**What is Missing?**

**Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Inequality**

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JEL: D 63: Equity, Justice, Inequality, and Other Normative Criteria and Measurement; D 73: Bureaucracy; Administrative Processes in Public Organizations; Corruption; I 0: Health, Education and Welfare General; J 71: Discrimination; Z 13 Economic Sociology;

**Acknowledgements**: This paper has benefitted from the input of the members of the Successful Societies Program, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, as well as from insights and reactions from the reading group on social processes and racialization, which met in the Department of Sociology at Harvard University during AY 2012-13. We also benefitted from presenting our work to the colloquia of the Departments of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins University. We thank the following colleagues for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper: Asad Asad, Ellen Berrey, Jason Beckfield, Bart Bonikowski, Larissa Buchholz. Frank Dobbin, Wendy Espeland, Margaret Frye, Neil Gross, David Grusky, Peter A. Hall, David Harding, Carly Knight, Leslie McCall, Devah Pager, Cecilia Ridgeway, Lauren Rivera, Wendy Roth, Robert Sampson, William Sewell, Jr., William Julius Wilson, and Christopher Winship. We also thank Gregory Jackson and the editors of SER who commented on our text. The third author acknowledges support from the National Science Foundation, while the first author acknowledges support of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

**Abstract**

This paper provides a framework for understanding the ways in which social processes produce social inequality. Specifically, we focus on a particular type of social process which has received limited attention in the literature and in which intersubjective meaning-making is central: cultural processes. Much of the literature on inequality has focused on the actions of dominant actors and institutions in gaining access to material and non-material resources, or on how ecological effects cause unequal access to material resources. In contrast, we focus on processes that contribute to the production (and reproduction) of inequality through the routine and taken for granted actions of both dominant and subordinate actors. e highlight two types of cultural processes: identification and rationalization. We describe and illustrate four processes that we consider to be significant analytical exemplars of these two types of cultural processes: racialization and stigmatization (for identification) and standardization and evaluation (for rationalization). We argue that attention to such cultural processes is critical and complementary to current explanations of social inequality.

## 1. Introduction

Understanding the causes and consequences of social inequality is one of the most dynamic research areas in the contemporary social sciences.[1] As the gulf between those at the top and those at the bottom grows wider, researchers are increasingly concerned with "unequal democracies," "winner-take-all societies," and the plight of those who are "nickel and dimed" (Frank and Cook, 1996; Ehrenreich, 2001; Bartels, 2008). In this context, analyses of how inequality is produced and grows have been multiplying. In this paper, we first take a bird's-eye view of this literature before zooming in on specific social processes that have generally escaped attention but are necessary complements to current understandings of social inequality.

One of the most significant recent developments, which was featured as the theme of the 2013 meetings of the American Sociological Association, concerns the relationship between micro cognitive processes and macro-level processes: sociologists are examining how individual-level cognitive processes contribute to macro-level phenomena such as residential and racial segregation (Massey, 2007), gender inequality (Ridgeway, 2011), and employment, housing and credit discrimination (Pager and Shepherd, 2008). While these contributions reveal how micro-level cognitive and social-psychological patterns affect the distribution of material and symbolic resources, many important dynamics have remained largely beyond the scope of inquiry. These pertain to how intersubjective frameworks or cultural structures connect the *cognitive* to the *macro-social*.

In this paper, we make a case for broadening the agenda for the study of social inequality by focusing on what we term cultural processes. These are moved by intersubjective meaning-

[1] We focus on "*social* inequality," which we define as unequal access to all kinds of resources between individuals or social groups. We see social inequality as distinct from, yet overlapping with, economic or income inequality. While economic inequality focuses nearly exclusively on differences in wealth and income, social inequality considers other differences between individuals, groups and nations that matter for one's quality of life and general well-being. Building on Fraser (1995), we are concerned with distribution and recognition of dignity as the two main aspects of inequality.

making: they take shape through the mobilization of shared categories and classification systems through which individuals perceive and make sense of their environment.[2] Key examples of such processes include rationalization (Weber, 1978), stigmatization (Goffman, 1963), racialization (Omi and Winant, 1994), commensuration (Espeland and Stevens, 1998), identification (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000), assimilation (Brubaker, 2001), standardization (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010), and evaluation (Lamont, 2012).[3]

We consider these processes to be important because they contribute to the production and reproduction of inequality in routine ways, often as a side-effect of other ongoing activities, and as such do not necessarily involve the intentional action of dominant actors. Furthermore, unlike the processes currently considered by the inequality literature connecting the micro and the macro (especially those inspired by analytical sociology, e.g. Hedström and Swedberg, 1998), they operate not only at the level of individual cognition, but also intersubjectively, through shared scripts and cultural structures, such as "frames," "narratives," and "cultural repertoires" (Lamont and Small, 2008; Small *et al*, 2010).

Our central goal is to establish the main characteristics of cultural processes and illustrate how they contribute to the production and reproduction of inequality. For this purpose, we focus on identification and rationalization as two broad meta-categories – or "families" – of cultural processes and provide a discussion of two examples of each: for identification, we focus on racialization and stigmatization; and for rationalization, we focus on standardization and evaluation. We also consider the causal pathways from cultural processes at the micro and meso-

[2] The classical statement on classification systems is Durkheim and Mauss (2009).

[3] While these processes are described here under the lens of "culture," they could also be described as social or economic processes. The same holds for democratization, liberalization, nationalization, and other processes that result from and mobilize multidimensional causal dynamics. We term these processes "cultural processes," however, in order to draw attention to what we believe to be their fundamentally semiotic attributes (e.g. their intersubjective nature and their reliance on shared scripts--see Sewell, 2005).

levels to social inequality at the macro-level. We conclude with a discussion of the added value of the perspective offered here.

## 2. Three Dimensions in the Study of Inequality

We start by locating our contribution in the broader sociological literature on inequality. In this section, we sketch in broad strokes the development of sociological research on social inequality. As a way of organizing the literature, inspired by Lukes (1974), we identify three broad dimensions of inequality which correspond, *grosso modo*, to three overlapping phases in the study of inequality.[4] Each phase has brought to light an important and complementary set of social processes and causal pathways to inequality – which has led to an increasingly refined understanding of how inequality in society is produced and reproduced. But this literature has also left important pathways—certain social processes—unexplored. A fuller understanding of inequality requires us to extend the focus to an additional type of social processes, which we broadly term “cultural processes.” The bulk of the paper describes such cultural processes, comparing exemplars with the dominant types of processes explored most often in the three broad dimensions of inequality. Figure 1 previews of our argument and is explicated in the pages that follow.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

[4] A full consideration of the literature on inequality would also require a discussion of the macro-sociological and macro-economic literature on institutional dynamics such as union decline, technological change, or globalization, and how they have exacerbated inequality over the last few decades (see e.g., Western and Rosenfeld, 2011). However, space constraints prevent a full discussion of this literature.

