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# Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis\*

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## *Abstract*

*The study of inequality has been largely defined as the study of its measurable extent, degree, and consequences. It is no less important, however, to understand the interactive processes through which inequalities are created and reproduced in concrete settings. The qualitative research that bears on understanding these processes has not yet been consolidated, and thus its theoretical value remains unrealized. In this article we inductively derive from the literature a sensitizing theory of the generic processes through which inequality is reproduced. The major processes that we identify are othering, subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance, and emotion management. We argue that conceiving the reproduction of inequality in terms of these generic processes can resolve theoretical problems concerning the connection between local action and extralocal inequalities, and concerning the nature of inequality itself.*

Sociologists have traditionally asked three questions about inequality: What kind of inequalities exist? How large are these inequalities? and How are these inequalities created and reproduced? Answers to the first two questions can be found in a vast literature on inequalities in income, wealth, status, political power, health, and other resources. It is fair to say that we know a great deal about patterns of

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resource distribution both across and within social groups. Yet without answers to the third question our knowledge remains documentary. To *explain* inequality requires attention to the processes that produce and perpetuate it.

Such processes can be studied in various ways. Historical data can reveal process, or at least provide an empirical basis from which to infer it. Quantitative analyses of changes in resource distribution over time can also provide a basis for testing and refining ideas about process. Alternatively, process can be examined directly, through qualitative research. Many qualitative studies have in fact looked at how inequality is reproduced (see Horowitz 1997 for a review). The theoretical value of this literature remains unrealized, however, because each study, focusing on a particular group or setting, can seem to offer little generalizable knowledge. In this article we analytically consolidate this body of qualitative work, deriving from it a conceptual scheme that can take us far toward answering that third question about inequality.

We are hardly on new ground in arguing for the value of a qualitative approach to the reproduction of inequality. Blumer's studies of the consequences of industrialization (Blumer 1960, 1965, 1990), Stone and Form's studies of status arrangements in small towns (Stone & Form 1953; Form & Stone 1957), Hughes's studies of work (Hughes 1958), and Shibutani and Kwan's (1963) analyses of ethnic stratification treat inequality as accomplished by the use of symbols to differentiate groups, construct identities, and mobilize collective action. The idea that inequality cannot be understood apart from the processes that produce it is thus deeply rooted in the interactionist tradition, as is the idea that these processes must be examined directly. There is by now, however, much more theoretical and empirical work upon which to build the new ground we are seeking.

We draw heavily on what has come to be known as the negotiated-order perspective (Maines 1977; Strauss 1978). This perspective rejects the macro-micro dichotomy that obscures the value of ground-level qualitative work for understanding matters that are typically defined as "structural." Negotiated-order theorists criticize the tendency to reify organizations, institutions, and systems, arguing that these social entities must be understood as recurrent patterns of joint action. We take from this the implication that the reproduction of inequality, even when it appears thoroughly institutionalized, ultimately depends on face-to-face interaction, which therefore must be studied as part of understanding the reproduction of inequality. We also draw on recent theoretical work growing out of the negotiated-order perspective to suggest how "structures" and social conditions are reproduced by the linking of action across institutional realms (Hall 1995, 1997).

A second line of thought that informs our work concerns generic social processes. This thinking is also rooted in the interactionist tradition (Blumer 1969: 43-44, 67-70; Hughes 1958: 48-55). The concern here is with how people do things together — in particular, those things that are endemic to and pervasive in a form

of social life (Prus 1996, 1997). By thinking in terms of generic processes it is possible to see the common analytic ground of qualitative studies of disparate settings and groups. For example, we can interpret studies of homeless men (Snow & Anderson 1987) and preoperative transsexuals (Mason-Schrock 1996) as showing how identity work, as a generic social process, is accomplished through fictive storytelling. Likewise, we might interpret studies of corporate managers (Jackall 1988) and mushroom pickers (Fine & Holyfield 1996) as showing how trust is established under conditions of competition. The point, in other words, is to generalize about process, not populations (Becker 1990).

We take inequality to be endemic to and pervasive in late capitalist societies (our main concern here). We ask, How is this inequality reproduced? — and then seek answers in terms of the generic processes out of which inequality emerges or is sustained. To call these processes “generic” does not imply that they are unaffected by context. It means, rather, that they occur in multiple contexts wherein social actors face similar or analogous problems. The precise form a process takes in any given setting is a matter for empirical determination. Managers and mushroomers may build trust in different ways, using the resources they have at hand, but there is still a generic process of “building trust” that can be studied and analyzed, with the goal of understanding its occurrence more generally.

### The Qualitative Literature as Data for Inductive Analysis

While our theoretical orientation is symbolic interactionist, much qualitative work does not wear this label. What matters for our purposes, however, is not the label but whether the work in question can tell us something useful about (1) what happens in face-to-face interaction, such that a form of inequality is the result; (2) how symbols and meanings are created and used to sustain the patterns of interaction that lead to inequality; or (3) how inequality itself is perceived, experienced, and reacted to, such that it is either reproduced or resisted. These concerns are, in effect, the criteria we used to select the studies we examined. We have not reviewed every qualitative study that bears on some issue related to inequality. Rather, we focused on studies compatible with interactionist principles, and which also could be interpreted as showing how disparities in power, status, suffering, or reward are created and reproduced.

Emphasizing generic processes allows us to extract greater theoretical value from the qualitative literature by overcoming the tendency to see each study as dealing with a specific group and setting, rather than a more general process. But a traditional literature review would still face the problem of trying to integrate analyses that use diverse concepts to make sense of specific groups and settings. We have thus taken the approach of treating the literature as data to be analyzed,

rather than as a source of conclusions to be summarized. Our goal, in Blumer's (1969:176) terms, is "to secure conceptualizations that fit empirical experience."

To do this, we have applied the method of analytic induction (see Lofland 1995) to the body of qualitative studies that met the criteria noted above. As in coding fieldnotes or interview transcripts, we have sought to devise a set of concepts that best capture patterns in the information at hand. We thus asked of each study a question that typically guides the coding of qualitative data: *Of what more abstract category of phenomena is this an instance?* Our procedure was quasi-inductive in that we had already identified the interesting phenomena as those having to do, directly or indirectly, with the creation or reproduction of inequality.

The emerging analysis was tested and refined by the group of authors, who were by no means of one mind. If one or more members of the group proposed that a study could be interpreted as an instance of *X*, others frequently offered counter-arguments, thereby forcing reexamination of the study in question, and of our analytic categories. We also sought "negative cases," that is, studies which revealed processes that did not fit the categories we had yet devised. Such cases forced us to revise until we arrived at a formulation that could accommodate them. Finally, we continually sought to reduce the number of major categories to the fewest needed to organize the minor ones.

Our analysis of the literature leads us to propose that four generic processes are central to the reproduction of inequality: *othering*, *subordinate adaptation*, *boundary maintenance*, and *emotion management* — each of which in turn comprises several subprocesses. We argue that these transsituationally occurring processes, as revealed in a diverse body of qualitative research, are the key forms of joint action through which inequalities are reproduced in small groups, complex organizations, communities, and societies. In the final section of the paper we consider how a focus on generic processes can resolve theoretical problems concerning the connection between local action and extra-local inequalities, and concerning the nature of inequality itself.

## Othering

The term *othering* has come to refer to the process whereby a dominant group defines into existence an inferior group (Fine 1994). This process entails the invention of categories and of ideas about what marks people as belonging to these categories.<sup>1</sup> From an interactionist perspective, othering is a form of collective identity work (Hadden & Lester 1978; Snow & Anderson 1987; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996) aimed at creating and/or reproducing inequality. The literature suggests that othering can take at least three forms: (1) oppressive othering; (2) implicit othering by the creation of powerful virtual selves; and (3) defensive

othering among subordinates. In each case, meanings are created that shape consciousness and behavior, such that inequality is directly or indirectly reproduced.

