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Categories and Categorization. Towards a Comprehensive Sociological Framework

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This article presents a comprehensive framework for the study of categories and categorization. Sociological studies of the classic theme ‘categorization’ seem to have faded in favor of psychological research and – most recently – policy studies, and we argue that present theories lack an adequate conception of the distinction between political and social categories as well as an adequate conceptualization of the different social contexts for categorization. Concerning the first point, we suggest separating an understanding of the political as legitimate use of state power and performative and dislocative practices, corresponding to a conception of the social as that which is beyond political institutions and that which is sedimented and stable. Drawing mainly on French epistemology, the article further discusses three important contexts for social (i.e. beyond political institutions) categories and categorization, namely systems of exchange, symbolic lifestyles and bodily schemes, and moral boundaries and perceptions of normality. These contexts are complementary and each presents an autonomous arena for processes of categorization and construction of social categories. In conclusion, we suggest that much can be gained from addressing political categories in the sociological study of categorization.

**Keywords:** Bourdieu; Canguilhem; categories; categorization; political categories; social categories; symbolic boundaries.

**Introduction**

Categories are at the root of human action and society, embedded in our minds, discourses and social practices. Or, more precisely, categories are organizing principles in the way we understand and act in the world and the ways we relate to and interact with each other. For
several decades, the study of categories and categorization has figured prominently in e.g. linguistics, psychology and sociology (Bourdieu 1984, 1987b; Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Edwards 1991; Jenkins 2000, 2008; Lakoff 1987; Rosch 1978).

Today, however, sociological studies of categories and categorization are less widespread. A search for ‘Categorization’ within article topics in the database ‘Web of Science’ resulted in approximately 17,000 hits, among which only 200 were categorized (!) as Sociology, whereas almost 7500 where categorized as Psychology.[2] Indeed, some sociological sub-disciplines continue to focus on categories and categorization, for example discourse studies, especially of race and racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva and Doane 2003; Mallinston and Brewster 2005), and ethnomethodology (e.g. Housley and Fitzgerald 2009; Kim and Berard 2009). However, categories as a broad sociological interest seem to have disappeared.

More recently however, an interest in categories and categorization has appeared in policy studies (e.g. Ingram and Schneider 2005; Stone 1988; Yanow 2003) that argue that state-defined categories reflected through eligibility criteria following for example categories of age, race or gender, are central in understanding how state and policies regulate citizens’ lives. These studies underline the broad empirical impact of categories and categorization, and thus the importance of these theoretical concepts. However, the studies also demonstrate serious theoretical problems and a need for renewed sociological and theoretical discussion.

This article contributes to the theoretical understanding of categorization by drawing upon French historical epistemology (Bourdieu, Canguilhem and, to a lesser extent, Foucault) and sociologists in this tradition. We begin with a critical review of policy studies of categorization to illustrate why sociology should take an interest in categories and categorization, and we discuss some serious problems and challenges that deserve theoretical elaboration. Following one of these problems, we discuss the need for a clearer distinction between political and social categories, an indeed a more elaborate understanding of the
distinction between ‘the political’ and ‘the social’. Even though political practices seem to make or institute categories, for example when registering people in different sanctioning and benefitting categories, citizens are already categorized and continuously involved in the categorization of each other (see also Jenkins 2000). Political categorization, therefore, cannot be detached from social categories, neither when we study the systemic level of policy, nor when we explore policy making at the level of interaction between state agents (street-level bureaucrats) and citizens. This brings us to our main discussion of how the tradition of French epistemology and recent sociological studies may contribute to a more comprehensive framework for understanding categories and categorization.

1. Categorization in policy making

According to one of the main scholars of categorization in policy making, categorization can be defined as the grouping of objects that share a particular characteristic (Stone 2002, 164; see also Stone 2005, ix). Further, as Yanow suggests:

Category making entails classifying a set of items according to qualities the classifier perceives in them as making them belong to one category rather than the other. Categories highlight elements that are deemed to be similar within the boundaries they draw and different from elements beyond those boundaries. These perceptions of sameness of things in different categories become the organizing principles or logic around which categories are built: something belongs in category A because it shares ‘A-ness’ and is not ‘not-A’. (Yanow 2003, 9)

According to this definition, a political category relies on a kind of membership that draws a boundary between who to include and who to exclude from the category. Yanow also suggests that categories seem to rest either on a prototype approach, i.e. a normal curve with
outliers, where all individuals are assessed vis-à-vis the norm; or on a slotting approach, i.e. an exhaustive and finite system of ‘boxes’ in which all individuals fit once and only once (Yanow 2003, 12–3; Yanow and van der Haar 2010, 7–8). Also, she argues, categories and the practice of categorization include defining a point of view, marking, silencing of some features, and making category errors, i.e. characteristics that cannot be included in the categorical logic (Yanow 2003, 14–5).

These aspects underline the ‘power of construction’ embedded in the categories as such. Yanow further suggests that political categories ‘figure centrally in collective identity processes’ (Yanow 2003, 91), and based on her theoretical and methodological approach, she demonstrates empirically how racial categories used in national censes(re)create race as collective identity among different American social groups.