## 2.1. Dimensions 1 and 2: Control over Material and Non-Material Resources

Traditional approaches to inequality, as they appear in the classics, have been mostly concerned with control over material resources. Here we have in mind for instance the concept of exploitation in Marx (extraction of surplus value as described in *Das Kapital* (1961)), the concept of power in Weber (1978) which is defined in terms of the likelihood that someone will realize her will against the resistance of others (p. 212), and the concept of closure, as detailed in Weber's writings on the Chinese Literati (Weber, 1978) and expanded by Parkin (1979) and others. Such classic statements have inspired contemporary attempts to expand our understanding of the social processes central to the creation of inequality. The 1950s through the 1970s were marked by the work of C. Wright Mills (2000) and Domhoff (1967) on the power elite, and related studies. In the last two decades, Tilly (1998; 2008) turned to inequality-producing social mechanisms such as exploitation and opportunity hoarding, and keystone studies such as Massey and Denton (1993) analyzed segregation as an intentional, conscious process that is the root cause of Black poverty in the United States. As is the case in resource dependency theory and world system theory (e.g. Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976; Wallerstein, 1974), much of this work is concerned with relationships in which a dominant party willfully creates a situation that works to the detriment of the subordinate group, mostly by depriving it of material resources.[5] This analytic attempt to identify the causes and pathways underlying the distribution of material resources is what we call the first dimension of the study of inequality. As Figure 1 illustrates, studies focusing on this dimension have tended to examine social processes such as

[5] To some degree, Tilly (1998) examines the role of subordinates, and much of his research agenda concerns how "people below" engage in contentious action with "people above" (e.g., McAdam *et al*., 2001). While his articulation of the social mechanisms of emulation and adaptation include discussion of the role of subordinates in taken for granted inequality-producing practices (Tilly, 1998, p. 97), his central focus is on exploitation and opportunity hoarding, which he argues "cause the installation of categorical boundaries within organizations, while emulation and adaptation reinforce those effects" (Tilly, 1998, p. 114). As developed later in this paper, we argue instead that intersubjective cultural processes can *create* categories of exclusion and inclusion themselves, require coordinated action, are open-ended in their consequences for inequality, and, as such, are broader fundamental social processes implicated in many aspects of social life.

domination, exploitation, opportunity hoarding and social closure. It is safe to say that until 1980, the vast majority of North American sociologists were concerned with these types of processes, with the exception of social psychologists and those studying the particulars of place-based inequality.[6]

Without abandoning this concern for the distribution of material resources, over the past forty years, American sociologists have shifted their focus toward a wider range of relationships that contribute to inequality, turning their attention to the distribution of non-material resources, such as cultural and symbolic capital. While this line of work is not independent from Dimension 1, as a rule, relevant authors developed a greater interest in the role of status signals and symbolic domination in the study of inequality, building on early insights from Weber, Veblen and others on culturally-based closure.[7]

Collins' *The Credential Society* (1979) and Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979) are signal contributions in this vein. In *Distinction* in particular, Bourdieu showed how cultural exclusion feeds into inequality and how the class struggle operates in the symbolic realm through the monopolization of symbolic power or the imposition of a specific class culture as a dominant standard (or "doxa"). This shift toward a focus on the role of symbolic and cultural relationships in the reproduction of social inequality represents what we view as the second dimension in the study of inequality. In Dimension 2, inequality is primarily understood as the result of both intentional and habitus-driven actions by a dominant party over a subordinate group. Social inequality, here, entails symbolic domination and imposition and is determined by kin access to

[6] Both in political science and sociology, numerous debates have emerged about the role of institutions in channeling power relationships, the role of "interest" in driving the action of the dominant group, and the role of culture (or agenda setting) in explaining its action, as illustrated for instance by Lukes (1974)'s classical book on power.

[7] Because theories of human capital concern not the symbolic aspects of knowledge but its input in the production function, we would not include these theories into Type 2. A full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

non-material resources such as cultural and social capital. [8] This framework has become prevalent in a large segment of American and international sociology, largely through Bourdieu's influence (for evidence, see Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007; Coulangeon and Duval, 2013). As Figure 1 illustrates, the social processes studied in this dimension have tended to include distinction, symbolic violence, symbolic exclusion, and self-relegation.

## 2.2. Dimension 3: Ecological Effects

A third dimension of inequality accounts for the causes and consequences of inequality at the network (DiMaggio and Garip, 2012), neighborhood, community, or city levels of analysis. For instance, the neighborhood effects literature interrogates the social processes of neighborhoods and cities, taking the social-ecological environment, rather than the individual social actor, as its starting point. It focuses on specific inequality related outcomes, such as differential crime rates and health outcomes (Sampson, 2012; Browning *et al*., 2013), differential educational outcomes (Wodtke *et al*., 2011), intergenerational disadvantage (Sharkey, 2012), and joblessness (Wilson, 1996). These neighborhood-level processes are durable and continuous; they typically do not entail purposeful domination of one group over another. Wilson (1980; 2010) famously argued that while residential segregation may have brought about the conditions of inner-city neighborhoods, the development of the latter took on a life of their own, resulting in the reproduction of inequality.

As the recent ecological effects literature has attempted to unpack the causal "black box" connecting neighborhoods to social disadvantage, scholars have investigated specific "cultural patterns" (e.g. cultural adaptations that explain disparate crime rates), arguing that these patterns take on a self-replicating character even if their initial causes were structural or environmental (see Sampson and Wilson, 1995; Harding, 2010). Focusing on social disorganization, others

[8] Of course, symbolic domination is also central in Marx and Weber. While one can give a cultural interpretation of Marx's analysis of capitalism, it is fair to say that in the sixties and the seventies, he was almost exclusively read through a structural lens – that is, until E. P. Thompson's writings became influential.

have considered the role that "collective efficacy," or "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" (Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls, 1997, p. 918), plays in the amelioration of place-based inequality. The centrality of place in the ecological effects literature draws attention to meso-level social processes that are "supra-individual" (Sampson, 2012) in nature (see figure 1).[9] While this focus brings to light important processes and mechanisms at work in place-based inequality, social actors and situated social practices are often lost in this account.[10]

## 2.3 What is Missing?

These literatures have not captured the full range of relationships involved in the production of inequality. Focusing on the individual social actor as the unit of analysis (*contra* much of the ecological effects literature), several authors have recently aimed to connect the social structural and the social psychological to develop a more refined understanding of the pathways through which inequality develops and is perpetuated. For instance, building on the social-psychological literature on cognitive boundaries and prejudice, Massey (2007) argues that because human memory is finite, our brains rely on patterns of information (schemas) that enable us to quickly

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[9] The relational assumptions of the ecological effects literature are shared with the literature on social spaces or fields, networks, and geographical space, which by definition all focus on the supra-individual. We thank Bart Bonikowski for alerting us to this point.

[10] It should be noted that recent work at the intersection of cultural sociology and ecological effects has begun to account for individual-level perceptions of place. Such work has investigated, for example, individual-level frames (see Lamont and Small, 2008) and "cognitive landscapes" (Sampson and Wilson, 1995). Some authors (e.g. Harding, 2010), use a cultural perspective instead of taking the neighborhood as the unit of analysis. Others, such as Sampson (2012) and Sampson and Bean (2006), aim to bring a corrective to the ecological literature, arguing for a more integrative approach from the starting point of the ecological tradition. Sharkey and Faber (Forthcoming) argue that the neighborhood effects literature must move from a dichotomous focus on whether or not neighborhoods matter to a more complex focus on when, how, and why neighborhoods matter. By detailing *how* context matters, the literature, they argue, can better identify social processes and "the operation of systems that generate inequality in individuals' residential environments and the ways that these contexts affect the individuals within them."

interpret the world around us., We use such patterns *inter alia* to automatically and subconsciously categorize people based upon warmth and competence (as argued by Fiske *et al*., 2002). Furthermore, psychological studies suggest that we routinely apply such schemas to various social categories. As such, these cognitive schemas not only play an important role in the construction and reification of group boundaries, but also shape how we perceive and evaluate different groups: while we associate mostly positive attributes (e.g. competence, honesty, etc.) with high-status in-group members, members of low-status out-groups are perceived in largely negative terms (e.g. as incompetent, dishonest, etc.). In *Categorically Unequal*, Massey (2007) suggests that this cognitive mechanism has wide-ranging ramifications for social stratification: it not only leads to discrimination and exclusion for low-status out-group members, but also affects the distribution of important resources, as the esteemed in-group  hoards (or extracts) social, cultural, economic and spatial capital at the expense of the low-status out-group. Complementing this perspective, Ridgeway (2011) centers her work on the cognitive interpersonal processes that contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality in spite of the increase of women's control over resources in the past century. She asks: Why does gender inequality persist in everyday social relations despite the important progress of the past decades? She uses various studies to reveal that we categorize others by their sex quickly and automatically and that this largely unconscious categorization primes us with shared cultural stereotypes about each gender. She also shows how this leads to inequality in access to resources. She proposes that our shared cultural biases and our (perhaps biological) inclination to categorize people into two distinct sexes collude to affect the way in which we engage in social situations, reifying expectations of gender distinctions, and thus reinforcing/reproducing existing inequalities.

