Locating difference: class, 'race' and gender and the shaping of social inequalities

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Abstract
The current interest in difference has arisen in part because of its importance in recent recognition claims, and in part because of a belief that as a concept it can illuminate social diversity. Debates here have stressed the importance of the symbolic in the construction of social relations and social diversity, and have highlighted the relational underpinnings of diversity. In this paper we seek to take forward aspects of such an analysis by examining some issues in the shaping of difference and inequalities in the domains of gender, class and 'race'. It is our argument that we can gain insights in these domains by better describing and theorising the mutuality of value and material social relations. The paper argues that issues of identity and difference need to be more firmly located within relational accounts of social *practice*, and in the nature of claims (to recognition and resources) which emerge out of different social locations. By exploring issues of difference in debates on class, gender and 'race', we argue that relational accounts must be placed within a perspective that also emphasises the content and patterned nature of (highly differentiated) social relations.

Introduction
The 'cultural turn' in social theory and sociological thought has opened up new kinds of questions and insights into the social world (Clarke, 2002; Roseneil, 1995). A renewed concern with diversity, and social agency, has resulted in a strengthening 'sense' of culture, which sees that culture is not simply another 'sphere' to add to society, economy and polity but rather the medium through which 'material' relations acquire shape and meaning. In this paper we seek to take forward aspects of such an analysis by examining some issues in the shaping of difference and inequalities in the domains of gender, class and 'race'. It is our argument that we can gain insights in these domains by better describing and theorising the mutuality of value and material social relations. There is no singular 'model' being put forward here – the articulation of value and extant social relations is variable across social domains and across diverse cultural and historical contexts – however, the focus on their *particular* articulation helps to shed light on the shaping and reshaping of social experiences and inequalities.

The current interest in difference has arisen in part because of its importance in recent recognition claims, and in part because of a belief that as a concept it can illuminate social diversity, especially in respect of 'race', gender and, to a lesser extent, class. Debates here have stressed the importance of the symbolic, of the role of ideas and values, in the construction of social relations and social diversity. Culture is not 'tagged on' but is core in the production of material relations – of difference and of inequality. Accounts of 'difference' have highlighted the relational underpinnings of diversity, and focused attention on the *processes* giving rise to difference. Nevertheless there is a risk of getting trapped in the terms of difference. It is our argument that we need to *locate difference*, and its variable salience. This takes us closer to the objective of analysing values as embedded within differentiated social relations. This will be our task in the later discussion of empirical evidence on

perceptions and practices in the areas of class, 'race', gender. Our analysis is not intended as a full account of these domains, but rather takes them as a way of focusing on the coherence and mutual influence of social order and social values.

Issues of identity and difference need to be more firmly located within relational accounts of differentiated social *practices*, and in the nature of claims (to recognition and resources) which emerge out of different social locations. This entails looking at both the social relations constituted through overt claims, and also at the relations that underlie such values and claims. By exploring issues of difference in debates on class, gender and 'race', we argue that relational accounts must be placed within a perspective that also emphasises the content and patterned nature of (highly differentiated) social relations.

On difference
'Difference' is a concept used in diverse literatures with quite distinct agendas. However, certain key themes are of interest to the current discussion. A useful 'touchstone' is Anderson's notion of difference in terms of imagined communities, where the nation is imagined 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1983: 6). Communities are a cultural construction, a way of organising thought into ideas of similarity and difference, rather than a necessary reflection of reality. 'Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson, 1983: 6).

Many writers are concerned with the ways in which constructions of social difference shape both material inequalities and inequalities of recognition (for example, Honneth, 1996; Fraser, 1995; Philips, 1999; Brah, 1994; Anthias, 1998, 2001). The critique of essentialism is well established in social thinking and most writers focus on the social and discursive construction of difference. Difference is theorised as the relationship in which 'groups' stand to one another, rather than as an objective reflection of the content of two or more groups' values, or behaviours. It is not what inheres in groups, but rather the making of distinctions which makes people belong, or define themselves in particular ways.

Barth was an early advocate of this approach. His (1969) work represents, as he later phrased it, 'one of the first anthropological applications of a more postmodern view of culture' (Barth, 1994: 12) which abandoned the view that cultures are clearly bounded and homogenous entities, noting instead the internal diversity within cultures. This led to an approach to the study of culture which, rather than looking at what cultures held in common, instead explored the 'organisation of diversity'. In stressing 'the social organisation of culture difference' (1994: 12) Barth argued that 'the critical focus for investigation becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses' (1969: 15). Barth emphasised that 'the cultural differences of primary significance for ethnicity are those that people use to mark the distinction, the boundary' (1994: 12):

> 'The features that are taken into account are not the sum of "objective" differences, but only those
> which the actors themselves regard as significant ...some cultural features are used by the actors as
> signals and emblems of difference, others are ignored, and in some relationships radical differences
> are played down and denied' (Barth, 1969: 14).

