Telling People Apart: Outline of a Theory of Human Differentiation

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Abstract
Alongside subsystems, classes, and types of socials relations, societies differentiate between categories of their personnel, referring to their age, sex, "race," (dis)ability, performance, geographic and social origin, sexual preference, religious conviction, profession, and so on. This article outlines a theory of human differentiation with the aim of viewing processes leading to reified memberships of human categories in an encompassing comparative approach. Differentiating humans distinguishes them perceptively, categorizes them lingually, shapes them physically, segregates them spatially, and subjects them to othering and unequal evaluative treatment. The analytic vocabulary developed in this article puts forward five elementary processes—prelingual distinction, lingual categorization, official classification, material marking/dissimilation, and segregation—and three advanced processes of asymmetrical differentiation: the alterization of humans, their differential evaluation, and the escalation into boundary constitution and polarization. Processes of human differentiation are stabilized via coupling with social and societal differentiation, but they can also be practically minimalized, normatively contained, and institutionally diluted.

Keywords
human differentiation, categorization, classification, othering, stigmatization, boundaries

The social sciences are uniquely positioned vis-à-vis their subject matter. Whereas the natural sciences investigate and make distinctions between entities (e.g., planets, animals, plants, diseases), the social sciences can do nothing but deal with cultural phenomena that are always already preconstituted meaningful distinctions. These distinctions have been and are being defined historically and geographically, thus demarcating and furnishing entities differently with meaning. Based on these distinctions, societies develop whole "ethnosciences," conceived by cognitive anthropology as the lingual order of things that people have in mind

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(Sturtevant 1964). The benefit of such sorting of the world by "social mindscapes" (Zerubavel 1997) lies in the reduction of complexity. Categorizations, cutting swaths through the endless continua of dense similarities, banish disorientating ambiguity and reduce the contingency inherent in the business of world interpretation.

The most fundamental ethnoscience is the "ethnosociology" of societies, the classification of the classifiers (Bourdieu 1979), unifying the subject and object of distinction. Ethnosociological everyday knowledge operates on the premise of extant "human differences." Sociology is not immune here, working with terms such as "diversity" or "heterogeneity" (Blau 1977) based on the concept of (pre)existing "human kinds" with their specific features. Furthermore, standardized social research routinely draws on the seductive clarity of both everyday and official categories, in turn implying, if not reinforcing, the existence of human kinds. These categories accommodate researchers' need for reliable, decision-free variables (e.g., age and gender), ready to use in data collection as a resource for their own classificatory endeavors. This usage implies an assumption of constancy and relevancy, freeing researchers from having to deal with respondents' unreliable self-understandings and from having to investigate the varying social relevance of these affiliations for people and social processes.

Instead, it is often state organizations or social movements that make certain categories seem more prominent to sociologists than others. In this sense, Wacquant (1997) reproaches race and ethnicity studies for unquestioningly adopting the objectified products of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as tools of analysis. Similarly, Gilroy (2000:52, 51) has "renounce[d] 'race' for analytical purposes" and distances himself from a form of anti-racist activism that has become "complicit in the reification of racial difference." Both authors assail the objectifying alliance of activists and social scientists. Brubaker (2004) identifies a *general* tendency toward "groupism" that takes the existence of identities and groups as internally homogenous entities for granted as basic components of social life. The components of a group are not simply "members" but cognitive schemes, temporally fluctuating affects of solidarity, processes of everyday and official categorization, the political rhetoric of social movements, organizational feats, and mass-media framings.

Stepping back from ethnosociological (self-)descriptions of society, its grouplike collectives, and human kinds is not the same as ignoring them. Ever since the formulation of the Thomas theorem ("If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"; Thomas and Thomas 1928:571–72), sociologists have known all too well that these cultural works of fiction greatly inform practical ways of living. In line with this insight, an alternative approach to societies' ethnosociology stems from a cultural sociological tradition. Rather than using life-world categories as a *resource* for sociological categorization, this approach makes social categorizing itself the *topic* of investigation. This type of research can build on classical studies in the sociology of knowledge (Durkheim and Mauss 1901/02), ethnomethodological studies on "membership categorization" (Sacks 1995), and social psychology (e.g., Allport 1954; Tajfel 1978) but also on cultural anthropological studies on classifications (e.g., Barth 1969; Needham 1975), linguistic studies on the key medium of categorization (e.g., Lakoff 1987), and work in the history of knowledge regarding bureaucratic and scientific classification systems (e.g., Desrosières 1998; Foucault 2004; Hacking 1986).

In this article, I adopt this cultural sociological approach to theorizing human differentiation. My intention is not the diagnosis of contemporary society (unlike, e.g., Diehl and McFarland 2010 or Fourcade 2016), but one of systematization. I target the issue of the reification of human kinds by suggesting the term *human differentiation* as a general sociological concept in a formal comparative approach. My aim is to develop an analytic vocabulary

capable of collating processes that go by diverse terms in different approaches, such as *distinction*, *typification*, *categorization*, *classification*, *difference*, *discrimination*, *stigmatization*, and *alterization*, and of delimiting them conceptually, defining them more precisely, and arranging them as elements of *one and the same* process of differentiation.

The term *human differentiation* (Hirschauer 2017) takes several steps back from presupposing human kinds. It focuses on the processes of differentiation (re)producing human categories, features, and memberships in the first place. People are locked into certain social affiliations—for example, in imagined communities (e.g., nations, ethnic groups, religious denominations) or ascribed classes (e.g., genders, "races," age groups)—by continuous self and external categorizations. Human differentiation consists of diverse processes that accumulate, mutually reinforce one another, and "featurize" humans. Differentiating humans means distinguishing them perceptively and shaping them physically, categorizing them lingually and sorting them classificatorily, but also subjecting them to unequal evaluative treatment, segregating them spatially, and separating them permanently on an institutional basis. Human differentiation is a process of increasing gaps: A distinction is expressed lingually, vestimentally, behaviorally, and spatially; it groups people, further accruing interests and (e)valuations, potentially becoming a policed boundary. Conceiving differentiation thus does not refer to an evolutionary, self-emergent, self-dividing process of societal history but, instead, to a continual keeping, pulling, and driving apart maintained in practice. Thus, a praxeological term for differentiation, approaching the process fundamentally from the enacted, often conflictual reality of forms of differentiation, follows less the biological model of cell division and more the agricultural model of cultivation: a practically accomplished form of division.

Unlike well-established theories of differentiation, dealing with the societal differentiation of subsystems and classes and the social differentiation of forms of interrelation on a micro/macro scale, the term *human differentiation* introduces a specific form of cultural differentiation: Just like animal species or object classes (e.g., cars), human kinds (e.g., "children," "foreigners," "straights") constitute fundamental cultural species. In most theories of society, the subject of human differentiation has only been broached implicitly and covered selectively. The functional differentiation of society is based primarily on professional activities and communication, differentiating humans only partially and temporarily in *roles*. Stratificatory differentiation is based mainly on goods and income, registering humans regarding *status*, that is, their position in a hierarchy. The differentiation of forms of social interrelation takes their qualities as its basis, differentiating humans in a *relational* manner (e.g., as participants of interactions, members of groups, networks, organizations). In contrast, most cases of human differentiation begin in immediate proximity to that which ethnosociological self-description considers to be *personal features* of individuals; it works directly with "human material" (Simmel [1908] 1992:33), with human bodies, languages, places of birth, beliefs, and achievements.

Anchoring human differentiation in the personal encompasses a spectrum of phenomena with differing dimensions of variability. For instance, societies use *physical invariants* like sex, "race," and some bodily dimensions (e.g., height or disability); inherent *biographical roots* such as geographic, social, familial, and generational provenances and age (invariant in the sense that it remains fixed to a date of birth); passively accumulated and actively pursued *biographical trajectories* like sexual identities and political and religious convictions; *biographical decisions*, including self-determined passages such as entering into a relationship, a profession, an organization, or a country as a citizen; and individually ascribed *situational commitments*, primarily rendered and certified achievements (in education, work, and sports).[1]

However, not every distinction congeals into a cultural difference, deeply entrenched in social and material structures. In each case, this depends on interactions of different types of

human differentiation and entanglements with other forms of social differentiation. To reduce the ensuing complexity, this article will describe an ideal-typical path of institutionalization, analytically separating eight stages of human differentiation. First, I distinguish between five elementary processes on which the differentiation of humans and animals and artifacts are founded[2]: distinctions, categorization, classification, marking/dissimilation, and segregation. Then, I elucidate some characteristics exclusive to human differentiation: the agency of its objects (humans actively participate in their categorization), its relationality (most distinctions happen in reciprocal relationships), and its perspectivity (self vs. external categorization). These characteristics form the background for three advanced processes of asymmetrical human differentiation: the alterization or othering of humans, their differential evaluation, and the development into social boundaries and polarization. In the conclusion, I correct this necessarily simplified model and briefly consider the recursivity of the suggested path of differential escalation, some options of de-escalation, and the entanglement with other forms of social and societal differentiation.

