

FROM SOCIOLOGY TO
CULTURAL STUDIES

New Perspectives

Edited by

ELIZABETH LONG

 **BLACKWELL**
P u b l i s h e r s

*Colliding Moralities Between Black
and White Workers*

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In recent years, analysts of contemporary culture have become increasingly concerned with the demonization of African-Americans in the press and the mass media. For instance, in her influential book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) argues that popular representations of black females oscillate between several negative stereotypes such as the mammy, the welfare queen, and the Jezebel. Similarly, the literature on the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas affair is largely concerned with the pernicious effects that the widely publicized senate hearing had on already massively negative representations of African-Americans in public opinion (Chrisman and Alan, 1991; Morrison, 1992). Most often at stake in these writings is the portrayal of African-Americans as morally lacking in areas such as sexual restraint, traditional morality, responsibility, a work ethic, and so forth. Echoing this moral concern, social scientists suggest that a new form of racism is increasingly prevalent in American society, a symbolic racism embodied in widespread Euro-Americans' perceptions that African-Americans are violating mainstream American moral values.¹ This rhetoric of superiority suggests that the Euro-American majority perceives African-American culture as very differentiated from their own culture, which is congruous with observations that poor African-Americans are now more culturally distinct from "mainstream America" than they were 30 years ago (Anderson, 1990).² It is important to analyze this rhetoric of moral superiority because, as we will see, capturing race differences in moral status signals might also help us better understand cultural mechanisms of reproduction of inequality.

This essay is concerned with the alternative frames of meaning that African-American workers mobilize to define their differences in relation to Euro-Americans. I show that both groups value morality highly, but emphasize different moral status signals that they mobilize in the

boundary work they produce against one another.³ African-American workers often perceive Euro-Americans as immoral on the basis of status signals that are peripheral to the world view of the Euro-Americans I talked to, namely solidarity and generosity. Conversely, Euro-American workers often criticize African-Americans for not valuing as much as they themselves do other dimensions of morality, namely work ethic and responsibility. In conclusion, I shall draw the implications of my research for understanding how the ability to legitimize specific representations of one's identity and that of others can contribute to the reproduction of racial inequality. Also, taking this specific piece of research as a point of departure, I shall point at ways in which the boundary approach can enrich work on identity politics conducted from the perspective of cultural studies.

Very little scholarly work has been done on the extent to which African-American culture is differentiated from Euro-American culture in the contemporary United States.⁴ Social scientists have had difficulty addressing these issues in part because talk of cultural differences was, until very recently, always viewed as a way to "blame the victim."⁵ It is only in the last few years that American sociologists have again conceptualized culture as institutionalized repertoires that have as powerful an effect on the structuration of everyday life as do economic forces.⁶ These repertoires are studied here by drawing on in-depth interviews with members of an important symbolic community of American society, that of the *working man*.⁷ I study how white and black blue-collar workers draw boundaries against each other, viewing these boundaries as institutionalized cultural repertoires, that is, as publicly available categorization systems that are prevalent within their symbolic community.⁸ Instead of focusing on the much-studied black "underclass," I look at African-American working-class men because they represent a significant proportion of their racial group, yet remain largely understudied.⁹

In this essay I focus primarily on moral boundaries and on the boundary work of blacks, and refer to racial differences exclusively to elucidate the cultural specificity of African-American workers. At times, I discuss class differences, comparing the blue-collar men I talked to with white male college-educated professionals and managers I interviewed for an earlier study of the American upper-middle class.¹⁰ I draw on in-depth interviews to reconstruct the symbolic boundaries or mental maps through which individuals define *us* and *them*, simultaneously identifying the most salient principles of classification and identification that are operating behind these definitions, including race and class. I asked the men to describe their friends and foes, role models and heroes, and likes and dislikes.¹¹ In so doing, I tapped the criteria that are the basis of their evaluations and self-identity and reveal the natural order through which they hierarchize others when, for example, they declare that, of course, it is more

important to be honest than refined, or that money is not a good indicator of a person's value. The result is both a multifaceted theory of status that centers on the relationship between various standards of evaluation across populations, and a comparative sociology of models of inclusion/exclusion, that is, of the relative salience of various bases of societal segmentations across classes, races, and eventually, nations.¹²