Both of these authors offer accounts that go beyond traditional explanations of inequality: these accounts are different from Dimension 1 and Dimension 2 approaches in that they highlight the role of micro processes that contribute to inequality in subtle and largely unconscious ways (for instance, by drawing on the psychological literature which Bourdieu largely ignores). Moreover, their approaches are distinct from Dimension 3 (ecological effects) in that they focus on concrete individuals or groups and their actions. However, in doing so, they move directly from intra-individual cognitive processes to macro-level patterns of inequality with insufficient consideration of, or analytic precision regarding, what lies between those levels. In particular, what is typically missing from the picture is an understanding of how intersubjectively shared

meaning structures (e.g., scripts, narratives, repertoires, and symbolic boundaries) come to enable and constrain behaviors. This is where we make our intervention, as we theorize that cultural processes are the missing link between cognitive processes and macro-level inequality (see figure 2).[11]

A number of cultural sociologists have begun filling this gap over the last twenty years. For instance, Lamont (1992; 2000) compares conceptions of worth among upper-middle class and working class individuals in France and the United States, looking at how these are shaped by available cultural repertoires, and how these symbolic boundaries create the conditions for social boundaries. Lareau (2003) compares cultural tools used by middle class and working class parents to raise their children. Blair-Loy (2001) reveals how incompatible frames concerning motherhood and career (as exclusive commitments) are used by female financial executives to navigate the boundary between home and work. And in the neighborhood effects literature, David Harding, Mario Small and others have integrated cultural concepts into our understandings of the mechanisms that explain neighborhood effects. For example, Harding (2010) analyzes the mobilization of divergent toolkits among adolescent boys in low-income neighborhoods in order to understand violence in peer relationships. In *Villa Victoria*, Small (2004) reveals how residents' differential framing of the same neighborhood can enable or constrain community participation between cohorts (for additional examples, see Lamont and Small, 2008).[12]

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[11] The symbolic interactionist tradition has given considerable attention to the construction and negotiated character of the social order, but has not focused on the comparative study of cultural processes of the type that we advocate here. Space limitation precludes a full comparison of this tradition in relation to the program proposed here. We see our perspective as particularly germane to the interactionist perspective proposed by Frank (1979) who conceptualizes structure as constraints.

[12] Small (2002) shows not only that culture matters with regard to the social organization of neighborhood, but also *how* culture matters. While this work illuminates how culture (in particular, narrative frames) connects to structural change at the neighborhood level, we argue here for a more systematic theory of how culture matters across contexts and through various intersubjective cultural mechanisms, including frames, scripts, institutions, and symbolic and cultural capital.

Yet, while this work highlights the role of intersubjective meaning in the production (and reproduction) of inequality, it does not systematically tackle the fundamental social processes that are our focus here. What we have in mind are processes such as evaluation, standardization, racialization, and stigmatization, which are ongoing, routine, and fundamental features of social relationships.[13] While such processes may be perceived as having little to do with inequality, we show below how they help create the conditions from which inequality takes shape and argue that ignoring them blinds us to crucial pathways that contribute to the production (and reproduction) of inequality. Indeed, we understand these processes as acting as a privileged, but overlooked, link between the cognitive categories studied by Massey and Ridgeway and the macro level processes studied by non-cultural inequality scholars. As we elaborate in the following section, these cultural processes underlie and contribute to the distribution of material and non-material resources within each of the three dimensions of inequality (**compare Figure** 1). They also contribute to recognition, an important but often neglected aspect of inequality. Our task now is to explicate how cultural processes contribute to each dimension and to make the case for a systematic study of cultural processes as a complement to the other dimensions of inequality.

## 3. What are Cultural Processes?

The view we develop here is informed by several publications that, with one exception, were published over the previous fifteen years. They deal with the following processes: stigmatization (Goffman, 1963); racialization (Omi and Winant, 1994); commensuration (Espeland and Stevens, 1998); identification (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; 2005), standardization (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010), and evaluation (Lamont, 2012). As we explicate in the following pages, considering these processes in the study of inequality opens up an under-

[13] Note that while scholars like Ridgeway and Correll (2006; Correll and Ridgeway, 2003) write about how evaluation influences gender typing (of mothers, for instance), they do not draw parallels between the specific case they study and other instances of evaluation, or other cultural processes.

theorized dimension of social inequality, moving empirical sociological work down a novel path.[14] This is particularly the case because, as shown on figure 1, we make a systematic effort to analyze these processes in a parallel fashion, whereas previous efforts examined them in isolation without systematically examining similarities and differences in the role they play (or do not play) in the production of inequality. In addition, we consider their impact on distribution and recognition.

These various papers offer close theoretical and empirical consideration of processes (as opposed to "states" or "attributes") that mobilize collectively produced categories.[15] They also highlight ongoing actions or practices denoted by the gerund "ing" as in "racializ*ing*" or "evaluat*ing*," which may result in specific outcomes such as a racialized social structure or hierarchies of status and worth. Describing and illustrating several of these cultural processes in more detail in the next section, we spell out their other shared characteristics, by distinguishing cultural processes from the social processes considered in Dimensions 1, 2, and 3. Before we move to illustrations of specific cultural processes and their roles in the production and reproduction of inequality, we must first explicitly define "cultural processes"—an analytic definition that we have inductively developed through a systematic comparison of the ways in which these various processes contribute (or not) to social inequality.

First, compared to Dimension 1 processes (control over material resources), cultural processes are centrally constituted at the level of meaning-making: in their essence, they take shape around the creation of shared categories or classification systems through which individuals perceive and make sense of their environment.[16] They all involve a sorting out of

[14] While Foucault and others have considered the importance of classification for power and exclusion, his writings have not been systematically put in dialogue with the sociological literature on inequality nor integrated into a broader approach to cultural processes. Pursuing such an objective would be a logical extension of our current agenda.

[15] For a parallel argument, see Brubaker (2001) on assimilation, which inspired our analysis on this point.

[16] Tilly (1998)'s *Durable Inequality* has done much to bring to light the role that categorization processes play in the production of inequality. As we have noted, categorization is central to the cultural processes that we identify as missing in the literature on inequality. While Tilly's work explicates how exploitation and opportunity hoarding "establish systems of categorical inequality" (p. 10) both intentionally and unintentionally (through emulation and

people, actions, or environments that requires the creation of group boundaries (cf. Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Barth, 1969; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2013) and the creation and relative stabilization of hierarchies, objectively and intersubjectively (Douglas, 1966).[17] These boundaries and hierarchies are typically a collective accomplishment that requires *de facto* the use of shared conventions between various actors and institutions (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Thévenot, 2006). Individuals do not necessarily aim to consciously deploy one system of categorization over another, as they are rarely conscious that they inhabit a categorization system. Thus, classification systems (and thus, cultural processes) are not necessarily oriented toward ultimate instrumental goals such as gaining resources or exercising power (as is the case in Dimension 1 and Dimension 2), since these systems emerge as shared frameworks that are constitutive of reality (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1964; DiMaggio, 1997; Sewell, 2005).[18]

Second, it follows that cultural processes do not solely depend on the actions of dominant actors. As we show in the illustrations in Section 4, subordinates often participate in the

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adaptation), our approach envisions a systematic explication of the way in which group classifications are negotiated intersubjectively by dominants as well as subordinates. Moreover, we argue for an analytic approach that specifies how *specific types* of classificatory processes employ categorization at the meso-level. In other words and for example, we specify how evaluation or standardization practices, in particular, bring about social inequality rather than simply revealing the myriad ways shared classificatory practices *generally* bring about such inequality. . See also Footnote 5.