ELEMENTARY DIFFERENTIATION PROCESSES

Distinctions

Distinctions are tacit and fragile acts of differentiation within the framework of situated practice, for example, between the form and color of pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the taste of different wines, perceiving a person's attractiveness or feeling empathy for them, but also the spontaneous constitution of opposing positions and rival teams. Distinctions form clusters without clear demarcation. They are defined by the attempt to "affix" themselves to something because objects do not possess natural salience. Their qualities do not simply stand out on their own; contexts and distinctions single them out. Entities do not differentiate themselves per se; the distinctions differentiate them. They create a tentative minimal space between two (sets of) objects. Many distinctions do not even make it into language or conscious thought—the differentiation of taste or smells is often not articulable.[3] Such distinctions are akin to reflexes found in animal pattern recognition, distinguishing between their own kind, predators, and prey with a high, if not vital, practical orientation value (e.g., immediate physical repulsion or primal fear). The automatic physical and affective distinction that Bourdieu (1979:60) attributed to taste is accompanied by implicit valuations,[4] a concurrent push and pull of attraction and repulsion attempting to navigate its way out of ambivalence. It can be quite fickle, finding things one day to be one way, the next another, and it can be completely absent when entities (e.g., colors) are distinguished without value.

Each distinction is embedded within constant tacit comparing according to the practical purposes of those observing. In one fell swoop, it creates homo- and heterogeneity. In a diffusely delimited set (a heap of jigsaw pieces) or in a presupposed, already differentiated unit ("blue pieces"), it makes two new units to whose uniformity it lays claim. Distinctions are made in a twofold process: They differentiate and specify the sets on both sides of the distinction (e.g., as lighter or darker); they also equalize and totalize the elements on each side (as the lighter and the darker pieces). Distinctions thus similarize and dissimilarize; they have a differentiating front and an egalitarian back.[5]

Any distinction deals with the issue of *ambiguity*. How can a line drawn be sufficiently selective that all the elements it pertains to belong on one side or the other? Barth (1969), for example, asked how land and sea can be demarcated when the tide is constantly moving the goalposts of the distinction. Distinctions address ambiguities at different stages. First, fundamental *general ambiguity* is the normal case with and against which they are continually working. Before any difference has been created, things are indefinite and ambivalent. Thus,

all distinctions aim to disambiguate. Second, efforts at distinction come across phenomena that are completely resistant to them, challenge them, or lead them to temporarily fail. This tenacious *problematic ambiguity* (e.g., in the realms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity) leads to categorial undecidability. The problem's solution lies, on the one hand, in increasing the capacity for differentiation (e.g., via criteria) and, on the other, in its pointed representation via *contoured ambiguity*: that is, explicitly hybrid figures of human differentiation, such as mestizos, intersex people, bisexuals, binationals, bilinguals, syncretists, and eclectics. These cultural figures do not cancel distinctions out but stabilize them: A distinction's failure is absorbed by the constitution of "outliers."

This aligns with a robust finding of cultural studies. All distinctions unavoidably lead to cultural anomalies (Douglas 1966), hybridity (Nederveen Pieterse 2001), and residual cases (Bowker and Star 2000), so ambiguity is both their constitutive problem and their inevitable effect. Cultural order, once created, is thus inherently unstable and open to change. Contingent distinctions make the construction of order a constant work in progress, a never-ending sorting process. The work of doing distinctions is self-perpetuating.

Categorization

The most important means of taming ambiguity are lingual categories, designations that free distinctions of their situational contexts, similar to how trails cut their way through flora, making paths repeatable. Categories represent distinctions in language, especially in its daily vocabulary, within which the ethnosociology of a society is on display. Distinctions find their way into language structures to a varying degree. Many become an attribute (tasty, ugly, colorful), some make it as a noun (tree, dog, man), and some find their place in the naming system (e.g., gender, ethnicity, generation). Only a few proceed far enough to become a form of address (Mrs., Dr., Sahib) or are integrated into grammatical forms (e.g., grammatical gender or honorific systems).

Categories make difference out of distinctions: They convert the initial act of differentiation into a feature of the differentiated. Categories collate objects and transform them into exemplars. In so doing, they increase the sorting proficiency of a distinction—to differentiate on the one side and equalize on the other—by performing "mental quantum leaps" (Zerubavel 1996:424) between the entities. They lay claim to the homogeneity of what is rent asunder and seal off the sides of a distinction from one another. This matching of one alongside the unmatching of the other writes the constitution of sets (e.g., of "apples" and "pears") in stone.

On this basis, many well-known phenomena arise. For instance, stereotypes can become attached to categories: vaguely insinuated features implied by categorial affiliation ("thieving magpies"). Stereotypes generalize these features for all elements of a category and totalize their qualities. Such (evaluative or neutral) attributes recursively authenticate the significance of the distinction, providing its foundation: Are these not differences that were just asking for a distinction? Thus, categories establish fictive groups. Each category collates a heterogenous set of objects in an *imagined class*, omitting its internal differentiation. Consequently, categories have a difference-heightening effect on perception: Observers systematically overestimate both intercategorical differences and intracategorical homogeneity (Messick and Mackie 1989).

Categories facilitate the determination of distinctions, enabling and enforcing the assignment of entities to the sets distinguished by them. *Categorizing* is an act of assignment, attributing an object to an affiliation with respect to a prior meaningful distinction. Due to the ambiguity of many objects and their difficult or lack of fit with the attributes generalized

by stereotypes, this is a regular source of friction, which is absorbed by typizations—not in Schütz's sense (s. fn 3), but by positioning objects within a category as exemplarily proto-typical, as average, or untypically deviant exemplars (Hannan et al. 2019; Hirschauer 2017).

Categorization is not fully determined by language structures (i.e., not based on extant vocabularies) because lingual acts of distinction are selective. When they select from a cultural repertoire of available distinctions (ready-made differences), only one aspect of an entity is addressed. Participants have options in their spoken language *usage*, choosing between categories of their ethnosociology and thus which aspect of the phenotype, appearance, or behavior of humans they draw attention to in order to attribute social affiliations (Antaki and Widdicombe 2008; Sacks 1995).

Classification

In social practice, a great number of lingual categories can emerge, but their effects remain limited, spatially and temporally. Their sustainability and range increase when they are integrated into the scientific, legal, and bureaucratic orders of things, which absorb, refine, and reflect them back at society (Bowker and Star 2000; Hacking 1986; Starr 1993). This is typically accompanied by a qualitative step from spoken to written language (Goody 1986). Categorizing is to make an explicit distinction; classifying is explicit categorizing. Initially, classifications formalize the relationship of vocabulary and language use. Their terms often mark distance vis-à-vis everyday language, for instance, utilizing loan words from another language. This formalization also replaces quotidian language usage with stable definitory delimitation. For instance, the designation of an ethnic group in an academic taxonomy (as a variant of "officialese") is more stable than the different names ethnic groups might use for one another in speech. Classification can redistribute everyday categories so that, for example, strawberries and rose hip are classed as nuts but not almonds and Brazil nuts. Finally, classification systems, akin to how collections demand their completion, give rise to a demand for new categories to exhaust all available classificatory space: the "world of vertebrates" in zoology, the population of a national territory in demography, the spectrum of psychological disorders according to the International Classification of Diseases.

Ultimately, classification founds systems of interrelated categories. It enables differential branching off via taxonomies that arrange superordinate and subsumed categories hierarchically (Durkheim and Mauss 1901/02). The simplest branching operation is the "fractal" repetition of a distinction on either of its sides (Abbott 2001). Such refinement also requires elaborate procedures of categorization (i.e., investigation, description, comparison of entities), which support the disambiguation efforts and exclusionary effect of distinctions. They hone them in terms of binarization: *tertium non datur*.