For this study, I talked for approximately two hours with 60 stable blue-collar workers who have a high school degree but not a college degree¹³ – 30 self-identified African-Americans and 30 self-identified Euro-Americans who were, when possible, matched in terms of occupation and age.¹⁴ They were randomly selected from phone books of working-class towns located in the New York suburbs, such as Elizabeth, Rahway, and Linden, in New Jersey, and Hempstead and Uniondale on Long Island. This random selection and the relatively large number of respondents aimed not at building a representative sample, but at tapping a wide range of perspectives within a community of workers, thereby going beyond the unavoidable limitations of site-specific research.¹⁵ Although produced in specifically structured interactional contexts, interviews can get at relatively stable and powerful aspects of identity by documenting what respondents take for granted in their responses.

While the growing presence of women and immigrants has dramatically altered the character of the American working class,¹⁶ the latter remains a highly gendered – masculine – cultural construct. I talked to nonimmigrant men only in order to minimize cultural variations unrelated to occupation and race/ethnicity – this choice is justified because the larger study within which this particular project takes place is concerned with cultural differentiation between college and non-college educated men, and not with the character of the American working class *per se*; the gendered nature of working-class discourse will be discussed elsewhere. My interviewees include plumbers, electricians, truck drivers, letter carriers, plant workers, painters, and other blue-collar workers.¹⁷ Each in-depth interview lasted approximately two hours – long enough for me to develop a complex view of the ways in which these men understood the similarities and differences between themselves and others. I conducted all the interviews myself at a place these men chose.¹⁸ Future research will compare the trends that emerged from the interviews with national survey data and other secondary sources.

Boundary Work Among White and Black Workers

The African-American men I talked to are often more concerned with the similarities between themselves and Euro-Americans than they are with

the differences. In the view of Brian Washington, a textile worker, both groups "want a decent paying job, a few credit cards, a car that's decent, and a nice place to live. I think people in a certain age, certain income bracket, their thinking is just about equal or the same." Similarly, John Patterson, a plumber, believes that blacks and whites both want "good education for the kids, an environment that you could come to and have nice things and not have them destroyed or vandalized, or threatened in any way, and have a lawn to cut." Nevertheless, discussions of the differences between both groups are omnipresent in the interviews. Blacks alternatively describe whites as power-mongers and as morally flawed because they are inhumane and sneaky. I analyze these aspects of African-American working-class discourse on Euro-Americans in turn, after discussing the dimensions of morality that both groups value most. If I focus on differences between groups herein, I plan to explore intra-group differences elsewhere.

Collectivist definitions of morality among black respondents: solidarity and generosity

When defining what they value, the white and black workers I interviewed emphasized moral criteria more than socioeconomic or cultural criteria. They value moral criteria even more than the upper-middle-class men I talked to. Moral criteria are most salient when individuals discuss the values they hope to pass on to their children,¹⁹ the qualities they like and dislike in others,²⁰ and the meaning they attach to success.²¹ This itself is less striking than the fact that African-Americans and Euro-Americans stress very different dimensions of morality. In general, African-American workers have a more collectivist view of morality that accentuates solidarity and generosity. Whites have a more individualistic view that emphasizes the work ethic and responsibility. These traits are also valued by blacks, but they are less central in black understandings of morality than they are in white understandings, maybe in part because blacks also value solidarity.

The importance that black workers put on solidarity is evidenced by the fact that when asked to choose from a list a quality that they value highly, more than a third of them, as compared to only a fifth of whites, choose "shows solidarity" as an important quality – the same proportions apply to the choice of "generous" as an important quality. Beyond these simple percentages, the content of the interviews themselves – which can only be painted in broad strokes here – reveal that the themes of solidarity and generosity penetrate deeply into African-American discussions of moral character. Solidarity toward the black race outweighs discussions of solidarity toward other workers or toward the human race.