To be sure, Yanow does hint at the importance of including a larger social context for the processes of political category making, for example when she refers to Mary Douglas’ notion of the individual as ‘society writ small’ (Yanow 2003, 89), or when she refers to categories as tacit knowledge (2003, 14–5). However, in her analyses she does not – nor does she intend to – go beyond a purely political level of categorization, and she does not offer a coherent analytical approach for understanding the difference and relationship between political and social categories – or between the political and the social context for constructing categories and identity.

Indeed, Yanow does argue convincingly how the political context has been extremely important for the development of race as a category for social identity and group formation in the American case. However, this importance of political categories for identity construction may not be the case in general, and in fact Yanow never suggests that it is. Even so, the strong emphasis on political construction of categories is evident throughout Yanow’s work, for example in her understanding of resistance. Thus, she underlines examples of resisting acts of administrative categorization (i.e. filling out forms) (Yanow 2003, 47–75), but not for
example resistance present outside the political-administrative context, in e.g. lifestyles, consumption practices, or practices of marriage and friendship.

A similar tendency to focus narrowly on the power of the political categories and downplay the power of social categories is present in studies of categorization in street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980; Stone 2002). Indeed, the strength of Lipsky’s approach to policy making in street-level bureaucracy is that it demonstrates how a political decision is not ‘made real’ until it is transformed into policy making in the concrete discretion practices of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980, 4). Therefore, discretion portrays an important part of how political categories influence citizens by making a decision about whether an individual belongs (or not) to a certain group that has access to political and social rights:

People come to street-level bureaucracies as unique individuals with different life experiences, personalities, and current circumstances. In their encounter with bureaucracy they are transformed into clients, identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if, and treating themselves as if, they fit standardized definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots. (Lipsky 1980, 59)

In the context of understanding categorization in policy making, one can therefore say that Lipsky portrays the final process of political categorization where clients are ordered into separate categories with distinct political rights. Rather than a technical or an automatic exercise, this is ‘a social process’ (Lipsky 1980, 59), requiring a particular (often professionalized) discretion as the means to categorize. Also within this perspective, Stone further argues that this social process is rarely unambiguous, and that a situational assessment (discretion) is therefore needed to decide who belongs to a certain category and where precisely to draw the boundary between the respective categories.
Even an apparently clear-cut category such as ‘age’ depends on how we perceive at least two social groups: the young and the old. Thus, the boundary is drawn by a political, value-driven decision about when a person is considered eligible for rights of ‘the old’.

Another example of the political dimension is medical categories or diagnoses and entitlements following diagnoses. For example, a child suffering from ADHD can be classified as disabled or as a product of bad parenting, resulting in two very different sets of rights with regard to welfare support. According to Stone, such a categorization depends on the way the process of categorization is organized, but also on the particular group comparison (Stone 2002, 53). Is the child compared to other disabled children, for example children with learning disabilities or to misbehaving children in general? The comparison rather than the specific case decides.

Typically, such ambiguity is handled precisely in the discretionary and categorizing practices of street-level bureaucrats, and not in the political construction of the categorical system, i.e. by defining even more categories, since it would be near impossible to design enough categories to meet all specific cases. According to Lipsky, this handling of ambiguity is one of the defining characteristics of street-level bureaucrats, and further an element that guarantees basic juridical and democratic principles such as ‘accountability’ and ‘equal access to treatment’ (e.g. Lipsky and Smith 1989, 11).

However, although discretion and categorization in street-level bureaucracy are thought to strengthen fair distribution of resources, there are indications to the contrary. Research suggests that in exercising discretion, street-level bureaucrats use more than just the law, thus reproducing and reinforcing existing social categories instead of counteracting them. Several studies demonstrate how reproduction of social categories occurs in the interaction between citizens and street-level bureaucrats, e.g. at the social office (Mik-Meyer 2004; Møller 2009; Schram et al. 2010; van der Haar 2007), at the daycare center (Bundgaard and Gulløv 2006, 2008; Palludan 2008), in the school (Nielsen, Fink-Jensen and Ringmose 2005; Staunæs
2004) at the police station (Holmberg 2000; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003) and in family programs (Gillies 2005, 2007).

These studies show the impact of social categories on political categorization. And even though both Stone and Lipsky acknowledge the importance of a social context, they do not aim to understand the difference between the political category and the social category or the relationship between them. Again, this speaks to our argument suggesting a clearer distinction between political and social categories, as well as a more elaborate understanding of processes and mechanisms involved in the construction of social categories and their consequences for policy making and discretion practices.

Some policy scholars do seem to move closer to an understanding of social categories and their impact on political category making, showing, for example, how different welfare policies are directed towards different ‘target populations’, and how the construction of such populations is deeply intertwined with both a social and a political logic of legitimacy (Ingram and Schneider 1991, 1993a; see also Collins 1989; DiAlto 2005; Jensen 2005; Newton 2005; Schram 2005; Sidney 2005). The main point in this literature is to demonstrate how social construction installs positive and negative stereotypes in the relation between the population and policy makers, with ‘popular images’ and ‘cultural characterizations’ as defining elements in the construction of political categories (Ingram and Schneider 1993a, 334). These social constructions, Schneider and Ingram further argue, are evident across several contexts, including both political and ‘highly non-political contexts’, and influence both policy makers and experts (1993a, 345).

