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# 3 Un/Doing Differences. The Contingency of Social Affiliations[55]

## 3.1 The Distinctness of Human Distinctions

Using a minimalist definition, we might say that cultural phenomena—unlike naturally given differences—consist of contingent, meaningful *distinctions* that are shaped by historically and geographically specific contexts. These meaningful distinctions are socially constructed and applied to such things as different plants, animals, artefacts or illnesses. This paper examines the most sociologically interesting of these distinctions: those through which the makers of distinctions distinguish themselves from one another, in other words the classification of the classifiers (Bourdieu, 1984). This process marks out the classifiers' social affiliations, defines the composition of groups, ascribes forms of *membership* to individuals and subjectivizes them through specific cultural categories.

In everyday life, the effects of such meaningful distinctions are perceived as individual "characteristics", and on the aggregate level as "types of people". Conversely, sociologists generally unpick these characteristics and conceive of them as forms of membership, that is, as qualities *shared* with others (rather than merely individual ones), qualities that render people exemplars of social entities (chiefly collectivities). Social distinctions between group-like entities, then, are immanent in the perception of individual characteristics. Having stated this, the social scientific observer is confronted with two challenges:

1. The tremendous *heterogeneity* of human distinctions.
2. The highly variable *intensity* of forms of membership.

*First*, alongside time-worn classifications based on age and gender with a long cultural history (Linton, 1942) and stratificatory distinctions between classes and status groups, there are also distinctions based on generations, social milieus and occupational groups, different distinctions between normality and deviance, and everyday

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distinctions relating to dialect or attractiveness. Let us pick out a number of key distinctions around which autonomous fields of research have developed. *Ethnicity* is an imagined affiliation to a community, based on a belief in shared culture and shared descent. This belief is backed up by cultural practices, myths of origin or physical similarities; membership is mostly presented as ascriptive, primordial and inescapable (Weber, 1922/1972; Barth, 1969; Lentz, 1995). *Religious* affiliation, meanwhile, requires not just belief in commonality but also beliefs in common; in other words it begins with convictions. These convictions may change as a result of conversion. They may dwindle, be linked together and fuse syncretically, and people may offend against them and be excluded. *National* distinctions also construct "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983), but here there is a claim to political-territorial sovereignty. Within the context of state formations, these distinctions are an attempt to create collective identities for large populations and to draw boundaries between nationals and foreigners (Calhoun, 2007). "*Race*" is also related to ethnicity (Jenkins, 1997) but is a cruder classification that directly focusses on bodies, a classification imagined as a biologically anchored marker since the late nineteenth century. The emphasis here is not on community building but on downgrading, and this saw the "racialization" not just of unfree labour (as in the case of slaves in the United States), but also of religious communities (such as the Jews in Europe) (Wacquant, 2001). In terms of cultural history, alongside *age distinctions*, *gender distinctions* are probably the oldest instance of human differentiation and an elementary case of (mostly) binary classification (Tyrell, 1986). This distinction too has been profoundly naturalized (Laqueur, 1992) and re-assigns the divided elements back into complimentary dyads by endowing sexed individuals with attributes of essential heterogeneity. Finally, particularly in "modern", meritocratic societies, we also find classification according to individual *performance*. This is quite different in character from the other categorizations in that, like a great social leveller, it exhorts us to *disregard* all differences of an ascriptive and categorical nature (Bourdieu, 2004). The objective assessment of performance (Parsons, 1987) is supposedly a socially neutral act: a classification expurgated of the classifier. But it gives rise to new categories featuring specific forms of asymmetry: rather than binary oppositions on the model of us/them distinctions, here we find ordinal scales (in the sense of better/worse).

Even this cursory list points to some specific features of these different cases, alongside a number of commonalities. Certain distinctions begin with bodies, others with convictions, activities or goods. Gender and "race" are expected to be lifelong constants, while age is inherently transitory and there is at least some consideration of mobility when it comes to classes and nations. Performance aims to produce individuals, while gender creates pairings, and ethnicity, nationality and religion build collectivities. As a result, the latter three are often linked with segregation, while genders tend to be joined together through cohabitation. These differences among distinctions are one of the reasons why specific research fields have developed to deal with each of them (such as ethnicity, "race" and gender studies). These fields can deal

quite freely with their key distinction within their own sphere of action, inflating them without fear of contradiction (ethnicizing or genderizing the world, for example), "appropriating" the individuals within their field of investigation and endowing their key distinction with a claim to "omnirelevance" (such as gender, see West & Zimmerman, 1987). It is then a small step for theoretical statements to overgeneralize the empirical case of differentiation that has been paradigmatically inscribed in them (Hirschauer, 2008). To take a look at neighbouring cases through the lens of a given case would be to risk category errors: conceived in ethnonational terms, the phenomenon of ageing would appear as permanent migration, in religious terms as constant conversion and through the prism of gender studies it would be easy to see precisely two "races".

*Second,* in addition to this heterogeneity of the dimensions of distinction, the differing *intensity* of these forms of membership is a key challenge to the sociological observer. There are not only institutionally secured forms of membership (such as citizenship) and socially lived, active forms of membership (in groups), but also more distanced forms of affiliation and abeyant (dormant) forms up to and including purely categorical ones, which are essentially established by the observer or that remain no more than observers' constructions.

Social scientists seek to deal with this second challenge in two opposing ways. First, standard social research routinely draws on the seductive clarity of everyday or even bureaucratic categories. These accommodate researchers' need for reliable, decision-free variables for use in data collection (such as age and gender), so they utilize them as a resource that facilitates their own classificatory endeavours. If this research deploys a methodology that takes individuals as the source of almost all data (verbal information from interviews) and conceives of their ways of living as expressing the characteristics of variables, it can construct social identities autonomously. It can, for example, make an arithmetical Jew out of an individual with a Jewish mother who occasionally celebrates Hanukkah. The social scientific questionnaire performs this reduction as stubbornly and unwaveringly as the administrative questionnaire of a census authority. It comprehends its objects through a logic similar to that of administrative typifications: with an assumption of constancy and relevance that frees researchers from respondents' unreliable self-understanding and from the varying social relevance of these affiliations. Many of the affiliations established by scholars may in fact be dormant. As in many organizational archives, these are held by members who were merely too lazy to quit.

Such research has a tendency to reify membership, equating it with individuals' social characteristics and losing sight of the fact that these are primarily a matter of social organization. A given form of social organization, meanwhile, makes certain categories seem more prominent to sociologists than others. Loïc Wacquant (2001) reproaches "race studies" for unquestioningly adopting the objectified products of ethnopolitical entrepreneurs as tools of analysis. And Rogers Brubaker (2007) identifies a general "groupism"—the tendency, while investigating ethnicity, "race" and

nation, to take the existence of identities and groups for granted as the basic components of social life, as if social life amounted to nothing more than these internally homogenous entities, sealed off from the rest of the world. Wacquant and Brubaker assail the unholy objectifying alliance of activists and social scientists. The components of a group, according to Brubaker, are not simply members, but temporally fluctuating affects, processes of categorization, political rhetorics, feats of organization and mass media framings.

To avoid this problem, meanwhile, a cultural sociological alternative has emerged. Rather than using lifeworldly categories as a resource for sociological categorization, this approach begins at a deeper level (prior to lived or assumed membership), by making categorizing itself the object of investigation. This alternative is characterized by a perspective on social phenomena that emphasizes *contingency* (Reckwitz, 2008, p. 17). It can build on early reflections in the sociology of knowledge (Durkheim & Mauss, 1903/1987), microsociological studies on "membership categorization" (Sacks, 1992), social psychology (Allport, 1954; Tajfel, 1978), but also "culturalist disciplines"[56] beyond the social sciences: cultural anthropological studies on classifications and their symbolic representation (Barth, 1969; Needham, 1975), linguistic studies on the key medium of categorization, namely language (Whorf, 1963), and poststructuralist theories of difference in fields such as cultural and postcolonial studies (Reckwitz, 2008, pp. 301–320). This sociological research investigates processes of categorization on different social levels: in everyday interactions and group processes (see e.g., Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998), through state organizations and procedures, whose postulates enter into statistics and personal documents (Foucault, 2004; Hacking, 1986) and through classificatory experts (Bowker & Star, 2000; Desrosières, 1998; Wobbe, 2012).[57] This research increasingly seeks to theorize those aspects that are common to the cultural making of human distinctions (Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Pachucki et al., 2007; Wimmer & Lamont, 2006).

It is this cultural sociological approach to theorizing human distinctions that I adopt in this paper. I begin by presenting a number of general insights into the self-perpetuation, relationality and asymmetry of categorizations and discuss the limitations of the concept of *boundary making* (Categorical Order and Boundary Making). The most important of these limitations is found in the idea of multiple affiliations, to which there are three main approaches: intersectionality, from the perspective of the

**56** By "culturalist disciplines" I mean the traditional humanities and several disciplines that do not fit the distinction between science and humanities: for example cultural anthropology, history, cultural studies, linguistics, and every approach that turns the analysis of literature into broader media sciences.