#### OPPRESSIVE OTHERING

Oppressive othering occurs when one group seeks advantage by defining another group as morally and/or intellectually inferior. Perhaps the clearest examples are racial classification schemes. Social historians and historical sociologists have shown how elites in Europe and America used such schemes to claim superiority vis-à-vis peoples in Africa, Asia, and the New World, and later to prevent working-class solidarity in North America (Allen 1994; Brown 1993; Omi & Winant; Roediger 1991). Qualitative research has examined how these schemes are used, intentionally or inadvertently, in ways that reproduce inequality in the present.

Blee (1996), for example, shows how Klan women used racial ideologies to make sense of apparent differences between people, create scapegoats, build community among themselves, and maintain feelings of superiority. Frankenberg (1993) shows how even whites who disavowed racism used a discourse of race that makes *whiteness* invisible, effectively defining whites as the standard group and thus implicitly defining Others as exotic and different (see also Gallagher 1995). Rollins (1985) shows how middle/upper-middle-class white women defined the women of color whom they employed to do domestic work as irresponsible, childlike, and happy to serve (see also Romero 1992). Oppressive othering, these studies suggest, commonly entails the overt or subtle assertion of *difference as deficit*.

Othering can also create patterns of interaction that reaffirm a dominant group's ideology of difference. For example, Holden's (1997) study of a homeless shelter shows how the mostly white, middle-class volunteers deflected residents' complaints by defining them as ungrateful, "having an attitude," or "in need of rules," and thereby evoked angry responses that were taken as further proof that the residents were at fault. The inequalities (both within and outside the shelter) that gave rise to the residents' complaints were thus obscured. Anderson (1990) shows how young black men who adopt the "urban predator" pose as a matter of style, self-assertion, or self-protection are then treated by whites in ways that lead to tense encounters — thus affirming, for whites, the dangerousness they stereotypically attribute to black males (see also Vander Ven 1998).

Oppressive othering can also take the form of turning subordinates into commodities. For example, Rogers (1995; see also Kunda 1992) shows how "temps" are defined by full-time employees as unambitious and incompetent, and thus not to be taken seriously as co-workers. In this we see old-fashioned stereotyping. What Rogers also shows is how the owners of temp agencies abet the problem by encouraging temp workers to change their names, voices, and job histories to appear suited for various work assignments. This demand for fakery creates a trap: if temps

do not misrepresent themselves, they risk being cut off from assignments; if they do, their chances for a full-time job with an employer who has been duped are slim. Temporary workers experience this situation as profoundly alienating, and thus seldom work to their full capacity — in turn making it likely that they will remain marginally-employed Others.

The symbolic tools used to accomplish oppressive othering include not only classification schemes but *identity codes*, which are the rules of performance and interpretation whereby members of a group know what kind of self is signified by certain words, deeds, and dress (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996:125-27). To know the code is to know how to elicit the imputation of possessing a desired kind of self. Oppressive othering entails the creation of identity codes that make it impossible for members of a subjugated group to signify fully creditable selves. A code that treats a male body and Caucasian features as signs of competence peremptorily discredits those with female bodies and African features. Equally insidious are identity codes that define the adaptive or dissident behaviors of subordinates as signs of inferior selves — thus turning acts of resistance into evidence that subordination is deserved and inequality is legitimate.

#### CREATING POWERFUL VIRTUAL SELVES

Inequality is reproduced by identity work that upholds the dramaturgical fronts of the powerful. These fronts obscure discrediting backstage realities, create powerful virtual (i.e., imputed) selves, and implicitly create inferior Others. The impression that elites possess powerful, worthy selves — no matter the reality — can induce feelings of trust, awe, and/or fear that help to legitimate inequality and deter dissent (cf. Della Fave 1980; Wolf 1986).<sup>2</sup>

This kind of identity work is typically done by elites or would-be elites. For example, Jackall (1988) shows how corporate managers tried to foster impressions of competence and trustworthiness, so as to appear destined for top executive positions. Gillespie (1980) shows how the wives of politicians enact the role of “public wife” to create the impression that their husbands are strong, moral, and deserving of election. In his analysis of the presidency, Hall (1979) shows how candidates shape their public performances to elicit imputations of strength and masculinity. Similarly, Haas and Shaffir (1977) show how medical students learn to fashion a “cloak of competence” to legitimate their status as physicians.

The creation of powerful virtual selves depends on more than the dramaturgical skill of individuals. Wealth is typically needed to acquire that skill (a form of cultural capital), along with material signs of competence and power. Wealth can also buy the image-making services of PR firms, media doctors, and speech writers. Cooperation is important, too. Elites typically engage in mutually supportive facework that serves to maintain, vis-à-vis subordinate groups, a collective impression of competence and trustworthiness.<sup>3</sup> The general (and long-recognized)

principle here is that an unequal distribution of wealth and power generates an unequal distribution of ability to shape symbolic realities, including powerful virtual selves.

Another way that inequality is linked to the fashioning of superior selves is suggested by studies that have used the concept of "moral identity." For example, Kleinman (1996) shows how members of a holistic health organization were so invested in thinking of themselves as virtuous because of their nonconventionality that they failed to see how their efforts to be "alternative" reproduced conventional gender inequalities in pay and status. Schwalbe (1996) shows how men involved in the mythopoetic men's movement sought to remake "man" as a moral identity, and in the process drew upon and reinforced an essentialist ideology of male supremacy. McMahon's (1995) study of new mothers shows how embracing "mother" as a moral identity — an embrace that we see as adaptive rather than strategic — can lead women to become invested in reproducing conventional gender inequalities in the family.

#### DEFENSIVE OTHERING AMONG SUBORDINATES

Defensive othering is identity work done by those seeking membership in a dominant group, or by those seeking to deflect the stigma they experience as members of a subordinate group. When homeless men disparage other homeless men as "lazy bums," they practice a kind of defensive othering (Snow & Anderson 1987). A similar process occurs in the workplace, as Padavic (1991) shows, when some women join men in disdaining other women whom the men define as unattractive. Field (1994) likewise shows how some Irish immigrants distance themselves from those whose behavior feeds the stereotype of the rowdy Irish drunk. The process, in each case, involves accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group, but then saying, in effect, "There are indeed Others to whom this applies, but it does not apply to me."

Defensive othering does not define into existence a group of exploitable Others; rather, it is a *reaction* to an oppressive identity code already imposed by a dominant group. For example, Cain (1994) shows how leaders of an AIDS service group responded to homophobic pressures by distancing themselves from the gay community. Granfield (1991) shows how the upper-middle-class values that pervade law school led students from working-class backgrounds to hide their class origins. And in a study of local elites, Satow (1993) shows how the powerful old money group compelled rich newcomers to compete with each other to avoid being labeled *gauche*.

Though defensive othering is an adaptive reaction, it nonetheless aids the reproduction of inequality. When members of subordinate groups seek safety or advantage by othering those in their own group, the belief system that supports the dominant group's claim to superiority is reinforced. Subordinate solidarity is also



undermined. Thus when some subordinates break solidarity and seek to fashion powerful, or at least creditable, selves by embracing and enforcing the identity code of the dominant group, they inadvertently aid the reproduction of a larger system of inequality.

Identity work is basic to differentiating individuals and groups (cf. Shibutani & Kwan 1963). But it can be a means to create hierarchy as well as to mark difference. As we have implied here, and will return to later, identity work overlaps with other parts of the reproductive process: subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance, and emotion management. In the following sections we consider research that has shown us how these other processes reproduce inequality.