[17] Classification struggles are also central to Bourdieu's theory of fields,. However, he does not theorize their place in a broader theory of cultural processes and he predefines them as always resulting in symbolic domination, whereas as explained below, we consider the impact of classification on inequality to be somewhat open ended. A full explication of the differences between our framework and his approach is beyond the purview of this paper.

[18] Our focus on the cultural "supply side" (or the repertoires that individuals mobilize to make sense of their environment) is one of the points by which we distinguish our approach from that of cognitive psychologists. We are inspired by the work of John Meyer (1986) which draws on Berger and Luckmann (1964), and more broadly by the phenomenological tradition. Moreover, we share with Lahire and Rosental (2008) a Durkheimian focus on collective representations, as opposed to psychological binaries (e.g. a focus on warmth and competence in Fiske *et al*, 2002)).

elaboration of cultural processes as much as dominant agents do (e.g. in self-racialization through self-identification or self-stigmatization; see e.g. Jenkins, 2008). Furthermore, the sorting can result either from intentional action, or as an unintended consequence of, unintentional actions. Thus, "a will for domination" is not posited as a primary condition for producing these outcomes as it is in the major theories of Dimensions 1 and 2.

Third, cultural processes typically operate in a routine fashion (e.g. Sewell, 2005; Giddens, 1984.) As individuals and groups go about acting in the world (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), they tend to use schemas that are largely taken for granted and made available by the cultural toolkits that surround them. Thus, while considering cultural processes, we move from a focus on discrete, instrumental actions aimed at monopolizing material and non-material resources to a focus on a range of ongoing, routine relationships that enable and constrain social action (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992). In this way, our approach resembles the ecological effects literature (Dimension 3), which considers processes to be durable and self-replicating. Yet, we understand these cultural processes to be the result of the actions of individual and group actors and the systems of meaning in which they operate, as opposed to the consequence of an ecological environment.

Fourth, while Dimension 1 processes are largely concerned with the distribution of material resources, cultural processes explicitly concern the distribution of both material and non-material resources *as well as* recognition, which, borrowing loosely from Fraser (1995; also Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 2012), we define as the fact of being acknowledged and given legitimacy, value, worth, dignity and full cultural membership (Lamont, 1992; 2000).[19] The dual

[19] Note however that Fraser (1995) focuses on injustice instead of inequality. She considers cultural or symbolic injustices "rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication." These include cultural domination ("being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own," non-recognition (being rendered invisible) and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged) (p. 71). The remedy is recognition, that is "upwardly revaluing disrespected identities and the cultural products of maligned groups [. . . ] recognizing and positively valorizing cultural diversity." (p. 73). See also Fraser (2000).

focus on the distribution of resources and recognition is crucial as we understand social inequality as operating *both* at the level of legitimacy and dignity as much as the distribution of material and social resources (Taylor, 1992: Honneth, 2012).[20] While the contribution of cultural processes to inequality would largely be mediated by feeding into Dimensions 1, 2, and 3, we argue below that cultural processes can also feed directly into inequality through recognition and its opposite, misrecognition.

Fifth, we argue that – as a general rule of thumb – the inequality-related outcomes of most cultural processes are largely uncertain and open-ended. Cultural processes unfold in routine fashion as individuals and groups generally go about pursuing other goals: they can feed into Dimensions 1, 2, and 3, but do *not* have to do so in *every* particular instance. The examination of this indetermination marks the study of cultural processes as distinct from the classic and contemporary analyses of social processes in Dimensions 1, 2, and 3. The study of these latter processes often begins with the goal of explaining inequality, whereas the study of cultural processes does not necessitate such a premise. For example, the study of standardization or evaluation processes in a firm may not be motivated by the analyst's desire to understand how the firm contributes to the unequal distribution of resources and recognition among its employees A systematic study of such processes may or may not reveal the ways in which standardization or evaluation contribute to inequality in that firm. We advocate approaching this as an empirical question, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of when and how inequality results from the unfolding of cultural processes.

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[20] Moreover, we consider distribution and recognition to be the two faces of inequality – even though most of the literature on inequality is focused on the distribution of material and non-material resources. Historically, this literature has often only considered contests over recognition by analyzing resistance and related phenomena instead of comparing the full range of strategies deployed to gain recognition (see for instance Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012; Wimmer, 2012). Instead, following Jenkins (2008), we would advocate examining all forms of categorization and legitimation contests around the meanings associated with individual and collective social identity. Note that Lamont (2012) identifies categorization and legitimation as fundamental features of evaluation. Future research should ascertain whether these can be understood as shared by all types of cultural processes.

Sixth, these processes do not operate *ex nihilo*: they unfold in the context of structures (organizations and institutions) in which individual live. As we will see in the next section, the latter contribute significantly to both distribution and recognition. For instance, even in the 1990s, eligibility in the mortgage lending industry depended on apparently neutral rationalized evaluative practices that led to unequal access to resources for African Americans.[21] Similarly, there are many other institutions that allocate resources based on taken for granted rules that depend on the activation of "neutral" classification systems, but which systematically privilege some groups over others. It is the case for access to higher education in American colleges (Lemann, 2000; Karabel, 2005) and the determination of salaries for working mothers (see Budig and England (2001) on the motherhood penalty). Along the same line, social scientists have shown how the recent growth in wealth inequality in the United States has resulted from small, but incremental political-legal changes (Hacker and Pierson, 2010) and staggering "performance based" increases in executive compensation that advantage the rich (DiPrete, *et al.*, 2010).

Perhaps the most important institutional actor is the state, which has a considerable effect on the macro patterns of distribution of material and non-material resources, and on the recognition of diverse social groups. Through law and social programs, the state wields immense power in shaping and legitimizing systems of categorization, which we have argued are fundamental preconditions for cultural processes. Many cultural social processes operate at the state level, particularly those processes that are associated with rationalization (compare e.g. Gupta,2012). These processes—like standardization and evaluation—often animate the everyday functioning of major social programs. For example, *No Child Left Behind* is a government-led program at the federal level that enforces the standardization of the education system—the standardization of teachers as well as classroom content within, and increasingly, *acros*, states. Other prime examples of such state-sponsored, large-scale standardization programs include the census or statistical indicators such as the GDP. Moreover, these processes are often intertwined

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[21] The Boston Fed Study (Munnell *et al*. 1996) collected actual loan application data from Boston-area financial institutions in 1990 and analyzed the variables that lenders themselves identified as important for their decision making. The authors conclude that even if two mortgage applicants were financially identical, a minority applicant would be 60 percent more likely to be rejected than a comparable white applicant.

with identification processes such as the racialization of citizens through the inclusion of racial categories on the census and other forms. These types of state actions are based upon classificatory schemes (e.g. Bowker and Star, 2000; Loveman and Muniz, 2007; Fox, 2012) which just like cognitive categorization on the individual-level--is the fundamental root (Massey, 2007) of social stratification and inequality. However, such schemes do not operate in isolation, but always in specific institutional contexts (composed of systems of rules and sanctions) which channel and magnify the impact of classification systems.

To recap: We conceptualize cultural processes as ongoing classifying representations/ practices that unfold in the context of structures (organizations, institutions) to produce various types of outcomes. These processes shape everyday interactions and result in an array of consequences that may feed into the distribution of resources *and* recognition—and thus, often contribute to the outcomes considered by each of the three dimensions of inequality. These processes are largely a collective accomplishment as they are shared representation systems involving dominants and subordinates alike.