**57** Other research questions relate to the connection between these aspects. Under what conditions do categorizations of the other find expression in categorizations of the self? Which quotidian categories become administratively solidified and how do discursive categories relate to experienced affiliations within peoples' self-understanding and habitus (see e.g., Brubaker, 2007)?

sociology of inequality; the intersection of social circles from the perspective of theories of differentiation; and the trope of the hybrid as found within various cultural-based disciplines (Crossings: Concepts of Multiple Affiliation). With a critical assessment of the "bisected contingency" in these approaches in mind, the next section (The Dual Contingency of Categories) outlines the essential features of an analytical framework that privileges the competition between and temporality of human categorizations. "Doing difference" refers to meaningful selection from a set of competing categorizations (Doing and Undoing Differences) whose combination may both reinforce and suppress them (Simultaneous Distinctions: Mutual Reinforcement or Neutralization). These categorizations may be forged in frames that are open to contingency (culture) or averse to contingency (nature) and within various aggregates states (Frames and Aggregate States). Human distinctions are contingent not only because they are manufactured and have a history, but also because they may be disregarded and made irrelevant in social practice.

In view of the pronounced relativity of distinctions, my goal in this paper is to develop an analytical framework that is open to the multidimensionality and contingency of the categorization of the members of society. This framework shifts the focus of sociological attention away from the social position of individuals and the formation of groups of individuals with particular "characteristics" towards the distinctions made between individuals within social processes of varying duration. This framework is intended to facilitate comparative research in light of the elementary question: *Which* difference is (ir)relevant *when*? The sociological significance of this question lies in the classificatory consequences of contemporary processes of globalization and individualization: the discipline of sociology needs to be more sensitive to how multiple affiliations are processed within functionally differentiated "multicultural" societies, and how individuals characterized by an advanced degree of individuality categorize and identify themselves in view of the plethora of classificatory options.

## 3.2 Categorical Order and Boundary Making

There is evidently a cultural need for order that requires the upholding of categories in order to provide orientation and a secure framework for action (Schütz & Luckmann, 1979). From an anthropological perspective, this desire for order may also be understood as a mania for purification (Douglas, 1992) that resists intermingling, particularly of the cultural and natural realms. "Impurity" in this context is a disorderliness felt in the body, so to speak. The *self-perpetuation* of distinctions occurs on this basis. Mary Douglas has shown that the assertion of every classification inevitably entails the production of deviations and anomalies. In this sense, the construction of cultural categories is an interminable process. As Zygmunt Bauman (1995) suggests, it is impelled by two enduring functions: first by the banishment of disorienting

ambiguity, a fundamental feat of ordering (categories reduce the contingency of our interpretations of the world), and second by the self-positioning of those making a distinction, who gain reassurance through the identification of "others".

Categories thus make a fundamental contribution to cultural order. They do so by enabling three types of association: categorizations (subsumptive perceptual allocations of objects to linguistic terms), identifications (fluctuating affective associations within actors' self-understanding) and selective social relations (social associations), that regulate proximity and distance and facilitate social closures. Categorizations work with the help of a distinction made within a comparative framework in which two objects that have been equated from one perspective (as human beings for example) appear "equal" or "unequal" according to particular criteria (Heintz, 2010, p. 164). This elementary *relationality* of characteristics (already highlighted by Georg Simmel) endows each of them with a fundamentally bivalent social significance: depending on who one is interacting with, one and the same "feature" means "the same" or "other"[58]. The purely categorical form of membership within a class of individuals, with whom one shares some attribute or other, thus grounds one's (affective and social) relational affiliation to a web of relationships, such as couples, groups or communities (Brubaker, 2007, p. 67). Perceptual, affective and social associations are the elementary forms of social interpretation of anything perceived through categories.

Finally, the distinction between "types of people" posits various forms of *asymmetry*. In the first instance, this is bound up with the function of self-positioning: while every conceptual distinction between whichever objects (such as that between apples and non-apples) is always logically asymmetrical, because it distinguishes one thing from another (Spencer-Brown, 1999), us/them distinctions among human beings are also *sociologically* asymmetrical because they are always carried out somewhere and by someone. The two sides of these distinctions cannot be seen, as with left and right, through the eyes of a neutral theorizing observer; instead the process of carrying out these distinctions places whoever is making them on a given side, in the sense of "here or there", like Bauman (1995) refers to inside and outside.[59] This

**58** This means for instance that in many social situations an individual has a socially dual gender: the same *and* a different gender depending on who s/he is interacting with. Further, an individual may be a member of a pairing in a binding, imperative sense (otherwise the social unit will dissolve), while her or his categorical gender affiliation is sometimes relevant and sometimes secondary within this relationship. An individual may also be a member of a "women's group", in other words a group formed with explicit reference to gender distinctions (though not including all women), and, finally, an individual may be perceived stereotypically as an exemplar of the collective category "women". All of these—interactional bivalence, dyadic (ir)relevance, group-*definiens* and categorical appropriation—are differing cases of the use of categories.

**59** The asymmetrical conceptual structure of "us/them" is probably as fundamental as the distinction that animals make between members of the same species on the one hand and their prey and predators on the other.

is associated with valences extending from mild preferences for the "in-group" all the way through to pronounced valorization and devalorization. Such distinctions frequently entail normalizing acts of othering and nostrification (Stagl, 1981), open up divides between the self-categorization of individuals and their categorization by others (Tajfel, 1978; Jenkins, 1997) and separate normality from deviance. Here, distinctions render various elements both different and the same. They feature a polarizing obverse and a homogenizing reverse side, equalizing or totalizing the elements on both sides of the distinction (such as "blacks" and "whites").[60] They also mark themselves off from an excluded third (Derrida, 1995) and inherently generate a constitutive exterior (Laclau & Mouffe, 2006).

In an effort to identify such general aspects of human distinctions, scholars have recently suggested how we might conceptualize them. Wimmer (2008), Lamont and Molnar (2002) as well as Wimmer and Lamont (2006), building on the work of Barth (1969) and Gieryn (1983), refer to *boundary making*. For them a boundary has two dimensions: a symbolic one relating to perceptual schemata and representations, and a social one that implies behavioural patterns, is based on the proximity and distance of relations and is ultimately objectified in the shape of unequal access and social closures. This implies the idea of the social hardening of cultural distinctions. The concept of boundary making has some potential. It conceives of boundaries and memberships in a dynamic way and begins to reveal their considerable variation[61] from a comparative perspective. Nonetheless, the concept entails three problems.

*First*, a number of authors deploy this concept in order to weave together various threads of distinction. For example, Brubaker (2007) and—even more emphatically—Andreas Wimmer (2008) have deployed the concept of ethnicity as a means of *subsuming* adjacent forms of differentiation (spurning Weber's advice to avoid the concept entirely as hopelessly nebulous). Wimmer (2008) identifies ethnosomatic ("race"), ethnopolitical (nation), ethnoreligious, ethnolinguistic and ethnoregional groups (p. 974). Expressed in terms of the "strategies of ethnic boundary making" that he identifies (Wimmer, 2008, pp. 986–989), we might also regard this as a strategy of professional expansion pursued by scholars of ethnicity, an example of research fields' above-mentioned tendency towards appropriation. In their review, Lamont and Molnar (2002) thus discuss a more broadly based list and, alongside "race", ethnicity and nation, include class, gender, professions, disciplines and local communities under the concept of boundary.

*Second*, this generalization only renders the concept's *implicit case-specific character* all the clearer. The empirical cases inscribed in the concept are still primarily

**60** The overstating of inter-categorical distinctions and of intra-categorical homogeneity highlighted by social psychologists (such as Tajfel, 1978) is a formal mechanism for reinforcing difference.

**61** Wimmer (2008) distinguishes, for example, between degrees of political salience, social closure, cultural distinction and the stability of ethnic distinctions.

forms of ethnicity (in Wimmer's expansive sense of the term), while such things as "genders" can hardly be conceived in such "groupist" terms. Barth's early notion of boundaries failed to distinguish sufficiently between categories and groups, as the implied demarcation of entities assumes an excessive degree of homogeneity (see Brubaker, 2007, p. 25). Further, the metaphor of the boundary represents a *topological* way of thinking. This metaphor leads to issues of limited surface area (boundaries expand or contract) and permeability (boundaries are closed or opened up); the metaphor of the boundary evokes the intuitive sense of a threshold traversed at the cost of social energy; and it encloses individuals as a whole within the communicative limits of a given boundary: they cannot be in two places at once. The nation state, the "ethnonational master scheme of modern society" (Wimmer, 2008, p. 992), evidently influenced not just the salience of categories within society (promoting ethnicization according to Wimmer), but also the way in which sociologists comprehend affiliations. Membership itself sometimes seems like a latently administrative concept. What fails to fit neatly into this topological image of boundaries is the variable salience of a distinction and its relation to other distinctions.