When distinctions are integrated into elaborate knowledge systems as classifications, the language they are expressed in is generally reinforced in written form but also in graphical or numerical form.[6] This heightens expectations of clarity and lowers the tolerance for ambiguity. Classifications are based on explicit and systematic comparisons carried out by experts and organizations. They transform vaguely assumed qualities (stereotypes) into described and measured features and thus prepare for the scaling of explicit evaluation (see the section on "Differential Evaluation"). In contrast, everyday categorization can get along well with vagueness and approximation; indeed, it systematically profits from room for interpretation (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970). Its daily business is working and living with *shifting similarities*, with two things being the same *and* different depending on the mode of distinction. Things appear "the same" when they are not subject to a strict comparison and when one can

take or leave the distinction. As Goodman (1993:22) wrote: "If statements of similarity...cannot be trusted in the philosopher's study, they are still serviceable in the streets."

Marking and Dissimilation

Cognition and language (everyday and official) are necessary for categorizing but not sufficient. Categorizing of objects involves a lingual and a perceptual dimension of *identifying*.[7] Identification requires the possible terms of designation and distinguishability based on the marking of objects. Thus, for categorizations to work, distinctions need to be represented in lingual categories, and their objects must be semiotically marked by nonlingual sign systems. This notion of categorization differs from how Hannan et al. (2019) conceive it; they refer to categorization as assigning objects to mental concepts. In their usage, categories are perceptively "lumped" objects fitting a presumed mental representation. Instead of this mentalist relation between "objects and concepts" (Hannan et al. 2019:8), I suggest a semiotic relation between lingual categories *for* objects and nonlingual markers *of* objects. Categorization links verbal categories to nonlingual markers.

Semiotic marking consists of the perceptually accessible (often visual) designation of cultural objects. They have an appearance, a display, a design and thus invite the senses to perceive them as recognizable entities. To "distinguish that which we attend from that which we ignore" (Zerubavel 1991:1), our attention is aided not only by concepts, language, and discourse but also by the semiotic affordances of cultural objects. Things that catch our eye as salient are structured by nonlingual signs whose affordances attract our attention and, thus, steer our perception.

Such an analytic distinction between categorization and marking can borrow from Goodman's (1968:65) distinction between denotation and exemplification. Denoting refers explicitly to a set of objects via a label; exemplary objects indicate implicitly the category to which they belong: "[E]xemplification is reference running from denotatum back to label." Categories transform objects into exemplars, but a cultural object also exemplifies itself. It does not enter into distinctions of human language and cognition as a mere tabula rasa. Much of that to which we apply lingual categories was already communicating beforehand.[8]

In the context of human differentiation, such signs are physical features (e.g., skin color or obesity), bodily performances (stance, gestures, facial expressions), use of voice and language (vocabulary, pronunciation), appearance (dress, hairstyle, makeup, jewelry), given names, and IDs. Semiologically, one can distinguish between *indices*, or pointers and clues in communicative action, and *markers*, that is, culturally established distinctive signs of a category. In the course of categorizing, there is an interplay between sign systems and lingual designations, that is, there is interference between identification and indication processes. Humans are physically arranged in such a way that they make themselves distinguishable for certain distinctions and thus shore up stability against categorial confusion.

Whereas markings contribute to an increase in aesthetic distance on a "surface layer," dissimilation processes go deeper as an increase in material distance. Marking guides perception; dissimilation inscribes distinctions into the objects. For instance, "genders" can not only be named, styled, and dressed differently, but one can also feed, play with, and teach them differently and differentiate them regarding their voice usage. As design is to objects and breeding is to animals, outwardly differentiating them, making visible and further developing in their material structures the attributes ascribed to them, similarly here, material distance between human categories is produced on humans by humans, and this distance is promoted via dissimilar treatment, contributing to the constitution of differentiated human

kinds. Such processes of practical dissimilation cover phenomena such as inculcating professional habitus, physically disciplining athletes, socializing younger members of society according to class or gender, training different voice types in singing (soprano, mezzosoprano, contralto), or the drift in language use of opposing ethnic groups. Constitutively unequal (self-)treatment of humans is first and foremost differential, dissimilating treatment that endeavors to inscribe into them a cultural distinction as a bodily difference, decreasing their similarity and materially othering them.

Segregation

Another part of the institutionalization of distinctions, alongside their spoken, written, and physical articulation, is their spatial representation, a kind of "spatial zoning" (Zerubavel 1996:429) that creates more distinguishable distance. A prototypical historical case is the spatial representation of the political spectrum as "left wing" and "right wing" based on the seating arrangement of the French National Assembly of 1789. A prominent current case is ethnic residential segregation. Segregation processes also play a part in the differentiation of nonhuman objects, for example, when animals are kept in stables, plants housed in beds and seed boxes, and things are displayed in shops and shelves.

Segregation also varies due to historical and cultural differences. For instance, whereas the segregation of washrooms in Western societies is only a rudimentary, albeit stubborn form of institutionalized gender representation (Goffman 1977), for the Berbers, it is fundamental (Bourdieu 1972), and in Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, it is a central means of human differentiation. Segregation is always more than the mere representation of a categorial differentiation via spatial organization: It also utilizes a distinction to organize space. In this sense, "races" are equally kinds of humans and spatial partitions: Apartheid in South Africa was a kind of spatial division that both separated human kinds and colorized spaces on the basis of skin, like areas on a map.

This feeds back on the previous differentiation processes. Segregation also stabilizes ethnic categories, rules of marriage that keep denominations apart stabilize religious categories, sex diagnostics and segregation of the sexes in sports consolidate gender categories, and of course, state territories form the backbone of the segmentary differentiation of world society into nations. Rules against mixing and spatial partitions decrease the probability of contact. They perpetuate the interactive avoidance of refusing eye and conversational contact (i.e., avoiding each other) by supplying or prescribing the separate ways one can go. And because social contacts (encounters, relationships) are one of the most important mechanisms of getting past prejudices (Allport 1954), this avoidance of contact recursively supports and strengthens mental separation. On the basis of spatial division, inclusive processes of social closure and integration inward and exclusive processes of social distancing outward flourish.

THREE CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN DIFFERENTIATION

The elementary differentiation processes discussed so far are part of the institutionalization of many cultural differences, including those pertaining to animals, plants, and artifacts. Past approaches to categorization have focused on distinctions in markets (e.g., Hannan et al. 2019) or distinctions between activities and temporal and spatial units (e.g., Zerubavel 1991, 1997). Instead of enlarging the perspective in this way, the following sections identify specific characteristics of human differentiation. I focus on the three most compelling: the agency of humans participating in their differentiation, their relationality in reciprocal comparative categorizations, and the perspectivity of self versus external categorization. In turn,

these three characteristics provide the platform for the asymmetrical escalation of human differentiation.

The Agency of Objects

Human objects participate in their own differentiation. They are amenable to taking up categories, with the promise of perceiving themselves not only as exemplars but also as members of the classes "imagined" by categories. Arranging groups according to categories invites the recruitment of associated personnel. Humans come together under the roof of key concepts (e.g., medical or political) in a mutual matching process of labels and populations: "Our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on" (Hacking 1986:228). Hacking (1995) calls this the "looping effect." Thus, assemblages built around a category can become self-organized assemblies with an emerging feeling of togetherness. "Grouping" (e.g., the constitution of social classes) is, as Brubaker (2004:12) demonstrates, a social, cultural, and political project of inclusion aiming to transform categories into communities and temporarily raise the sense of belonging together.

Such association requires dissociation: To unify is also to divide. This is why social formations that devise themselves as "collectives" (e.g., nations or social movements) spread propaganda of their sameness: They constitute themselves by prioritizing the single aspect in which their potential members are not unequal (e.g., in their political conviction). The more a group includes extreme unequals, the more they evoke this similarity. Imagined communities dramatize their homogeneity. Because the aspect according to which grouping takes place can vary strategically, contradictions in one aspect can be "reconciled" by another: the unity of a nation against ethnic contrasts within, a unified front of Christians against national differences, workers united against religious disagreements, women unified across class boundaries, and so on. Without the fiction of commonality, these groupings would sooner or later disperse.[9]

Beyond such groupings—of collaboratively produced and enforced self-categorization—human agency is considerably more unpredictable. Human objects cut across and diverge from the paths put down by language—they are "moving targets" (Hacking 2007). They change their usage of indices and markers, adjust their displays and performances, and can even deceive others to claim categorizations that appear more opportune. They react to their terms of designation, use or refuse categories, constantly modify them, and develop new ones. Humans utilize different options of categorial *self-positioning*, which are fundamental forms of social mobility.