Recent discussions of difference have maintained this stress on relationality and on the organisation of diversity (for example, Young, 1990, 1997; Jenkins, 1996; Burkitt, 1998; Afshar, 1998), with much debate on the nature of groups as outcomes of the differential positioning of those with particular characteristics (real or imagined). As Young (1997) says:

'Groups should be understood in relational terms rather than as self-identical substantial entities with essential attributes. A social group is a collective of persons differentiated from others by cultural forms, practices, special needs or capacities, structures of power or prestige in a relational conceptualization, what constitutes a social group is not internal to the attributes and self understanding of its members. Rather, what makes the group a group is the relation in which it stands to others' (Young, 1997: 389).

This definition emphasises relationality as the maker of difference, but begs the question 'when is a group a group'? As Brubaker argues in his analysis of ethnic categories and identifications 'groupings' properly belong 'to our empirical data, not our analytical toolkit' (2002: 165). As with 'race', we should put inverted commas around dimensions of difference to flag their philosophical arbitrariness, their socially constructed nature. For example if we talk of gender, of women and men in categorical terms then we reify the terms, and continue to police people and conceptualise diverse experience in terms of a numbing conceptual dichotomy. This concern is expressed recurrently within research on diversity, agency, and manifests as a reluctance by some to 'talk structure', or its disavowal altogether. Many others do seek ways of 'talking structure', and point to the need for analytic frameworks which both recognise the central importance of human agency and social diversity, and reveal the structured ways in which social hierarchies are reproduced (Maynard, 1994; Bradley, 1997;Walby, 1997, 2001).

The key argument to be stressed here is the need to 'locate difference'. We need tools capable of illuminating the varying salience of dimensions of difference, and their articulation with other social arrangements. Anthias (1998, 2001) for example, argues that categories of difference, such as ethnicity and gender, are often treated as a cause, rather than as an a outcome, of social relations, yet:

'…class, gender and ethnicity/race cannot be seen as constructing permanent fixed groups but involve shifting constellations of social actors, depending on the ways the boundaries of a denoted category are constructed' (Anthias, 2001: 378).

We therefore need to attend to the processes by which such boundaries are constructed. Anthias seeks to:

'…rethink social stratification away from the polarity between the material and the symbolic, and argue that material inequality is informed by claims and struggles over resources of different types, undertaken in terms of gender, ethnicity/race and class ' (Anthias, 2001: 368).

We agree on the importance of 'locating difference'. A productive direction here, we argue, is to engage with its variability across diverse contexts, both contemporary contexts and changing historical contexts. To do so adequately requires that we move outside the terms of difference and work with a more general perspective. With such a perspective we can analyse difference partly in terms of overt values and commitments: as claims. However, such a focus also needs to be matched by the analysis of *implicit* assumptions and norms, as they are embedded in social interaction and in practical engagements with the social world. We suggest that the significance of the latter has been underplayed and under-theorised. These two difference aspects of value, as overt claims and implicit norms within social assumptions and social relations, are intertwined. Exploring their relationship is crucial for understanding the processes by which claims to difference take on salience in particular contexts, how they are given voice and mobilised, and how overt constructions of difference both emerge from, and become embedded in, social relationships.

Walby argues that theorists who address the issue of difference offer an abstracted account which is inadequately grounded in real social relations. We need to go 'beyond the simplicities of

community"' (2001: 123), that is beyond abstracted notions of group identity, difference and group claims to a more grounded analysis. In this paper we seek to develop a more grounded analysis. The following discussion draws from the authors' recent research concerns and explores the mutuality of values and social relations, of the 'cultural' and the 'material', across gender, class and ethnicity. We argue that this kind of approach offers a new conceptual framing through which to analyse the shaping and reshaping of social differences and inequalities.

Values in practice

Debates about difference make central the importance of culture, of value, in theorising the social. Judgements of value are seen as integral to social relations and patterns of oppression. Our argument is consistent with this emerging sense that we need new ways of locating attributions of difference (and differential worth) – as part of a broader theorisation of inequality and its reproduction. In the examples to follow we take as a central focus the mutuality of social relations and patterns of social organisation, on the one hand, and social values, on the other. However, these different 'sides' of the social coin are descriptive devices only, since values and social arrangements are integral, mutually and historically enmeshed. We can explore values as they are embedded – implicitly – in social arrangements (we construe these as norms) and we can explore consciously held, or practised values. The first domain comprises the implicit assumptions and meanings which people draw on in their practical interactions and engagements with others. The second domain concerns overtly held values, commitments, claims and politicised interventions. These domains overlap in ways we elaborate below. For example, some overt, particularistic values and claims may come to hold a general currency and be normalised and naturalised: an implicit part of the social landscape. By distinguishing overt claims from values implicit in social relations, we are not trying to argue that they refer to distinct issues, but rather indicating that they can be seen as different analytical perspectives on the same patterns and processes.

We hold with a metaphor of society as a differentiated social space in which people, identities, resources and activities are differently positioned, and differently valued. In some 'domains', notably gender (and generation), social differentiation is associated with quite direct and largely manifest ties of interdependence and mutuality. A repositioning in social space is associated with a shift in patterns of exchange and interdependence. Across all our domains, though, we can see that values are integral to the shape of social relations. For example, with respect to contemporary developments in gender, class and of 'race'/ethnicity we can talk of a changing social (evaluational) space of gendered, classed and 'raced' relations. This is emphatically not an argument that patterns of inequality somehow straightforwardly map onto values but rather an insistence that culture, the evaluational, lies always in the order of things.