The premium put on racial solidarity is exemplified by Jimmy Light, a phone technician, who defines the whole black race as his kin.²² He says he would like to have enough money to help people: "They don't have to be our relatives, just be black and need it." Using the kinship metaphor, Tyrone Smith, a chemical operator, also states that his goal in life is "helping my brothers. If somebody needs help and we can help them, we put our arm up to help them. Help anybody as much we could without putting myself in danger." Another phone technician also describes his goals in life by stating: "I'm more interested in things that are going to help minorities. I've always been for the underdog because of my upbringing when you're discriminated against."

The promotion of solidarity among blacks means fighting daily for social justice as well as helping "the brothers." Concretely, this requires standing up against people who make racial slurs at the workplace and "getting on the case" of those who "feel through the thing of being slaves and things like that, they're supposed to be superior to you."²³ When asked to name their hero, several mentioned Martin Luther King, expressing their commitment to the peaceful fight for social justice.

The emphasis that black workers put on solidarity is expressed in their greater reluctance to describe themselves as feeling superior or inferior to others: when asked what kinds of people they feel inferior and superior to, more than twice as many African-Americans say that they never feel superior to people than do whites. Generally, they justify this reluctance by wishing that "people [would] realize that we have one creator, and not many creators, and . . . there are many different colors of birds, and trees, and fishes, and everything that crosses this globe." Their egalitarianism goes hand in hand with their emphasis on solidarity, generosity, and other such qualities.

Finally, the centrality of solidarity for these men also manifests itself in the way they discuss their friendships and the strength of their community. Taking the time to talk with people is something they value highly.²⁴ They say that they like to relate to people, to have a strong bond with others. Like many interviewees, Jimmy Light, the phone technician, explains that "I have my networks of friends, where we still have [a strong community.] We look out for each other, we 'diss' each other, we know each other's families." Like white workers, they often define happiness in terms of being able to relate, and to have good, warm relationships with friends and family.

Generosity is one of the moral traits highly valued by the black men I talked to. When discussing the types of people they do not like, they often point to people who took advantage of their generosity – black or white. They criticize individuals who do not reciprocate when expected and who break the implicit social contract that unifies people, thereby

violating the integrity of the person who helps. Concretely, this means borrowing money and not returning it, taking advantage, free-loading, or even manipulating to get certain benefits from a relationship. For instance, when asked to describe the types of people he does not like, Jerry Bloom, a machinist, mentions "people that sponge, that try to use you or con you. . . . Just people that try to get over on you. . . . People that use you and be your friend and tell you anything in the world as long as you have money." Answering the same question, Art Armstrong, a newspaper worker, points to people "who want to hurt other people and try to control other people to get them to do things for their benefit; so these people that are doing it don't get anything out of it." For his part, John Robinson, a union representative who works in a large automobile plant, says that he dislikes people who are "lookin' for somethin' for nothin' . . . try to chisel you, play games with you. Some people have a way of, you know, makin' themselves look good and then do it at my expense." This widespread dislike for people who "use" others is expressed succinctly by Lou Johnson, a maintenance worker, who says:

There's a thing you just don't do. You don't take a person's kindness for weakness or play him for a fool. You don't do that. . . . If I'm sitting here and eating and I have enough for myself and you sittin' there, . . . I give it to you, and then once you get yours, it's like, the hell with you. You don't take a person's kindness for weakness' cause they're giving from here, you know, they feeling sorry for you and giving it from here [pointing to his heart].

Studies show that blacks are in general more supportive of public redistributive measures than whites, which is added evidence of the premium they put on generosity.²⁵ As Anderson (1990: 61) and others have shown, they are particularly critical toward upwardly mobile blacks who do not "put back" in the community.²⁶ Finally, only one of the 30 black men I talked to said that he feels inferior to people in general on moral grounds, compared to one fifth of white blue-collar workers. Clearly, the black Americans I talked to often view themselves as very moral and are not about to yield to the notion that they are less so than white people.