Shaping of target populations happens when social groups become associated with so much negativity that they become a threat to society, and action and solutions are demanded, or when certain groups are associated with positive values, empathy and legitimacy and constructed as ‘deserving’. Negative or positive values are hence ascribed to certain groups of individuals, and this group comparison informs about their status as citizens and how they are
likely to be treated by government. In other words, not only does negative or positive information ascribe stigma or legitimacy to individuals associated with the target population; it also construes the meaning of how one should expect these groups to be treated by government, i.e. as deserving or undeserving of certain welfare benefits (Ingram and Schneider 1993a, 340; Soss 1999, 376).

In accordance with this knowledge, other studies have demonstrated how social constructions of target populations also shape citizens’ identities and expectations about themselves as well as their behavior as individuals and citizens (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 2009; Soss 1999). Ingram and Schneider suggest that this is due to people’s concrete experiences with policy and the ‘lessons and messages they take from it’ (Ingram and Schneider 1995, 442). This disciplining or ‘pedagogical effect’ of welfare policies (or any policy for that matter) through categories making up policy, has been demonstrated widely, for example with regard to conceptions of citizenship and political participation (Soss 1999, 2005), conceptions of citizenship and culture (van der Haar 2007), and self-conceptions and motivations towards the labor market (Born and Jensen 2005; Carstens 2002; Mik-Meyer 2002; Schram et al. 2010).

In some ways, Ingram and Schneider move closer to understanding the way social contexts shape and influence categorization in policy making, and how political categories impact the identity of citizens by way of policy learning. However, Ingram and Schneider focus almost exclusively on the top-down level of policy making, leaving aside implementation and professional discretion. Thus, the distinction between policy categories and categorization at the street level (as mentioned above) is never really discussed and remains blurred. More importantly, social categories are conceptualized in a rather simplified manner, most often consisting of four main groups: the advantaged, the dependent, the deviant and the deserving citizen (e.g. Ingram and Schneider 1993b). These social categories seem to be perceived ontologically as real groups, i.e. as holding a reality aside from the
social (and political) construction of categories. Ingram and Schneider to a certain extent reify existing social categories by under stating the processes and mechanisms involved in the construction of the categories under study, and one can say – borrowing a central argument from Yanow (2003) – that the ‘as-if-character’ of categories is forgotten. So, where Yanow, Lipsky and Stone could be seen as overestimating the power of the political, Ingram and Schneider may be overestimating the power of social groups, or at least they tell us less about how to understand the processes by which social categories are constructed, changed and made relevant in policy making.

In sum, recent policy analyses show how categories and categorization are important elements in policy making and implementation, in the distribution of public sanctions and benefits and in the construction of citizenship and identity. Political categories are created in the political system both at the level of policy making and in the practices of state agents interacting with citizens in different contexts. Surely, this supports the argument that categories and categorization have a broad empirical impact that goes beyond the micro-contexts often focused upon in both psychological and ethnomethodological studies, as well as beyond categories of race (and sometimes gender and sexuality), which is the traditional focus of many discourse studies. Thus, the policy analyses show how political, discursive, distributional and even moral aspects of categories are intertwined and mutually dependent, and they demonstrate how ‘common’ social categories such as race, gender and class meet and intersect with other categories, e.g. the disabled, the criminal, the gifted or the unemployed. The studies further demonstrate how these intersections prevent professionals from exercising discretion with respect to individuality so that they use social stereotypes instead when they categorize citizens.

However, as explained so far, none of the studies offer an adequate distinction between political and social categories or an adequate understanding of the relationship between them. Further, although some scholars have pointed towards the social context as shaping political
categories, we find that a comprehensive understanding of how social categories are constructed and spread to political domains (and how political categories strengthen or change social categories) is still missing. Following this critique, we suggest a distinction between social categories and political categories, and further posit the claim that categories always contain a social dimension, but only sometimes a political value. After discussing this point, we turn to a discussion of a comprehensive framework for understanding social categories.

2. Social and political categories

To address precisely the relationship between social and political categories, a clarification of the distinction between them is needed. This is in itself a complex task, and we therefore limit our discussion to two conceptualizations of political categories drawing on two conceptions of ‘the political’: legitimate use of state power and practices of change. As will be explained below, this also involves two conceptualizations of social categories.