We are not advocating a single explanatory framework, nor suggesting there is uniformity across our three domains of gender, class and 'race', which offer diverse experiences of difference, with important variations in how social organisation and social values articulate. However, we do argue that important insights can be achieved in all three domains through better describing and analysing the *nature* of the links between social organisation and value.

In our first example we look at the domain of class and stratification. A seeming gap between values and patterns of social interaction has been unresolved in recent debates about class, yet the gap is an artefact of social hierarchy. Hierarchy positions people differently and works to entail 'normal' interactions with like others, or similar reference groups. 'Class' is not therefore a core component in many people's identities nor in the values they bring to bear in their routine and day-to-day interactions. Rather 'class' can be best seen as a set of *claims* about the nature of the social hierarchy, claims which hold variable force across diverse contexts. The example reveals how the

scope of evaluation, and to some extent its content, is structured by aspects of the social interaction order. In our second example we consider 'race' and ethnicity. More overt 'us and them' expressions of difference are central to the experience of racialised groups (Anthias, 1998), although it is also the case that in the construction of majority/minority groups there is a 'normalising' set of processes at work. Like that of class this example reveals how the scope of evaluation is structured by aspects of the social interaction order. This is not to suggest that racism somehow emerges from this order, but rather to analyse this order as part of a dominant cultural imagined community of 'people like us' which is ethnically coded. In our third example we explore aspects of change in gender and in patterns of fertility. In both the first fertility decline around a century ago, and in current patterns of demographic change we can trace the mutuality of change in group differentiation (and de-differentiation) and change in values regarding morally proper roles, and appropriate social divisions of labour.

Aspects of class and stratification
The concept of difference has been infrequently applied to the domain of class (except as a cross-cutting influence to class processes), partly because the 'politics of recognition', central to accounts of difference, has been seen to eclipse the 'politics of redistribution' (Walby, 2001). Despite widening material inequalities, class is no longer 'a major source of [. . .] identity and group belonging' (Savage, 2000: 40). Qualitative studies indicate that people refuse to place themselves 'within' classes, explicitly disavow class identities (Skeggs, 1997; Reay, 1997), and are concerned to establish their own 'ordinariness' (Devine, 1992; Savage *et al*., 2001), an indirect way of refusing 'the entire "class" discourse altogether' (Savage, 2000: 35).The decline of explicit class claims has led to a curious situation where class relations express differentiation but not 'difference'. The embarrassing absence of clear-cut class identities, regardless of persistent class inequalities, has raised a fundamental question of whether social values and claims have come 'unstuck' from material relations.

The apparent divide between class conditions and the subjective perceptions and reactions to those conditions has led some theorists to conclude that individualisation has resulted in the increasing free-floating nature of cultural identity and values.

> 'Action is divorced from underlying material constraints (or rather these constraints disappear) and enters the voluntaristic realm of taste, choice and preference. As it does so the boundaries between determined social groups disappear' (Crook *et al*., 1992: 35).

Such theorists are not arguing that material inequality has declined. For Beck, for example, contemporary society is both highly unequal but also classless: 'it is a capitalism without classes, but individualized social inequality and all the related social and political problems' (Beck, 1986: 88). Rather, such writers are arguing that the translation of material relations into social groupings and political action no longer has the same force it once had. Because society has become individualised and fragmented, the prospects for material inequality giving rise to class communities, solidarity, consciousness or action have receded. However, a newer generation of class theorists have attacked this argument by fundamentally rethinking how class location is bound up with cultural values and social claims. New writers on class still see class as significant, but now argue that it is *implicit* in social relations rather than in terms of overt values or explicit self-identifications.

> 'What establishes the relationship between class and culture (ie, what establishes the classed nature of cultural dispositions) is not the existence of class consciousness, or the coherence or uniformity of a distinct set of cultural dispositions. Rather, the relationship is to be found in the way in which cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and/or domination' (Devine and Savage, 2000: 195).

People do not have to explicitly recognise class issues, or identify with discrete class groupings, for class processes to operate. Class identity is implied in the specific cultural practices which are bound up with the reproduction of hierarchy, and 'class' is now encoded in implicit ways. The emphasis is not on the development (or not) of class consciousness, but rather on the classed nature of particular social and cultural practices. For new class theorists individualisation does not involve the death of class (as for Beck), but rather a shift in how class operates: for 'while collective class identities are indeed weak, people continue to define their own individual identities in ways which inevitably involve relational comparisons with members of various social classes' (Savage, 2000: xii). So 'despite a pervasive denial of class status, there are emotional intimacies of class which continue to shape individuals' everyday understandings, attitudes and actions' (Reay, 1998b: 267). The absence of direct reference to class in everyday discourse is taken as a *sign* of class in action, with class now encoded in implicit ways. Such accounts stress a much more implicit and unselfconscious 'class identity', but argue that 'class' continues to shape people's cultural practices (even if experienced and perceived in highly individualised ways) because class cultures are now viewed as 'modes of differentiation rather than as types of collectivity' (Savage, 2000: 102).