Black workers set limits to racial solidarity when they discuss the "no-good niggers" who "have no morals, no respect, no plans, no hopes, no outlook" (quality inspector, paper plant) and who "don't want to go out there and get a job, or when you do get a job, you don't keep a job. You'd rather be out there with your friends, hanging out in the street, not having a purpose or a direction" (security agent).²⁷ If they respect work ethics and mainstream definitions of success, stressing how they have or have not been able to get "a nice home, a nice private yard, whatever"

(fumigation technician), they often make room for alternative, more personal definitions of success: they recognize the limits that racial discrimination puts on their ability to achieve success and often have a somewhat sociological understanding of the dynamics of closed opportunities. This does not mean that their emphasis on generosity and solidarity is only a self-interested form of resistance to dominant culture – it can also find meaning in itself.

Individualist definitions of morality among white respondents: work ethic and responsibility

Like black interviewees, the white men I talked to valued being helpful and friendly, for instance, stopping to assist people who have problems with their cars, giving a hand when they can, and so forth. They also like to point out that “everybody’s born and everybody’s gonna die” and that there is no use to try to show your superiority. Like black workers, they also put a premium on sincerity, integrity, and “speaking one’s mind.” However, white workers have a more individualistic concept of morality than do blacks. This was already suggested by figures presented above concerning black/white differences in the importance each group gives to solidarity and generosity. In addition, when asked to choose a quality that they value highly, whites emphasize slightly more traits pertaining to the Protestant ethic: more whites than blacks chose “hardworking” (18 compared to 12) and “responsible” (21 compared to 17). While none of the African-Americans put work at the center of their definition of success, a fifth of the whites did. In the interviews themselves, white workers were very critical of people who do nothing to improve their lot and take no pride in their work.²⁸

Another racial difference in definitions of morality is that white workers were more likely to label “dishonest” people who do not respect traditional morality, who cheat on or physically abuse their wives, and who lie and steal. They say that they like strong morals because they are “worried about the country, the state of affairs we’re in . . . [the] groups that are trying to break our morality. . . . like the rainbow coalition that pushes the rainbow curriculum” (train conductor). However, like blacks, whites are very sensitive to drugs, alcohol, and violence as sources of problems in their environment. These were rarely mentioned by the upper-middle-class men I talked to.

In short, the black and white workers I interviewed value morality highly. While blacks value responsibility and work ethics slightly less than whites, they put a much stronger emphasis on solidarity and generosity than whites do.²⁹ As we shall see, the descriptions that blacks produce of

the differences between themselves and white people point again to major contrasts in definitions of morality.

The moral flaws of white people

In the eyes of most of the black men I talked to, moral differences between whites and blacks are abundant. African-Americans often describe white people as essentially sneaky and not to be trusted. They often believe blacks to be superior to whites because blacks are more communal and intimate. Jimmy Bloom, a machinist who lives in Elizabeth, New Jersey, said that black people are more humane than white people: "Black people are sensitive toward human needs because we are concerned humans, whereas the white people that I have met in my life seem detached from the human thing." An assistant cable splicer, John Patterson, echoes this perspective when he says that blacks "have a strong sense of family, a strong sense of togetherness." Illustrating his cultural distance from white culture, he adds:

Black people, actually black women for one, they hold together much more. White people they don't take as much time with their families as we do. . . . How they let their kids be so much more on their own. Blacks seem to take more time with their children. Whites, I've noticed they have a tendency to always have someone else there. Like their kids will go maybe to school away from home and might come home one weekend a year. . . . And then when they're there, the parents are always going somewhere and they have a babysitter, then they have a nanny. That's to me, that's a big difference and to me a lot of the black family compared to the white family. It's a big difference. I mean, I don't know if it makes the kid eventually better. But it's just, as far as the closeness and stuff, it's different.

The egotism, sneakiness, and essentially unfair nature of white people is a theme that came back repeatedly during the interviews. It is expressed by Larry Black, a plumber, who says:

White people . . . probably 95 percent of the time they're going to . . . screw me over, and probably 35 percent of the time, I think that blacks are going to do that. So when I meet a white person, [the probability is] three to four times more greater that I'm scared they're going to do something really sneaky and nasty . . . screw you over, trying to set you up, being nosy, trying to get you fired from your job, trying to trick you to go to certain places and do something wrong, have you set up and frame you, everything you think that a person can do that's no good. . . . Sell you things that are no good, get you hooked on drugs, alcohol. Yeah, I believe in that. A

matter of fact I think black peoples do think white peoples as that, yeah. Honestly, I think 95 percent do believe that.