The most dramatic of these options are *biographical shifts between categories*. This encompasses regular status passages (e.g., initiation, pregnancy, retirement) but also extraordinary conversions between religious denominations, classes, genders, or nations. Shifts can be carried out to completion (Brubaker [2016] calls this the "trans of migration"), or people can remain as hybrids, straddling borders in a "no man's land" of the distinction (Brubaker 2016: "trans of between"). Among these possible shifts, migration has far-reaching consequences because it often involves not only a shift from one place to another but also a switch of one's cultural frame of reference. In this shift, "classification systems from different worlds meet, adjust, fracture, or merge" (Bowker and Star 2000:16). Some people leave one continent and disembark in another, only to find that they suddenly have a skin color that was not a significant feature in their previous self-conception.

The *strategical switching of a distinction* works differently. In his work on the Nuer, Evans-Pritchard (1940) uses the term *segmentary opposition* to describe how one type of differentiation (patrilineal descent) can give rise to and juxtapose sometimes smaller, sometimes larger segments of kinship (families, clans, ethnic groups).[10] Such instrumentally rational,

flexible alliance building is also found in contextual shifts between distinctions, like the "gear changes" between age group, gender, or professional affiliations. Depending on the occasion, actors seeking advantage can associate with one category or another. These shifts do not entail bodily mobility as in migration but, rather, fluctuations of social affects and loyalties. Such strategic moves toward or away from affiliations increase/decrease distance to others; they either rejuvenate or ignore certain aspects of commonality. This type of grouping contingency is especially clear in the formation of political alliances.

In contrast, the mechanism of *everyday switching between roles and social circles*, as elucidated by differentiation theories ever since Simmel, does not involve a change of group affiliation but only switching between thematic aspects. In place of singular biographical changes of allegiance and strategically motivated group affiliation, this mobility consists of the quotidian navigation between pluralized social worlds that one selects and neglects and in which one (dis)engages oneself (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012:50) as a citizen, customer, professional, patient, parent, friend, or passenger.

Even less dramatic and almost imperceptible are *imagined shifts along scales*. Umberto Eco is credited with the bon mot: "In Rome I'm Milanese, in Paris I'm Italian, and in New York I'm European." The imagined movement up and down such scales is the nimblest case of categorial repositioning: the reaccentuation of affiliations. Eco was referring to regional-identity shifts within a stable geographic framework of space. Baumann (2005) considers a case related to segmentary opposition: People can despise players of a rival team one week in a local derby but a week later can cheer them on as part of a national team. Such scalar shifts can also be conceived more abstractly, as symbolic generalizations of categories such as "workers" and "women" (Simmel [1908] 1992:439, 500), "Hispanics" or "Asian American" (Starr 1993:163), "disabled" and "indigenous peoples" (Bennani and Müller 2018). One can self-identify not only as an Apache or a Native American but also as an indigenous person and a cosmopolitan; that is, one can imagine oneself as belonging to a more extensive unit independent of a specific geographic place or space. Like migratory shifting between countries, this type of repositioning is one dimensional (in contrast to switching between roles or group affiliations). However, here, the new cultural framework of reference is not simply different but more abstract.

These fundamental forms of social mobility move the spotlight that humans use in the presentation of their respective affiliations. For the shifting of definitions of a situation, Goffman (1974) used the musical metaphor of "keying." Analogously, one could speak of "re-chording" human differentiation. There are also shifts in the "root note," that is, the respective leading differentiation, of chords of categories used in social situations. In a manner similar to code-switching in language, these continual shifts engender social switches in point of view between those positioned by the categories: Extraordinary and normalized *biographical shifts* (e.g., of voters between parties or people between age groups) allow former affiliations to be evoked as memories (e.g., of once being a child or a voter of the opposing party), *fluctuating alliance formation* grants group affiliation an awareness of reversibility (today one way, tomorrow perhaps another), continual *switching between roles* can lead to the intersection of behavioral repertoires like complementary active and passive vocabularies (e.g., in the way customers have a passive vocabulary of what it is to work in sales), and *scalar shifts* widen the horizon of affiliations. The categorial mobility of humans gives rise to vital sources of societal integration.

Relationality: Cultural In/Equality

Humans not only participate in their own categorization, they also categorize other classifiers. This adds a layer of reciprocity that is not present in the classification of animals and

artifacts. Human differentiation is fundamentally based on *reciprocal comparative operations* in which distinguished and distinguishers become entwined in different relations with one another: as unequally ranked or as peers; as overweight, underweight, or normal weight; of the same or of different gender(s); as acquaintances or strangers. This *relationality* of features endows each with a fundamentally bivalent social significance: Depending on whom one is relating to (e.g., via copresent interaction), the same "feature" can mean "the same" or "different."

Thus, any form of human differentiation inevitably produces a fundamental *cultural in/equality*. As soon as humans are distinguished according to a certain aspect, they become entwined as equals or unequals, and they encounter each other in homosocial or heterosocial interactions, groups, and networks. Human differentness is not simply an indeterminate "diversity" or "heterogeneity" but consists of meaningfully qualified *distinctions within relations*. Cultural "differences" are temporary gaps that humans maintain from one another. For instance, a person is never simply a youth but depending on social relations, is "older/younger/of the same age." Cultural in/equality arises from qualitative distinctions with regard to practical aspects of comparison via which humans position themselves homosocially or heterosocially (Hirschauer 2017).[11]

The traditional sociological conception of *social* inequality overlooks this fundamental cultural in/equality. It is a mathematical-normative hybrid combining the determination that two entities can be either quantitively equal (=) or unequal (≠) with a fundamental value of democratic societies: the legal and political equality of all their citizens regardless of whatever else may distinguish them. Consequently, social inequality denotes potentially illegitimate distributions of resources, opportunities, and recognition. It implies injustice. This perspective tackles an important aspect of society, but it neglects two others. First, using *unequal* in the sense of an unjust distribution of material goods underestimates that material gaps between humans are also produced in themselves. This occurs by means of dissimilation in direct forms via human bodies but also in more indirect forms. For instance, the material accessibility of buildings is not simply the unequal treatment of disabled people but, rather, unequalization that makes them disabled—a kind of treatment that brings about the cultural inequality of the two sides. Second, the focus on the distribution of resources to people (Who has what goods?) abstracts from the more fundamental issue of the distribution of people over categories (Who actually counts as what?). As Starr (1993:176) wrote, "the conventional, hard-nosed view is that politics is about 'who gets what,' the prior question is who 'who' is."

Perspectivity: Self and External Categorization

The reciprocal production of cultural in/equalities can end in the same result for both sides. This is, for instance, the rule for commonsense categories (e.g., age). In such cases, both parties share an identical perspective on the gaps they maintain between each other. However, because interested actors partake in this reciprocal categorization, the case of divergent categorization is at least as prominent. For instance, someone calling themselves Rohingya goes by Bengali with their neighbors in Myanmar, someone who learned in Mauritania to see themselves as "Black" discovers they are not seen this way in Senegal, or someone is driven out of Germany as a "Jew" to then be known as "boche" (German) in France (Arendt 1943:74). In the context of human differentiation, one must specify whether one is dealing with self or external categorization and to what extent a person (or a formed collective) is either agent or object of categorizations, that is, how pronounced their general agency is. Do they choose a denotation for themselves, or are they subsumed by one?

Already at the production of categories it is necessary to consider who is predominant in their authorship and can shape their meaning. Are the categories historically new, administrative, subcultural labels, or old categories taken from the life-world's once forgotten history? Regarding the range and design of categories, who is affected, and who is not? Human categories include and exclude. They pertain to interests and often carry evaluative connotations: Designations can offer gains in distinction, but they can also be unfavorable.

Regarding the practical usage of categories, which category is selected from the ethnosociological repertoire (Via which affiliations is someone addressed?), and who uses which categories? Is it an extraneous label with a stigmatizing effect or a self-label developed by terminological innovators providing themselves with distinction advantages? Some self-labels are readily adapted expert categories that, for example, help people afflicted with rare diseases find a legitimized identity. Some groups appropriate defamatory designations (e.g., gay, slut) for their own usage. Conversely, humans can resist being subsumed under superordinate categories within classification systems: People with autism lay claim to being a high-performing minority; deaf people as a language minority resist being subsumed as "disabled people." Matters of human categorization can easily become politically loaded because shifts in lingual forms can lead to movements in power constellations: for instance, from illegal alien to undocumented immigrant, from Colored to Person of Color, from handicapped to people with disabilities.

The agency of self and external categorization needs to be differentiated in two directions. On the one hand, alongside individual actors, groups, networks, social movements, and organizations (e.g., government agencies or scientific communities who enforce categories with considerable definitory power and range of influence) can all promote the production and usage of categories. Opponents of these distinctions can then challenge their use. One side promotes, accentuates, and reinforces a distinction, while the other levels out, qualifies, and undermines it. On the other hand, agency need not lie in human action or decisions at all but can emanate from unconscious schemas that lead humans to think a certain way, from ripples in discourse that allow categories to circulate or from elements of material infrastructure: smaller airplane seats that widen passengers, fashions that bring forth new kinds of people, armrests on a park bench that help the elderly get back on their feet but make sleep impossible for the homeless, or algorithms that differentiate peoples' performance and personalities.[12]

ADVANCED PROCESSES OF ASYMMETRIC DIFFERENTIATION

The strong agency of the categorized themselves, the pronounced relationality of categories, and the potentially divergent perspectives within categorization do not preclude human differentiation from being practiced in a convergent, egalitarian, and reciprocal manner. Categorization facilitates the swift navigation of social situations and the attainment of common goals by way of role differentiation; even in the case of completely one-sided external categorization—for example, when biologists classify body types or physicians classify patient types—it can still remain neutral regardless of power distribution. However, it is a common sociological observation that human differentiation is closely correlated with power. How does this come about? What ingredients of human differentiation lead to asymmetrization and the deepening of separations? What triggers their escalation? The following sections identify three processes of the cultural deepening and social rigidification of the elementary stages of human differentiation: the alterization of us/them distinction, the differential evaluation of the alterized, and the constitution of social boundaries that invite polarization.

Alterization: Latent Asymmetries

We have determined that categorizations can diverge, that is, can split into self and external categorizations. The theoretical impact of this seemingly simple state of affairs is that unlike scientific classifications, social distinctions are only seldom neutral operations in which an impartial observer distinguishes between two objects. Instead, those making the distinctions position themselves on one side of the line drawn in the sand. Making distinctions between humans in social practice entails *self-positioning.* This makes perspective a socially consequential issue. Bauman (1993) found that human differentiation is best viewed as distinguishing between inside/outside, not right/left. Human distinctions are centered on one side of the equation, separating "us" from "them" and constituting "us" via "them." Consequently, distinctions are always relative to the observer; they depend on who is currently making a difference.

This is already latently asymmetrical for two reasons. First, although every distinction differentiates between two sides and dedifferentiates the elements on these sides, in the case of egocentric us/them differentiations, the sides are dedifferentiated to an *unequal* degree. One's *own* side is perceived as being more strongly differentiated internally on the basis of the homophilic perception of the in-group; the other side is, in turn, more strongly totalized (Boldry, Gaertner, and Quinn 2007; Messick and Mackie 1989). Asymmetrical totalization pertains to language ("the French and Africans") and perception. Experiments show that for many Europeans, people from Asia look alike (Hugenberg, Miller, and Claypool 2007), and the term *dà bízi* ("big noses") denotes a similar categorization of Westerners in China. An empathetic typified "we" faces a stereotypical "them."[13]

Second, what is "inside" or "one's own" cannot be as clearly perceived in its differentness as what is "outside" or "other." The blind spot of egocentric distinctions stems from the normality of the familiar, meaning only "the other" seems to possess salient features. The "other" is profiled against an invisible standard of what is normal, marked as being "dissimilar," and ascribed higher "semiotic weight" (Zerubavel 2018:12). Otherness is more apparent than "ownness" (e.g., being an adult, white, heterosexual) because the other side being "different" also represents *the* difference, that is, the thing that is the basis of distinguishing both sides, as historical cases show: women as stand-ins for gender, Black people for race, homosexuals for sexual orientation. The more "the others" make themselves responsible for said difference, the better this works; the imperceptibility of normalcy makes it less susceptible to challenges of its implicit normativity, contributing to its social predominance (Zerubavel 2018:57–58).

Therefore, the normality of "ownness" actually has two facets: Majorities afflicted with their specific bias, in line with their interests and stereotypes, cannot clearly perceive their own idiosyncrasies, and they project onto minorities as their characteristics that which has previously set them apart. Thus, majorities and minorities alike become overly occupied with the alleged properties of the latter.[14] Human differentiations tend toward latent asymmetry because used as us/them distinctions, they are *centered* on one side and *marked* by the other. Their setup is *nostristic* and *projective.*

Based on us/them distinctions, there are two options for handling "others." First, they can be engulfed by subsuming them into "us" and negating their being different as a mere deviation overestimated by them (Dumont 1971). Whoever wishes to resist the affiliative suggestion of being "one of us" is forced to counteract the flamboyant subsumption ("America") with strenuous self-distinction ("Latin America"). The second, more prominent option is *alterization.* This frames others not only as superficially dissimilar but also as essentially different in the sense of being "alien" or "foreign": They are fundamentally of a different

character than "our kind." Three cultural strategies contribute to this. *Contrasting* (Gieryn 1983:791) ties into the features attributed and materially produced in humans, heightening stereotypes, overexaggerating what is different, and negating what is similar or the same. It inflates material dissimilation, denies commensurability, and prevents comparisons. *Essentialization* gives depth to a distinction. It anchors the superficial markers required for categorization in imagined internal characteristic traits. For instance, starting with distinguishing female bodies and the category of "woman," it proceeds to the stereotypical characteristics of women and idealized femininity, culminating in the "essence of womanhood": the internal source of everything perceptible about women, explaining the homogeneity the category lays claim to and ultimately making women incomparable with men. Finally, *exoticization* increases the cognitive and affective gaps between human kinds via cultural mystification. If femininity constitutes women, it is then "unmanly" and, as such, an affectual and behavioral matter that must be split off and projected onto others.

Alterization does not necessarily mean manifest asymmetry. Said (1978) emphasized that orientalism works with a mirrored inversion of negative and positive features. "Others" not only trigger confused, anxious, or even heterophobe, xenophobic reactions (Memmi 1982), but they can also be idealized. This is seen in the romanticization of the "noble savage," the Francophilia of Germans, the (now somewhat chilled) idealization of the United States in Europe, and of course, heterosexuality: the reciprocal xenophile exoticization of women and men. Thus, alterized women and men, Americans and Asians, homosexuals and heterosexuals can be symmetrically positioned to one another including gynocentric, homonormative, and Occidentalist distortions. Which side eventually becomes marked is not simply ingrained in the difference. That said, whoever is in the majority will begin to mark the other as different. What becomes marked will often be a matter of the quantitative inequality of the local distribution of a population.[15] Historically stable "centrisms" (e.g., androcentrism or eurocentrism) arise when one of the particularisms becomes established as a local, regional, or global perspective due to its accumulated power to define, leading to only one side being strictly grouped and committed to embodying a distinction in an undifferentiated manner. It is then that this group is in danger of becoming "others" to themselves.

Differential Evaluation: Manifest Asymmetries

Distinctions become *manifestly* asymmetrical in the extent to which they are enriched with evaluations and portray the alterized side as possessing a different *value*. Hence, they differentiate according to not only similarity but also to better/worse, superior/inferior, that is, according to value and rank. This evaluative aspect is built into many prelingual distinctions (e.g., as a preference of taste or antipathy); it becomes more explicit with the design and attributive filling out of categories, manifesting in differential evaluation. This is evident in the case of defamatory categories (e.g., "cripple") and in elaborate evaluation procedures of performance as they are found in school or athletics, specifically aiming to hierarchically arrange (Fourcade 2016) and thus flesh out their criteria as *standards* for evaluative comparison. Rankings are a form of explicit stratificatory human differentiation. Implicit evaluations work more subtly by constructing already asymmetrical (i.e., inherently distinctive) categories such as Christians/heathens, humans/animals, adults/children.

A further technique of asymmetrization is the use of double standards, bestowing on the same feature either a positive or negative sign valuing "in-group virtues" as "out-group vices" (Merton 1948:198): We are frugal, the others are stingy; we make sexual conquests, they are promiscuous. Elias describes another technique of differentiation in his community study (Elias and Scotson [1965] 1994): Those who are "established" raise up their best

specimens (i.e., model citizens) to serve pars pro toto as prototypes of themselves and imply that others possess all the worst qualities of their own outsiders. Thus, they assimilate and commit newcomers to the internal evaluative differentiation of their community. Evaluative polarization is also used in the internal differentiation of individual categories, for instance, when maleness is fleshed out into a gradable term (manliness, virility), which, in turn, valorizes the difference by means of its evident differential sophistication. Then the category "man" is implicitly associated with certain prototypes, and the implied behavioral constraints for men are euphemized.

Research focusing only on social inequality captures different asymmetries as "disadvantages." There are, however, quite diverse modes of asymmetrical distinction. First, evaluations can be implemented in different directions: as upgrading or downgrading, valuation or devaluation (Lamont 2012). Upgradings are produced by *evaluative self-distinction* ("la distinction" of the distinguished in French) usually of a minority ("we academics") vis-à-vis a larger indefinite "rest" serving as an unspecific background. Prototypical forms of this are the feudal self-distinction of noble (aristocratic) *Übermenschen* vis-à-vis "common folk" (i.e., mere mortals) and the ethnoreligious self-distinction as God's "chosen people." A self-distinction not only functions from inside out (in the sense of Bauman) but also top-down (in the sense of Bourdieu), thus removing and exalting those doing the distinguishing as superior. Self-distinctions work (in contrast to normal/deviant distinctions) with self-exceptionalization. This includes the establishment of an exclusive form of offendability: conceitedness by virtue of one's status that can be affronted, national pride that can be defiled, gender-related honor that can be insulted, a religious sensibility that can be incensed by blasphemy. Self-distinctions of ennobled humans can also be supported on the residual part of the "rest" "from below" who effusively put them on a pedestal, idealize them, and identify with them via projection.

Evaluation can also be carried out as *devaluation*—the disparagement of others that often operates by terminology ("white trash") but for which certain kinds of intonation ("sociologists!") or withering looks can suffice. Devaluation, if well implemented and targeted, deprives the addressee of the option of feeling any insult. This kind of degradation often occurs in combination with self-valorization. A century ago, Weber (1922:239) observed that in the United States, "social honor" among the dispossessed White people in the Southern states depended on *Deklassierung*, the downgrading of Black people. The definition of what "we" are nests in the construction of "others." Thus, "selfing" and "othering" are two sides of the same relational coin. The degraded can participate in their own degradation if they allow their devaluation to remain in effect and let it sit deeply within them. Obsequious behavior (Popitz 2017), limited aspirations, low self-esteem, and self-loathing (Bourdieu 1997) are the symptoms and the consequences.

Other distinctions are set up more symmetrically with regard to categories but are asymmetrical in their *application* and therefore affect one side more than the other. *Discrimination* can only exist in societies where equality applies as a norm (Rosanvallon 2011). In feudal societies consisting of "nobles and commoners," that is, with culturally taken-for-granted inequality, categories such as "priest," "knight," and "peasant" did not denote humans of the same value (Duby 1973). Being human was itself stratified. It is only when all people are considered principally equal that discrimination arises as an act of distinction, taking away a person's normatively expected and legally guaranteed equal treatment. It makes a difference via selection ("everyone, except you"). In this case, the residual rest is not the indistinct masses but those who by law are to be treated equal. Yet again, experiencing discrimination can be perpetuated by those once struck by it: via the allergic expectation anticipating each next time of being discriminated again; via a readiness of pique, taking each disadvantage one experiences, every

setback, or every impolite treatment and habitually attributing them to the social affiliation that others so often brought into the foreground.

Stigmatizations also work with the asymmetrical application of a distinction. They boost the usual identification of a person via indices and markers by identifying, or equating, a person with a certain marker that is then ascribed to them as their identity ("fatty"). Stigmatizations increase alterity because they attribute a difference to the different as deviance ("only you"). They imply that only people on the deviant side possess a significant feature, devalue it, and bond them to it. In this way, they reduce multiple affiliations to a single one and then leave a person to sustain themselves on this category alone. They are highly selective total categorizations making everything else irrelevant, negating a person's inherent diversity. Here also, those hit by this type of distinction can emotionally charge that by which they are being stigmatized. To identify oneself with something also means to subordinate, even equate oneself to a category. Those who ultimately become convinced they *are* that by which they are stigmatized harden their self-understanding into an "identity" open to politicization. The often criticized narcissist cult of (over)sensitivity found in some forms of identity politics takes stigmatization and uses it as a platform to distinguish themselves.[16]

In summary, the logic behind asymmetric distinctions is diverse. Self-distinction excludes "our kind" from the masses, devaluation excludes a person from respect, discrimination excludes them from equal treatment, and stigmatization excludes them from normalcy. Self-distinction marks one's own side, stigmatization the other. Self-distinction is self-exemption from generality, discrimination exemption carried out by others: distinctions despite their prohibition. Differences in logic notwithstanding, all forms of asymmetric distinction create a barrier, a hierarchical gradient between top and bottom. Biographical side-shifting is then seen, when moving up, as arrogant or "above their station" and when moving down, as condescendingly stooping to a common level, as illegitimate, perhaps even as "betrayal."

The devaluation of others can take on varying strength: There are weaker forms of (also self-mocking) devaluation in the case of reciprocal stereotyping and strong forms of the normal/deviant type. When it comes to nations, disparagement tends to be a two-way street based on reciprocal stereotypes: In England, syphilis was called the "French disease," whereas in France, it was a *maladia* of the *anglaise* variety. Between religions, it depends whether the others are viewed only as of a different faith or as unbelievers. The arrangement of genders is founded on a refined and ambivalent mix of sexist contempt for and idealization of women, who are put on an aesthetic and moral pedestal for which they are asked to pay in professional life. In contrast, the differentiation of "races" (in the historical tradition of the U.S. slave trade but also in inner-African racism, e.g., directed at the San peoples in South Africa) is constructed like the animal/human distinction: It aims toward dehumanization. In general, all current critiques of asymmetrical human differentiation are directed at status differentiation *within* definitions of what it is to be human, that is, qualifying humans as being of more or less value. In democracies, this seems taboo, yet evaluative differences regarding humans are still in practice as a matter of course, for instance, when children or people with disabilities count as defective specimens of *homo sapiens*.

Boundary Constitution and Polarization

With segregation, alterization, and differential evaluation, human differentiation takes on the form of barriers with far-reaching consequences. Barriers (constructed from biases, prejudices, and distrust) are obstacles; overcoming them costs energy. Boundaries are even less permeable. They can stifle efforts to surmount them and come to be seen as an ultimate barricade or as a path whose passage is secured by some sort of liminal zone. Gaps can be closed, barriers can be overcome, and boundaries can be impassable.[17]

Typical for demarcations of boundary constitution is that the weaker the differences produced (the dissimilations), the more resolutely distinctions are made. Freud (1930:90) spoke of the "narcissism of minor differences": "[I]t is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other in other ways as well, who are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other." When religious denominations do not have much light between them, it is then that they make the case for segregation of "their" children in religious education. When neighboring languages are very similar (e.g., Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian), it is then that ethnonationalists demand lexical and educational differentiation. Demarcation dramatizes the distinguishable and maintains a consciousness of difference.

Categories collect exemplars, classifications heighten the exclusivity of categories, marking and dissimilation disperse categories aesthetically and materially, segregation separates them spatially, alterization separates them mentally, and differential evaluation sorts them stratificatorily. Thus, the playing field is ready for stark exclusion and the stable constitution of boundaries. This can remain as the peaceful coexistence of strangers, rivals, or status groups in parallel worlds. However, when distrust and lack of contact form a vicious circle, boundaries become lines of conflict and division.

Polarization occurs when crossing a boundary is perceived as "violating" it; fuel for (further) conflict and the experience of violence accumulate, and antagonistic communities arise. They then portray themselves as victims, the others as a threat, and they escalate their reciprocal devaluations into reinforced concepts of the enemy. They enforce their double standards (their terrorists, our freedom fighters) and maintain divergent ethnosociologies and ideologically segregated worldviews. Polarization requires reinforcement: indignation begetting outrage and revenge begetting retribution that itself injures with the full legitimacy of prior injury. Furthermore, it requires stronger closure: Physical displacement homogenizes populations and "purifies" regions, and defaming mediators as traitors "purifies" convictions; the profiteers of polarization do not allow mere observers to exist. Terrorist acts of violence aim to force the undecided to take a stand, to rip asunder the mosaic difference of believers and unbelievers, and to obscure third parties comprising the neutral and the fickle, that is, all those who remain undecided on the all-important issue (Popitz 2017).