Through illustrations of racialization, stigmatization, standardization, and evaluation, we reveal the way in which cultural processes function in empirical work in the social sciences. While some of this work explicitly considers the analytic role that cultural processes play in the reproduction of inequality, the majority of this work fails to systematically envision cultural processes as analytically meaningful pathways to unequal social outcomes. By considering various studies through the analytic lens offered here, we reveal how cultural processes sort out individuals and groups on an ongoing basis. This sorting process both opens and closes opportunities, and enables and constrains individuals' life course trajectories. The outcomes of such processes are open-ended or uncertain, as opposed to *always* resulting in exploitation (Dimension 1), exclusion (Dimension 2) or isolation (Dimension 3).

## 4. Illustrations

We now turn to concrete examples of such processes to put empirical flesh on the theoretical bones of the proposed approach. For heuristic purposes, we organize cultural processes into two types of process "families": identification and rationalization. We illustrate

these with the specific exemplars of racialization and stigmatization (for identification) and standardization and evaluation (for rationalization). We describe how different types of practices “anchor” these processes, and how these processes feed into inequality in often unpredictable ways. While we may describe these processes as concrete “real world” happenings, they are in fact analytical constructs we devise for the purpose of capturing and illuminating social dynamics.

## 4.1 Identification

The first type of cultural processes concern *identification*, that is, the process through which individuals and groups identify themselves, and are identified by others as members of a larger collective. A large body of sociological and anthropological research shows that this process can occur on the basis of a broad range of individual categorical attributes, such as race, ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, citizenship, sexual orientation, and the like (Owens *et al.* 2010). For their part, groups can identify themselves as members of more or less clearly defined and bounded supra entities (e.g. a nation, church, sport, ideological community, lifestyle enclave, etc.).

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) advocated using the concept of identification over “identity” because it derives from an active verb, and is therefore a processual concept that “lacks the reifying connotations of ‘identity’. While the latter suggests acharacteristic that is inherent and fixed,identification avoids essentialism and “invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying” (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, p. 41; Wimmer, 2013 for a kindred perspective). We follow in their footsteps. In studying cultural processes, we focus on identification by tracing specific micro practices through which individuals and groups construct their identities (through self-identification) as well as the practices through which their identities are constructed by other individuals, groups, and institutions (through group categorization)—inspired by Jenkins (2008). The classification of people into groups and categories is central to both racialization and stigmatization.

### *4.1.1. Racialization*

Racialization is the process by which social markers or biological and phenotypic differences between human bodies are imbued with significance by social actors (Murji and Solomos, 2005). Meaning-making is central to this process, as phenotypic markers do not speak for themselves, but have to be interpreted through shared and locally embedded categories. Moreover, racialization necessitates that social actors (e.g. individuals, groups, nation-states) share an understanding of the significance attached to these markers and of how they distinguish between groups of people.[22]

Various schools of thought define racialization in particular ways. Just as anthropological, sociological and biological disagreements abound over the definition of race (Morning, 2011), authors compete around the proper definition of racialization (cf. Barot and Bird, 2001). However, the process in which actors instill biological markers with meaning is common among all these understandings (Murji and Solomos, 2005). For instance, Omi and Winant (1994) account for racialization as a recursive process whereby racial meanings are constantly re-interpreted and re-classified.

Racialization's implications for inequality can be ambiguous and open-ended. In many cases, actors who engage in racialization intend, in fact, to *counteract* oppression and inequality through calls for social inclusion and political representation (Polletta, 2009). More specifically, the subordinated contribute to the reproduction of group boundaries by embracing their ethnoracial identity, thus participating in the stabilization of racial classification systems. Hence, the generation of inequality along racial lines comes not just "from above" (as in Dimension 1) but is produced conjointly by the dominant and the subordinated group. In other cases, racialization by dominant group members is more unidirectional (via the mobilization of racial stereotypes in the workplace for instance), and closes opportunities for the subordinate group, without direct input of the subordinate group. Thus, the outcome of interest is open-ended and has to be traced on a case-by-case basis.

[22] Of course, the same process operates for gender, which results in 'genderization', and which interacts with racialization to generate differentiated representation of men and women belonging to a same ethno-racial groups.

A body of social-psychological literature has uncovered the cognitive processes that enable the cultural categories of race to be socially meaningful (see for instance the Implicit Association Test literature; Ottaway *et al*. 2001). Building on this work, Massey (2007) shows how (often-unconscious) cognitive classification of groups along racial lines (racialization) has resulted, historically and to this day, in structural discrimination such as discriminatory lending practices and *de facto* segregation. However, Saperstein and Penner (2012) reveal how racial classificatory categories are fluid and depend upon context and social position. Assessing two decades of longitudinal data, they find that self-racialization and racialization by others is associated with changes in socio-economic status: they show that individuals are more likely to identify and be identified as White with increases in their socio-economic status and as Black with drops in status.

Other examples come from research on the durability (and fluidity) of racial categorization across national contexts. For instance, Roth (2012) studies immigrants from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic to reveal that increasing Latino migration into the United States has re-shaped the nation's historically two-tiered racial hierarchy; now, the migration of Latino immigrants has structured "a middle tier between Whites and Blacks" (p. 193). In addition to re-shaping American racial classifications, Latino migrants "send" back to their home countries new racial schemas that they have adopted from their exposure to the American racial hierarchy. This includes diffusing a more clear-cut bimodal view of race (which opposes whites to blacks) into societies that historically have had a gradational view of race. The cross-pollination of racial categorization between host and home countries impacts not only individual-level identification but also macro-level and institutional identification and racialization, and reshapes inequalities. For example, in the United States, new common cultural understandings of race (increasingly a three-tiered view) create new forms of stratification.

The research of Saperstein and Penner (2012) and Roth (2012) shows us that racialization is a collective accomplishment that occurs through a wide range of interactions, and that both in-group and out-group members participate in the construction of boundaries by mobilizing schemas that are available to them (e.g. the association of racial groups with socio-economic standing in the case of Saperstein and Penner). They also show that the resulting hierarchies can

operate to the detriment *or* the advantage of those being racialized. This work points to a quite different reality than theories that focus on the first and second dimensions of inequality. Through racialization, individuals and groups are being not only sorted out but also put on differentiated paths for accessing material and non-material resources, often through the impact of apparently neutral institutions. In this sense, cultural processes such as racialization are a *precondition* for inequalities that result from the processes most often considered in Dimensions 1 and 2. However, because racialization also results in the devaluation of certain categories of individuals, it also acts as direct source of inequality in itself (via misrecognition). The same holds for stigmatization.

### a) 4.1.2. Stigmatization

In his now classic book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman (1963, p. 3) defined stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting." Link and Phelan (2001) extended this definition by characterizing the phenomenon as the convergence of interrelated components of labeling, negative stereotyping, separation, and status loss/ discrimination in the context of a power structure. More recently, social scientists have shifted the focus from stigma to stigmatization, defined as the process which consists in designating symbolically, and qualifying negatively, identities and differences (e.g. Dubet *et al*., 2013).

As comparative studies of responses to stigmatization by marked groups in Brazil, Israel and the United States and other countries demonstrate, stigmatized groups respond to this process in part by promoting alternative definitions of their social identities, mobilizing a range of repertoires and alternative classification systems (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012). When combined, these responses may gain momentum and can modulate the impact of stigmatization on their circumstances and influence what definition of their social identity comes to be seen as legitimate. Thus, even though, the outcome of stigmatization might appear less open-ended than that of other cultural processes, it is still far from over- determined: one cannot tell *a priori* how and to what extent stigmatization will affect the lives of a stigmatized group. While some individuals are greatly affected by the stigmatization of their group, others can come out relatively unscathed. Link and Phelan (2001) suggest that one important reason for this stems from individual differences in the access to resources which might moderate the negative effects

of stigmatization: "Individual differences in personal, social, and economic resources […] shape the life circumstances of persons in stigmatized groups, thereby producing substantial variation within stigmatized groups in any outcome one might consider" (p. 380).[23]

Stigmatization is open-ended in another sense, as well: both dominant and subordinate groups can be stigmatized. While we often think of stigma as a burden carried only by those in subordinate positions, stigmatization can also be practiced against those in dominant positions. For example, in *The Dignity of Working Men*, Lamont (2000) shows how working class men maintain their sense of moral worth by drawing boundaries against those they believe to be above and below them. These men view the upper-middle class as exploitative and dishonest. Similarly, following the recent recession, journalists, politicians, and everyday citizens constructed a similar stigmatizing narrative against Wall Street bankers. These cases show that stigmatization can operate both ways, with potentially different impacts on the politics of recognition. Similarly, McCall (2012) documents how the "undeserving rich" come to be viewed as illegitimate in the American context. Her findings add inmportant nuance to our understanding of the logic of stigmatization.