New theories of class argue that hierarchical position acts as a constraint on aspirations and tastes, social networks and resources, and that hierarchy is therefore an important element shaping social identity. Such studies are not looking for class consciousness, but rather *classed* consciousness, in which the recognition of social divisions – or rather social distance – is embedded in *practice*.This rebuts postmodern arguments that individualisation undermines class identities by placing issues of cultural identity at the heart of class theory, but entails rejecting the older analytical model in which economic class structure gives rise to status (or cultural) differences.

The renewed 'culturalist class analysis' aims to 'focus on how cultural processes are embedded within specific kinds of socio-economic practices', exploring how 'processes of inequality are produced and reproduced routinely and how this involves both economic and cultural practices' (Devine and Savage, 2000: 193, 196). However, given that the aims of class revisionists entail embracing the idea of inequality as a process of individualized differentiation, emphasize hierarchy over collectivity, and stress the fusion of economic, cultural and symbolic elements in hierarchical differentiation, it is hard to see what remains of 'class' in 'class theory' (Bottero and Prandy, 2003). Moreover, in rebutting the notion that culture has become detached from material relations, new theorists of class have merely raised, in newly critical form, another problem: namely, what is the *relationship* between implicit hierarchical cultures and explicit 'class' values and claims? There is a potential solution to this issue, but it entails yet another step away from traditional class concerns. What is required is a sharper distinction between hierarchical differentiation (as an ordering of social relations in which cultural values are implicit and normative), and 'class' (as a set of explicit and politicized claims), in order that the relations between the two can be traced out in particular contexts.

It is appropriate for 'new' class analysis to down-grade the search for self-conscious class awareness or identity, because social interaction and lifestyle have an orderly and consistent pattern constrained by hierarchy. Not merely cultural tastes, but also our most intimate and important social relationships (friendship, partnership etc) are strongly related to hierarchical position (Kalmijn, 1994, 1998; Prandy and Bottero, 2000; Prandy and Jones, 2001). So to the extent that people limit their social interactions with each other we can argue that hierarchy (not 'class') is 'recognised' and acts as an important cultural force in people's lives. The people we are closest to tend to come from a very similar social location to our own, and our choices are governed both by contiguity and by the social comfort that comes from associating with 'people like us'. Since hierarchy is embedded in the most intimate social relationships, and 'social location' and 'culture' are united in the structured nature of everyday social practices, hierarchical practices emerge as 'second nature', unremarkable and unremarked.

Take, for example, the evidence that people shrug off class labels, instead locating themselves as 'ordinary' or 'middling'. Savage argues that 'in so far as class [identity] is significant, it is largely with respect to politics' (2000: 37), and that 'people seem keen to invoke a distinction between their personal lives –in which class is rarely seen as a salient issue – and the world "out there", the world of politics, the economy, the media' (2000: 117).When they speak in personal terms 'People want to belong to a group of ordinary, average types, differentiating from a group above them and below them' (Savage, 2000: 116). It is important to recognise that this does not represent the *de-coupling* of values and social location (Crook *et al.*, 1992; Pakulski and Waters, 1995) but rather the particular way in which values are *embedded* in social relations.

Claims to being 'ordinary' or 'middling' are strongly related to the hierarchical nature of general social networks. In a six nation study of subjective class identification, Kelley and Evans found that a 'middling' self-image: 'holds at all levels of the objective stratification hierarchy. Rich and poor, well-educated and poorly educated, high-status and low status, all see themselves near the middle of the class system, rarely at the top or bottom' (Kelley and Evans, 1995: 166). But the reason for the ubiquity of an 'ordinary' middling self-image is that 'reference-group forces restrict the subjective arena to a narrow range in the middle of the class hierarchy' (Kelley and Evans, 1995: 166). 'Reference-group forces' refers to the way in which: 'Individuals assess their class location in light of the distribution of education, occupations, authority, and income among the people around them. As a consequence, even very high status people see many others above themselves, and very low status people see others even lower. [. . .] This tendency to perceive everyone as similar to oneself is reinforced by the tendency for one's spouse and friends to be similar to oneself in education, occupational status and income. (Evans *et al.*, 1992: 465). Because our personal world is largely filled with people just like us, we tend to think of our social situation as normal and unexceptional, and we therefore see our hierarchical position as 'average' or 'middling'.

It is clear that many of the processes of everyday life lived within an unequal structure *themselves* help to undermine a sense of class, or at least serve to fray the edges in such a manner that clear-cut identities fail to emerge. It is precisely because personal life (friendship, marriage, the people who surround us) is hierarchically ordered that people tend to see themselves as 'ordinary', and thus downplay the significance of hierarchy in their lives. Moreover, because relations between peers and kin tend to be conducted on a relatively equal, consensual basis, people are likely to feel that 'class' and class conflict are less significant as a feature of *personal* identity.