He adds:

I'm scared of white people too 'cause I say to myself, this guy's gonna fuck me somehow or another. He's gonna fuck me, I've gotta watch him. I don't know how he's gonna do it, but I gotta watch him, until feel comfortable and I see that he's not gonna charge more . . . and see that maybe I can trust him.

This view is echoed by Steve Simpson, a worker in a recycling plant, who describes his co-workers, who are predominantly white, as sneaky.

He says:

They try to basically figure, get into your personality, [see] what you think about certain things, and why. My black friends would never ask me a question [like that] while 99.9 percent of the white people constantly ask you. . . . How you spend your money, what you do with your money, what kind of girlfriend you deal with, do you deal with Hispanic women, do you deal with white women. . . . A black person couldn't care less. . . . I guess it's competitive, I guess [whites] probably get an idea of do black men think their womens is the choice of the female over black race or Hispanic race, or their politician is the choice over a black politician.

On the other hand, Tony Clark, who works for a medical supply company on Long Island, perceives whites as too rigid. He says that what characterizes blacks is

To believe in God, to believe in hope, believe in heaven and hell. To believe that if you live a good life, and you are a good person, generally, good will come from it. Those kinds of things I feel are there as opposed to like when I relate to a white person as far as that same kind of situation, they seem to have a more structured aspects of it. . . . They say you can't go [to church in blue jeans and sneakers] because that wouldn't be polite. That's not right. . . . They have a hard time understanding concepts. . . . They live in certain boxes. They live in more boxes. Some have more corners cut off. There are things they can't relate to.

For many of these black men, white people are too concerned with status when deciding who they will interact with. Like Larry Black, the plumber, many also view whites as having inherent domineering tendencies. He says, talking about blacks:

We didn't create the bombs, we didn't play with gunpowder, we didn't do this. . . . The interest of white America was always to build and be better

and be competitive, and in doin' that, that's more reading and sitting and studying and being more manipulative, and more deceiving, and more, you know, whereas we weren't.

Larry implicitly suggests that the exercise of power implies moral deception and corruption, as if moral purity and socioeconomic success were mutually exclusive. The domineering tendencies of whites are also emphasized by John Smith, a letter carrier concerned with white cultural imperialism. He explains:

I see [whites] as being, or as wanting to be, the dominant force in everything. I see them as being intolerant of other lifestyles and other thoughts from other people what other people think. Especially American whites. . . . They think everybody, I mean other people from other countries or other races, should bend and do things their way. If their clothes are not like their, they're funny. If you can't speak English, you're inferior. And the people in other countries, it looks like they feel an obligation to learn to speak English to satisfy the Americans. . . . They want to impose their philosophy or thoughts on other people.

Similar examples abound: a phone technician explains that blacks dislike whites for their "superior attitude. They think they are above you, you know." In the view of a bindery worker, white people "try to be more domineering. Some of them have a more superior attitude if you allow them to get away with it." Along the same lines, a truck driver contrasts the domineering tendencies of whites to the playfulness of blacks when he says that "white people always lookin' for a way to beat you. . . . Everything is how to keep somebody else, how to beat you at the game. . . . [Blacks] enjoy havin' a good time, hangin' out in the park, playin' sports, stuff like that. I think they enjoy that a lot more."

Other black interviewees stress that there are good white people and bad white people, just like there are good blacks and bad blacks. At times, they appeal to the Bible to justify their claim that we are all equal because we are all the children of God. Others appeal to biological argument to ground equality in the fact that we have all spent nine months in our mother's womb, and have similar anatomies. While these religious/biological *qua* universalist statements are relatively widespread, they are often voiced simultaneously with denunciation of the domineering tendencies of whites (Lamont, 1996a).