Understanding ‘the political’ as the legitimate use of state power draws on several sources in sociology and political science, most importantly Weber’s notion of ‘Politik als Beruf’ and the definition of the state as the legitimate use of violence (Weber 1994). Also, the functionalist and system-theoretical understanding of politics as specialized and differentiated, i.e. ‘the authoritative allocation of values’ (Easton 1953; see also Frohock 1974), is constitutive for this conception. More recently, Weber’s conceptualization has been elaborated by Bourdieu, who suggests the concept of the bureaucratic field as a field that enjoys a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical and symbolic power (Bourdieu 1998; see also Wacquant 2009). By introducing this notion of symbolic power, Bourdieu underlines the way State power includes the power to construct categories as well as a mechanism of ‘disciplining the minds of people’ (Bourdieu 1998, 11), a theme that is also explored by Foucault in studies of discipline, self-technologies and governmentality (e.g. Foucault 1979, 1988, 1991).
Following this conception of the political, political categories are constructed within the specialized political and administrative practices, and social categories connote categories constructed ‘outside’ the state or the political field, for example in practices in the family, in sports, the media or the economy. Further, the key question regarding the relation between political and social categories becomes how social categories are enacted by the state – either at the level of policy or at the street level of implementation – and the way such enactments on the one hand draw on and on the other hand reinforce, reproduce or change social categories.

However, in policy studies of categories and categorization (as well as in many discourse studies), another conception of ‘the political’ is also present, underlining political practices as performative. Many scholars have pointed out how ‘the political’ understood as performative practices are not necessarily related to the state. This is evident, for example, in Schmitt’s distinction between friend and foe, and the notion of the political as conflict, and (at least partly) in Arendt’s understanding of the public realm as the realm of freedom (Arendt 1958). Most elaborated, however, is the distinction made by Laclau, who argues that ‘there is politics because there is subversion and dislocation of the social’ (1990, 61). As such, the political is conceptualized as dislocation in continuous hegemonic struggles, changing, but also made possible by, the constitution of the social as a field of discursivity encompassing social antagonisms as traces of contingency and otherness (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990; Howarth 2009; Torfing 1999). This conception of the political points towards understanding political categories and categorization as constructive or performative acts, constituting, dislocating and changing social (i.e. stable and sedimented) categories. In this approach, prevalent political categories do not come into existence as a relationship between a specialized system and its context, but through a relationship between change and stability.

With this elaboration of two conceptualizations of political and social categories, we can now complete our critique of the policy studies of political categories discussed above.
The problem is that many studies use the two notions of political categories interchangeably, thereby assuming that categories constructed within the political-administrative system are constitutive of change, whereas categories outside the political-administrative system are stable and moldable. We find this assumption dubious, since change and dislocation of categories can just as easily take place in economic practices or family practices, just as political-administrative categories can provide stability and show resistance towards change. In sum, we suggest treating as separate questions the question of change and stability and the question of the relationship between categories used in the political and administrative system (which we from hereon denote political categories) and categories used in other social systems and practices (which we denote social categories).

With this separation, we further claim that a more comprehensive understanding of social categories, i.e. categories beyond the political domain and not solely understood as ‘sedimentation’, is needed. In the remainder of the article, we therefore draw together different theoretical contributions.

3. The construction of social categories

Understanding categories and categorization involves dealing with the epistemological problem that categorization in itself is an epistemological practice, since ‘Nature doesn’t have categories; people do’ (Stone 1988, 307; see also Yanow 2003, 9). This further involves the complication that ‘agents are both classified and classifiers, but they classify according to (or depending upon) their position within classification’ (Bourdieu 1987b, 2). Numerous studies have shown how social categories are enacted and reproduced in interactions and practices across many different settings and contexts (for example Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1984, 1996; Faber 2008; Harrits 2005; Lamont 1992, 2000; Prieur, Skjøtt-Larsen and Rosenlund 2008; Reay 2005, 2008; Savage 2000; Schippers 2008; Skeggs 2004, 2005; West and Fenstermaker 1995).
As mentioned, one of the main empirical conclusions in policy studies of categories and categorization is that the political categorization is contextualized in a complex web of discursive, distributional and moral processes, which nonetheless are hard to approach with existing theoretical concepts. This conclusion is supported by Jenkins (1998, 2000, 2008), who argues that social categories are created in a complex interplay between internal (self-identification) and external processes (categorization of others), involving such different processes as e.g. primary socialization, kinship, medicine and market relations.

Further, several sociological studies of reproduction of categories emphasize especially the interplay between economic, symbolic, bodily and moral contexts, and thus support the empirical findings in policy studies of categorization. We take our point of departure in these empirical studies and structure our discussion of social categories to deal successively with the economic, the symbolic and the moral context. We see these contexts as complementary and as containing processes of both sedimentation and dislocation. We disregard – for now – the question of stability or change and leave aside political categories and categorization already touched upon in our discussion of policy studies. After the discussion we return to the political.

**The economy of social categories**

Among scholars in the French epistemological tradition, Bourdieu stands out as the main theoretical contributor to understanding the economic dimensions of social categories, insisting in almost all his studies on producing a general economy of practice. By this, Bourdieu did not imply that all social relations can be reduced to economic relations (Lebaron 2003), but rather that all social practices fruitfully can be understood analogously to an economic model, i.e. as a distribution and a struggle for the accumulation of resources and powers or, as he coined it: capital. In the same vein, British sociologist Beverly Skeggs (2004) suggests the term ‘analysis of exchange’ and says that ‘we have to address the attribution of
value and authority, enabling us to explore inequality as struggle’ (2004, 28). She further elaborates that this type of analysis draws not only on a Marxian understanding of market and capital, but also on sociological and anthropological analyses of markets in the broader sense of the terms, as exemplified in Mauss’ and Levi-Strauss’ studies of gift giving (Mauss 2006; Levi-Strauss 1969).