As a rule, such escalation of human differentiation is preceded by extensive discursive preparation. In everyday, more or less harmless conflict, emotional language identifies others with specific animals (e.g., pigs, snakes, dogs), but in violent conflict, this can turn into perceptions of the other as being barely human (e.g., vermin), going beyond the ontological limits of external human differentiation and paving the way for genocidal killing of dehumanized entities. Such conflicts entail the discursive totalization of the other side: Politization and moralization sharpen distinctions via binary logics that create parties and sharply distinguish between good and evil, friend and fiend. Spatial segregation supports this: It is easier to hate and kill at a distance. Yet again, the more strongly the conflicting parties are differentiated, the more powerful is their dedifferentiation in the eyes of the others. Conflicts and categorizations shape each other.

CONCLUSION: RECURSION, ENTANGLEMENT, AND NEGATION OF DIFFERENTIATION

In this article, I put forward a category-building and classificatory outline regarding a form of cultural differentiation in which categories and classifications themselves play a central role. In so doing, I confirmed Mary Douglas's observation that "talking about classification is endlessly self-exemplifying" (Douglas and Hull 1993:2). In this attempt, I undertook a twofold idealization. First, my ideal-typical representation should not hide that the constitution of sociological categories is only attainable vis-à-vis the countless cases of ambiguity,

distortion, and fluidity of real empirical phenomena in need of research. Second, I presented the construction of asymmetrical distinction as a mostly linear and endogenous process—starting with ephemeral distinctions and ending in conflictual boundary constitution. As I stated in the introduction, such a line of argument is helpful for the construction of a theoretical text, but it does not correspond to how human differentiation works in singular, real-time cases. I thus now offer three corrections of this ideal-typical picture of "stages" of increasing substantiation and escalation to facilitate approaches to both historical and current processes of human differentiation.

First, the stages described form a linear process only in their logical, not temporal, reconstruction. Of course, each logically subsequent stage can build temporally on earlier constructions, for example, classifications on ready-made distinctions and ready-to-use categorizations, discrimination on extant stereotypes. However, the more complex processes also catalyze the more basal ones. Thus, alterization is an essential aspect of community building (i.e., of social boundary-making). It both precedes and succeeds it. Also, many distinctions can be implemented reciprocally, symmetrically, and nonevaluatively, but their evaluative enrichment via power and grouping processes is not simply a late addendum. Conversely, these elements also catalyze the original distinctions (as is the case for racism and its differential evaluation of bodies). Thus, social boundary constitution supports the alterization on which it relies, for example, ethnic and religious segregation often only serves the social avoidance needed to maintain prejudices.
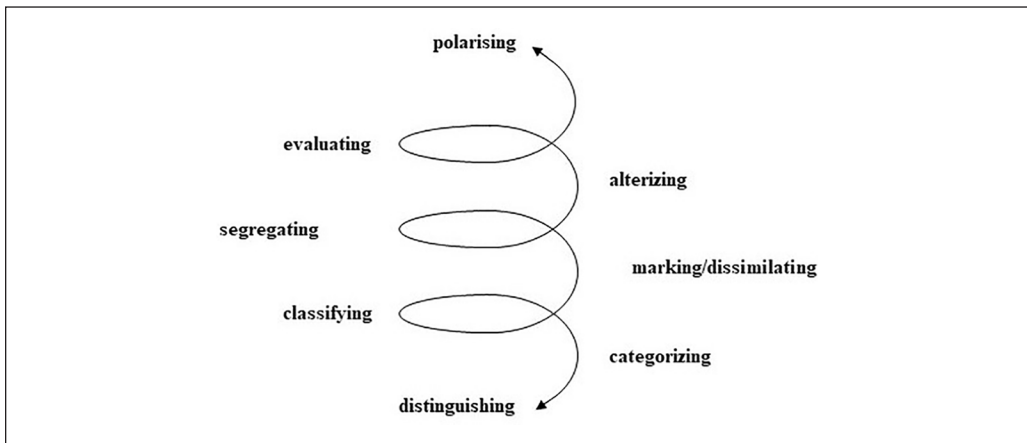

Figure 1. Recursion within the escalation path of human differentiation.

The design, development, and implementation of categories are not independent of interests and power relations. All these aspects build on cultural distinctions, but they also maintain their initial distinctions recursively (see Figure 1). Asymmetries motivate the distinguishers they favor, who, in turn, seek to secure the preferability of their side. The processes are co-constitutive, and they coevolve. Therefore, it also holds: Without *social* inequality, that is, the promise of privileges for one side, human differentiation would generally be founded on a weaker motivational basis. Categorical differences lose meaning when categories do not imply precedence. Therefore, semantics and politics of equality temper human differentiation by robbing it of some of its fuel (Brubaker 2015:39–40). However, even in the case of symmetrically weighted balances of power, the sorting function of reducing complexity remains, and this comprises vital practical functions of differentiating: for

instance, interactive *diagnostics* to quickly ascertain adequate etiquette, *stereotyping* to pre-reflexively and automatically set expectations, *situational rules of proximity* to regulate social relations, and *collective representations* to alleviate community building—all things required to produce cultural in/equality.

Second, why, Harari (2014:155) asks in his *Brief History of Humankind*, did Indian society divide people into castes, Ottoman society according to religion and U.S. society according to skin color? Where historians offer historical-genetic accounts, sociologists seek systematic explanations. The substantiation of a form of human differentiation depends both on their combinatorics with other forms (Hirschauer 2021:84) and their entanglement with forms of social and societal differentiation. It remains an open question for future research what type of human differentiation is connected with which type of differentiation. It seems likely there are cases of tight and loose coupling. Stratificatory differentiation of society is, as mentioned at the outset, closely connected to the differentiation of its personnel's status, and functional differentiation is closely connected to its differentiation of roles. Similarly close couplings in cases of human differentiation relate to the co-constitution of imagined communities (nations, denominations, ethnic groups, generations): Individuals draw considerable self-understanding from such imagined communities; communities, in turn, gain cohesive staging via emblematic embodiment.

Other cases of human differentiation (e.g., according to age, performance, gender) have no such tight couplings. The pertinent social formations here are not imagined communities but are smaller building blocks (e.g., dyads, groups, networks). Thus, a school class is composed of children of the same age, a family of people of diverse ages, the majority of couples of people of a different gender, a church congregation of people of the same denomination, a political party of the politically like-minded. In this light, it seems reasonable to ask not only which type of societal differentiation implies certain forms of human differentiation but also which forms of the differentiation of society's personnel establish certain social formations.

Taking this perspective could bring to light how the functional differentiation of society selectively accesses, alongside its role distinctions (e.g., according to manufacturer/consumer, professional/amateur), society-wide human differentiations: It can be a central instance of their supervision via subsystems (e.g., nationality via politics) or strongly occupy and determine them (e.g., performance via sport). These differentiations can also adapt to field-specific needs. Thus, gender is a target group for the economy, a performance league in athletics, a preference scheme on dating markets, a subject area in human medicine, and a role in theater. In the entanglement of differentiation forms, strong refractions can occur, expressing a cultural base differentiation (e.g., gender) according to specifics of a field.

A further interweaving occurs in the entanglement of external and internal differentiation of "human." Distinguishing humans from nonhumans is not only constitutive for the functional differentiation of society (Lindemann 2009; i.e., Where do humans start, where do they end? Whom or what do they treat as "human"?), but it is also relevant when considering internal differentiation because the treatment of potential people as mere living things (brain-dead patients, embryos), things (slaves), nonpersons (children, servants), nonhumans (enemies, cannibals), subhumans (savages, barbarians, plebs), or superhumans (monarchs, saints, heroes, geniuses) creates important historical options of human differentiation. Race, for instance, is (at least in European eyes) a concept that tends to deprive some people of being a fellow member of the species.