Partly influenced by the mass media depiction of society as an overwhelmingly (white) middle-class world,³⁰ the black men I talked to easily move from drawing boundaries against whites to drawing boundaries against the middle class, at times confounding both categories and using

similar rhetorics to describe both, equally exploitative, groups. In particular, Jerry Smith, the machinist, says that "most (workers) believe that management [who is white] is trying to squeeze them like a grape and get more, more, more." Art Armstrong, the newspaper worker, says about his bosses that "they don't really care about anyone anyway. . . . It's like sometimes they will do things that will remind you 'Well, you're a commodity to us, and if we feel we're not getting anything out of you anymore, or we feel we can get more out of that person, you're out.'" These comments all reveal a view of the higher social echelons as morally bankrupt, selfish, and exploitative. The class struggle takes a distinctively moral tone for these men. At the same time, black workers define the scale of evaluation such that they can put themselves above the middle class and white people in general, rejecting and resisting the principles of evaluation that would attribute them a lowly place.³¹

The explanation for these instances of boundaries that African-Americans draw against whites has to be found in the relationship between both groups. Indeed, the very frequent racial *qua* moral boundary work that whites produce against blacks certainly sustains for blacks a view of whites as unfriendly villains. Furthermore, the boundary work of blacks is steeped in categories borrowed from cultural repertoires of discrimination that Americans have produced over the last three centuries. For instance, that a young plumber like Larry Black – who grew up on Long Island – presumes that white people will try to trick him into getting into trouble brings up images of overt pre-desegregation racial persecution. Along these lines, Mia Bay (1994), in her study of slave narratives, found that like contemporary African-Americans, slaves associated whites with power and domination yet stressed that both the white race and the black race include good and bad people. The use that interviewees make of these historically constituted cultural repertoires remains to be explored in the context of their particular experience and life conditions.³²

Social implications of the research

What does this analysis tell us about the cultural mechanisms of reproduction of inequality? If black and white workers are equally concerned with morality, differences in the emphasis that each racial group gives to specific dimensions of morality allow them to locate themselves above the other group, demonizing it in the process. However, whites are much more successful at giving their own definition of morality legitimacy in the workplace, as suggested by the research of Kirschenman and Neckerman (1990), who show that white employers discriminate against black employees based on preconceptions concerning their work ethics. Whites

are also more successful at legitimizing their definition of morality in the public sphere at large – witness the popularity of Rush Limbaugh and other producers of hate speech in contemporary America. Public criticisms of egotistic whites rarely reach the intensity and frequency of condemnations of the always-implicitly black welfare queens, deadbeat dads, and teenage mothers. The support that Congress gave to the Personal Responsibility Act is only one measure of the cultural resilience of these representations. It is this context that gives the findings presented here their significance. The asymmetry in the ability of both groups to diffuse a demonized view of the other is key to understanding how representations of reality play a crucial role in the reproduction of inequality in American society. The definitions of morality that are documented here are not only different: they also have very unequal impact on American mainstream culture and reinforce racism, which contributes to the growing inequality in the resources that whites and nonwhites have access to.³³

The extent to which whites are ignorant of the complexities of black culture, and vice versa, should not be underestimated. That John Patterson, the assistant cable splicer, describes white people as typically having nannies is evidence of this gap, as is the dismay of the medical supply worker, Tony Clark, when he finds that his white colleagues think that he resembles Arsenio Hall although he himself is fat and short. Although talk of racism is pervasive in American public discourse, it is easy to forget how few contacts blacks and whites have with one another due to segregation in housing and employment. With the increase in the level of education of African-Americans, many are now closer to white culture than they were 20 years ago.³⁴ However, the percentage of blacks who have a college degree still hovers around 10 percent. The vast majority live in communities that are exclusively black and many enter in contact with white culture primarily through the mass media.³⁵ The relative isolation of blacks from whites and whites from blacks plays a key role in sustaining ignorance, an impoverishment of understanding of the culture of the other, and racial stereotypes in both groups. The spatial distance reinforces a social and cultural distance that remains largely understudied. Mainstream black American culture, in particular, deserves much more attention.

While influential scholars including Bellah, MacIntyre, Taylor, and Bloom have decried the decline of morality in American society, the men I talked to expressed very important moral concerns. