form distinguished by the durability of its essentialist legitimation. (Pp. 308-9)

Other scholars, such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003), point to similarly individualistic interpretations of racial disparities in post–civil rights, "colorblind" regimes:

> The United States does not depend on Archie Bunkers to defend white supremacy. . . . Modern racial ideology does not thrive on the ugliness of the past or on the language and tropes typical of slavery and Jim Crow. . . . Today most whites justify keeping minorities from having the good things of life with the language of liberalism. Whites believe minorities have the opportunities to succeed and that, if they do not, it is because they do not try hard. (P. 181)

Contested Issues in Contemporary Social Inequality Research

This article closes with a brief discussion of some contentious issues in the subfield. These include debates about whether "class" is a meaningful social category in advanced industrial societies; about the analytical usefulness of unidimensional ascriptive categories such as "gender" and "race"; and about the stability of race, class, and gender identities across time and space. Cultural concepts and cultural processes are central in each of these debates.

Disputes about the ongoing cultural and social salience of class distinctions under advanced industrialism are in some respects reminiscent of classical sociological debates concerning the definition of class. These questions have inspired much research on the extent to which class location shapes other aspects of individuals' lives, including cultural tastes, consumption practices, attitudes, values, education, and political behavior (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1993; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Critics of conventional class analysis suggest a decoupling of sociocultural practices from economic status, due to the fundamentally gradational character of contemporary stratification regimes; the growing political salience of social movements and cultural identities based on ethnic, national, religious, gender, and sexual affiliations; the increasing volatility and contextual contingency of individual identities; and/or the emergence of an homogenizing mass culture.

A second point of contention concerns the empirical and theoretical justification for unidimensional conceptualizations of social distinction. Maxine Baca Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael Messner (2005, 2) argued, for instance, that "treating women as a group united in its victimization by patriarchy" obscures differences among women and results in "too narrow a focus on the experiences and perspectives of women from more privileged social groups" (see also P. Collins 2000). A growing recognition that social distinctions interact in important ways has helped spur development of a burgeoning literature on social groups located at the *intersections* of multiple classification systems (e.g., black middle-class women).[10] At the same time, limited justification for unidimensional analyses (i.e., what Barbara Risman [2004] called "a both/and

strategy") can be found in work that describes gender and ethnic distinctions as culturally fundamental. For example, discussions of "constructed primordiality" (Griswold 1994) and "gender as a social structure" (Risman 2004) are based on the notion that *beliefs* about shared identities and about essential group differences themselves have significant social consequences (Ridgeway 2006; Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Charles and Bradley forthcoming).[11] Leslie McCall (2005) provided an excellent review of analytical and methodological approaches emerging to account for multidimensionality of social identities.

A closely related question concerns the fluidity versus stability of categorical identities. As discussed above, accounts of race/ethnicity and gender that emphasize biological difference or early childhood socialization have been losing influence in favor of adaptive, contextually contingent conceptualizations. Significant disagreements remain, however, regarding the degree to which standard social group boundaries map onto observable differences in attitudes or behavior and regarding the extent to which any such differences are internalized at the individual level. For example, Bourdieu's (1984) account of class-specific dispositions has been criticized as overly deterministic and insufficiently attentive to the fluidity and contextual contingency of identities and behaviors (Hall 1992; Lamont 1992; Kingston 2000). A similar cleavage can be found between those advancing primordial versus constructionist views of ethnicity (see Cornell and Hartmann [2007] for a review of this literature). Perhaps the most heated manifestation of this debate is in the literature on gender inequality, where charges of essentialism have been leveled against "difference feminists" (Chodorow 1978; Hartsock 1998) for describing particular attributes and experiences as belonging uniquely to men or women and/or for claiming that a distinctive "voice" or "standpoint" informs their work.[12] Critics argue that gender is variable and situationally activated, and that emphasis on difference helps to create the very distinctions that are at the root of women's oppression (C. Epstein 1988; Risman 2004).

Finally, we arrive at the obvious question as to what these intellectual debates foretell about future trends in American inequality research. Two developments seem likely. The first is continuation of a movement toward fluid, contextually contingent conceptualizations of class, race, and gender. This implies growing attention to multiple and intersecting axes of distinction and their variable salience across time and space. The challenge will be to strike a balance between generalizability and specificity to retain analytical focus without glossing over significant symbolic or social distinctions. In Bordo's (1990, 139) words, attention to specificity should not translate to "the coercive, mechanical requirement that *all* enlightened feminist projects attend to 'the intersection of race, class, and gender'" (see also Risman 2004). A second likely development is toward increasing prominence of dynamic multilevel analyses, which explore the interplay between individual, interactional, and institutional processes of stratification. Such integrative approaches promise to erase boundaries between "micro-" and "macro-level" research by taking observed individual-level differences seriously but treating them as cultural products with structural properties.

Notes

1. The term "inequality" is favored by scholars for whom the relevant social distinctions are categorical, whereas "stratification" is more often used by those advancing gradational (i.e., continuous, hierarchical) conceptualizations of inequality. I use the terms interchangeably here.

2. American functionalism saw its heyday during the stable postwar decades of the 1950s and 1960s, while conflict theories gained prominence during the turbulent years that followed the rise of the civil rights and antiwar movements. Conflict theorists have questioned the functionality of modern stratification systems by pointing to unequal opportunities for persons to be socialized into the cultural traits rewarded in the marketplace and by treating the prized attributes as culturally constructed and/or arbitrary.

3. An associated argument, dating back at least as far as Tocqueville, holds that U.S. rates of mobility are exceptionally high as a result of a strong *ideology* of equal opportunity. See, for example, Bellah et al. (1996) on American cultural exceptionalism.

4. Conservative analysts have in fact frequently invoked the "culture of poverty" concept—if not the term itself—in their analyses of urban poverty (Banfield 1970; Murray 1984).

5. Newman (1999), for example, described the strong work ethic that drives some members of the working poor to shun the welfare system and persevere in low-wage and dead-end jobs.

6. Attempts to advance continuous, rather than categorical, conceptualizations of sex and gender (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 2000) are still considered quite radical, even by some feminist scholars.

7. Lincoln Quillian (2006) reviewed recent scholarship on racial discrimination and prejudice.

8. These public perceptions, partly attributable to the growing influence of neoconservative voices, are discussed in recent books by Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Winant (2004).

9. See reviews by Lamont and Lareau (1988), DiMaggio (2001), and Lamont and Molnár (2002).

10. Observations about the multidimensionality of identity have prompted other scholars—most notably those working within postmodernist and poststructuralist traditions—to reject any sort of classification exercise because of their reifying and potentially stratifying effects.

11. Susan Bordo (1990) and Judith Butler (1999) discussed the potential strategic and analytical usefulness of universality claims for feminist activism. Butler described assertions of universality as performative, "conjuring a reality that does not yet exist and holding out the possibility for convergence of cultural horizons that have not yet met" (pp. xvii-xviii).

12. Judith Lorber (2005, 306) used the term "difference feminist" to describe those who "argue that the experience of female bodies and sexuality produces a common and stable identity—woman." "Gender feminists," in contrast "contend that sex, sexuality, and gender are constructed in everyday interaction within the constraints of social norms" (p. 305).

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