*Third*, this is bound up with the fact that the mere collection of boundary-like distinctions fails to take account of an elementary reality: that individuals do not possess membership in isolation, in other words more or less in line with disciplinary distinctions between research on gender, "race", ethnicity and so on. Instead, they have memberships in parallel, concurrently and in combination. Their membership always already takes the form of *multiple affiliation*. This simple fact, long suppressed as a result of the differentiation of research fields, gives rise to new demands to think processes of categorization sociologically. The key requirement here is expressed by Wimmer (2008) in the very title of his essay "The Making *and Unmaking* [emphasis added] of Ethnic Boundaries," though he fails to live up to this promise. Wimmer puts forward a theory of the reproduction and transformation of ethnic boundary making that implies the omnirelevance of ethnicity. This theory seeks to explain why ethnicity crops up in so many forms. Here, certain forms of ethnicity may become stronger or weaker, but can never fade or disappear due to a lack of *competing* types of distinction. This makes it impossible to conceive of the unmaking of distinctions and of the switch over to quite differently constructed distinctions.

## 3.3 Crossings: Concepts of Multiple Affiliation

There are three approaches, the three opposing corners of a conceptual triangle, that we might deploy to think about multiple affiliations and carry out multidimensional research on human distinctions, and each of these approaches is informed by various forms of *societal* differentiation. The debate in the social sciences is characterized by an opposition between theories of the stratificatory and functional differentiation of society, each of which implies differing premises on the differentiation of people

within society. Depending on where the emphasis is placed here, we find ourselves working with the concepts of intersectionality and heterogeneity (Intersectionality and Heterogeneity) or the notion of a role-like form of multiple membership (The Intersection of Social Circles). Within cultural theory, meanwhile, reflections on human distinctions are strongly determined by concepts of multiculturalism (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Hall, 2004) that implicitly presuppose a segmentary differentiation of society and lead to the concept of hybridity (Multiculturalism and Hybridity).

### 3.3.1 Intersectionality and Heterogeneity

Studies on *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1994; Anthias, 2005) investigate the interwoven character of and interaction between selected categories of difference (mostly class, "race" and gender, occasionally religion, age, sexuality and the body). Above all, these studies examine the effects on inequality of interactions between these distinctions, regarded as structural categories. This approach is concerned with the accumulation and combination of categories that expose individuals to a multiple structural positioning, engendering inequality. Here, multiple membership received its information value through the "establishment of subdisciplines with responsibility for specific categories of social division," (Knapp, 2013, p. 345) subdisciplines that not only illuminate their field of study through their singular, key distinction, but to some extent recruit their research personnel with this distinction in mind as well (particularly in the case of gender, "race" and queer studies). The intersectionality approach holds out the prospect of correcting these research fields' tendency to endow their key distinctions with omnirelevance. There are, however, three problematic aspects to this.

*First*, while it is true that this approach no longer responds to the specific features and comparability problems entailed in human distinctions through the relevance claims of just one research field (such as ethnicity), it still engages in major forms of reduction, limiting itself to the possible effects on *inequality* of more or less arbitrarily *selected* categories. This fails to illuminate, first, distinctions that do not necessarily have anything to do with discrimination, such as the coexistence of nations, confessions and professions, and, second, the substantial inequality between, for example, professionals and laypeople or between age groups. Researchers' selection of the great triad (sex/"race"/class) is ultimately due to the historically contingent formation of three social movements, and they seek to merge their research with the logic of these movements. The fractioning logic of the political field and the groupism of specific categories are thus inherent in intersectionality.

*Second*, this has conceptual consequences. This consensual limitation to a few key distinctions appears designed to divest them, once again, of the competition they face from one another and from other distinctions within social practice. Here, the assumption of structural categories beyond actors' reach provides latent theoretical

protection for specific key differences, namely those forms of distinction that begin with individuals and enclose them in a totalizing way (such as classes and ascriptive status categories). This approach conceives of individuality in an *inclusive* way and thus creates an "identitarian sociology" (Brubaker, 2007, p. 88).

*Third*, finally, the metaphor of intersection is empirically under-complex. How can the many forms of membership that overlap in social situations be limited a priori to the configuration of a major intersection (featuring just four directions) with respect to every social process? From high in the sky, after all, all you can see are a city's boulevards. The deeper we go empirically—into the valleys of the quotidian manufacture of social orders—the more side-streets, cycle paths and foot paths we see flowing into the intersection, to the point, in fact, where we come to understand that this intersection is located within a multidimensional space. In place of the old moral superpowers of the "oppression Olympics" (Knapp, 2013, p. 350), we find numerous "middle powers" with respect to social inequality and—crosscutting them—a dozen relevant subsystems generated by horizontal differentiation within society.

The Bielefeld Collaborative Research Center (SFB) "From Heterogeneities to Inequalities"[62] (Diewald & Faist, 2011) has adopted an approach that is also anchored in theories of inequality but with different emphases. On the basis of the fundamental conceptual distinction highlighted in the project's name, it seeks to identify the social mechanisms that may turn heterogeneities into social inequalities. On this view, heterogeneity is "mere difference ... everything that constitutes the variety and diversity of individuals" (Diewald & Faist, 2011, p. 95). Aiming to achieve a certain opening of social structural analysis to the cultural pluralization of social milieus, the SFB distinguishes four groups of individual features that may form the point of departure for "success in the labour market and in life": ascriptive features (including physical differences, gender, age, nationality and ethnicity), "cultural preferences" (meaning ways of life, lifestyles, attitudes, worldviews), formal qualifications and cultural capital, and various activities (occupations and housework).

Among the key mechanisms here, in addition to the establishment of hierarchies and exploitation, Diewald and Faist (2011) include social exclusion (in Weber's sense) and opportunity hoarding (in Tilly's sense) and, prior to these, boundary making, which they comprehend as the cultural perception and evaluation of heterogeneities. On this view, boundary making is one of the key mechanisms through which heterogeneity is socially defined in a meaningful way in the first place (Diewald & Faist, 2011, p. 109).

While the notion of intersections begins with categories whose relevance has been secured in advance, the Bielefeld approach is more empirically open, taking an undefined heterogeneity as its starting point and aiming to investigate its social relevance practices, though again, exclusively from the narrow perspective of its impact

**62** It comprises 18 research projects, funded for up to 12 years.

on inequality (in other words, while failing to consider other sociologically relevant dimensions). The approach absorbs the specificity of diverse human distinctions by observing them solely from the perspective of their (dis)advantageousness with respect to social success, in other words by implicitly subsuming them as aspects of individual "human capital". It is as if this approach merely seeks to unwaveringly perpetuate the in-house classificatory of social structural analysis (mentioned in the introduction).

This implies that inequality is a more socially significant and heterogeneity a potentially less significant form of difference. As with intersectionality, this produces an implicit a priori sociological hierarchy of distinctions. This exclusive focus on inequality within the context of an individual's success in life abstracts from the fact that quite different distinctions may be of equal or greater importance to social processes within specific situations or fields. But the pre-eminence of this inequality is more a reflection of its political than its sociological relevance. If differences in income can be considered an appropriate expression of heterogeneity or an indicator of social inequality (Diewald & Faist, 2011, p. 99), then the distinction between heterogeneity and inequality is also an implicitly normative one.

If the Bielefeld approach to social inequality seeks to attain the status of a more general sociology and to forge links with cultural sociology,[63] it will have to take a more elementary approach to the concept of inequality. Sociologically, inequality means more than the unequal distribution of goods and opportunities, which may be experienced as unjust because it improves or worsens individuals' lot. As mentioned in the introduction, inequality results from a comparative perspective that establishes (in)equalities according to particular criteria: in couples a heterogeneous pairing *is* the unequal pairing (Hirschauer, 2013). Binational cooperation, a Christian-Muslim group and the social relationship between service provider and customer are also *unequal* in a sociologically significant way.

In the work of Diewald and Faist (2011), meanwhile, heterogeneity seems to be understood in a markedly quotidian way (as a form of distinctiveness that is, somehow or other, the normal state of affairs for human beings). Here heterogeneity is a collective category for a plurality whose genesis—those social processes that bring about the differentiation of the different in the first place—is of no further

**63** More consistent here are those analyses of social structure that deal explicitly with respondents' self-categorizations, in other words that try to get to grips with "folk sociostructural analysis". For a study on the lifeworldly perceptibility of affiliation to different social strata, see Pape et al. (2008); for an investigation of the varying relevance of occupation, gender, ethnicity, nation and class, see Emmison and Western (1990). The connection between perceptibility and relevance remains an open question in these studies. Functioning markers (that is, congruent ascriptions) do not necessarily ensure that social agents take every opportunity to classify that presents itself (that they select a schema unprompted). Perceptibility may long pertain while becoming situationally meaningless (we need only think of "race" or gender).

interest. In a half-hearted attempt to integrate cultural sociological concepts that do in fact take account of the categorizations made in society, boundary making fades once again into the reified variables of individual "features". Taking a meaningless form of human distinctiveness as one's point of departure desociologizes processes of human differentiation.[64]

### 3.3.2 The Intersection of Social Circles

Rather than *enclosing* individuals in classes, since Durkheim, Weber and Simmel theories of differentiation have presented them as located *between* specialized fields. Through its structures, every society offers the people within it opportunities to be something specific, while the various social differentiations crosscut one another, in individuals among other things. Their resulting multiple membership is thus a quite elementary fact, but one that is becoming ever more important within the history of society. This is a phenomenon, bound up with the options available to individuals, that lies at the "intersection of social circles" (Simmel, 1992).