This means that relations of exchange are always part or co-constitutive of social categories. This goes for all types of capital, including for example physical capital (skin color, strength and fertility), economic capital (money, land and goods) or cultural capital (education and cultural knowledge). The social category of race could, for example, be seen as also constituted within negotiations of the attractiveness and social value of skin color, which are crucial in marriage planning – whether or not these arrangements are deliberate or ‘acts of love’. Similarly, we could see distributional struggles of economic and cultural capital on the education and labor markets as co-constitutive of the category of class, even if the distribution of resources certainly is a result of previous struggles, including previous constructions of categories and categorizations.

The fact that systems of exchange are relational in character has an important consequence. For Bourdieu, the view that ‘the real is relational’ (Vandenberghe 1999, 44) becomes both a model for understanding social relations and an epistemological principle for sociological studies (see also Emirbayer 1997). Bourdieu implements this principle in the concepts of fields and social space (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 99–125; 1998), defined as relational configurations of capital, as well as a relational configuration of symbolic practices and lifestyles. We deal with lifestyles below, but regarding the relational configuration capital, Bourdieu suggests that people have a practical comprehension of the distribution of salient social characteristics across the social space and will adjust their expectations accordingly (Bourdieu 1984, 466–75; 1990, 52–65). Although Bourdieu’s formulations in some instances leave a door open for a rigid structuralistic interpretation, we believe that the notion of
practical knowledge is fruitful, since it reminds us that the distribution of different characteristics, functioning as capital in systems of exchange, affects the ongoing construction of social categories.

It is easy to imagine that race will be constructed differently in a homogenous society, a heterogeneous society, and in a society with a large majority and several very small minorities. We would certainly expect the same to be true for the category of age, i.e. that age will be constructed differently in societies with respectively young and old majorities. We therefore argue that even though ‘nature doesn’t have categories’, it may be, as Georges Canguilhem explains in a discussion of the normal and the pathological, that ‘it is life itself and not medical judgment which makes the biological normal a concept of value and not a concept of statistical reality’ (Canguilhem 1989, 131). Similarly, we suggest that an important impetus for change may be (evolutionary) changes in distribution of resources or agents within fields of exchange and relations. Thus, although nature indeed does not have categories, categories may exist also as practical constructions highly influenced by practical experiences and not only discursive interventions.

One problem with Bourdieu’s approach is that he primarily discusses relations of exchange with regard to distributions of economic and cultural capital, which makes it inherently unclear how to conceptualize relations of e.g. gender and race (e.g. Adkins and Skeggs 2004; Weininger 2002). As pointed out by scholars criticizing and re-conceptualizing some of Bourdieu’s concepts, Bourdieu seems to think of these relations either as constitutive of the distribution of resources or as secondary properties derived from such distributions (or both?). However, we may also think of specific forms of physical and/or symbolic capital capturing differences such as race and gender (e.g. Reay 2004), and further conceive of these distributions as intersecting with other capital distributions (Anthias 2005; West and Fenstermaker 1995). We prefer this latter solution, since it leaves open the possibility for
other forms of capital (e.g. sexuality, health or language) to constitute systems of exchange important for the construction of social categories.

Either way and despite evolutionary change, most often social relations and systems of exchange are important because they serve as a context for (and result of) the active construction of categories by interacting agents. On that note, we move on to the discussion of such constructions.

**Lifestyles and the body**

One of Bourdieu’s main contributions to sociology (at least in our minds) is his insistence that we break with the tendency to focus on either material or symbolic relations (e.g. 1984, 482–3; 1991, 163–70; see also Wacquant 2009; a point which is directly related to his position in French epistemology (esp. Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron 1991)). Bourdieu thus deepens our understanding of epistemological complexities when he claims that the crucial question about social space is ‘raised within the space itself’, and that:

sociologists almost always forget that the ‘objects’ they classify produce not only objectively classifiable practices but also classifying operations that are no less objective and are themselves classifiable. (Bourdieu 1984, 169)

To capture these symbolic (but no less objective!) practices, and drawing on classic studies of categories and categorization (e.g. Cassirer 1945; Durkheim and Mauss 1963), Bourdieu introduces the notion of a symbolic space of dispositions and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984, 171). Symbolic differences between groups (i.e. symbolic categories) are thus upheld in different practices (of e.g. language, culture, media and consumption) as well as more directly in identifications of group boundaries for example in distinguishing between others and oneself.
as avant-garde or vulgar, populist or snobbish, mainstream or chic (Bourdieu 1984, 482; see also Anthias 2005).

Lifestyles have a representational existence, but at the same time they are present in (and produced by) the mental and bodily schemes of categorization that constitute habitus. Admittedly, this concept is not unproblematic (see e.g. Weininger 2002 for an excellent discussion), but we remind the reader that Bourdieu himself refers to habitus as a ‘metaphor of the world of objects’ (Bourdieu 1990, 77) or more broadly as the social structures in the body. More precisely, Bourdieu emphasizes how the distributional relations of the systems of exchange and the symbolic relations of the system of lifestyles are joined in habitus as a classificatory (or, in our vocabulary, categorical) system, which is both ‘the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices’ (Bourdieu 1984, 170).