'New' class analysis makes an important distinction between explicit, or discursive constructions of 'class', and tacit recognitions of 'class' embedded in social relations (what we would prefer to call hierarchical differentiation). However, we also need to explain how these different aspects of 'class' are related. Why do explicit class identities, solidarities and demarcated boundaries emerge at some times and places and not others? The evidence of collective class identities is comparatively thin. Cannadine's review of the history of discursive constructions of 'class' in Britain, argues that collective and more adversarial constructions of 'class' only emerged at particular times and contexts, often with the explicit politicisation of social description (1998: 167). The question, then, is not why the working class have *relinquished* class identifications, but rather why, and under what circumstances, hierarchically differentiated groups *adopt* explicit class discourses, since this seems to be more unusual. Hierarchy is decisive in shaping our experience, not least in that it often serves to obscure the nature of inequality and to prevent explicit class identities from forming. Because of the deep-seated way in which hierarchy is embedded in personal relationships such differences are likely to perceived in *public* rather than personal contexts[1]. 'Class' exists 'out there' in the public domain (or through stereotyped representations of 'them').

The rise (and fall) of oppositional class cultures and explicit class identities is therefore strongly related to the nature of 'class' in public life, and particularly to politicised claims and discourses or ideologies of hierarchy and inequality. It is not inequality or hierarchy per se which generate explicit, collective class identities, but rather that, at particular times and with varying success, collective 'class' has been mobilised as an organising (and dividing) principle: at work and in political life. But such mobilisations are contextual and often fleeting, in part because of the way in which other, general, processes of hierarchy work counter to 'class' processes (class in the explicit, collective sense). Particular historical moments can throw up sharp breaks in the social contacts, lifestyle, aspirations and opportunities of different groups of workers, creating discourses and identifications of an explicitly 'economic' or 'class' kind, yet such identifications can also dissolve. This is partly because of cultural changes and altered political discourses, however it is also related to the way in which normal processes of hierarchical differentiation (in which implicit cultural values are embedded) often work to filter the significance of inequality, and limit the application of explicit 'class' discourses in our personal lives.

Aspects of 'race'
New theoretical accounts of 'class' have helped show how hierarchy is implicit and deeply embedded in social practice. In a parallel vein Reay argues that this holds true also within constructions of 'whiteness':

> 'Within feminism black feminists have argued strongly that, despite whiteness remaining an unspoken taken-for-granted for white women, it powerfully influences actions and attitudes' (Reay, 1998: 265).

Noting the 'apparent emptiness of "white" as a cultural identity' (2000: 448), Frankenberg argues that, nonetheless, 'racism shapes white people's lives and identities in a way that is inseparable from other facets of daily life' (Frankenberg, 2000: 451). For Frankenberg, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, but 'refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed' (Frankenberg, 2000: 447). The implicit, embodied and taken-for-granted nature of 'whiteness' means that white experience becomes naturalised and normative.

We need to consider how to relate processes which generate 'whiteness' as invisible and taken-for-granted in contrast to other racialised or ethnic identities which are normally framed in terms of boundaries, overtly recognised differences, and explicit conflict. How are we to reconcile accounts of 'whiteness' as implicit, embodied, background, with more 'up front' identifications of ethnic belonging and difference?

As we have seen, reference group processes often work against the routine formation of classed identities. The effect of hierarchy on social networks means that we tend to associate with people from broadly similar backgrounds, meaning that processes shaping inequality become less 'visible'. Because individuals overestimate the number of persons similar to themselves and their intimates, we think of our social situation as normal and unexceptional, and therefore project our own hierarchical position as 'average' or 'middling'. Of course, close social networks (of friendship, marriage and partnership) are additionally constrained by ethnicity, and people thus also tend to associate with those from broadly similar ethnic identities (Kalmijn, 1994, 1998).

However, reference group effects work very differently for majority ethnic and minority ethnic groups. Whiteness takes on the status of 'seeming normativity . . . structured invisibility' because of the link between 'where one stands in society and what one perceives' (Frankenberg, 2000: 451, 452). For white people in a majority white society, the effects of social distance and reference group processes means that white people will typically associate with other white people, and will tend to normalise that experience:

> 'White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all other people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image' (Dyer, 1997: 9).

Where similar reference group effects operate within minority ethnic groups they are forcefully confronted with majoritarian constructions of the same thing. Thus reference group effects for minority groups work to *reinforce* the experience of differentiation and being positioned as different (cf. Modood *et al.*, 1994).

Of course reference group effects cannot be separated out from the values and claims which help shape the nature of such reference groups. Reference group effects, along with group boundaries, are arguably strengthened in the wake of black power movements, and recently diverse cultural recognition claims. These claims have fed into an altered landscape which puts racism more firmly on policy agendas and alters the cultural context by more effectively challenging the normativity of white 'majority' assumptions. For some, though, there has simply been a shift in racist constructions, not a weakening of such constructions. The majoritarian normalising process has in effect 'absorbed' criticisms acknowledging the falseness of biological hierarchy but recreating a racist code by racialising cultural difference (cf. Hall, 2000; Solomos and Back, 1996). In this logic, a majority 'our' culture is normalised in contrast to minority 'their' cultures, or 'their' ethnicity. Solomos and Back (1996) argue that the new racisms of the 1980s and 1990s were coded with a cultural logic. Changing constructions of ethnic belonging, through the growth of recognition claims and linked dynamics of diversification, and through racist constructions of difference, might seem to give culture and the normative a role which is almost unattached to material social relations. If so it would echo accounts of community identity which stress its symbolic nature:

> '…culture – the community as experienced by its members – does not consist in social structure or in 'the doing' of social behaviour. It inheres, rather, in 'the thinking' about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct' (Cohen, 1985: 98).