### Subordinate Adaptation

Qualitative studies of oppressive situations often highlight the strategies that people use to cope with the deprivations of subordinate status. We do not claim that all such strategies merely reproduce inequality. Some coping strategies might be largely reproductive in their consequences; others resist inequality or seek to abolish it. What qualitative research shows, however, is that most strategies of adaptation have dual consequences, challenging some inequalities while reproducing others. Exactly what consequences follow from any particular strategy is, of course, an empirical matter. Our point is that subordinates' adaptations to inequality play an essential part in its reproduction. We see three types of adaptations implicit in the literature: (1) trading power for patronage; (2) forming alternative subcultures; (3) hustling or dropping out.

#### TRADING POWER FOR PATRONAGE

One way to adapt to subordinate status is to accept it, while seeking ways to derive compensatory benefits from relationships with members of the dominant group. Stomblor and Martin (1994) give us the example of women who seek status and feelings of self-worth by becoming "little sisters" for fraternity men who, in actuality, objectify the women as sexual mascots. Similarly, Yount (1991) shows how women coal miners felt compelled to accept men's sexist "compliments," because, as women in traditionally male jobs, they wanted affirmation of their femininity. In these cases, members of a subordinate gender group accept practices that demean and disempower them in exchange for a degree of approval and protection.

Variations on this process of subordinates trading power for patronage can be seen in Fishman's (1987) study of how criminals' wives try to keep their husbands out of trouble; Ostrander's (1984) study of the entertainment and volunteer work done by upper-class women to support their husbands' social position; Gillespie's (1980) study of impression management by politicians' wives; and Ortiz's (1997) study of baseball players' wives, who learn to keep quiet about team members'

extramarital affairs. The adaptive behavior is, in each case, sufficiently rewarded to allow immediate psychic and material needs to be met — at the cost, however, of perpetuating a larger system of inequality.

Subordinates may try to sustain these symbiotic relationships by using the same imagery that the dominant group uses to legitimate inequality. For example, Ronai and Ellis (1989) show how strippers enhance their earnings by performing in ways that feed men's sexual fantasies. Ronai and Ellis argue that in doing this, strippers use the gender order to con men into paying more for their performances (cf. Frank 1998). While this strategy may pay off for the women who use it, the larger consequence is reproduction of the sexist imagery that helps to sustain the subordination of women in general. What is situationally adaptive for some members of a subordinate group thus can be disadvantageous, on the whole, for other members of the same group.

Power can also be traded for autonomy — the bargain often made by working-class men. Instead of challenging management for control of the labor process, working-class men often accept less control in exchange for the satisfaction of being free from the indignity of close supervision (Cherry 1974; Schwalbe 1985; Hodson 1991).<sup>4</sup> This bargain reproduces class inequality by preserving managerial control of the labor process. It also reinforces an element of gender ideology that links manhood to control. Even if "control" is largely an illusion, men are still encouraged to stake their feelings of worth on having it, and thus may strive for it in domestic and political realms as well.

#### FORMING ALTERNATIVE SUBCULTURES

Adaptation to subordinate status can be individual (trying to scam one's way through the system) or collective. In the latter case, people who share a subordinate status vis-a-vis the dominant group(s) collaborate to create alternative prestige hierarchies, forms of power, and ways to make a living (cf. Hughes 1958:49-55). Qualitative research has examined the origins, content, and consequences of a number of these alternative subcultures. These studies show how collective adaptation strategies can be simultaneously subversive and reproductive of inequality.

For example, Bourgois (1995) shows how the urban drug trade offers a path to status and economic success for young men who have no chance for industrial work, nor the cultural capital to break into middle-class service jobs (see also Adler & Adler 1983). Similarly, Anderson (1992) shows how the lack of good jobs in the inner city leads to the creation of a subculture wherein young men achieve status through violence and sexual prowess, while young women achieve it by having babies and outfitting them in fashionable clothes (see also Jacobs 1994). These signs of status — money, might, sexuality, consumer goods — are echoes of the dominant culture, the alternative culture providing other ways to achieve them.

The problem, however, is that conflict with the dominant culture tends to make success within the alternative culture tenuous, both economically and psychologically. As Bourgois, Anderson, and others (MacLeod [1987] 1995) have shown, even those who do well by the standards of the street tend to acquire habits and create situations (drug addiction, lack of education, multiple dependents, criminal records) that are debilitating and risky, and diminish chances for mainstream success, even in the form of stable working-class employment. As this pattern unfolds, members of dominant groups may also perceive that their stereotypes of subordinate Others as stupid, violent, irresponsible, and licentious are largely true.

MacLeod's ([1987] 1995) ethnography of two groups of young men — one group predominantly white, the other predominantly black — in a low-income housing project in Boston gives us another view of how adaptive cultures can reproduce inequality. The white men in MacLeod's study created a subculture that vaunted fighting ability, drug consumption, and sexual prowess. The habits and circumstances emerging from this subculture made it hard for these men to find and keep jobs, which were scarce to begin with. This situation engendered frustration and virulent racism. By blaming blacks for "taking all the jobs," the lower-class white men not only reproduced racism, but failed to see the class interests they shared with their black neighbors. Prospects for solidarity in the face of a common oppressor were thus undermined.

Other ethnographies of subordinate groups in both urban (Willis 1977; Cummings 1998) and rural (Harvey 1993) settings have produced similar results. In each case, deprivations imposed by the dominant culture lead to the creation of a subculture that offers practical knowledge of how to get by, and also alternative criteria by which to judge one's self competent, worthy, and successful. Again, however, the adaptations that allow one to earn respect and get by with fewer resources can also engender perceptions, habits, and circumstances that virtually ensure the reproduction of inequality on a larger scale.

The need for subgroup solidarity in the face of a hostile dominant culture can perpetuate inequality when members of subordinate groups discourage "collaboration with the enemy" by individuals seeking upward mobility for themselves. For example, black students who try hard to please their teachers may be reined-in by peers who accuse them of "acting white" (Fordham & Ogbu 1986). Working-class men may show a similar disdain, or at least ambivalence, toward efforts to achieve middle-class status (Halle 1984; Fantasia 1988; Sennett & Cobb 1972). Inequality is thus perpetuated by discouraging individual striving.<sup>5</sup>

Adaptive subcultures have a reproductive effect in part because they allow psychic needs to be met, despite subordination. For example, Burawoy (1979) shows how machine operators turned a piece-rate pay system into a satisfying game of "making out," in which workers competed to see who could earn the most with the least effort. Similarly, Paules (1991) shows how waitresses created a workplace

culture that gave them autonomy and space for self-assertion vis-a-vis customers and managers. Similar patterns of subculture building by organizational subordinates have been noted in schools (Becker et al. [1961] 1977), prisons (Ward & Kassebaum 1965), and the military (Shibutani 1978). Organizational elites often tolerate or even encourage the formation of such adaptive subcultures, since they function to mitigate overt resistance and to stabilize relations of inequality.

#### HUSTLING OR DROPPING OUT

The modal adaptation to inequality is acquiescence: accepting one's place within existing hierarchies of status, power, and wealth — while trying to make that place reasonably comfortable. This sort of adaptation implies acceptance of conventional goals and means of achieving them (as per Merton 1967; see also Becker 1995 on the “power of inertia”). Another possibility, however, is to work the margins of the system, looking for a niche within which one can hustle for a living. By “hustling” we mean economic activity that is officially considered illegal or dishonest.