Brought to a head in Luhmann's analysis (1997), functional differentiation does not begin with bodies or goods, but with types of actions or communications and involves individuals only via behavioural episodes during which they play specialized roles. The differentiation of social subsystems, then, no longer confines individuals (as in the case of estates or classes) in a totalizing way, but instead places them in a structurally exterior position: functional differentiation creates "*exclusionary individuality*" (Luhmann, 1989, p. 158) and a whole range of new opportunities to choose and renounce tangential forms of membership. In this way, individuality no longer emerges *within* specific subsystems, but instead through expectations that are primarily concerned with the material content of communication and secondarily with the field-specific roles that individuals temporarily play. This greatly weakens the relevance of ascriptive criteria, differences in status and inequalities based on collective affiliations. These face competition from new forms of inequality (particularly the opposition between performance-based and lay roles) and meritocratic principles that seek to classify individuals solely in light of their performance. Luhmann replaces the "features" of individual origin with the *selection criteria* of systems that include individuals.

**64** And it would then be merely consistent to sign the genesis of these processes over to biology: "The starting point for analysis of the distribution of social opportunity should be … the fact of differing genetic predispositions" (Diewald, 2010, p. 11). "As quasi-pre-social heterogeneity within a given population," these should be regarded as a fundamental explanatory factor (Diewald, 2010, p. 11)—as in the case of "gender-typical variations in genetic dispositions" (Diewald, 2010, p. 16).

This approach, which decentres individuals, is associated with a significant dereification of various kinds of distinctions and brings out their diversity. Two key aspects, however, require correction. *First*, the theory of functional differentiation underestimates cultural inertia because it overestimates society's communicative self-portrayal (its cherished semantics). It works with modernist idealizations and perceives persistent older forms of inequality solely as premodern remnants, despite the fact that these get in the way of purely task-oriented classifications (according to performance, for example) even in contemporary societies. If, despite the sociostructural expendability of many human distinctions, empirically notorious attempts at exclusion nonetheless occur (of women or migrants, for example), the theory of functional differentiation seeks to explain this in terms of persistent forms, of merely residual relevance, on subordinate societal levels. Weinbach and Stichweh (2001) for example argue that while organizations, with their formalized membership roles, feature strong imperatives to be gender-blind, when it comes to reconciling job requirements with personal capabilities, ascriptive features may come back into play. According to these authors, it is particularly difficult to abstract interactions from system-external role obligations. "As those present obtrude visibly as individuals, it may become apparent what else they have to do outside of the interaction," as Luhmann (1997, p. 815) puts it. This shunting off of non-task-related human distinctions to occurrences here and there in interaction or organization is not completely convincing, first because it entails a failure to consider other levels of order (such as dyads, groups and networks) on which such distinctions have an impact and second, because the task-related differentiation of performance obviously exercises a stratifying effect itself. Certainly, this distinction initially begins solely with actions, but it becomes inscribed in human beings, sometimes for a very long time, with the aid of individualising diagnoses that produce new categories (best, (un)suitable, (less) gifted, outstanding, and so on).

*Second*, conceptually, Luhmann's theoretical construct privileges a particular type of membership. He reserves this term for affiliation to organizations, whose boundary-forming principle such affiliation is supposed to be. The central place of organizations in Luhmann's (1975) distinction between levels is the internal theoretical reason why he omits to discuss other forms of membership, such as affiliation to groups or imagined communities. His focus on organizations, moreover, generalizes a specific "contingency of membership" (Luhmann, 1975, p. 14), namely the case of freely chosen and rescindable membership in organizations with their "opportunities to break off social relations and enter into new ones" (Luhmann, 1975, p. 17). Those forms of membership that have *not* been chosen—gender affiliation, ethnicity, age, and so on—and are maintained through cultural processes of categorization, are simply absent as "evolutionary remnants".

### 3.3.3 Multiculturalism and Hybridity

The key reference point for concepts of multiculturalism in the culturalist disciplines is a segmentary differentiation of society into countries or "cultures". Against this background, contemporary waves of global migration and worldwide media networks point to the cultural pluralization of lifeways: an ever greater number of people are influenced by an array of cultural traditions and frameworks of meaning, and they are combining them in novel ways (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 1995). Authors within the fields of cultural studies and postcolonial studies have put forward the concept of *hybridity* to comprehend such phenomena.[65] This refers to a combination of opposing categories within *one* dimension of distinction, in other words to mutually exclusive affiliations. Hybridity appears as a form of ambiguity between two entities. The basic assumption here is that, through transnational biographies, multicultural societies generate new forms of multiple cultural affiliation and polysemic forms of membership (Appiah, 1994; Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). Fixed classificatory systems become fluid through "cultural interference," which entails the overlapping of a number of different cultural codes (Kapchan & Strong, 1999; Reckwitz, 2008).

Central to hybrid phenomena is the creolization of national identities through the boundary-crossing inherent in migration, transnational communities and diasporas. Here, the "intersectionally" underprivileged "working-class Catholic girls from the country" contrast with the "cool" "Moroccan girls doing Thai boxing in Amsterdam" (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001, p. 19). But migration brings out just one aspect, which is also a source of anxiety in other forms of membership: *mobility* between categories, whether between classes, religions or genders. The slogan of illegal immigrants in the United States, "We didn't cross the borders, the borders crossed us" might be embraced by other hybrid figures such as religious eclectics or inter- and transsexuals, or the rapidly increasing number of "mixed raced people" in the United States, for whom the US census has permitted the category of "multiracial" alongside sixteen "races" since 2000. Finally, phenomena of hybridization are to be found in ambiguity-friendly popular culture, for example in the stylistic fusions of world music, a topic explored by cultural studies scholars, who have investigated aesthetic crossover in new social strata and markets (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). Cultural elements with diverse origins, then, are becoming amalgamated in a number of ways.

The concept of hybridity distances itself even further than theories of differentiation from a reifying thought style. But the identification of hybridity is logically preceded by a clear-cut distinction: that of "cultures". The holistic understanding of cultures as mentalistically integrated communities featuring shared norms is a

**65** Alternative terms are *creolization* (Hannerz, 1987) and *mestizization* (Amselle, 1998). A related concept is *transdifference,* which means the copresence of discrepant ascriptions and affiliations (Allolio-Näcke et al., 2005).

reification that has often been critiqued (Trouillot, 2002; Reckwitz, 2008; Lentz, 2009). In the present context, it has two implications. First, it again implies a latently topological conception of cultural distinctions conceived through the territorial logic of national boundaries and, second, a form of social affiliation that once again assumes the inclusion of individuals in a totalistic way, a form of affiliation from which people are then "liberated" by hybridity.

In line with this, many studies on hybridity are characterized by a moralizing theoretical air, implicitly conjuring up utopias of de-differentiation (Fluck, 2000) and subjecting processes of hybridization to aesthetic inflation. Here hybridity becomes a buzzword with a top-heavy normative load, a way of expressing opposition to essentialization and dualistic thinking of all kinds (see Nederveen Pieterse, 2001, p. 20). Much of this discourse reads "as if the expression of goodwill and the attestation of moral passion had anything to do with empirical attentiveness and theoretical rigour," to quote Wacquant (2001, p. 67) on "race" studies. Such normatively inspired theory building takes too little account of the basic sociocultural ordering function of processes of classification. Social categories create compulsory or chosen habitats between individuality and global citizenship, so that the blurring of one distinction often merely means shifting attention to another.

Despite these weaknesses, the notion of the hybrid is sociologically significant in two fundamental ways. First, telecommunications, goods traffic and migration have weakened cultural boundaries; for certain social milieus and generations, local traditions are becoming stylistic pools of cultural props that may be combined to create patchwork stylizations of the self. This patchwork resembles the notion of the individual at the intersection of social circles as found in theories of differentiation. In this case, however, we are dealing not with social relations involving individuals but with flows of goods, symbols and information that they log into as participants and utilize. So here the individual is located not between social structures but within globally circulating flows. Identities give way to practices: I am *x* as long as I do *x*.[66]

**66** In line with this, Andreas Reckwitz (2008) has explicitly proposed the culturalization of Simmel's notion: not only do social systems of norms and roles intersect in individuals, these individuals also take part in various complexes of social practice that are executed against the background of differing frameworks of meaning. But if actors take part in a number of "knowledge orders" at the same time, which lead them to differing interpretations of their lifeways, then this confronts them with the problem of interpretive indeterminacy; it renders identities fragile and requires identity work (Reckwitz, 2008, pp. 69–93). Reckwitz also deploys this generalized hybridity of the cultural to counter the purifications of classical social theory, which assumes that structural entities (classes, systems, and so on) have clear-cut boundaries. This perspective, I think, points the way ahead. But what seems problematic to me is the idea of definitive "knowledge orders" in which the holistic concept of culture retains its vigour, despite being detached from countries and collectivities. The challenge posed by cultural theory for sociologists is not to rethink "cultures" but to rethink the cultural itself.