While some studies of stigmatization follow Goffman's emphasis on the analytic primacy of micro-settings (e.g., Kleinman, 2009), others have focused on meso-level institutional dynamics. For instance, Saguy (2013) analyzes how obesity has become a top public health concern in the United States.[24] Based on a content analysis of public and expert discourse, she shows how obesity has become framed in increasingly negative terms – both on an individual and collective level: being fat is now widely treated as a major health risk for individuals, while on a societal level, obesity gets constructed as a public health *epidemic* via concerted, government-sponsored efforts to reduce it. This leads to weight-based discrimination as obesity gets constructed as a disease that people bring upon themselves (by making bad food and life-style choices). Hence, fatness becomes a social stigma—a sign of weak will and immorality. Yet,

[23] This would most likely also apply to processes studied in Dimension 1 (control over material resources) and Dimension 2 (control over non-material resources).

[24] Other studies that provide insights into stigmatization processes include Schnoor (2006) and Edgell *et al.* (2006).

this stigmatization is not the making of any single group of social actors. Rather, it is the outcome of the actions (and interactions) of various social groups includingmedical specialists, journalists, politicians, ordinary people on the street, as well as the stigmatized themselves. Furthermore, the stigmatization of fat is open-ended in that nothing predisposes obesity to be stigmatized per se, as demonstrated by the fact that it has been valued as a symbol of prosperity and high status in many societies throughout history.

## 4.2 Rationalization

Rationalization as a sociological concept is, of course, closely associated with the work of Max Weber (1978) who described it as a powerful historical force associated with the process of modernization—that is the rise of capitalism the birth of the nation state and the development of modern science. At its core, rationalization entails the displacement of tradition and values as motivations for action by a means-end orientation. Weber saw in this "rational" orientation to action the ideational foundation of Western capitalism (as detailed in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2002)) and a key defining characteristic of modernity more generally. For him, rationalization appears in many different domains of social life (economy, science, music etc.), and in particular in the modern bureaucratic organization. In its ideal-typical form, this particular type of administrative structure is based on rational-legal authority and it operates through the consistent application of universal and impersonal rules. Furthermore, it is designed according to rational principles that are intended to maximize efficiency. These are generally perceived as "neutral" and "fair" (based on merit) but they are often institutionalized from accumulated historical inequalities or resources (material or discursive, human or non-human, as argued *inter alia* by Foucault (1977) and Latour (1993)). Thus, as routine sets in, it is often difficult to find a nefarious villain. Still inequality gets reproduced via a rationalized process and is generally legitimized as a consequence.

Weber's analysis of bureaucracy is relevant for our argument here: processes such as standardization and evaluation can be described as sub-processes of rationalization and as such are closely tied to bureaucratic organizations in modern society. As we detail below, organizations are a context where cultural processes unfold and may result in inequality. For example, evaluation represents a basic operation of any bureaucratic organization. Office-holders

in bureaucratic organizations constantly need to make evaluative judgments and enable and constrain opportunities for action. At the same time, bureaucratic organizations can also be the central agents that shape the form of these cultural processes. The best illustration for this is the emergence of large bureaucratic organizations that dedicate all their resources to the further rationalization of already highly rationalized cultural processes such as evaluation or standardization, for example rating agencies or standards setting organizations like the International Standard Organization (ISO). Below we describe two examples of rationalization processes and how they feed into inequality.

### 4.2.1 Standardization

Standardization is the process by which individuals, groups and institutions construct "uniformities across time and space" through "the generation of agreed-upon rules" (Timmermans and Epstein, 2010, p. 71). While the process implies intention ("agreed-upon rules") on the part of social actors, standardization as a process in everyday life frequently has *unintended* consequences. The construction of uniformities becomes habitual and taken for granted once the agreed-upon rules are set in place and codified into institutional and intersubjective scripts (often formal, albeit sometimes also informal). In its industrial and post-industrial manifestations, the process of standardization is part and parcel of the rationalization and bureaucratization of society (Carruthers and Espeland, 1991; Olshan, 1993; Brunsson and Jacobsson, 2000; Timmermans and Epstein, 2010).

Unlike Dimension 1 and 2 processes, standardization works in subtle and often invisible ways in its everyday unfolding. For example, we rarely think about the myriads of procedural and technical standards that keep the flow of goods and services in our global economy running (see, e.g. Levinson 2006 for an analysis of the role of international normed ship containers in global trade). Moreover, the effects of standardization on inequality are often indeterminate. : often implemented with the intent of developing a common benchmark of success or competence and insure the application of universal criteria, the implementation of standards tends to be motivated by positive purposes (e.g. pollution standards, teaching standards, etc.). However, once institutionalized, standards are often used to distribute resources (which are allocated based upon whether or not individuals, groups or organizations meet the standards). This results in greater inequality, *ipso facto*. In this process, those who started out with more

resources are often advantaged as they are better able to meet the required standards (Buchmann et al. 2010). In this sense, the consequences of standardization for inequality are open-ended, as it can exacerbate *or* abate inequality.

One example of this interaction between standardization and social inequality is the use of standards in education as documented by Neckerman (2007). Among other things, her work analyzes the rise of standardized and IQ testing in the 1920s in American education and local Chicago education policy. It shows how standardized test scores came to be used to determine admission to Chicago's best vocational schools, with the goal of imposing more *universalist* practices. Yet, in reality, the reform resulted in diminished access to the best schooling for the city's low income African-American population.

Although standardization is a dominant feature of everyday social life in modern society, few scholars have considered it as a meaningful analytic concept for capturing how macro-level inequality develops and persists. In contrast, we view the explicit study of standardization—through a context-specific and micro-level analysis of practices of standardization as proposed by Timmermans and Epstein (2010, p. 74)—as critical to sociological inquiry into inequality. Such explicit attention to processes of standardization will shed light on the sorting processes which channel the distribution of material and non-material resources and thereby improve our understanding of the causal (often hidden) pathways through which inequality is created and perpetuated. Epstein (2008) provides a particularly persuasive demonstration of how this operates in the case of the recognition of differences in the context of bio-medical research.

#### *4.2.2. Evaluation*

Evaluation is a cultural process that – broadly defined - concerns the negotiation, definition, and stabilization of value in social life (Beckert and Musselin, 2013). According to Lamont (2012, p. 206), this process involves several important sub-processes, most importantly

categorization ("determining in which group the entity […] under consideration belongs") and legitimation ("recognition by oneself and others of the value of an entity").[25]

In the empirical literature, we find several examples of how evaluation as a cultural process can contribute to inequality, many of which are drawn from sociological research on hiring, recruiting and promotion in labor markets. The bulk of these studies concern how evaluation practices of organizations favor or discriminate against certain groups of employees (see e.g., Castilla and Benard, 2010) or applicants (see e.g., Rivera 2012). Yet, some scholars also examine evaluation processes in labor markets from a broader perspective, locating evaluation not only in hiring or promotion, but in entire occupational fields.