The study of groups that survive by hustling has been a staple tradition for qualitative sociologists. From classic studies of gangs (Short & Strodtbeck 1965) to contemporary studies of Gypsies (Kephart 1987), fortune tellers (Boles, Davis, & Tatro 1983), and drug dealers (Adler 1985), qualitative research has shown how members of subordinate groups, rather than challenge the system or push their way into the mainstream, organize to exploit it from the edge. Usually this means exploiting those who are more vulnerable — the jobless, the elderly, the uneducated, the addicted. This kind of hustling exploits the human fallout from extra-local inequalities, and in turn helps to reproduce those inequalities by further debilitating the already weak.

“Dropping out” is another response to inequality that might, though need not always, reproduce it. Individual dropping out — out of school, out of the corporate rat race, out of political involvement — is part of what we are referring to. Certainly the withdrawal of participation by people who are fed up with powerlessness and disrespect has the effect of allowing things to go on as they are. What qualitative sociologists have looked at more closely, however, is collective dropping out, that is, the formation of counter-cultural groups.

While collective dropping out is, in one sense, a form of subcultural adaptation, it is not simply a matter of finding a way to cope with deprivations or to create alternative paths to conventional rewards. It is a matter of rejecting the beliefs and practices of the dominant culture as oppressive, and trying to forge non-oppressive alternatives. We see this, for example, in studies of communes and collectives (Rothschild-Whitt 1979), lesbian communities (Krieger 1983), intentional communities (Gardner 1978), and in some social movement groups (Hunt &

Benford 1994). The goal for members of these groups is not to get along better within the dominant culture, nor to seek an exploitable niche within it, but to break from it.

Do such groups promote change or retard it? Certainly the withdrawal of dissident energy from the mainstream does little to threaten existing hierarchies. Counter-cultural groups may also strive to reject one form of inequality, yet internally reproduce other inequalities present in the dominant culture (Brown 1992; Kleinman 1996). Then again, even fringe and separatist groups that engage in no overt political action can foster change by modeling its possibility. Whether such groups inspire or, through withdrawal, impede change, depends, of course, on the historical context. Our point is that a holistic view of the process through which inequality is reproduced must take into account adaptations that involve dropping out, as well as fitting in.

### Boundary Maintenance

Preserving inequality requires maintaining boundaries between dominant and subordinate groups. These boundaries can be symbolic, interactional, spatial, or all of these. By preserving these boundaries, dominant groups protect the material and cultural capital they have acquired and upon which they rely to preserve their dominance. In plainer terms, the reproduction of inequality depends on elites cooperating to limit Others' access to valued resources.

Most boundary maintenance is accomplished institutionally. Schools, governments, police forces, banks, and work organizations can be seen as functioning, in part, to maintain boundaries between stratified groups. It is often easier, however, to document the boundary-maintaining *results* of institutional action than to see how these results are produced. Qualitative research can help us to see how these results arise out of face-to-face interaction. The processes we discern in this regard are: (1) transmitting cultural capital; (2) controlling network access; and (3) the use of violence or the threat thereof.

#### TRANSMITTING CULTURAL CAPITAL

"Cultural capital" refers to the knowledge, skills, habits, values, and tastes that are acquired in the course of socialization, and which can be turned to one's advantage in particular social settings (Bourdieu 1977). Everyone acquires cultural capital; but not everyone acquires the kind that is useful and valued in middle-, upper-middle-, and upper-class circles. Any privileged group can keep subordinates out by limiting access to the requisite cultural capital. Without the right cultural capital, one simply cannot make connections, interact competently, or be taken seriously in certain places. A group's boundaries can thus be maintained by regulating access to the cultural capital one needs to get in.

Families are the primary settings in which cultural capital is transmitted. This ensures selectivity in the transmission of cultural capital, since families are strictly-bounded social units. The state-enforced laws and traditions governing membership in families are the principal means whereby social class boundaries are maintained through the selective transmission of cultural and material capital (Allen 1987). The ideology of competitive individualism also imposes a moral imperative on parents — especially middle- and upper-middle-class parents, whose class standing depends on earned income rather than durable wealth — to make sure that their children acquire as much cultural capital as possible, so as to avoid a fall into the working class (Ehrenreich 1989; Hays 1996; Kohn 1969).

Schools are also key institutions for transmitting cultural capital. Getting in to schools in which valued cultural capital can be acquired requires knowhow and money (Cookson & Persell 1985). Even presuming entry, the cultural capital a student brings to school will limit what is acquired there. Students from lower- and working-class backgrounds often have difficulty getting their middle-class teachers to respect them and recognize their capabilities (Rosenbaum 1976; Luttrell 1997). School then comes to be experienced as a hostile, or at least inhospitable, place, making academic success even less likely. Social distance between teachers and students, combined with middle-class cultural hegemony in the schools, can thus engender an interactive process — often occurring beneath the conscious awareness of teachers and students — that nearly ensures an unequal distribution of the cultural capital potentially available in school.

Qualitative studies of schools also suggest how inequality can be reproduced when teachers reinforce what seem like innocuous boundaries between “natural” social groups. Thorne’s (1993) ethnography of an elementary school shows how this occurs in regard to gender. While boys and girls engage in their own territorial “boundary work,” teachers abet this process of marking gender divisions by establishing separate play areas for boys and girls, encouraging boys and girls to play different games, rewarding different kinds of behaviors, and assigning different kinds of tasks.<sup>6</sup> We suggest, following Lever (1978), that such boundary work has the result, over the long haul of a school career, of selectively transmitting to boys the kinds of habits and skills that are likely to be rewarded in the job market and the corporation.

Cultural capital is also assessed and acquired in workplaces. Knowing how to play golf, for instance, or how to make the right kind of small talk at parties, may open doors to acquiring more resources that can be turned to one’s further advantage. A similar process can be seen in trade unions. Getting an apprenticeship may hinge not simply on having adequate qualifying skills, but on having an inside sponsor, the right ethnic surname, and a zest for football. What this suggests is that inter-group boundaries are often maintained by the use of social markers that are largely invisible to non-gatekeepers.

What matters for reproducing inequality is the transmission of cultural capital that is valued by those who control access to jobs, pay, and positions of status and power. Subordinates are kept out, and privilege preserved, by selectively transmitting valued cultural capital to those who are, by birth or display of special aptitude, deemed worthy of having it. This process reproduces inequality not only through the unequal distribution of resources, but by legitimating hierarchy. Because it can be hard to see how cultural capital is transmitted in families and schools, and even harder to see how it is “cashed in” in closed circles, the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and status can come to look as if it corresponds to a natural distribution of ability (Bourdieu 1984).

#### CONTROLLING NETWORK ACCESS

The processes of selectively transmitting cultural capital and controlling network access overlap. Access to networks is controlled, in part, by selectively transmitting cultural capital; without the right credentials, it may be impossible to break into a network. But cultural capital per se does not guarantee access to elite networks *within* a group. Within a group, everyone may have roughly the same stocks of cultural capital. Inequality within the group may then be reproduced by controlling access to the key networks through which information is traded, decisions and deals are made, and rewards are disbursed.

Traweek's (1988) ethnographic study of physicists shows how networks are crucial to the reproduction of inequality in this field of science. Traweek shows how the directors of a few prominent research labs form a network through which post-docs are given, grants awarded, and people defined as stars or drones. What goes on in this network determines, in short, the fates of people's careers. Members of the elite network also effectively choose who will succeed them. Women who manage to break into the predominantly male *world* of high-energy particle physicists suffer, Traweek's analysis shows, because of their exclusion from key *networks*.

Access can also be regulated by subordinate actors in a network. For example, Ostrander's (1984) study of upper-class women shows how their volunteer work created opportunities to form political and business alliances between families (see also Daniels 1988; Lamont 1992). Moreover, as these women interacted on the boards of various civic organizations, they were able to assess newcomers to the community and determine if they had the right stuff — money, credentials, manners, and politics — to be admitted to the circle of local elites. In this way, the women not only helped to control network access, they also helped to reproduce the patriarchal authority of their husbands and fathers, who controlled family wealth and businesses.

Jackall's (1988) study of corporate managers shows how access to top networks depended on making one's peers and bosses feel comfortable. Having the right

cultural capital was crucial for inducing such comfort; but, as Jackall shows, it was consistent behavior — keeping secrets (or sharing them appropriately), not selling out one's allies or boss, looking like a winner and avoiding blame for failures — that mattered for *staying* in the network. As in the world of physics, these networks were the means through which promotion decisions were made, projects approved, blame assigned, and elite succession accomplished. To be cut out of a network was to lose influence and power, and to have one's fate sealed.

Adler and Adler (1995) show remarkably similar dynamics of inclusion and exclusion occurring among preadolescent teens. Entry to a clique is usually facilitated by connection to one of its central members. But after initial acceptance, there follows a period of testing and jockeying for position during which the real value of one's cultural capital — merely the “cover charge” for getting into the group — must be demonstrated in practice. The Adlers suggest that in this process teens learn about power, manipulation, conformity, and the importance of group boundaries. We would add that teens also learn how to use cultural capital to make connections, achieve status in a group, and retain privilege when newcomers try to usurp it.

Becker's (1982) study of art worlds shows the importance of networks for achieving fame. To do so, an artist must gain access to the network of people whose judgments define an artist's work as evidence of talent and who can give the work public visibility. The world of competitive swimming, where the clock decides who is best, might seem to be very different. But Chambliss's (1989) study of elite swimmers shows how network access is crucial for learning what it takes to be an Olympic-caliber swimmer. Without access to the networks of top coaches and competitors, one is unlikely to learn “how to do all the little things right,” which is, as Chambliss shows, what it takes — in addition to dogged practice — to become a champion.

#### THE THREAT AND USE OF VIOLENCE

To focus solely on the selective transmission of cultural capital and the control of network access would suggest that the reproduction of inequality is more genteel than it is. Boundaries are indeed maintained, perhaps most effectively and efficiently on a daily basis, through ideological and spatial separations. People can nonetheless get “out of place” when inequalities become too much to bear. Violence — the application of damaging force to human bodies — may then be necessary, from the standpoint of elites, to protect their power and privilege, and to ensure that boundaries do not break down.

What has qualitative research shown about how violence, or the threat thereof, is used to maintain boundaries? In one sense, not much. Most studies of violence by political and economic elites have been done by journalists and historians (e.g., Colby & Dennett 1995; James 1996). Qualitative sociologists have tended to study



violence by nonelite members of dominant groups (e.g., Athens 1997). A number of studies have shown how men use violence and threats to control the social lives of their female partners (Denzin 1984; Ferraro & Johnson 1983; Jones 1993). Other studies have shown how men cooperate in their use of degrading remarks, sexual bribery, and restriction of knowledge to keep women in place at work (Padavic 1991; Tallichet 1995; Yount 1991). Gardner (1995) shows that many of these same forms of inhibiting harassment occur in public as well. The effect of these forms of action, whether it is physical or verbal, is to limit women's access to people and places from which might be acquired the resources needed to challenge men for power (see also Chafe 1977).<sup>7</sup>

Violence can also function ideologically to maintain boundaries. When the capacity to enact violence is valorized within a culture, it becomes a criterion by which to decide who qualifies for membership in dominant or elite groups. Schacht's (1996) analysis of the subculture of rugby players shows how the capacities to commit violence and to suffer it stoically are constructed as markers of manhood (see also Curry 1993). A player who falls short in these respects risks being denigrated as a "woman." The boundary-maintaining logic here is not peculiar to the world of rugby; it is, rather, an amplification of a principle underlying the dominant gender order: *real* men are identifiable by their capacities to dominate and, if necessary, to hurt or kill; women are identifiable as the vulnerable. Sports, especially violent sports, can thus function to maintain gender boundaries, and a male-supremacist gender order, by providing venues in which the link between male bodies and power is celebrated (Connell 1987; Messner 1990).

### Emotion Management

All social arrangements consist of people doing things together in recurrent, orderly ways. Essential to maintaining these patterns of action are patterns of feeling. There must be, if not feelings of satisfaction, then feelings of complacency or resignation; there must be fear of change or of being punished for protest; and there must not be too much sympathy for the oppressed or too much anger toward elites. Sustaining a system of inequality, one that generates destabilizing feelings of anger, resentment, sympathy, and despair, requires that emotions be managed.

A large body of research exists on how people manage their own and others' emotions in interaction (see Smith-Lovin 1995 for a review). Some of these studies can help us see how inequality is reproduced, intentionally and incidentally, in face-to-face encounters that have obvious emotional content (e.g., Cahill & Eggleston 1994; Staske 1998). We would also argue, however, that inequality is reproduced as emotions are subtly shaped by symbolic and material culture. This view leads us to consider processes that might seem to lie beyond the usual purview of the sociology of emotions. Thus we consider how emotions are managed by

(1) regulating discourse; (2) conditioning emotional subjectivity; and (3) scripting mass events.

#### REGULATING DISCOURSE

Discourse is more than talk and writing; it is a way of talking and writing. To regulate discourse is to impose a set of formal or informal rules about what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say what to whom (Potter & Wetherell 1987). A courtroom is at one extreme in regard to degree of formal regulation; a barroom at the other. Inasmuch as language is the principal means by which we express, manage, and conjure emotions, to regulate discourse is to regulate emotion. The ultimate consequence is a regulation of action.

Cohn's (1987) study of the "technostrategic" language of defense intellectuals provides an example of how a form of discourse can mute potentially inhibiting emotions. Cohn reports that technostrategic discourse strictly avoids reference to human pain and suffering, and instead uses the abstract and dispassionate language of strikes, counter-strikes, megatonnage, and megadeaths. Given the rules of this discourse, to speak of pain and suffering is to discredit one's self as a "soft-headed activist instead of an expert" (708). We see here a form of discourse being used as an emotional anesthetic that allows technical experts to more efficiently serve the interests of political and military elites.

Corporate managers, as Jackall (1988) shows, use a similar rationalist discourse when making decisions that will hurt people (cf. Maccoby 1976). This discourse helps corporate managers stay focused on profits, even taking pride in their ability to make tough decisions that are "best for the company." In this case, corporate elites use a form of discourse — a language of efficiencies, returns, and fiduciary responsibilities — that keeps compassion at bay and facilitates the pursuit of narrow economic interests. As in the world of defense intellectuals, the privileged discourse of corporate managers can also be used to exclude or discredit those who are unable or unwilling to engage in it.

Discourse can be regulated to simultaneously quell some emotions and evoke others. This is most apparent in wartime, when political and military elites try to regulate the national discourse in ways that arouse and sustain enthusiasm for mass violence, while provoking hatred for enemy leaders and decreased sympathy for civilians on the other side. In the case of war, discourse must be regulated institutionally, via the mass media. This is accomplished by describing events, if they are described at all, in the frames preferred by elites (Gamson & Modigliani 1989), and by excluding dissident voices that might, by using alternative language and frames, evoke resistant emotions in the citizenry.

When a form of discourse is established as standard practice, it becomes a powerful tool for reproducing inequality, because it can serve not only to regulate thought and emotion, but also to identify Others and thus to maintain boundaries as well. Those who wish to belong to the dominant group, or who simply want to

be heard, may feel compelled to use the master's linguistic tools. Hegemonic discourses are not, however, eternal. As Wasielewski (1985) suggests, discourses that deny expression to the pain and anger of the oppressed create a powerful emotional tension, which in turn fosters the emergence of charismatic leaders. Such leaders catalyze change by articulating what is repressed and linking the resolution of repressed feelings to dissident action. All hegemonic discourses may thus carry within them the seeds of their own destruction.