Second, according to Nederveen Pieterse (2001), the significance of the hybrid lies primarily in a new perspective on the constitutive significance and *contingency* of boundaries. He refers to a hybridity of the *longue durée* that is as old as the history of humanity: on this view, the old "cultures" that underpin the hybrid are themselves products of older syncretisms, their origins lying in cultural contact, trade, conquests and migration. The idea here is that globalization has merely accelerated this (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001, p. 13). This gives rise to a cycle: hybrids logically presuppose categorical orders that in turn are chronologically imposed (in the sense of Bauman and Douglas) on an antecedent indeterminacy, prior to which there may lie older categorical orders. Distinct "cultures" are thus historical phases of the temporary stabilization of older dynamic phases of the encounter between and fusion of cultural patterns, and hybrids are inevitable transitional phenomena within a constant process of the displacement of categorical boundaries. The realm of the cultural consists, so to speak, of continuous processes of boundary displacement, very well illustrated by the historical erection, contestation, transgression and vegetative overgrowing of national borders. As Wimmer and Lamont (2006) put it: "[U]nits emerge, enter into various relationships with other units which then may lead to their dissolution and regrouping into other social entities" (p. 5). The notion that cultural distinctions place purified entities in the world, cause them to interact, thereby "contaminate" them and thus dissolve them once again, is a more dynamic conception than that of the preserved (path-dependent) processes of differentiation found in theories of evolution: borders may in fact *disappear*.

### 3.3.4 Interim Conclusion: Bisected Contingency

These three approaches to thinking about multiple affiliations describe three very different intersections: of road axes of social inequality, social circles and cultural codes that, as with the intersection of genetic codes, appear as a form of "cross-breeding". Within these three concepts, individuals find themselves either fixed at the intersection of powerful axes of social inequality (intersectionality), set free at the junction of variable social circles (exclusionary individuality) or oscillating at the transfer point between different cultural systems of reference (hybridity). All three of these perspectives present researchers with two fundamental problems.

*First*, despite efforts to consider several types of distinction at the same time, again and again the disciplinary or research field-related origin of these approaches ensures the selective dominance of specific differences, such as nationality and ethnicity within research on hybridity, the close linkage of gender and class in intersectionality research, and a fixation on freely chosen and rescindable forms of membership in studies of functional differentiation. This constricting of perspective to specific differences or closed lists often results in a generalization of specific empirical cases. What we have yet to see is a perspective that pays attention to multiple affiliations

without overlooking the specific features of a given categorization (binary, ascriptive, grouping, asymmetrical, and so on) and the varying *forms* of affiliation that they offer or require. We may be dealing with an identity-appropriating form of membership of classes or "cultures"; membership in organizations, which is less inclusive but rendered clear-cut through formalization; diffuse affiliations to social circles and cultural origins; or the rights and opportunities to participate in networks and communication flows.

*Second*, research informed by these three ways of thinking risks the implicit conceptual reproduction of the very differences it seeks to unpick. This is evident when research on inequality deploys everyday categorizations to collect its data (heterogeneity) or places them beyond the realm of observation as a result of theoretical predecisions (intersectionality). But this risk is particularly great in research that seeks to oppose the essentialist assumption of given entities and their qualities (such as ethnic groups, "races", and genders). This is partly due to the character of research fields that have a hard time letting go of the particular form of difference so central to their own existence (Hirschauer, 2003). But it also has something to do with problems related to the logic of observation and conceptual mechanics, when, for example, the conceptual frame of the hybrid reproduces the very boundary that has supposedly been crossed.

We can capture the second problem through the concept of *bisected contingency*. Researchers often reconstruct everything that produces, structures, reinforces and lends relevance to their key distinctions. But prejudiced by their particular focus, they are far less sensitive to the possibility of the irrelevance of these distinctions, because they have invested too much in them. Much of the research on human distinctions cultivates a pronounced constructivism, as if a given research field must constantly seek to counter the claim to relevance posited by its own existence and designation (as "race" or gender studies for example). Within this claim, the finding of differences becomes the key objective of observations premised upon a given distinction. Here, Bateson's (1972) definition of an informative difference, "a difference that makes a difference," (p. 315) is halved. Researchers expend a lot of words stating that this difference is a *process of distinguishing*. But does it *make* a difference? Much light is often shed on the contingent *production* of a difference, but the contingent way in which people *make use of* this difference within social processes remains in the shadows. Categories undoubtedly provide observers with orientation, but do actors themselves make use of them? And when categorization occurs, is it meaningfully selected and ongoingly deployed or does it remain insignificant within a specific situation or field? These gradations of relevance (Kotthoff, 2002) must not only be considered (as has been the case so far) in relation to functional differentiation (as factual irrelevance), but also in relation to the structure of social strata (if social mobility indicates an *indifference* to classes or the absorption of difference through the education system) and in terms of the competition *between* distinctions, a topic the intersectionality approach opens up only to shut it down again.

Theoretically and empirically, we can comprehend the linkage of social affiliations through multiple memberships or the conjoining of different forms of distinction within social processes only if these concepts leave room for one another in research as they do in everyday life. Of course, each distinction contributes to the reduction of complexity (creates cultural order), but together distinctions cause this complexity to mushroom once again. This means that, for observers, specific distinctions must be allowed to *lie dormant* just as they do for the actors who use them. These actors cannot enact every distinction concurrently and in equal measure; after all, (as Luhmann might put it) they always have other things to do.

What this means is that multidimensional research on human distinctions must *empirically jeopardize* the distinctions central to specific research fields and abandon their claims to omnirelevance, in other words make room for the *competition* between their key distinctions within social practice. A multidimensional *focus* on individuals through a more complex investigation of their affiliations equates to the multidimensional *decentring* of social distinctions. What we need, then, are studies on cultural distinctions among people that assume the mutual relativization of these distinctions, studies that reflexively observe their own use of distinctions and that systematically presume that each case of differentiation may be displaced by other distinctions, lose relevance and disappear.

## 3.4 The Dual Contingency of Categories

At present there is no viable theoretical framework for such a contingency-aware approach to research. In what follows, I first highlight a possible starting point for such a framework before going on to flesh this out. I began this paper with the minimalist social theoretical assumption that cultural differences can be traced back to meaningful distinctions. If we now spotlight the contingency of these distinctions, what we find is that they may be made *or* unmade, upheld *or* undermined, and that when they come up against other distinctions they may be strengthened *or* supplanted. What we must examine, then, are not just the intersection of certain axes of differentiation defined in advance (intersectionality) or the individual transgression of specific binarisms (hybridity), but a complex empirical interplay of human distinctions: the constant shifting of multiple categorizations between reinforcement and displacement, stabilization and forgetting, thematization and de-thematization. There are processes of differentiation *and* de-differentiation, constellations of actualization *or* neutralization, practices of boundary making and distinction, *but* also of levelling and the negation of difference. In historical and field-specific terms, cultural differences may be displaced by others, diminish in intensity because their applicability is limited, and they include fewer cultural objects, and disappear entirely within certain layers of meaning. The simple question to be answered is: *Which* difference is

in force *where* and *when*? This emphasis on contingency requires the relativization and temporalization of differences.

We must counter the specialization of the various *studies in differences* by relativizing their key distinctions in light of one another. The simultaneity of distinctions requires a broad conceptual framework. This should enable us to compare cultural distinctions of varying character with one another and, on a case-by-case basis, to consider how stable they are and whether people wield them in a cursory or consequential way. How do people carry out field-specific classifications and how do they ensure the visibility of affiliations? What kinds of interdependence and competition do we find between the various forms of categorization? Which categorizations are irrelevant or dominant and when?

In place of the master schema of nationality, which has led many scholars to conceptualize distinctions in a topological way (as boundary), it seems more productive to think about cultural distinctions in terms of *time*. Culturally constituted phenomena—from the most minor of linguistic distinctions all the way through to the largest of structural formations—are *processual* (Abbott, 2001), regardless of whether we investigate them micrologically within the situational time of action sequences, the biographical time of narratives or macrologically in highly consequential administrative postulates and historical developments. We must assume the existence of variation at every turn—that people situatively actualize and neutralize distinctions on a *moment-by-moment* basis (so what we find are points of insertion and reversal, cessation and interruption), or that distinctions take the form of biographical and historical *upturns and downturns*.