However, such arguments make too rigid a distinction between the symbolic, on the one hand, and the material and interactional, on the other. Patterned processes of social interaction are linked to different expressions of value, and within which broader racist assumptions and evaluations are filtered.

Wallman (1986), for example, has argued that perceptions of ethnic difference relate to the nature of social networks. In particular, her research found that differences between two urban boroughs in the recognition and strength of ethnic boundary processes were related to the nature of social networks in the two locales. In one, networks were open and heterogeneous, whereas in the other, networks were strongly overlapping (neighbours were also work colleagues, friends and so on). In the former, the more diffuse nature of networks meant that it was easier for individuals to cross ethnic boundaries: since friendship, neighbourhood, and work groups were not congruent, individuals had only one boundary at a time to negotiate. Additionally, the resources held in such networks were more loosely distributed. In the latter locale, because networks were strongly reinforcing, boundary processes were stronger, and network resources were concentrated within ethnic groups. Wallman thus provides a theorisation of the link between the 'associational' and the evaluational. The salience of 'race'/ethnicity as a dimension of difference draws on wider cultural constructions of racial hierarchy, In the one, overtly racist, borough, this construction was mobilised as a set of racist assumptions and attributions, whilst it held relatively limited salience in the other context. This research offers an empirically grounded argument about how different social contexts, theorised in terms of networks and patterns of social interaction, lend a different salience to

racialised constructions of difference. There are parallels here with Brubaker, whose analysis of context, process and relationality rather than groups entails a delineation of the circumstances in which group, specifically ethnic, identifications acquire meaning (Brubaker, 2002).

As Solomos and Back (1996) argue, the need to conceptualise racism in ways which can provide conceptual links between local or contextual patterns of racism and wider national discourses remains an important challenge. To understand processes of racism we need to look not only at differentiated patterns of association and interaction, but also at the ways in which they mesh with attributions of meaning and value at the level of direct experience of personal interactions, and at the level of generalised and shifting constructions of 'race', and cultural difference.

Within the field of the anthropology of community and ethnicity, theorists such as Vered Amit have been sharply critical of how the notion of imagined community has increasingly led to a view of identity and community that is 'devoid of social content even while it is symbolically marked in terms of opposition between insiders and outsiders' (Amit and Rapport, 2002: 165). Yet, as Amit notes, 'some of the most crucial forms of fellowship, of belonging, are barely marked by explicit symbolic icons', and 'some of the most common avenues for forming a sense of fellowship, of belonging and social connection are realized through modest daily practices that are often not strongly marked by symbolic categorical identities' through 'people and relationships known loosely as friends, neighbours, workmates, companions in a variety of leisure, parenting, schooling, political activities' (2002, 64, 165).

> 'These are forms of community which are conceptualized first and foremost by reference to what is held in common by members rather than in terms of oppositional categories between members and outsiders. That is to say, such consociation and the identities deriving from it are built up through the shared experiences of participation in particular associations and events. What matters most, therefore, is what "we" have shared, not the boundary dividing "us" from "them". In such circumstances, the identity and sense of community arises in the course of, and is conceptualized in terms of particular forms of social interaction' (2002: 59–60).

Amit stresses the importance of contextualising symbolic categorical identifications and seeing how they 'are likely to be invoked, by whom, and how these invocations articulate, collide or are bypassed by particular forms of social relations (2002: 19).We would echo such views.

Aspects of gender and family
Gender lies at the heart of discussions of contemporary social changes in the areas of family, intimate relations, care, work and well-being. There is wide reference to the importance of value change across these areas but we are short of tools for its description and analysis. There is difficulty in operationalising the concept of value change in part, we would argue, because it tends to be set apart from material changes (Crompton, 2002). The contemporary family is often seen to have undergone a revolutionary change, in which rising rates of divorce, lone parenthood, independent living, and fertility decline have been part of a transformation in intimate relationships and in the position of the 'individual in society' – their commitments to themselves and others (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; McRae, 1999; Silva and Smart, 1999, Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988).With few general analytical frameworks available it is notable that an influential one, the individualisation perspective, seeks to make a virtue out of the apparent separation of value from material circumstance in contemporary society. Its advocates argue that values are less 'determined' than they were historically as we become individualised and authors of our own life trajectories, forced to make choices (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Lesthaeghe and Surkyn, 1988; Aries, 1980). Such a view seems to separate out individuals (and their values) from social structural processes. We argue that altered choices and values can still be seen as integral to the social order – even whilst more people are more the agents of their own lives and even whilst that order is undergoing transition.