For instance, Beljean (2013b) studies standards of evaluation in the cultural industry of stand-up comedy. Drawing on interviews with comedians and their employers as well as ethnographic fieldwork, he finds that even though the work task of stand-up comedians is highly uniform in that they all try to make people laugh, there is considerable variation in how comedians are evaluated across different levels of stratification of the comedy industry. Thus, for example, newcomer comedians and star performers are judged against different standards: while the former must be highly adaptable to the taste of different audiences and owners of comedy clubs, the latter are primarily judged by their ability to nurture their fan-base and to sell out shows. Even though this difference does not necessarily translate into more inequality among comedians, it tends to have negative effects on the career prospects of newcomer comedians. Due to mechanisms of cumulative advantage, and because both audiences and bookers tend to be conservative in their judgment, it is easier for more established comedians to maintain their status than for newcomers to build up a reputation. As a result, a few star comedians get to enjoy a disproportionally large share of fame and monetary rewards, while a large majority of comedians remain anonymous and marginalized.[26]

[25] For analytical purposes, Beljean (2013a) further distinguish between (1) practices of evaluation; (2) technologies of evaluation; and (3) criteria of evaluation.

[26] Beljean's study also illustrates the complexity of the pathways from evaluation to inequality. While previous research on markets for cultural goods has primarily focused on the role of powerful intermediaries, or gatekeepers,

The cultural process of evaluation undergirds the everyday functioning of workplaces, schools, and numerous other social institutions. In the workplace, hiring decisions require evaluative procedures regarding who is of worth or who has competence. At the same time, other cultural processes like racialization and stigmatization also play a role in the evaluative process for the job market (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Pager, 2003). However, even in the absence of racial categorization, evaluation is a process that results in winners and losers, for example through rankings, or the differential allocation of desirable resources (Lamont, 2012). The particular instantiations of the process depend upon routine practices and scripts that organizations and individuals deploy to assign value to various types or groups of people and objects.

We argue that there is much to be gained by focusing on the processes themselves, as opposed to their specific areas of application (such as hiring). Indeed, by zooming in on the fundamental cultural process, we are better able to generalize from each specific case to other instances where evaluation feeds into inequality, and to work on identifying similarities and differences across cases. Such comparison is likely to reveal details that would go unnoticed otherwise, and may lead to theoretical development. For example, in their study of urban high school policy debate, Asad and Bell (Forthcoming) interrogate how conflicted cultural meanings about the perceived purpose of the activity – what they term "evaluative frames" – shape how debate judges evaluate competitors in this disadvantaged context as compared to "mainstream" debating teams. Similarly, Lamont (2009) considers how academic evaluators distinguish between types of academic work and factor formal and informal criteria in their decision making. Both studies underline the need to compare how universal principles or formal criteria of evaluation are combined across cases, as well as to how cultural frames (whether universalistic or particularistic – e.g. Heimer, 1992) direct evaluation and the distribution of resources.

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in determining the value of cultural goods (see e.g., Beckert and Musselin, 2013; Bessy and Chauvin, 2013), Beljean shows that evaluative authority in the field of stand-up comedy is not concentrated in the hands of a single group of actors. Rather it is distributed and depends on the judgment of peers, audiences, as well as on that of intermediaries.

Last but not least, while cultural processes operate in micro-level interactions between actors through the application of meso-level scripts and frames, they are also instantiated at the meso-level through the practices of organizations, firms, and institutions who are actors themselves. For example, Smith (2010) reveals how low-income blacks decide to share or withhold job information from their peers. She finds that jobholders are frequently reluctant to share information with their job-seeking peers because they fear that these peers lack appropriate workplace behavior, which would reflect badly on them. Thus opportunities are foreclosed without any intentional intervention by a dominant group. The micro-level actions are thus shaping meso-level labor market outcomes (and reinforce widely shared stereotypes). As Smith (2010, p. 4) notes: "the centrality of interpersonal dynamics highlights the role that micro-level processes play in the reproduction of inequality, essentially cementing the disadvantage initiated by larger macro- and meso-level forces." Furthermore, the shared evaluative beliefs not only have implications for individuals' labor market outcomes but also dampen neighborhood collective efficacy and propagate pervasive distrust (Smith, 2010). In this way, evaluative processes also have profound implications for social processes falling under the third dimension of inequality.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

From our analysis, we have attempted to show the various, often subtle, ways in which cultural processes contribute to the persistence of social inequality. Social inequality does not result merely from discrete, intentional actions of the dominant. Nor does it result merely from ecological effects (whether emerging from neighborhoods). Inequality is also shaped by taken for granted and routine processes that manifest themselves in our individual lives and in the functioning of organizations, institutions, and the state. Cultural processes of identification and rationalization can both constrain and enable opportunities of individuals categorized into different groups, based upon ascribed and achieved, characteristics. The opening and closing of opportunities, in turn, has real consequences for access to material and non-material resources. As Figure 2 shows, cultural processes function at the meso-level—they are the processes that animate our cognitive classifications; they constitute the missing link between micro-level cognition and macro-level outcomes.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

The existing literature on inequality has not ignored such causal pathways altogether. In fact, the studies cited in this paper suggest that empirical work on them is well underway. What has been missing is an attempt to compare these cultural processes in a systematic way and to consider how they contribute to inequality in tandem. There is a clear advantage to comparing different types of processes, especially given the abundance of similar formulations in the literature which has hampered theoretical progress. Systematization is an important step toward a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at work and a more cumulative approach to theory building.[27]

But how should we study cultural processes? We have already suggested that a focus on the situated practices that are connected to cultural processes would be generative (in line with Gross (2009) on habits and Brubaker (2001) on assimilation). For even though we give processes abstract labels such as "evaluation," they are always the product of concrete "doings." They are either something that one is doing to oneself (e.g. identifying oneself racially) or something that is being done to one (e.g. being racialized). Hence, a necessary condition for understanding cultural processes is to focus on the micro-level practices that constitute them. These can be studied through observation or interviews (see Swidler and Lamont, 2013).

Yet, despite our emphasis on practices and "following the actor" (*à la* Actor Network Theory), the study of cultural processes should not be confined to the micro-level of analysis. Rather, to develop a full understanding of their ramifications, we also have to study how they are enabled and constrained at the meso-level, through institutional and cultural forces; for instance,

[27] See Snow *et al.* (2003) for a particularly useful explanation of how theory building can result from detailed comparisons. A research program that is centered on social processes is likely to produce similar theoretical refinement.

how they solidify into policies through the formalization of rules and how they are represented or debated in various arenas (public discourse and scholarly research for instance).[28]

To carry out such analysis, sociologists could borrow from political scientists who use "systematic process tracing" as a method (as described in Hall, 2006). This analytic approach has been developed for drawing (and evaluating) causal inferences in small-n case studies. It consists in the systematic and disciplined examination of the causal processes that are producing a given outcome of interest. As such, it requires a careful and close-up analysis of sequences (and conjunctures) of specific events and actions. [29] In this literature, authors have focused on the role of "processes" such as "learning," "competition" (Pierson, 2004), "institutional conversion," and "institutional layering" (Thelen, 2004). Others have focused on path-dependent processes (Mahoney, 2000) and critical junctures (Collier and Collier, 1991). Sociologists could develop theorizing on cultural processes by considering how such conceptual tools may be applied, adapted, or extended to the cases at hand, and whether they are suggestive of new tools.

What are the other benefits of the approach developed here? The study of cultural processes could become a valuable shared reference point for scholars working in different substantive areas of research and facilitate dialogue between scholars. As such, it could also help strengthen the integration of different lines of research. For instance, evaluation is a fundamental cultural process that is not only of relevance in the study of labor markets, but also of higher education, law, public policy, the arts, etc. Hence, a focus on evaluation as a generic cultural process (rather than a focus on specific settings or populations) could fruitfully connect substantive research in each of these subfields (compare Lamont,2012 and Beljean, 2013a). More theory development could emerge from a systematic comparison across cases to determine whether new phenomena are under consideration, or not.