These distinctions not only have a socio-spatial relevance (well captured by theories of differentiation). They also have a *temporally* fluctuating significance. Which subjectively experienced affiliation is affectively potent when and for how long? Which factors determine such biographical upturns in institutions and interactions? Under which historical conditions does a distinction become established, and which lattice of conditions renders it inoperative?

In what follows I outline a concept that might begin to capture this relativization and temporalization (Doing and Undoing Differences). I then discuss two types of condition that contribute to the contingency or stabilization of distinctions: their crossing with other distinctions (Simultaneous Distinctions: Mutual Reinforcement or Neutralization) and their framing and processing within different aggregate states (Frames and Aggregate States).

### 3.4.1 Doing and Undoing Differences

A sufficiently broad theoretical starting point is provided by the concept of *doing differences* (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), which introduced a praxeological-constructivist perspective into intersectionality research. The basic ethnomethodological

assumption here is that all social distinction must be *practised* (doing gender, doing "race" etc.), in other words, that all social distinction is part of a reality that is *carried out*, with individuals being regarded neither as actors nor as bearers of identities but instead as the mere conveyors of social practice.[67] *Doing ethnicity* (for example) is then "a practical achievement, something which 'happens', when ethnic categories become relevant in the course of an interaction" (Brubaker, 2007, p. 103). In the work of West and Fenstermaker (1995), meanwhile, *doing differences* means the way in which people *simultaneously* coproduce distinctions (doing *x* while doing *y*). This takes the concept away from an overly narrow focus on specific distinctions, but brings along with it—from the debate on intersectionality—the notion that several distinctions are simultaneously relevant. This makes it difficult to observe the competition between them.

This shortcoming can easily be remedied by focusing the ethnomethodological concept of doing *x* more consistently than hitherto on the element of contingency inherent within it: The fundamental notion of a *practical doing* of affiliations and distinctions implies that people may also *refrain* from doing them. To the extent that they practically perform meaningful distinctions, they may interrupt, abstain from or discontinue this process of performance, and they may deactivate memberships within specific situations or fields. Doing always already implies the potential for *undoing* (Hirschauer, 1994, pp. 676–679).[68]

On this basis, I propose a reconceptualization of doing difference, namely as meaningful *selection* from a set of *competing* categorizations, a selection that creates a difference that makes a difference. It is not enough for a categorization to occur (providing sociologists with an opportunity to adopt or reconstruct it). What matters

**67** I have no space to discuss here the social theoretical limiting of ethnomethodology to interactions. On the need to supplement this approach with organizational opportunity structures, cultural knowledge stocks, and biographical and societal processes, see Hirschauer (2001) as well as Gildemeister and Hericks (2012).

**68** This leads on to the idea that we ought to regard the process of gender construction, for example, as *episodes* in which gender appears and disappears in social situations. An example is the use of gender distinctions to create groups among pupils (Breidenstein, 1997). Gender is inscribed in certain games (such as "kissing tag", in which the girls must catch and kiss the boys or vice versa); in other games, gender classes may be actualized as sides, if the quantitative availability of girls and boys is balanced when it comes to organizing teams. But if the game requires equality of strength (as in tug-of-war), the deployment of gender immediately ceases. If there is just one girl too many, she may become an "substitute" in a game of football. Or if there is just one woman teacher, then the "group of boys" may be trained by her (and here her gender is neutralized), but not if a male teacher is available. In both cases, singularity suspends the gender distinction, but for different reasons: the single girl is integrated into a group of fellow players, while the single (equivalent-less) woman teacher is perceived primarily as different in status. The cognitive accompaniments of such social processes in schools have been investigated by psychologists (Kessels, 2002). For a review of the cognitive inhibition of category activation, see Macrae and Bodenhausen (2000).

is whether people *subscribe to* this categorization in social processes (interactions, biographies, procedures, fashions, discourses, and so on), in other words whether, in the course of these processes, people enact a distinction in such a way as to establish its social relevance (Hirschauer, 2001). From the perspective of a distinction, its repeated use represents an increase in significance, while from the perspective of its users it brings about a lessening of complexity through which they reduce the many forms of membership, which overlap situationally (or field-specifically), to a single currently dominant one (or a few currently dominant ones).

If a distinction is not selected, then for the time being it does not occur; it rests in a kind of standby mode (Coulter, 1996). Just as membership within an organization may be dormant and the salience of affiliations may peak and trough within people's self-understanding (both psychologically and biographically)—one individual is a woman working for the police service, another merely a female cop, one individual is an atheist, another merely lives in an areligious way—this also applies situationally, field-specifically and historically. Individuals' non-affiliation or absence of ties corresponds to an *indifference* of distinctions. This applies especially to experienced togetherness (the social association): This is a context-dependent event that may be intensive at certain times. We must be open to the possibility that it "does not 'happen'" (Brubaker, 2007, p. 23), that what we are otherwise dealing with, on a case-by-case basis, is aschematic individuals, weak affective ties and mere nominal members.

It is scarcely possible to observe such states of dormancy empirically. All we can observe is a period of the negation of distinction, of its *undoing*. Within a historical timescale, this may involve counter-discourses, programmes of urban demolition or antidiscrimination policies, through which, for example, attempts have been made to erase "race" from minds, speech and practices in post-apartheid South Africa. Within a biographical timescale, it may entail negatory narratives that attempt to nullify an earlier religious or political identification; within an interactional timescale, we may be dealing with opposition (practised disregard, the active minimization of difference) or a tacit skipping of categorizations (Hirschauer, 2001), for these are situationally "ascribed (and rejected), avowed (and disavowed), displayed (and ignored)" (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, p. 2). In this sense, undoing ethnicity (for example) refers only to a narrow intermediate zone, a cessation of distinction that remains within its horizon, but which dissolves into *not* doing ethnicity at all on the margins (just as silence may dissolve into not speaking), in other words, this undoing transitions into the doing of something quite different (such as professionalism). *Undoing* has an empirical identity only in the sense that keeping silent does, a form of inactivity that is significant within a given horizon of expectations, an inactivity that may

seamlessly transition into something quite different. At the margins of *undoing*, then, what we find is a switch over to other distinctions.[69]

In this sense, the (am)bivalent expression *un/doing differences*—like the indeterminacy of pure dual contingency in the work of Luhmann (1984, pp. 168–70)—merely marks a ground zero of possible structure-building or dismantlement. This expression is an attempt to fix conceptually a perpetually fleeting state of fluctuating contingency, a transitory state of limbo, of in-difference. This microsocial basis provides us with a better theoretical grasp of the evident competition between key distinctions, the displacement of distinctions through social processes, than if we mythologize every distinction as simply having happened in an evolutionary (in other words macro-temporal) sense or supplant the actual selections made by participants with the theoretical selections made by sociological observers. It entails a more dynamic notion of the instigation, breaking off and pausing of distinctions.

As time passes human distinctions are rendered inoperative before coming into force once again. Rather than a process of linear evolution, we need to think here in terms of historical and biographical upturns and downturns and their cross-over. In a biography, for example, the relevance curve of age may be generally flat in the middle and run counter to that of gender (high in the middle).[70] Historical relevance curves for the blossoming of nations in Europe (their rise and decline) may come up against the fluctuating significance of "races" with a different temporal trajectory. Such fluctuations in a distinction's relevance may not only overlap with other distinctions, but also with other times, in which these distinctions occur at once situationally, biographically and historically.

**69** The problem of establishing empirically that something does not occur has long been familiar to sociologists. Marx, for example, faced this problem with respect to the failure of revolutions to occur, and Weber in the shape of the question of when omissions are actions and when they are swallowed up in the "universe of mere non-action" (Geser, 1986, pp. 643–644). The commonest answer involves the identification of structures of expectation (such as urgently needed help), in relation to which something recognizably fails to occur. Ethnomethodology suggests that this horizon of expectation must lie within participants' everyday reality and must be created through their practical action itself (Lynch, 2001). In terms of research practice, then, demonstrations of *undoing x* are circumscribed instances in which a distinction is, for example, interactively rejected, procedurally prohibited or institutionally inhibited (Hirschauer, 2001, pp. 214–231). In contrast to these practices of abstaining, of de-thematization and de-institutionalization, which have a clear empirical reference that they negate, *not* doing *x* can in no way be an empirical object. The term *undoing x*, therefore, is not just a reference to an object, it is also a conceptual pointer, one that demands from researchers a far greater openness to the notion that something *other* is happening than the *observer's* key distinctions would lead one to expect.

**70** See the early contribution by Linton (1942) on the significance of gender and age as these vary over the life course.