#### CONDITIONING EMOTIONAL SUBJECTIVITY

A basic tenet of symbolic interactionism is that people act toward things based on the meanings they learn to give to things (Blumer 1969). We take this idea to apply to emotion as well: people's feelings toward things — other people, situations, events, objects — depend on the meanings they learn to give to those things. Emotion thus depends, first of all, on interpretation. It also depends, however, on self-awareness of arousal and what is then done, cognitively or interactively, to manage that arousal. An individual's acquired *habits* of interpretation and of emotion work are what we mean by conditioned emotional subjectivity.

Qualitative research in the sociology of emotions shows how emotional subjectivity can be conditioned in ways that reproduce inequality. A classic example is Hochschild's (1983) study of flight attendants and bill collectors. Hochschild shows how employers train these workers to respond emotionally to people and situations in ways that allow business to get done. Flight attendants learn how to avoid getting angry by picturing obnoxious passengers as cranky children. Bill collectors learn how to quash their feelings of sympathy for people who fall behind on their payments. What these and many other service jobs demand, Hochschild says, is not craft skill but skill at managing one's own emotions and the emotions of others — in ways that serve an employer's interests (see also Hall 1993; Leidner 1993).

Employers in service industries have a clear interest in conditioning workers' emotional subjectivity. Teaching workers to be efficient performers of emotional labor is part of the process whereby employers try to extract more value from labor than is returned to workers in the form of wages. Conditioning workers' emotional subjectivity — making emotional labor a matter of habit — is thus an important part of reproducing economic inequality. In the case of Hochschild's female flight attendants, something more is going on. When employers teach them not to be angered by the sexist behavior of male passengers, flight attendants are compelled to collude in the reproduction of gender inequality.

Scully and Marolla's (1984) study of convicted rapists suggests another link between sexism, discourse, and emotional conditioning. Scully and Marolla examined the accounts rapists used to excuse and justify their behavior. Some men justified their acts by claiming that their victims were seducers, that their victims enjoyed it, or that she said "no" but meant "yes." Other men excused themselves by

claiming that they were drunk, stoned, or mentally distressed during the crime. A common feature of these accounts is that they preclude appreciation for the victim's fear, pain, and suffering. The men thus avoid empathizing or sympathizing with their victims.

The significance of Scully and Marolla's study is underscored by two points. One is that many of the men, in describing their crimes, told of using the same accounts to facilitate their action. These accounts functioned, in other words, as legitimations that allowed the men to act on violent impulses aimed at women. A second point is that the rapists' excuses and justifications are commonplace, familiar to any adult raised in U.S. culture. We see these accounts as elements of a wider sexist discourse that, on the one hand, devalues women's subjectivity and, at the same time, conditions men's subjectivity in a way that diminishes empathy with women, and thus facilitates action that perpetuates male supremacy.

Emotional subjectivity must be similarly conditioned to enable mass violence. Armies and police forces would be feckless if it were not possible to condition individuals to suppress feelings of empathy for those whom they are ordered to batter or kill. Individuals must thus be taught how to put aside inhibiting feelings — fear as well as empathy — and do what they are told. Some theorists have argued that this kind of conditioning is a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Seidler 1991; Schwalbe 1992). Part of learning to be a man, the argument goes, is learning to devalue emotions — not only the emotions of those who might become targets of violence, but one's own emotions as well, because if one's own emotions are seen as unimportant, or as signs of weakness, then it becomes easier to despise those who show emotion or value it.

The flip side to the conditioning of masculine emotional subjectivity is the creation of femininity, as both a complementary form of conditioning and a set of adaptive practices. As a complementary form of conditioning, conventional femininity involves learning not only to value others' emotions (men's in particular), but often to value them more highly than one's own (Miller 1976; Bartky 1990). It may also entail conditioning one's self to accept as normal the feelings that are attendant to subordination.<sup>8</sup> Femininity can also be seen as a subcultural adaptation that consists of practices for managing the emotions of men (cf. Janeway 1980). This suggests, as a general principle, that the smooth reproduction of inequality depends as much on subordinates managing the emotions of dominants, as vice versa.

#### SCRIPTING MASS EVENTS

Humans are self-reflective, fraught with conflicting feelings, and capable of reconditioning themselves. These qualities create a problem in that emotional subjectivity cannot be so firmly conditioned that it can be taken for granted as a stable determinant of conformist behavior. Those who have an interest in preserving the status quo must therefore find ways both to reaffirm the desired conditioning,

and, at extraordinary times, induce desired emotions in masses of people. Elite shaping of public discourse, we have already suggested, is part of how this is done. Another way is through the scripting of emotion-inducing events.

In his analysis of primitive religion, Durkheim argued that rituals are a primary means through which group solidarity and a collective conscience are created and maintained. The emotion induced by ritual, Durkheim (1915) argued, is what creates in individuals the shared illusion that a supernatural force exists beyond the group and takes an interest in the group's fate. Subsequent writers, mostly anthropologists, have echoed and elaborated Durkheim's ideas about the power and function of ritual (Turner 1969; see also Bell 1992). Qualitative research can help us see how ritual continues to function as a social technology for managing emotions.

When we refer to the "scripting" of emotion-inducing events, we mean their orchestration to bring about an intended emotional result. Zurcher gives us two examples. In one case, he analyzes what might be called the macroscripting of a college football game (Zurcher 1982). He examines the set of activities — practices, press conferences, facility preparation, rallies — leading up to the game, the timing of these activities, the defining of the game's importance, the feeling rules invoked, and the interaction on the day of the game to show how this organization produces a powerful emotional experience for thousands of people. In another case, Zurcher (1985) analyzes a war game and shows how the event is scripted and orchestrated by military leaders to generate enthusiasm for practice killing.

Zurcher's analyses expose the process whereby collective actions are woven together to produce a mass emotional response. Zurcher also helps us see that emotion is not incidental to these events, but is essential to their happening at all, and, in fact, largely constitutes what these events *are* (cf. Gross 1986). While we might argue that football and war are activities that aid the reproduction of gender inequality, we want to make a more general point, which is that scripts underlie most emotion-inducing mass events. To understand how these events induce and organize emotion, we need to examine how the events themselves are organized.

Scripted events that inspire feelings of solidarity at the level of the "race," the firm, or the nation, reproduce inequality by encouraging subordinates to ignore inequality and embrace the dominant regime. Mass political rallies, wars, parades, and national celebrations are spectacular examples. The same social technology of emotion management is used on smaller scales. For example, Schwalbe (1996) shows how the leaders of men's movement gatherings artfully combined simple acts — decorating a room with totemic objects, burning incense, playing ethereal music, drumming, chanting, invoking spirits, and excluding women — to induce a feeling of emotional communion that compelled men to ignore political conflicts, social class differences, and sexist behavior by other men. Other studies have shown how organizational leaders likewise script meetings to manage emotions in ways

that deflect challenges to existing hierarchies (e.g., Kleinman 1996: 63-89; Kunda 1992).<sup>9</sup>

The practices of regulating discourse, conditioning emotional subjectivity, and scripting events clearly overlap. Events are always organized by using some form of discourse, which is likely to be reinforced by the event itself. Events also have socializing effects on their organizers and participants. Moreover, the kinds of emotional responses that events can induce depend on prior conditioning. No one of these practices can ensure the reproduction of inequality; rather, as we see them, they are all necessary to the process, and are most powerful when organized to be mutually reinforcing. These same methods of emotion inducement can also be used, of course, to incite dissident behavior; thus, under the right conditions, they are as essential to producing change as they are to reproducing the status quo.

## Implications

We have sought to discern what qualitative research tells us about the generic processes that reproduce inequality. Our analysis yielded a set of related concepts that, taken together, constitute a sensitizing theory of how inequality is created and reproduced. The value of such a theory lies not in specifying relationships among variables, but in guiding studies of how inequality is created and reproduced through face-to-face interaction. As discussed below, we also see our formulation as useful for resolving a number of theoretical problems concerning the link between local action and so-called structural inequalities, and the nature of inequality itself.

### LOCAL ACTION AND "STRUCTURAL" INEQUALITIES

Burawoy (1998) argues that qualitative work often fails to link local and extra-local social arrangements. By this failure, Burawoy suggests, qualitative work weakens its prospects for contributing to the development of theory about the creation and reproduction of social structure. Burawoy thus urges qualitative sociologists to proceed with more explicit concern for the development of theory. In our view, however, the problem of linking interaction to extra-local structural realities does not arise because qualitative sociology slights theory, but because of how the problem is typically framed.

To speak of linking *action* to *structure* implies the need to build a theoretical bridge between different orders of social reality. But from an interactionist standpoint, there is no need for such a bridge, one end of which would rest on a reification—"structure" being a metaphor for recurrent patterns of action involving large numbers of people. To recognize the metaphor here reminds us that the problem is not one of linking action to structure, but one of linking action across times and places. It is equally mystifying to think of a distribution of wealth, status, power, education, or other resources as a "structure" to which action must be linked.

A distribution of resources, be it equal or unequal, is not a structure; it is a *condition* under which action occurs.

An interactionist perspective leads us to see that what people in any setting can do depends on the ideas, feelings, procedural rules, tools, and habits available to enable their individual and joint action. What is it, then, that exists *beyond a setting* and constrains action within it? It can only be the actual or anticipated action of people elsewhere, enabled by the resources available to them.<sup>10</sup> "Structural forces," in this view, are constituted by the cooperative or resistant actions of people outside a setting, in response to action within it (Hall 1997:401). There is thus no superimposing structure to be found, only a myriad of other local settings.

There are good reasons to try to understand how action in one place is linked to action in another, if we are concerned with the reproduction of inequality. We might want to know, for example, how action by a few members of a dominant group, employing resources only they possess, can undermine the solidarity of subordinate groups at a distance; or how a resistance strategy devised by subordinates in one place is successfully adopted by subordinates in other places. The best way to get at these matters is perhaps also the most straightforward: study the action that constitutes inter-situational connections. How, we might ask, are the material and symbolic resources that enable othering, boundary maintenance, or emotion management in one setting transmitted or imported to another? This approach forces us to examine, or try to, the processes through which action in one locale enables and constrains action in another.

Michael Burawoy's (1991) "extended case method" likewise aims to explain how situated action is shaped by the larger social world within which such action occurs. But whereas Burawoy would rely on preexisting theory to explain the "forces of social structure" (Burawoy 1998: 5, 23) that impinge on situated action, we would conceptualize these extra-local "forces" as distant resources, which include human beings instilled with certain beliefs, habits, and skills. The distribution, accessibility, and utility of these resources then become matters for empirical, rather than theoretical, determination. As we see it, however, the key analytic question is not about resources or their distribution, but about how resources are *used*, in any given time and place, to create and reproduce patterns of action and experience.

#### INEQUALITY AS CONDITION, PROCESS, AND EXPERIENCE

Some argue that we should combine quantitative information about the conditions under which people act with qualitative analyses of how people cope with deprivation. But even this can leave us with a static view of inequality. What is missing is an analysis of the *relationships* that arise between those who seek, or seek to preserve, an unequal share of resources, power, and privilege for themselves, and those who resist or adapt. Our formulation identifies the generic processes through which these relationships of domination and subordination are created

and maintained. We see these processes not merely as generic, in the sense of occurring in multiple contexts, but as essential and generative.

Suppose, for example, that one wished to create a hierarchy of wealth, status, and power based on the familiar notion of "race." To do so would *require* a program of othering, boundary maintenance, and emotion management. Subordinates would also have to find ways to adapt, or the arrangement would collapse. Similarly, inequalities typically identified as having to do with class, gender, and sexuality depend for their reproduction on some combination of these same processes. The implication, to put it another way, is that these processes are what give rise to the forms of inequality we commonly know as "race," "class," "gender," and so on. We would thus claim that some generic processes are more important than others, because they are *generative of* patterns and conditions that are significantly consequential for large numbers of people.<sup>11</sup>

Getting at these processes requires bracketing certain labor-saving reifications. "Race," "class," and "gender," for example, though often used as explanatory variables, are merely labels for routinized forms of thought, speech, and action through which some people attempt to dominate and exploit others. Just as gender has been recognized as a form of doing (Kessler & McKenna 1978; West & Zimmerman 1987), we would argue that race and class must also be examined as they are constituted by particular forms of thought, speech, and action that create and maintain relations of domination and subordination.

Instead of asking, for example, What effect does race have on income? — as if we knew what "race" is and that it is the same everywhere — we would ask, How do people think, feel, and interact here, such that some material or felt inequality is a result, whether intended or not? Or, instead of presuming to know what "gender" is and that gender inequality will be obvious if present, we might study the beliefs and practices that seem to constitute gender in a setting, and then try to discern the consequences of these beliefs and practices. Class, too, can be approached as a situated construction, accomplished through people's daily efforts to make a living; through struggles between workers and employers to control the labor process and the disposition of the surplus; and through cooperation among elites to control business, finance, and government.

Other theorists concerned with the reproduction of inequality are coming around to a more processual view. Most notably, Tilly (1998) has recently argued that to understand the persistence of inequality it is necessary to examine the "social mechanisms — recurrent causal sequences of general scope — that actually lock categorical inequality into place" (7). These "mechanisms," Tilly proposes, "operate in similar fashion over a wide variety of organizational settings" (11). It thus seems that Tilly is interested, as are we, in understanding the generic processes that create and sustain the bounded categories upon which "durable inequalities" are erected. Tilly rejects approaches that attempt to explain inequality by reference to the qualities of individuals or to the workings of agentless systems, preferring a



“relational” approach that focuses on how actors solve organizational problems by creating bounded categories, which in turn give rise to networks that enable “opportunity-hoarding” and the coordinated exploitation of weaker groups.

Our analysis and Tilly’s relational approach overlap in regard to the processes identified as important: the creation of categories, boundaries, and networks. The differences lie in how we seek to understand these processes. We would focus, for example, on how actors use identity codes to claim category membership in a setting; how actors negotiate the meaning and salience of categories in a setting; how a setting provides resources for doing this; and how actors in a setting cooperate to valorize the cultural capital they share and use to signify superior selves. We also see it as essential to examine the emotion work through which acceptance of any regime of categories, boundaries, and networks is induced. Nor do we take for granted the strategic use of force, or the threat thereof, to hold oppressive arrangements in place. These differences do not imply incompatibility, but rather the need for interactionist analyses that more deeply probe the processes pointed to by relational analyses of the kind suggested by Tilly.<sup>12</sup>

Another notable line of parallel theorizing is offered by West and Fenstermaker (1995). Their argument, in brief, is that inequality is maintained by the possibility of people being “held accountable” as members of hierarchically ordered social categories. To be held accountable, in West and Fenstermaker’s ethnomethodological sense, is to stand vulnerable to being ignored, discredited, or otherwise punished if one’s behavior appears inconsistent with what is ideologically prescribed for members of a certain category. Compliance with an oppressive social order is thus enforced, or strongly compelled, because the threat or actuality of being held accountable makes compliance the least interactively costly option.