To explore these issues we take the example of changing patterns of fertility behaviour. Declines in fertility were significant in the UK from the 1960s to the late 1970s, with patterns of deferral in the timing of parenthood and with an increasing incidence of childlessness. But these changes cannot be understood as a result of a new round of individualisation in the current era nor in terms of a shift to more ego-centred behaviour. Rather, recent changes can, like prior ones, be located as a part of emergent patterns of social differentiation and inter-dependence between social groups. One of the most general features of analyses of the first fertility decline is that it was intricately bound up with changing patterns of social inter-dependence. These dimensions, of changing relations of inter-dependence between groups, and change in their social location and claiming position, remain crucial to an understanding of late 20th century patterns of fertility change.

The first fertility decline saw a radically new set of values and choices being made, a revolution in 'rational' reproductive behaviours. From the 1860s to the 1930s fertility fell dramatically (rates declined from over 6 children per married couple to 2.3 by 1920s). It was a remarkable change in the space of just two generations. For the first time, the mass of the people became agents of their own reproductive behaviour through making choices and through newly reflexive behaviours (eg. Gillis *et al.*, 1992; Szreter, 1996). Yet we can see this shift in values *as an integral part of change in social structure*, as a coherent round of social transition. Innovative, culturally informed analyses of the first fertility decline maintain that it was intricately bound up with changing social locations, roles and patterns of inter-dependence across generations and between women and men.

With various factory acts and legislation restricting child labour, and with improved standards of living generally in the second half of the nineteenth century, change in the pattern of capital accumulation and labour use in the second phase of industrialisation, and the implementation of compulsory schooling, children became less extensively engaged in economic activity. Caldwell (1980) describes this as a reversal of the flow of wealth across generations. Children became dependent for longer, claiming family resources, rather than contributing towards them. These shifts were variable across occupations and local labour markets, and their causes complex (Szreter, 1996; Smelser, 1991; Levine, 1987; Handwerker, 1986). However, in summary, available evidence reveals that the shifting social positioning of children altered motives for having children, placing children very differently not only in the social division of labour, but also in the cultural imagination. Zelizer speaks of a 'sacralisation' of childhood: a shift from children being seen as an economic asset to an economic cost, but a priceless emotional asset (Zelizer, 1985).

The other key dimension of explanation has to do with gender relations and the relative positioning of women and men. Various writers argue that a convergence in the interests of women and men both enhanced motivations for smaller families, and facilitated more effective birth control (Szreter, 1996; Seccombe, 1993; Gittins, 1982). With the entrenchment of a family wage system, Seccombe argues, male breadwinners came to share in the longer standing female interest in reducing family size. This contributed to the revolution in reproductive consciousness. The decline in family size both facilitated, and was reinforced by, an intensified investment of time, energy and resources devoted to each child; a strengthening of a particular ideal of motherhood, and of proper gender roles in the nuclear family, in the inter-war period. The period saw a new dominance or scope of the breadwinner/carer ideology (Gittins, 1982; Lewis, 1986). Such a pattern attained a new breadth of coverage and came into its own as the 'proper' aspiration for working households. The social and subjective identities of women as domestic managers and carers and men as breadwinners became more deeply embedded in clearly differentiated roles and responsibilities, a model of respectability for better off working class families (eg Roberts, 1986).

We can see in this example the mutual nature of *changing values* pertaining to gender and to childhood and the *changing relative positioning* of women and men, and of adults and children (Irwin, 2003 for more detail). The dynamic is partly contingent on the relative success and embedding of particular *claims*, notably the claim to breadwinning wages (Pederson, 1993; Jenson, 1986). The breadwinner claim gained momentum and became more entrenched within social relations and norms. Whilst we argue there is a mutuality of values and changing patterns of interaction this must not be taken to imply consensus. Jenson (1986) sees the inter-war construction of gender roles and identities in terms of a narrowing of the 'universe of political discourse', a closing down of space in which alternative patterns of living could be constructed and expressed. We can see an embedding of particular assumptions of what was proper, and even moral, behaviour, about the proper 'interdependence' and difference that gender made. The relational reconfiguring, and altered social identities and norms were all part of a narrowing of what was deemed a common-sense way of organising things. This is not to say the vision of 'proper' gender difference was general – that there was no protest or variability – but rather that this pattern came to hold a dominant, cultural currency.