Thus, agents internalize differences from economic and symbolic distributions, creating both a set of dispositions that generate practices, and a classificatory scheme enabling agents to navigate in the myriad of social differences. Although Bourdieu often uses terms like ‘mental scheme’ to explain the concept of habitus, this should not be read as a cognitive or idealistic bias. Habitus is inherently embodied (Bourdieu 2000) and typically functions ‘below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will’ (1984, 466). Skeggs supplements the concept of habitus with the concept of inscription (Lingis 1994), arguing that ‘inscription produces the body via various regimes, classification schema and control of the body’ (Skeggs 2004, 12), and linking it further to the use of self-technologies (cf. Foucault 1979, 1988).

Summing up, social categories are simultaneously present in lifestyles and self-technologies as well as in the bodies and minds of people. At one point in time, these symbolic and practical categories are founded on distributions of capital within systems of exchange. However this synchronic ‘point in time’ can only be distinguished analytically. In
practice, symbolic and practical categories are involved in continuous categorization struggles, renegotiating the values of different positions and thus restructuring the social relations and systems of exchange (Bourdieu 1984, 466–84; Skeggs 2004, 13–5). Far from being a ‘derived’ level determined by social relations, the symbolic and practical social categories constructed in everyday lives are constitutive of and continuously changing the distributional and economic dimension.

**Association, dissociation and normalization: Drawing moral boundaries**

To fully understand the construction of social categories, we have to move beyond acts of interest and power struggles and consider moral acts of recognition, resentment, attraction, disgust and restoration (Reay 2005; Sayer 2005a, 2005b; Skeggs 2005; Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst 2001).

In a partial critique of Bourdieu, and drawing on e.g. Durkheim and Simmel, Michele Lamont (1992, 2000) demonstrates how social categories are upheld by the constant drawing of boundaries by people ‘defining their own identity, ideology and status against that of other groups’ (1992, 6), including the drawing of moral boundaries based on criteria of desirability/repulsion, worth/worthlessness and purity/impurity (1992, 9; 2000, 245; see also Faber 2008). Lamont further emphasizes, that she understand[s] these patterns of boundary work not as essentialized individual or national characteristics but as cultural structures, that is, institutionalized cultural repertoires or publicly available categorization systems. (Lamont 2000, 243)

The moral dimension of social categories is also underlined by Skeggs (1997, 2004; Wood and Skeggs 2008), who demonstrates how the construction of groups is not only economic or symbolic, but also always moral. More precisely, the moral dimension involves the
construction of legitimacy, which in practice becomes a matter of how the struggle over identities and power is distributed in a certain social context. In fact, processes of power and legitimacy are seen as complementary and mutually constitutive, with legitimacy functioning as a tool capable of misrecognizing power. Further, such processes of misrecognition act to produce legitimacy of privilege as well as naturalizations of stigma (Skeggs 2004, 4).

Surely, political categories also carry with them a legitimating power as discussed in several of the critical policy studies discussed above. However, we refer to these sociological studies to remind the reader that social processes in themselves involve processes of legitimacy and that such processes together with the drawing of moral boundaries are important in the construction of social categories. For example, the category of middle class is related not only to possessing a certain amount of cultural and economic capital, or to a specific lifestyle and consumption pattern, but also to a specific taste and morality, associated with, for example, the ‘right’ way to carry oneself, to raise children and to engage in work. As Lamont shows, this goes for race too. In an American context, ‘blackness’, for example, is constructed as connected to compassion and a caring morality (Lamont 2000). Further, the social categories of for example middle class or ‘blackness’ are held together precisely when confronted with other categories that provoke disgust and fear.

Further, as explored by Canguilhem (1989, 1994) in his epistemological studies of pathology and normality, the moral dimension of social categories is connected to the relational character of the normal. Canguilhem suggests that we understand the normal and the pathological as interwoven and constituted in an interdependent relationship, always including one another although constantly trying to exclude each other. This implies a built-in relationship between ‘normality’ and ‘the normative’, since, as he argues, understanding the establishment of norms includes an understanding of spacing and attraction to one another. In other words norms are related to normality, because normality becomes more than an average
or median position, constituting instead an attractive normative position, by which other positions are judged.

However, comparing the constitutional mechanisms of physical norms with constitutional mechanisms of social norms is challenging even in Canguilhem’s approach to normality. The difference between them is that social norms are performed within a context of seeking ‘social order’ through different strategies of e.g. normalizing or eliminating deviant norms, that is norms that are perceived as pathological by a dominant normative position in society. This intolerance towards deviant social norms on the one hand and an idealization of other social norms on the other hand distinguishes how social norms evolve from physical norms, which ‘simply’ come into existence through evolutionary solutions. Further, social norms or normative positions are created in an ongoing attempt to discipline the pathological e.g. ‘in the clinique and therapeutics, that is, in a technique of establishing or restoring the normal’ (Canguilhem 1989, 34), meaning that social normality in contrast to physical normality becomes a position towards which other positions are restored rather than eliminated in an ongoing evolutionary practice.

Nevertheless Canguilhem’s point is exactly to demonstrate why social constructions in the minds of scientists and ultimately in the minds of physicians influence how norms and deviations in life should be interpreted. Even in (life) sciences, which assume a rational and an objective epistemology, Canguilhem demonstrates how each domain of knowledge carries with it its own system of interpretation of normality and pathology.

This implies a dynamic of change in the form of logic of either restoration or elimination of deviance by way of enacting normality (Canguilhem 1989, 246), and Canguilhem suggests the exploration of how the category of deviance, or the pathological, is actually handled in a concrete knowledge domain. In Canguilhem’s own epistemological study of normality in the life sciences he identifies three historical models for how different kinds of physicians exercising life science have understood the relationship between
normality and pathology: 1) The ontological model, in which disease is ‘portrayed as the qualitative opposite of health’, i.e. where pathology is seen as evil and as a threat to the normal, and therapy, therefore, is ‘given for a revalorization’ (1989, 275). 2) The positivist model, where disease is derived quantitatively from the normal, i.e. where pathology is seen as a deficiency or a defect vis-à-vis the normal, and therapy ‘consists in compensation’ (1989, 275). And finally 3) The evolutionary model, where disease is seen as an immanent and original flaw, i.e. where pathology is seen as an inborn error and therapy as continuous adaptation (1989, 276–84).

The analytical value of adding Canguilhem’s reflections on the relationship between the normal and the pathological beyond a medical epistemological context when social categories are under study is a better grasp of how the economic, symbolic, bodily and moral orders also result in perceptions (and knowledge) about normality and deviance – categories traditionally monopolized by a medical discourse often associated with an objective perspective. Inspired by Canguilhem, we therefore suggest that social categorizations as they appear in today’s societies may entail similarly normative as well as restorative dynamics following the above-mentioned models. First, an ontological dynamic of eradicating the ‘threatening other’ (as in the pre-welfare state period where contagious individuals were physically excluded from towns and hence from society), second a dynamic of compensation and normalization (Goffman’s studies (1988) of the asylums offer examples of such a normalizing strategy), and third a dynamic of development and adaptation (as seen in current normalization strategies where deviant behavior is treated through physical contact – and not isolation from normality as in the previous model – with normality as for example in district psychiatric treatment, preventive health and social policies).

The first two dynamics parallel those found by Lamont and Skeggs and the drawing of moral boundaries against other groups based on a feeling of either threat or superiority. The third dynamic moves us toward an understanding of how normality and development are
perceived as integrated, and how development can be constructed as attractive and normal, whereas mediocrity and stagnation can be constructed as pathological and hence as something we should avoid by restoring such values ‘back’ to normality.

4. Political and social categorization

As we have demonstrated, scholars in the tradition of French epistemology have convincingly suggested that social categories exist across economic, symbolic and moral contexts. And although inherently constructed, social categories can obtain stability and thus an ‘existence’ in the sediments of economic, symbolic and moral relations as well as in the body. However, social categories may also be subject to social change, either by way of distributional evolutions, social and symbolic struggles or the drawing of moral boundaries and dynamics of restoration and normalization.

Returning to political categories, then, it is possible to see social categories as the constitutive context of political categorization. Thus, instead of seeing political category making as only a constructive practice (as is done in many policy studies), we suggest that the political context is seen as capable of irritating and changing, but also of invoking and reproducing social categories. As suggested by Ingram and Schneider, this is the case at the level of policy making, where social and cultural stereotypes (or, we would argue, economic, symbolic, bodily and moral relations) function as repertoires informing the construction of target populations. For instance: The lifestyle of an urban, black, young boy, dressed in baggy pants and oversized basketball t-shirt, listening to Snoop Dog, riding his skateboard, may be seen as co-constitutive of the political category of ‘troublemakers in public schools’.

Similarly, a western dressed Muslim girl can become evidence of the success of integration and toleration while at the same time reconstructing the boundary between two categories, namely Muslim ‘troublesome’ immigrants and deserving ‘natural’ members of (for example Danish or French) society.
Further, we claim that especially the embodied habitus generating categorizing discretionary judgments is at play in street-level bureaucracy. What is missing in the understanding of categorization and discretionary practice as presented by e.g. Lipsky and Stone, then, is the acknowledgement that street-level bureaucrats bring with them, ingrained in their own bodies, categorical systems and a position in systems of symbolic and social relations. To put it differently: they are themselves part of the categorical system they ideally are put in office to manage and therefore cannot be seen as outside-observing agents.

Altogether, we claim that the perspectives and symbolic categories street-level bureaucrats bring with them to the interaction with clients might explain much of the reproduction of social categorization going on in street-level bureaucracy. To underline this, we should keep in mind that despite formal and informal bureaucratic rules, professional training and organizational leadership, street-level bureaucrats always act as human beings confronting other human beings. As such they never escape what we argue defines basic social interaction between individuals (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 2009).