### 3.4.2 Simultaneous Distinctions: Mutual Reinforcement or Neutralization

To illuminate the tremendous contingency of distinctions I have supplemented the familiar notion of their historical genesis or their status as made (in other words their social construction) with that of their negatability (their practical deconstruction). There is a reciprocal relationship between the "undoing" of distinctions and the competition between them that we need to consider if we aim to comprehend multiple affiliations in all their dynamism. It is only by taking account of the competition between categorizations that we can enduringly undo their reification as membership (or even as individual attribute). Conversely, it is only through this process of fluidization that we can open up space for a symmetric way of thinking about multiple affiliations.

So far I have proceeded on the assumption, drawn from theories of differentiation, that social processes refer back only periodically to categorizations, in other words, *not* in the mode of *simultaneity* but in that of *succession*. But at times, of course, categories intersect significantly within social processes.[71] How might this interaction contribute to the contingency of distinctions?

The crossing of distinctions is a far more elementary fact than is recognized by the intersectionality approach. It is a fact often evident even in the linguistic categories through which affiliations are identified. Gender and class overlap within the category "lady", gender and age in the term "girl". And the practices of "girlish behaviour" are a case of doing gender while doing age. Thorne (1993) refers to the continual "flexion" of social categories by other categories. Even given names regularly perform such linkages, indicating multiple social affiliations (Nübling, 2009). The distinctions central to research fields, reunited in the intersectional paradigm, are always already fused within the social types of the everyday world.[72]

If we approach these types through the prism of theories of the constitution of the social rather than theories of social inequality, we may even reconstruct lifeworldly categories, which are unquestioningly adopted by the intersectionality approach, as a case of the crossing of distinctions in themselves. An example: conceived in intersectional terms, a "lesbian" is a case of the intersection of sex membership and sexual orientation. But if we distance ourselves sociologically from this objectification (drawn

**71** By way of illustration: while the school *first* recruits pupils of the same age and then differentiates them according to performance, an army looks for healthy young men and a modelling agency for attractive young women. Within an individual's self-understanding and in the way others describe her or him, this hybrid type may be more common. But if we limit ourselves sociologically to this juxtaposition, we are already failing to consider the personal grading of the relevance of such attributes.

**72** As it happens, this is already conceptually inherent in the doing gender approach. If we conceive of gender affiliation not as a physical attribute, psychological identity or social role, but as a social process, the phenomenon of gender immediately loses its clear boundaries. It blurs into the production of other distinctions, such as age and status.

from political struggles), "homosexuality" emerges as the result of the intersection of one thread of distinction with itself, or to be more precise: as the intersection of the gender categorization of an individual with that of her or his relationship with another (equal/unequal). Within the context of intersectional (and quotidian) thinking, this is still reified as a "sexual attribute" of the individual, while the contemporary gender-indifferent legal transformation of marriage, opening it up to everyone, actually involves a departure from "homosexuality" (Hirschauer, 2013).

This instance of crossing is just one of many possible kinds. Some distinctions get in each other's way, others interact without consequence, some mutually reinforce one another, others neutralize each other, while many cross in a way that involves a mutual fracturing. Distinctions enter into various relationships with one another depending on their specific characteristics. Establishing how human distinctions relate to one another on the level of their constitution is ultimately a task of research. In order to do this, it makes sense to systematically identify whether there is a hardening of difference that shuts down contingency or a minimization of difference that fosters contingency. This corrects the intersectionality approach's tendency to overstate the stability of specific distinctions.

On the one hand we find many cases of the *dynamic reinforcing of difference* through the combining of distinctions. One example are situations in which, as "race" studies has shown, the signification of skin colour is greatly intensified and rendered socially consequential through its linkage with legal-political processes of segregation (Apartheid), social class (enslavement) and endogamy rules (marriage prohibitions) (Wacquant, 2003). An analogous example from gender studies is the implanting of an age-based distinction into gender distinctions through norms of attractiveness in the context of pairing: men's greater age is aestheticized, securing them enormous career and income advantages (Goffman, 1977a). An example from research on ethnicity is ethnic resettlement and expulsion that aligns "peoples" with territories and thus ensures distributive clarity and visibility (Ryan, 1996). And finally, the Pisa studies have made clear that social classes are reproduced through the creation of performance-based classes within school types that are also subject to classification (in contrast to the equalizing effects that may be achieved by other school systems). All these cases involve the mutual reinforcement of difference: The character of a "race" is demarcated, among other things, by a process of de-classing, while the nature of a gender is delineated, among other things, through differences in age.

But we are not dealing here with static qualities such as "gender relations" or "class structure" but with historically variable strategies of differentiation. The nineteenth-century bourgeois classes, for example, sought to distinguish themselves through a pronounced focus on gender differences (Hausen, 1976). Durkheim provided sociological affirmation of this phenomenon, stating that the genders were "far more similar" in primitive societies than in developed ones (Durkheim, 1988, pp. 103–120). Modern-day academic milieus, meanwhile, tend to claim that they uphold gender equality, making significant gender differences appear plebeian. The

distinction between genders, then, may be used in an ambivalent way to say something about social classes, that is, it may be both *played up* and *played down*.[73]

On the other hand, however, the crossing of distinctions also regularly entails contingency-promoting *minimizations of difference*, as for example when ethnic and linguistic distinctions rupture as they compete with religions or, conversely, the formation of religious communities is disrupted by ethnic and linguistic distinctions. Such processes of the superimposition of distinctions are particularly evident in the development of nations. If a higher-level distinction (nation) claims to subordinate other distinctions (such as ethnic ones), what occurs is a competitive struggle for dominance, a battle over the privileging or relative downgrading of differences. As a result, we sometimes find not just different gradations of relevance but also processes of de-differentiation. These occur not just within the hybrids of postcolonial studies but also in the temporary distinctionlessness of revolutionary communities, when ethnic groups, genders, religions and classes experience themselves as united against an enemy (in other words under the banner of another major distinction).

One key phenomenon within the framework of such difference minimization is the *scale shifting* of various kinds of distinction. Political loyalties, for example, may be ethnicized on a number of levels: Immigrants in the United States may—in different semantic oppositions—identify themselves as Hmong, Vietnamese, Asian-American or American (Wimmer, 2008, p. 977). Such shifts of the regional frame of reference are also found in sport: An identification with a local football club (in opposition to the neighbouring club) gives way to identification with a city team (in the local cup), then a regional one (including the keenest of local rivals) and this in turn is superseded by a national team. But such shifts of scale may occur not just with respect to space, but also with respect to the *temporal axis*, for example intergenerationally. This at least is the implication of Evans-Pritchard's portrayal of the Nuer, among whom a conflict between two families or clans was often mediated by older Nuer with reference to the ancestors, through whom the two parties to conflict were related as kin (in other words united once again) (Brubaker, 2007, p. 77). Both the spatial and temporal "unification" of the divided elements inject into the more specific distinction a sense of reversibility or contingency.

The encounter between various strands of distinction, then, may be associated with a spontaneous lessening of relevance for some of them. But there may also be enduring cases of devalorization if distinctions are systematically dismantled, as when the devalorization of national boundaries in Europe caused a general fading

**73** Age may also interfere here: "Young women from social strata marked by low levels of education often stage their femininity and heterosexuality in a significantly more dramatic way than other members of their gender. But this picture may be reversed with increasing age. And from retirement age at the latest, the dolled-up upper- and middle-class wearers of ladies' suits ensure a more visible display of gender difference than in the lower classes" (Müller, 2011, p. 308).

of what had been intense national sentiments into forms of sporting and folkloric patriotism. Distinctions may be weakened as religious boundaries were through the secularist separation of state and church or because the great leveller of capitalism exploits workers "regardless of gender or age" (Marx & Engels, 1956, p. 416), in other words places them within another category without distinction. Distinctions may be detached from the linkages with other distinctions that reinforce them and what was once a relevant category of identity may decline to the status of anatomical peculiarity. This can occur because a given distinction is held in check normatively and politically and is neutralized in the name of performance-based classification through formalized procedures (Heintz, 2008).[74] Alternatively, it may happen because a distinction is absorbed—within the framework of the love-centred individualism inherent in pairings—within a more complex perception of the individual (Hirschauer, 2013).

### 3.4.3 Frames and Aggregate States

Alongside such possible combinations, there is another fact that contributes to the stability or contingency of cultural human distinctions. Distinctions can essentially be made in two different *ontological registers*: in the primary frames (Goffman, 1977b) of "culture" and "nature". Performance (in the sense of achievement), for example, may be interpreted as an innate *gift* or as the effect of *diligence*; the distinction between men and women may be understood as one between *sexes* or *genders*; physical phenotypes may be framed in terms of "*race*" or *ethnicity*, and reference may be made to *impairment* or *disability*. The cultural differentiation of human beings, then, is continually crosscut by the ontological distinction between nature and culture, which marks a key difference between distinctions because it places them within a contingency-open (culturalization) or contingency-averse (naturalization) frame.[75] In line with this, within a given subject area we can observe framing strategies of culturalization and naturalization among the observed themselves (Kleeberg & Langenohl, 2011). Of course, beyond this observation, as professions the social sciences and

**74** The school, for example, takes account of age difference to recruit pupils, using it to create and establish gradations of "classes" but since the introduction of co-education it pays very little attention to gender or confession. Further, it recruits pupils with reference to prior performance classifications (entrance exams or primary school reports), in other words it constructs its school type according to latently naturalized "giftedness classes". On this basis, which ensures comparability—the homogenization of gifts and age—and on the basis of explicit indifference to other distinctions (such as ethnicity, confession or gender), the school works to solidify its human distinctions—through ordinarily stratified, reliable categories that claim to disregard social relationality. Within the informal realm of organization, however, the inhibited categories may continue to be cultivated (see footnote 68).