These dimensions, of changing relations of inter-dependence between gender and generation, and change in their social location and claiming position, remain crucial to an understanding of contemporary patterns of fertility change (Irwin, 2000a). For example, patterns of delay in family formation since the 1970s, in part reflect a shift to the co-resourcing of households and newly formed families, where the earnings of women have become more important relative to the earnings of men. Young men have seen a deterioration in their relative position, and young women a relative improvement (Irwin, 1995; Egerton and Savage, 2000).We have also witnessed the increased significance of claims to independence and autonomy amongst young women. This has created an altered set of motivations around family formation. In part, later ages at family formation are due to the constraints of achieving 'adequate' resources and living arrangements for raising children (such as home ownership), and in part due to an altered salience of family and work in the identities of young women in particular, and of young men. These shifts are an integral part of the restructuring of social relations, patterns of interdependence and hierarchy. Research into childlessness also puts in doubt growing autonomy or choice as sufficient concepts for analysing change. For various individuals and couples childlessness is not explicitly chosen (and not an index of radically new kinds of values around commitment) but is an outcome of the same kinds of processes that lead to 'deferral'. Research on childlessness is suggestive of the ways in which choice and constraint take on meaning within a changed cultural context. It is not simply that women are more autonomous or more free to choose than in the past. This may be the case for some groups of women but choice is a problematic concept for understanding childlessness (Morell, 1994; Campbell, 1999). For example, amongst the women interviewed by Morell (1994), remaining childless was perceived not as a choice but as an outcome of a variety of circumstances. As with the early decades of the 20th century in the UK when the incidence of childlessness was almost as it is now (16–20% of women not having children) we need to explore values as an intrinsic part of changing social relations.

In respect of gender we are witnessing a repositioning of women and men in social space: they are still interdependent within social reproduction, not individualised. Their altered position is inseparable from changing structures in inequality more generally, as well as tied up with changing values and claims to do with gender. In the current era the breadwinning model has been eroded, and women's identities are less exclusively shaped by family duties (eg Walby, 1997; Crompton, 1999; Creighton, 1999). But this is part of a broader *restructuring* of difference and of relations of interdependence across women and men, and generations. This restructuring entails an alteration in the relative positioning of different groups, and in their subjective identities. It links to altered values regarding proper gender roles and responsibilities, and indeed alters the salience of 'gender' across different contexts.

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a deepening of gender difference and asymmetry, and gender became more significant as a marker of social difference. Now, in the midst of contemporary restructuring, we are witnessing a pattern of gender *re-differentiation*. This entails both a reconfiguring of the relative social positioning of women and men (themselves both highly differentiated categories) and changing values regarding the meaning and salience of gender as a marker (and maker) of social difference.

Conclusion

It is not possible to adequately theorise social relations and value independently of one another. We have argued that evaluational subjective processes and extant social relations and patterns of interaction are mutually formative and must be analysed as such. We have explored these processes across the domains of class, 'race' and gender. We have moved beyond 'the terms of difference' to an analysis of differentiated social relations, interaction and the structuring of social perceptions. We have sought to locate class, 'race' and gender in relation to these processes as well as to linked claims about, and attributions of, difference. We have argued too that claims and designations of difference can become embedded within the social interaction order. In this way routinised practices are themselves partly composed of normalised claims and values. Any separating out of the evaluational or cultural from material social relations is spurious.

Some critics have suggested that debates around difference encourage a focus on the 'difference' of the 'minority' group, problematising this whilst implying the 'majority' or dominant position is the norm (Maynard, 1992; Anthias, 1998). The value of the perspective offered here is that it helps reveal the ways in which values are embedded in majoritarian social arrangements as much as in challenges against such arrangements. Indeed it helps to reveal the constructed and historical nature of much that is taken for granted or naturalised, seeing in 'norms' the power of particular interests, voices and assumptions about the world. We can very usefully understand categories of difference as claims: overtly held values or sets of expectations about differential social competencies or moral attributes. Gender, class, 'race', dis/ability, sexuality and age are themselves statements (claims) about difference: its nature and its salience[2]. They are inherently about power relations, inequality and the naturalisation / fixing of human made social relations. Values and assumptions about natural differences, about different competencies and appropriate behaviours, and about norms and transgressions, serve to normalise and naturalise hierarchy. The claiming perspective holds particular value since it helps throw into relief the historical and cultural nature of such arrangements.

We need to understand dimensions of difference as claims, and not take at face value the contents of such claims. For example, whilst there is a legitimate question mark over whether class and the politics of redistribution have been eclipsed and displaced by a politics of recognition, we might say, with Walby, that we are witnessing a new set of claims about equality:

> 'There has been a decline in the politics in which largely white men made claims which they legitimated by an appeal to class, but these were often claims which privileged their own ethnic and gender specific interests, not those of class alone. There is a reconfiguration of the cross-cutting alliances around gender, ethnicity and class, but that is not the same as the demise of the politics of equality. Rather we have seen its re-birth within a new political project in which class, gender and race interests are differently balanced' (Walby, 2001: 118).

We need to be able to analyse and locate gender, 'race', and class as elements and outcomes of social changes even where they are not organising principles of change. Rather than take these dimensions of difference as pre-given categories we need to *locate* them as dimensions of social difference, and hierarchy, historically influenced by values and processes of claiming as well

as by routinised and sometimes unremarked features of social life and its reproduction.

Notes
1. We do not attempt to deny that personal lives are imbued with perceptions of social distance and dislocation. It has been noted, for example, that working-class women frequently experience encounters of social distance which remind them of their out of placeness (Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). Rather, the argument being made here is that the contexts in which such contrasts are experienced are likely to shape the formation (or not) of explicit claims and values.

2. For a discussion of later life and attributions of difference see Irwin 1999, and on disability and social claiming see Irwin 2000b.

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Locating difference