Further, we suggest that processes of marking, silencing and making category errors, which Yanow uses to capture the legitimizing and stigmatizing functions of political categories, are always already contextualized by social processes installing moral boundaries and restorative and normalizing dynamics. Again, our main point is that we should not overemphasize the moral or legitimizing power of political categories but include in the analysis the extent to which moral processes occur already in the construction of social categories.

In sum, policy studies of categories and categorization should not ignore the social context but directly address the impact of social categories, as well as independently address and explore dynamics of stability or change. Surely, this is mainly an empirical task, yet we hope to have contributed to its feasibility by discussing these matters theoretically.
However, we would also emphasize how sociological studies can learn from studies of political categories and categorization. As emphasized by Bourdieu in the notion of the State as holding the legitimate means of symbolic capital, and as demonstrated in most of Foucault’s work, State and policy formations hold an autonomous dynamic for social change as well as stabilization. State enforcement of some categories over others contributes with legitimacy beyond moral boundaries and sedimentation qua inscription of categories in the law and administrative acts (Bourdieu 1987a). As a concluding point, we suggest including political categories and categorizations as a fourth context complementary to the three social contexts already discussed (i.e. the economic, the symbolic and the moral context). In sum, we suggest that comprehensive studies of categories and categorization should be conducted across these four contexts, leaving it as an empirical question and historical variable from where change and stability are constituted, and how the intersection of categories is completed.

Based on this comprehensive framework, we further suggest that studies of the intersection of categories at the level of policy making, implementation and interaction between clients and street-level bureaucrats may prove a particularly fruitful laboratory for studies of current forms of categorization. At the policy level, both the study of deservingness and entitlement and the study of administrative and statistical registration could point at politically salient struggles of categorization. For example, when some Danish municipalities ask parents of schoolchildren if their children are raised in a smoking environment, it creates a political category of ‘smoking homes’, drawing, it seems, on a medical discourse, but also on a moral devaluation of the practice of smoking, on a conception of a lifestyle practiced in homes with smoking parents and on knowledge of the ‘social profile’ of smokers, i.e. the distribution of economic and cultural resources among smokers compared to non-smokers. Also, the study of implementation and street-level discretion may show the possible impact of intersecting categorizations at the micro-level, as for example when social workers make
decisions about eligibility for disability pensions based not only on medical diagnoses but also on symbolic and moral evaluations of clients’ lifestyles and work ethics (Møller 2009).

5. The critical potential of studying categories

Such empirical studies are important, we argue, not only for advancing our understanding of these matters, but also for continuous critical analyses of dynamics of power in states, societies and communities. Let us therefore as our last point discuss the critical potential of studying categories and categorization.

As pointed out throughout the article, the study of categories is slippery. This has to do with the epistemological complexities and different perspectives continuously crossing and overlapping each other. These complexities are also evident when scholars of categories and categorization address the critical potential of their work. Here we encounter a cruel dilemma: no matter how we do it, categorization implies a selection of some features and a suppression of others (Yanow 2003: 205–29). It seems as if categories are on the one hand necessary for the potential acknowledgement of suppression and need, but at the same time always carry with them stigma and further suppression. Or, as Yanow suggests: ‘if we ignore the category names and terms, there will be no relief; but if we dwell on them, stigma is continued’ (2003, 216).

We suggest that there is also a lesson to be learned from French epistemology. Bachelard, who is most occupied with the normative position of scientific disciplines, argues that every science should be measured by how much it is capable of moving ‘away from itself’, and he argues for ‘error’ as a normative aim, guiding scientific progress (Bachelard 1976). Similarly, the normative implication of Canguilhem’s ‘theory of error’ is that both the individual and society should improve their capacity to tolerate and live with their own pathologies instead of eliminating them, since they present the very possibility for a better way of living. According to Canguilhem, this existence of irritation is exactly what makes a
norm strong, tolerant and self-reflective. As he puts it: ‘The menace of disease [deviance] is one of the components of health [normality]’ (Canguilhem 1989, 287).

In relation to categorization, we argue that this ‘moving away from oneself’ equals a practice that is capable of refusing to normalize any given deviant feature, but instead always tries to tolerate differences as irritations and not as threats. This notion of tolerance, we suggest, is also inherent in Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity understood as social cohesion based on difference as consisting of interdependent relations between individuals, corporations and the state as well as on a spontaneous division of labor (Durkheim 1984, chapters 3 and 6). This also seems to be suggested by Laclau and Mouffe’s notion of a logic of differences (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 130).

A possible critical stance vis-à-vis the study of categories is thus not so much taking sides in struggles of categorization (which may be struggles of suppression, stigmatization, power and recognition), but rather moving away from intolerant or even allergic categories towards categories with a growing capacity for tolerating apparently deconstructive differences. Hopefully this critical stance can further serve as correction and perspective in potentially slippery studies.

Notes

1. This study was partly financed by the The Danish Council for Independent Research – Social Sciences.
2. In comparison, a search for ‘social category’ resulted in 300 articles, of which over half were categorized as Psychology and only 30 as Sociology.
References


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