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[28] For instance, as demonstrated by Steensland (2006), debates surrounding the adoption of guaranteed annual income policy in the sixties and seventies involved the moral evaluation and framing of low-income populations. Together with Guetzkow (2010) study of on congressional discourse on poverty, Steensland's paper stands out as an excellent example of the type of detailed process tracing we are advocating. Both Guetzkow and Steensland reconstruct the words and action of individual actors involved in the creation of policies and thus demonstrate how specific types of social changes take place, organized this time around evaluation processes.

[29] For a "how-to" approach to process tracing, see Collier (2011).

One could also envisage systematic exchange among groups of scholars who are oriented toward the study of processes and mechanisms – not only analytical sociology, but also historical sociologists (Abbott, 2001; Glaeser, 2005) and social psychologists who have recently made similar pleas for a more process-centered sociology (see e.g., MacLeod, 2013).[30]A systematic comparison between the study of "generic processes" (Schwalbe *et al.* 2000) and our framework is likely to be particularly fruitful. We should also compare the framework offered here with other frameworks explicitly concerned with linking micro and macro by the way of intersubjectively produced and reproduced cultural meaning (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Collins, 2005; Tavory and Eliasoph, 2013).

We conclude with a few directions for further exploration which would be the necessary extension of the ideas developed here: 1) we need to consider how different cultural processes intersect (e.g. racialization and standardization) in order to better theorize how inequality is produced and reproduced through the conjuncture of different fundamental processes. While a few isolated studies already consider such questions (e.g., Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Epstein, 2008), we are advocating locating such important projects within a broader theoretical framework oriented toward the systematic study of cultural processes. 2) Future work should assess whether some pathways are more prevalent or universal than others in the production of inequality. For instance, while stigmatization may more likely result in inequality, standardization may more often be implemented with the intention of *equalizing* outcomes (e.g. in schooling), and only sometimes result in resource hoarding through the rewards and sanctions to which standards are typically linked. 3) In considering the impact of these processes on inequality, we should consider the role of institutions and cultural repertoires in fostering social resilience by providing buffers and scaffolds against the effect of inequality (Hall and Lamont, 2013). For instance, Carter (2012) considers how high schools in South Africa and the United

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[30] It would also be useful to more systematically explore the frontier between cultural and social psychology along the lines developed by DiMaggio and Markus (2010) and Fiske and Markus (2012), and others, so as to highlight the work of the most cultural of the social psychologists, as well as the most cultural of the analytical sociologists (e.g. Zuckerman, 2012).

States validate (or *miss* to validate) the cultural identities of their students of color. In other words, she studies institutional conditions that foster *recognition*.  4) We should systematically compare cultural processes to demographic, economic, and structural processes which, although they involve meaning-making, can be described without necessarily foregrounding the latter. Lastly, 5) we should go beyond the processes discussed here to compare the cultural side of processes such as exploitation, domination, discrimination, industrialization, and modernization (all directly implicated in inequality) as well as other less immediately political processes, such as differentiation or homogenization. It is our view that most of social life organized around cultural processes, and as such, systematically comparing these processes will prove to be a particularly generative and illuminating analytical wedge.

## 6. CODA: Social Processes, Mechanisms, and Analytical Sociology

The cultural processes discussed here have some surface resemblance to "social mechanisms," and we find it necessary to briefly position ourselves in relation to the relevant literatures.  These short remarks are meant to open a dialogue between approaches..

Many scholars use the terms "processes" and "mechanisms" interchangeably, even though some have tried to separate them analytically (e.g., Tilly, 2008). Following Demetriou (2012), we view the meaning of both concepts as arbitrary and ultimately depending on convention and habit. Nevertheless, we distinguish between processes and mechanisms because we understand them to perform different functions in explanatory accounts: mechanisms are usually treated as a chain of events that mediates between a cause and effect. To identify or formulate a mechanism means to explain what links a certain initial condition (X) to a certain outcome (Y).[31] In contrast, processes can be studied without presuming any set cause or outcome. Here, analytic priority is given to describing the properties of a generative process or chain of events rather than to explaining an observed association between two variables

[31] We are grateful to Curtis Chan and Bart Bonikowski for this insight.

Our emphasis on the generic nature of cultural processes and the value of cumulative theory-building puts our approach into some proximity with another approach that has received some attention of late: analytical sociology (AS), which focuses on the study of social mechanisms. AS is associated with a heterogeneous group of scholars who are only loosely connected by a common label. However, a few core proponents of this line of work have tried to formulate and promote a unified research agenda (e.g. Hedström and Swedberg, 1998; Hedström and Bearman, 2009). They argue that the main focus of empirical sociological research should be the study of generic social mechanisms (rather than specific populations or settings) and that these mechanisms should constitute the basic building-blocks of sociological theory. The central purpose of this focus on mechanisms is to overcome the fragmentation of the discipline (see Manzo (2010) for more background).

While we share AS' focus on basic building-blocks, there are more differences than similarities in our approaches. Most importantly, analytical sociologists typically draw on a version of methodological individualism (which they term "structural individualism", e.g., Hedström and Bearman, 2009), which cannot be conciliated with our approach, as our approach focuses on social actors or groups as embedded within the relational, the intersubjective, and the institutional. While particular instantiations of cultural processes often require actions by a number of discrete actors when they are initially implemented (e.g. Timmermans and Epstein, 2010 on the introduction of new standards as discussed below), they can take on a life of their own and are no longer dependent on any specific stakeholders or agents, particularly as they become institutionalized (e.g. Meyer, 1986). Moreover, some key proponents of analytical sociology focus on the desires, beliefs and opportunities (DBO) of the individual social actor (e.g. Hedström, 2005). In contrast, in our perspective, cultural processes do not necessarily depend on individual social actors acting in an intentional, or "rational," way. Rather, they are often a function of deeply engrained organizational and bureaucratic routines that are, at least ostensibly, far removed from individuals' desires and beliefs.[32] Finally, like the pragmatic

[32] See for instance the tight interweaving between individual meaning-making and macro-level social processes of the state in the form of "political epistemics," as described by Glaeser (2011). Also, Timmermans and Epstein (2010) reveal how stakeholders have motivations for creating standards.

approach to mechanisms (Gross, 2009), we put habits at the center of our conceptualization - including not only behavioral habits, but also cognitive-affective and collectively enacted habits.

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Figure 1: Social Processes and Relationships to Inequality

| | **Processes concerned with first dimension of inequality: Material Inequality** | **Processes concerned with second dimension of inequality: Symbolic Inequality** | **Processes concerned with third dimension of inequality: Location-Based Inequality** | **Cultural Processes** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ideal-Typical Processes** | domination, exploitation, opportunity hoarding, closure etc. | distinction, symbolic violence, self-relegation, social resources (networks) etc. | neighborhood effects, network effects, social isolation, segregation, etc. | identification (racialization, stigmatization, etc.), rationalization (standardization, evaluation, etc.) |
| **Main outcome of interest** | distribution of material resources | distribution non-material and material resources | distribution of material and non-material resources | distribution of material and symbolic resources, and of recognition |
| **Temporal nature** | discrete and continuous actions | both ongoing and discrete actions | ongoing | ongoing |
| **Key agent(s)** | dominant party | dominant party (“dominant class exercises symbolic violence”) | no dominant party/ actor; rather the “actor” is ecology/ neighborhood/ city) | both dominant and subordinate actors |
| **Intentionality of agent(s)** | intentional (“willful domination”, “exploitation,” etc.) | intentional or unintentional | largely unintentional | intentional or unintentional |
| **Pathway to inequality** | Often deterministic | Often deterministic | probabilistic | open-ended and complex |

Figure 2: Pathways from Cultural Processes to the Three Dimensions of Inequality