Accountability, West and Fenstermaker argue, is not a matter of individual discretion. It is, rather, “a feature of social relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted” (1995:24). By this, West and Fenstermaker mean that the conduct of relationships *requires* accountability, and that how accountability is manifested, in any given case, depends on the historical and cultural context. But exactly how we are to link accountability to larger features of social organization, West and Fenstermaker do not say. Our analysis suggests that the power to hold others accountable in one setting depends upon relationships — that is, a larger *net of accountability* (Schwalbe n.d.) — with actors outside the setting. The general point, again, is that to understand the reproduction of inequality in one setting, we need to see how social actors in that setting are enabled and constrained by what actors elsewhere have done, are doing, or might do.

Our aim is indeed ambitious. We are proposing to open not only the black box of social process — how actions  $X$  and  $Y$  lead to results  $Z_{1-n}$  under some set of conditions, but also to open the boxes created by the terms and categories in which sociological discourse about inequality is commonly framed. These terms and categories, we have argued, often obscure the processes that constitute the

phenomena which need to be examined directly to understand what inequality is and how it is reproduced. A sensitizing theory of generic processes in the reproduction of inequality can tell us what to look for when the lids are off, but not exactly what we will see.

#### DIRECTIONS

Our conceptualization of generic processes in the reproduction of inequality raises a number of questions that can guide future research and theory development. For instance, Under what conditions do these processes arise? How are the processes related? What are the processes through which oppression and exploitation are resisted? How are the symbolic resources that sustain these processes jointly created? Such questions might be answered, in general terms, through consolidation efforts of the kind we have undertaken here; they can also be answered, in more specific terms, through analyses of concrete settings.

There certainly remains qualitative/interactionist work to be done to understand the reproduction of inequality. Our reading of the literature revealed a number of gaps that need to be filled (see also Maines 2000). For example, it remains true (cf. Liazos 1972) that far more research focuses on action by subordinates than on action by elites. While this has given us a detailed view of how subordinates adapt to inequality, it has left us with a relatively sketchy view of how elites act strategically to perpetuate it. To understand inequality we need to study how it is maintained by those with the power to do so (e.g., Park 1999), not to continually focus on victims of the process.

Another kind of gap is evident in much qualitative research: taking race, class, gender, and sexuality for granted — as if they were background conditions with slight bearing on how people do things together in a setting. Even when one form of inequality (e.g., gender) is brought into an analysis, it is not uncommon to see other forms (e.g., class and race) left out or barely mentioned. As noted earlier, we think this tendency is changing as qualitative sociologists give more explicit attention to multiple forms of inequality within the settings they study.

In the past decade sociologists have become more aware of the need to understand how multiple systems of inequality are related. Ironically, however, the main result of calls to examine the nexus of race, class, and gender seems to be uncertainty about how to do it. Part of the problem, it seems to us, stems from seeing race, class, and gender as variables that first must be assembled in a theoretical puzzle. Perhaps more headway can be made by turning the puzzle into an empirical one. Instead of theorizing about how race, class, and gender intersect, we would look at a setting and ask, How do people create and reproduce inequalities here, and what, if anything, do “race,” “class,” and “gender” have to do with it? A good answer will tell us what we need to know about alleged intersections.

We endorse calls for new thinking about how people are caught in a “matrix of domination,” to use Patricia Hill Collins’s phrase. Much of the old thinking, as we

have argued, relies on reified conceptions of structure, confuses structure with conditions of action, and fails to see the processual character of race, class, gender, and other forms of inequality. But there is no need to reinvent the wheel. For decades, interactionist and other qualitative research has looked at how inequalities are created and linked, how actors simultaneously resist inequality and recreate it, and how relations of domination and subordination depend on complex and problematic negotiation. It makes sense to build on this work if we want to achieve deeper sociological insights into the processes through which people create and sustain the arrangements that benefit some and hurt others.

### Notes

1. Michelle Fine (1994) argues that social scientific research is often implicated in the process of othering. When researchers define a group or type of people as objects of curiosity and targets of study, the unconscious subtext may be that “these people are interesting because they are different from us.” To focus attention on a group in this way — that is, from the implicit standpoint of the dominant culture — is, in effect, to contribute to their continued othering.

2. Subordinates may also engage in a kind of silent othering aimed at deflating the impressive virtual selves that dominants try to create. For example, Pierce (1995) describes how paralegals defined their overly demanding bosses as “immature children” who needed a lot of hand-holding. This kind of cognitive coping strategy makes interaction more bearable for subordinates, but at the same time allows oppressive patterns of interaction to persist.

3. It might seem that the Clinton sexual misconduct debacle, commonly called the “Monica Lewinsky affair,” is an example of elites failing to do face-work for one of their own. Attacks on Clinton’s character can be seen, however, as self-serving attempts by elites to signify a concern for morality, and thus to reinforce the illusion of elite virtue. Focusing on Clinton as an individual also functions to avoid bringing into question the system that put him in office.

4. It is not only working-class men who trade power for autonomy. Paules’s (1991) study of waitresses shows working-class women doing much the same thing. There are, however, reasons to expect this kind of adaptive strategy to vary by gender. Men may be more inclined to seek autonomy because they are less economically and physically vulnerable than women, and because they are taught to see autonomy as a sign of manhood.

5. Individual striving for upward mobility does not, of course, threaten the system against which subordinates are reacting. In fact, *individual* striving is encouraged because it protects the larger system of inequality by making collective protest unlikely. Allowing a limited amount of upward mobility also serves to legitimate inequality by implying that the system allows the truly gifted to get ahead, and that those who remain at the bottom belong there because of their lesser merits.

6. Van Ausdale and Feagin (1996) show how young children use racial categorization schemes to do an analogous kind of boundary work.

7. In a study of Appalachian women, Gagne (1992) shows how a lack of reproductive freedom, sexist stereotypes about women, lack of transportation, lack of job opportunities, and ideologies that legitimated violence made women vulnerable to violence and allowed men to use it with near impunity. Gagne's study reminds us that the effectiveness of violence as a means of social control depends on the context in which it is used.

8. Bartky (1990:42-44, 63-82) argues that part of socialization into femininity is learning to take pleasure in practices that have the consequence of reinforcing women's subordination. DeVault's (1991) study of women's work in feeding families can be interpreted as showing how socialization into femininity equips and conditions women to create meaning and satisfaction in activities that pose no threat to male supremacy.

9. Scripting can also be seen as a form of work-process rationalization. Leidner's (1993) studies of fast-food workers show how employers routinize not only manual tasks but also the interactions that workers are supposed to have with customers. The goal of this scripting, Leidner suggests, is to regulate the emotions of workers and customers, so as to make the outcomes of these interactions predictable and profitable.

10. Lee (1995), for example, examines the social control practices of managers in two different labor markets in southern China. Either site could have yielded an interesting, self-contained analytic story about managerial control. But Lee goes on to show how the strategies used in the two sites were linked to local labor market conditions and to the gender order. Lee's analysis was thus enhanced by consideration of how the surrounding economic and cultural context equipped actors (or ill-equipped them) to pursue their interests on the shop floor.

11. Giddens (1979, 1984) treats the tacit rules that guide interaction as generative of structure, in much the way that the rules of grammar are generative of well-formed, meaningful sentences. Somewhat differently, we presuppose the existence of an interaction order (Goffman 1983) and treat generic social processes as generative of types of experiences and relationships, in much the way that the rules of scholarship are generative of different kinds of literary experiences than the rules of poetry.

12. Tilly (1998:8) makes the curious remark that in seeking the roots of categorical inequality he is setting off to explore a "wilderness." The classic interactionist sources and the many qualitative studies cited here suggest that Tilly's wilderness is rather well populated, if not yet incorporated. We hope that the unfortunate invisibility of qualitative contributions to understanding the roots of inequality will be in part overcome by our efforts.

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