Finally, a third corrective is required in my outline because it focuses on *building up* distinctions to cultural differences without saying much about how they are torn down. On the one hand, there is a constant flow of distinction and totalization, disassimilation and

assimilation, alterization and subsumption, segregation and association, demarcation and collectivization. On the other hand, some categories regress into gradual distinctions (Fourcade 2016); alterization can be dissipated by contact and steered back onto a symmetrical track by taking the perspective of the other. Discrimination and stigmatization can be prohibited normatively and pursued legally, segregation can be eased, and evaluative differentiation can be mitigated by the choice of words or in an enhanced tolerance for diversity. Moreover, very few human differentiations will ultimately escalate because boundary constitution and polarization can be weakened and delimited via political disputes in functioning democracies, minimizing differences by integrating them into their pluralist ideologies and making compromise possible. Lastly, making distinctions between humans is not only maintained, enforced, and vaunted as "diversity," but it also constantly bumps into limits set for it and is canceled out (Hirschauer 2020, 2021). Distinctions are made and taken back, are accepted and rejected, are maintained and circumvented because societies possess repertoires of difference negation that slow down human differentiation, weaken it, and allow it to be redirected into indifference.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. This list challenges Parsons's meritocratic dualism (Parsons and Shils 1951:76) of invariant *ascribed* features and variable *achievements*, unable to capture many cases of human differentiation: "Features" are not all invariant in the same way; achievements are not the only variable. Thus, the short list expands Parsons's residual category of "ascription" according to levels of agency.
2. The ontological external differentiation of humans from animals, artifacts, corpses, and so on, relevant in several cases of "liminal persons" (e.g., coma patients, robots, monsters, heroes; Zerubavel 1991:72), is not my point in this article, but I touch on this issue again in the conclusion.
3. In this sense, Schütz characterized "typizations" as a comparative preconscious orientation activity within the framework of practical relevance (Schütz and Luckmann 1973).
4. This does not yet qualify as "evaluation." Evaluation research distinguishes between valuation as the attribution of value and evaluation as its reflexive judgment and legitimation (Lamont 2012:215). This is an important distinction, often neglected. In similar fields, the sociology of comparison (Heintz 2016) or classification (Bowker and Star 2000) mainly deal with lingually explicit processes, systematic operations, and professionally elaborate procedures (e.g., in science or bureaucracies). Fourcade (2016) speaks of classificatory *judgments*. In contrast, my praxeological focus is on making a distinction, valuing and comparing mundane and less elaborate processes that mostly run implicitly in the background. Just as merely valuating something is not yet an evaluation procedure that utilizes predicates, making a distinction does not yet make a categorization, and comparing something does not yet make a comparison.
5. Zerubavel (1996:421) distinguishes between two operations of the constitution of categories: "lumping" as the grouping of similar things in a cognitive cluster and "splitting" as their separation. In my view, this clear bifurcation via similarity judgments is more appropriate for describing elaborate

classifications. In contrast, I understand distinctions as Janus-faced, temporary moves with bivalent (differentiating and equalizing) effect. If one differentiates A and B for one practical purpose here and now, many of their differences do not make a difference regarding the commonality their distinction has prioritized. However, in the next moment, these neglected differences can be used for a different distinction and equalization.

6. As Fourcade (2016) demonstrates, numerical human differentiation can also develop into a semiotic alternative to the lingual-categorial kind and function as a central mechanism in the graduated weakening of categories and in their ordinal arrangement, especially in the evaluative differentiation of performance (e.g., in credit and social scoring).

7. Here, identifying means discerning and perceiving, not *self-understanding* (or the questionable terms *identification* or *identity*; see the critique by Brubaker 2004), referring to a changing subjective association with categories mostly occurring unconsciously, partially performed as political (self)positioning.

8. The assumption of cognitive sociology that humans are equipped with "concepts" to make sense of their environment remains stuck in the "scholastic" bias identified by Bourdieu (1997), projecting social scientists' working conditions onto everyday life. The additional assumption that cognition is "fundamental" for social action (Hannan et al. 2019) remains unconvincing in the most general of the social sciences. Sociology must be open to the study of discourses, practices, and social and material structures if the inertia of social constructions is to be explained. Indeed, one could claim "fundamental" status for each of these layers of meaning, but their relation is recursive: "Classification is usually treated…as if the organization of thoughts comes first,…but the ordering process is itself embedded in prior and subsequent social action. It is a middle part of a circle" (Douglas and Hull 1993:2).

9. Of course, manufactured commonality can also lie precisely in claiming a pronounced differentiation in another respect, for example, that of the sexes by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (which Durkheim found to be much more pronounced than among peasants and workers) or that of the sophisticated judgment to which we academics often lay claim.

10. In the case of the Nuer, it is primarily a spatial gradient within which groups are either zoomed in on or extended. More important for the "general…principles underlying the way we envision genealogical relatedness" (Zerubavel 2011:11) is the splitting of a temporal continuum by which people, depending on context, construct their relatedness to a family, a race, a nation, a species, or hominids writ large.

11. Monk (2021:86) observes that the political dramatization of the Black/White distinction in the United States draws attention away from intracategorical stratification according to skin tone—the "pigmentocracy." Monk (2022:20) recently argued against the etatism of sociological categories: "We need analyses of dimensions of difference that are commonly overlooked, lack sociopolitical salience and official recognition, and do not refer to 'groups.'" His suggestion, to replace nominal categories with Likert scales of skin tone or of masculinity/femininity, would bring standardized social research closer to the social reality of its informants. However, it would also lead to second-order reifications (What counts as "feminine" in the twenty-first century?). The next step would be to gather data on the personal relevancy order that state categories have within people's self-understanding (What denotes a zombie category of little to no relevance? What denotes an active membership?). The issue of the relationality of categories that considering colorism brings to the fore provides good sociological reasons against identity-political reductionisms that could be expressed thus: "She is black? No, she isn't, her skin happens to look darker than others present, and this changes a lot when she is traveling internationally."

12. Algorithms typically forgo the everyday signs of human differentiation. Instead of referring to the indices and markers people use in their communication, they tap into the traces left behind in communication. People exude traces on the internet, which companies or state organizations can secure and collate as data material, mathematically cluster, and aggregate to new data points (e.g., target groups, suspect profiles). Traces allow the production of "inaccessible kinds" (Hacking 1995:374) for those being categorized. A pronounced case is the Chinese Social Credit System rewarding good and sanctioning misconduct.

13. This bias of unconscious cognition, in which out-groups are perceived as being more undifferentiated than in-groups, does not contradict the fact that communities invoke their sameness in their political discourse. Another question is the validity of self-perception. In political discourse, self-perception of collectives is often portrayed as authentic and external perception as pejoratively distorted. In fact, the relationship is often the other way around, similar to the distorted perception of one's own voice

through the skull vis-à-vis the disturbing experience of hearing it recorded: The familiar is euphemized, and what is foreign, alien, or other is perceived more soberly.

14. Naturally, minorities also possess their own stereotypes and distorted worldviews: political extremists, religious sects, (anti)feminist activists, and so on. In this regard, sociology since Marx has been much more amenable to the "false consciousness of the ruling class" than to the complementary distortion of views on society resulting from the experience of discrimination and powerlessness. Among these distortive views is the tendency of people who have a distinction repeatedly imposed on them (e.g., sexual orientation or skin color) to overestimate the facticity of this distinction (Bauman 1997) and its relevancy for society writ large.

15. For example, the majorities of women in nursing professions or sexagenarians in the U.S. Senate.

16. When proponents of identity politics claim to fight for the recognition of *their* "identity," they are working within the framework of societal *identification*, which is forced on them by the alterization of their lifestyle, behavior, or appearance. A symmetrical marking of all (including majorities), as suggested by Zerubavel (2018), cannot work in societies principally built on indifferent inclusion. Implementing the promise of inclusion means designifying the signified parties, that is, relieving them of their significant "features" and "identities" (Hirschauer 2020).

17. My suggestion of terminologically distinguishing between *barrier* and *boundary* is similar to Lamont and Molnár's (2002) conception of symbolic and social "boundaries," borrowing from Barth (1969). This concept brings dynamism and fluidity to borders and memberships, allowing their substantive variation to be viewed in a comparative perspective. Nevertheless, topological metaphors should remain restricted to the description of advanced stages of the institutionalization of differences; as a universal terminology, they would lose sight of the contingency of distinguishing (Hirschauer 2021:68). Barth already suspected that the master scheme of the nation-state had effects on the sociological concepts in which affiliations are grasped.

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