



Published in final edited form as:

Socioecon Rev. 2014 July ; 12(3): 610–614. doi:10.1093/ser/mwu021.

Filling the Meso-Level Gap in Stratification Theory

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The first chapter of my book *Categorically Unequal*, which Lamont, Beljean, and Clair specifically cite in their article, was entitled “How Stratification Works” and in it I sought to sketch out a simple theoretical framework to explain how inequality was produced, one that bridged the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. At the micro-level I drew heavily on the work of Susan Fiske (2003) and her stereotype content model (Fiske et al. 2002) whereas at the macro-level I drew heavily on the work of Charles Tilly (1998) and his theory of durable inequality. At the time I was writing in 2006, I was acutely aware that my synthesis elided a sizeable conceptual gap by failing to elucidate how categorical processes of stratification at the micro-level translated into categorical processes of inequality at the macro-level.

At that time, I was not aware of any systematic body of thought that clearly elaborated on processes of stratification at the meso-level, and I was not in a position to invent one myself as I was writing under a deadline (the book was commissioned to commemorate the centennial of the Russell Sage Foundation in 2007). To fill the void, I briefly mentioned Tilly’s (1998) concepts of adaptation and emulation as mechanisms by which stratification diffused throughout a society and included some vague language about framing (Kahneman and Tversky 2000) and boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002), noting that “boundary work involves defining categories in the social structure, and framing involves defining them in human cognition,” but I was silent on the specifics” (Massey 2007, p. 15).

After the book’s publication (on-time!), the meso-level gap in my thinking kept gnawing at me so you can imagine the interest and appreciation I felt when I read Lamont et al.’s essay on cultural processes and their role in the production of inequality, for in it the authors provide just the sort of theoretical framing and conceptual language that I lacked in 2006 to connect micro- and macro-levels of the American stratification system. In retrospect, it seems obvious to me now that the conceptual bridge I sought would somehow involve culture, given that it is the quintessential tool that human beings rely upon to adapt to whatever environment they inhabit, using shared meanings and commonly understood scripts to cohere socially and act collectively to deal with problems as they arise. For whatever reason, however, I didn’t go down that path in my conceptualization of the stratification process.

Perhaps it is unsurprising that I did not follow the cultural path, for culture had long disappeared from sociological discussions of poverty and inequality. Unfortunately, in my view, sociology did itself a grave disservice when it demonized and ostracized Oscar Lewis following the 1966 publication of his book, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty*, for which he was vilified and accused of “blaming the victim.” For decades it was not possible to use culture and poverty in the same sentence in polite sociological

company. A careful reading of his original work, however, reveals that Lewis grounded his cultural argument firmly within social structure. Rather than viewing culture as an exogenous entity that autonomously generates and reproduces poverty, he argued that people living under conditions of prolonged material deprivation and social isolation—what we would now refer to as concentrated poverty—adapt by assuming attitudes and behaviors that facilitate survival within the impoverished structural niche they occupy, but which are counterproductive in the wider society, thereby exacerbating their disadvantage.

Culture only began to creep slowly back into the sociological analysis of stratification with the publication of William Julius Wilson's celebrated book *The Truly Disadvantaged* in 1987. In it, Wilson noted that the structural transformation of the urban economy had isolated urban black communities economically and disconnected them socially from the mainstream world of work, thereby rendering joblessness, welfare dependency, unwed childbearing, and shadowy ways of making a living normative rather than aberrant in ghetto neighborhoods. In 1993 Nancy Denton and I complemented Wilson's argument in *American Apartheid* by pointing out that it was the unparalleled residential segregation of African Americans in the United States that caused the structural transformation of the urban economy to produce a uniquely high spatial concentration of black poverty in cities, which in turn generated the maladies that Wilson had noted and contributed to what we called a "culture of segregation."

Over the ensuing decades culture has steadily come to play a more central role in discussions of poverty and stratification, with its full emergence from the sociological closet signaled by the publication in 2010 of the volume *Reconsidering Culture and Poverty*, a special issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* edited by David Harding, Michele Lamont, and Mario Small. In many ways, the current article offers a conceptual synthesis of points made by authors in that volume as well as earlier works by the editors themselves and researchers such as Kathryn Edin (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin and Nelson 2013), Annette Lareau (200, 2003), Katherine Newman (2000), and many others.

In the present article, Lamont et al. argue that two general cultural processes—*identification* and *rationalization*—act to connect social schemas embedded within individual cognition to mechanisms of stratification institutionalized in the social structure, thereby bridging the micro and the macro levels. Identification refers to cultural processes that generate individual and group identities and confers meaning upon those identities, and rationalization refers to processes that generate and apply universal, impersonal rules to individuals and groups according to rational principles generally intended to maximize efficiency.

Each of these broad categories subsumes a large set of sub-processes, four of which the authors specifically discuss. Under the rubric of identification they discuss *racialization*, processes whereby social meaning becomes attached to phenotypic characteristics of group members, and *stigmatization*, whereby some achieved or ascribed attribute is discredited and individuals possessing it are socially rejected. Under the heading of rationalization, they discuss *standardization*, which is the process by which individuals, groups, and institutions

construct uniform beliefs and practices according to agreed-upon rules, and *evaluation*, a cultural process that assesses group members in terms of measurable attributes to make judgments about worth and value.

The opening chapter of *Categorically Unequal* was followed by successive chapters that discussed stratification on the basis of race, class, and gender, and how they intersect to produce inequality. It is clear to me now that what I was doing in these chapters was describing how the cultural processes of racialization, stigmatization, standardization, and evaluation operate within the United States to stratify American society. Were I to write the book now my first chapter would include a summary of the cultural process theory elaborated by Lamont et al. to foreshadow the narratives that would follow in later chapters. The various cultural processes they discuss are not mutually exclusive, of course. In the case of racial stratification, for example, African Americans have historically been oppressed through a vicious combination of racialization, stigmatization, standardization, and evaluation.

Since the publication of *Categorically Unequal* I have worked to elucidate the ongoing racialization of Latinos in the United States (see Massey 2013b). In successive publications I have traced the racialization of Latinos from past to present (Massey 2009); connected the current era of racialization to specific shifts in U.S. immigration and border policy in the 1960s (Massey and Pren 2012a); and identified the U.S. immigration system as a new and powerful race-making institution in the United States (Massey 2013a). I have shown how discrimination and exclusion associated with racialization s affected Latino identity formation (Massey and Sanchez 2010) while undermining their economic status (Massey and Gentsch 2011, 2014) and health (Ullmann, Goldman, and Massey 2011), ultimately creating a new underclass characterized by unprecedented mass illegality (Massey and Pren 2012b). Unfortunately, racialization remains a powerful cultural process in American society, even in the Age of Obama, and perhaps *because* the election of the nation's first black president coincided with a demographic transformation will make white European-origin Americans a minority by mid-century, owing largely to the rapid growth of the Latino population.

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