**75** Essentialist culturalizations may, however, turn out to be just as contingency-averse as naturalizations. On the cultural relativity of this "ethno-epistemology," see Descola (2011).

culturalist disciplines themselves strive to elaborate one of these frames. This frame makes it possible to recognize naturalizations as cultural achievements in the first place and to decode them as mechanisms of misapprehension (Bourdieu, 1987) designed to stabilize cultural distinctions.

In addition, a number of *secondary frames* are significant to the drawing of cultural boundaries. Goffman refers to "keyings" of everyday reality that may oust a serious use of distinction in everyday situations in favour of a playful one (as with the ironic citing of ethnic stereotypes), but which are also cultivated in specific societal fields, such as theatre and literature—frames within which transgressions and ruptures of primary framings are a frequent occurrence. The differentiation of society into social fields, then, also generates a variety of frames for the differentiation of the people within it. People may be distinguished biologically in science, separated categorically in law, purified by religion, measured by performance in schools and labelled in struggles over distinction within the political sphere, but they may also be hybridized through global consumption, intermixed aesthetically through art and fashion, or simply play the opposite of themselves in theatre.

But the *thematization* of cultural differences in societal fields constitutes just one thin discursive layer of the cultural. Cultural distinctions are also processed in quite different *aggregate states of the cultural*. It seems to me that this notion that matter exists in differing states, developed in the natural sciences, can help forge agreement between the social sciences and culturalist disciplines on the *degree of social solidity* of meaningful phenomena, on whether layers of cultural meaning take a more or less fluid or congealed form, which is something that changes depending on how institutionalized a distinction is.[76] Here, the concept of the *boundary* that I outlined at the start of this paper executes a dualistic distinction between symbolic (soft) and social (hard) boundaries. This distinction separates the cultural and the social in an unconvincing manner. The heuristic of differing aggregate states circumvents this dualism in order not only to link the ideas of the social sciences with those of the culturalist disciplines, but also to bring them more into line with one another. This heuristic avoids a one-sided focus on boundary *making* or "hardening" in the sense of Berger and Luckmann (1969), opening the analysis to the potential for processes of *de-hardening*, in other words instances of de-institutionalization (Heintz & Nadai, 1998).

**76** This metaphor has a history. Simmel (1908/1992) already referred to the "degree of crystallization" of social phenomena and stated that the "solidifications" of social systems rest on the "eternal flow and pulsation" of interactive exchange (p. 33). Berger and Luckmann (1969) referred (as Schütz had already done) to the "sedimentation" of meaning and to the institutionalization of habitualized conduct as "hardening" (pp. 63, 72–76). Bauman (1999) conceived of the "adhesiveness" (a notion borrowed from Sartre) of the socially other as a state that makes indigenes appear at times more fluid and at times more viscous depending on their own resources (pp. 52–56). For actor-network theory, see the concept of "fluidity" in the work of Mol and Law (1994).

In the first instance, the aggregate states of the cultural comprise *linguistic structures* (categories, grammars, personal names, and so on) that find direct expression in *discursive representations*, including specialized scholarly discourses (in the medium of writing, as in literature, science and jurisprudence), but also popular discourses articulated in more oral forms such as sayings and everyday myths, and visually (as in the mass media). But these public representations also have mental counterparts in *cognitive schemata* (frames, scripts, stereotypical ways of seeing and hearing), which comprehend feelings and individuals (including the self) alongside situations, events and statements. Of great sociological interest are *situated practices* (of communication, labour, consumption, and so on)—in other words routinized behaviour, speech and habitual conduct underpinned by embodied knowledge—and the range of enduring *institutional infrastructures*, from social relations through organizations to sociostructural formations. Conversely, and again more on the margins of the sociological gaze, there are the elements of *material culture*: structures of the socially moulded body, artefacts, technologies and architectures.[77]

The relevance of these different descriptive levels can be illustrated through a simple example, which for once conceives of the boundary not as a theoretical metaphor but as an empirical phenomenon. A national boundary generally consists of a linguistic difference, cartographic representations, a dividing line between the validity of laws, border posts and border guards, forms and identity checks, flags and barriers, thresholds of habitual driving practices, and so on. These layers of meaning have widely varying life-spans and overlap one another, as do historical, biographical and situational time. At the same moment, then, non-contemporaneous elements—the enduring, persistent, fashionable and bang up-to-date—exercise an effect simultaneously.

The coherence of these layers of meaning has often been described as a matter of hardening: Categories are deployed in situated practices in order to identify oneself or others, stabilized through interpretive models and ways of speaking, adopted by organizations (which implant them in administrative processes), and disseminated by mass media. When categories are institutionalized in this way, the categorized may ultimately develop an "identity"—a specific aggregate state of self-understanding. But if we consider not just the objectifications but also their reversibility, then we can see more clearly that these layerings enjoy a degree of relative independence and may be linked together more loosely or more tightly in any given case.

77 It is also on this level that we are confronted with the *distribution* of material goods, a key concern of inequality research. From a more general sociological perspective a "disability", for example, is not simply a physical state that has effects on income, it also consists of architectural structures that help *bring about* disability in the first place (just as gender-segregated toilets and clothing generate "genders").

Meanwhile, an investigation limited to isolated aspects of these layers of meaning, of the kind generally carried out by academic disciplines or approaches, can easily overstate both the stability and contingency of distinctions. For example, a sharply dichotomizing language used within the nationalist discourse of Eastern Europe may be counteracted by mixed marriages, bilingualism, migration, assimilation and ethnopolitical indifference (Brubaker, 2007, p. 84). Or a racist discourse intended to highlight distinctions from others in colonized Latin America may be undermined by the presence of "mestizos," living proof of the attractiveness of this other (Nederveen Pieterse, 2001, p. 8).

Cultural human distinctions, that is, may not only enter into a diverse range of combinations (intersect, reinforce, overlap, displace, and so on) and be framed in various ways (as culture/nature, playful/serious, and so on), they may also emerge or submerge in other layers of meaning, in other words transition into other aggregate states. Some distinctions, for example, are grammaticalized in languages (Haase, 1994), or explicated and discursively fluidized by experts; others are de-institutionalized and transferred to contexts of interaction (Heintz & Nadai, 1998); others again become sedimented for a certain historical period in habitus and bodily essences, institutions and artefacts. If we diagnose a loss of relevance in one layer of meaning (such as clothing), it may be that one distinction has been relocated into another (such as the habitus). If we diagnose great stability, it may be that it is limited to one medium (such as language). Cultural distinctions are not just discursive effects, cognitive schemata (as Brubaker suggests) or cases of theoretical essentialization as often assumed within the culture-based disciplines (as in the work of Nederveen Pieterse). Above all, these are *practically executed* "real-world essentializations" that are materialized both bodily and situationally and solidified institutionally, and it is this socially constructed *factuality* of distinctions that is waiting for investigation.

## 3.5 Conclusion

This essay adds to recent attempts within cultural sociology to de-reify the categories that establish human distinctions. It has moved, so to speak, away from the static anatomy of social structural analysis, with its skeleton of variables, towards the more dynamic physiology of the social with its developmental curves, aggregate states and code-blending: *gradations* of membership, relevance and institutionalization. Bourdieu's "classifications of the classifiers" emerged here as multiply nuanced: not only with respect to those aspects of distinction that lend many research fields their names, but also with respect to the specificities of distinctions (such as the number of categories involved) and their relations to other distinctions, their upturns and downturns of relevance in differing societal fields and their cultural framings and degrees of institutionalization.

The analytical framework I have outlined is not a theory that claims to resolve every problem that may crop up in the study of human distinctions. It "explains" nothing. Instead, by highlighting the diversity and contingency of these categorizations, it shall invite to take a number of merely conceptual disputes in a more empirical direction. The intention is to make it easier to produce comparative studies of the production, displacement and invalidation of a number of the cultural distinctions made about the members of society. The comparative contrasting of the kinds of difference discussed in emphatically different research fields should be particularly helpful in enabling us to penetrate these specific empirical cases with greater analytical depth. Over the long term, through a dialogue between the social sciences and the culturalist disciplines, this may help us develop a transdisciplinary theoretical perspective. From this vantage point we might attempt to answer, in an empirically substantive and analytically precise way, questions about the general mechanisms of, and diverse interactions between, cultural human distinctions.

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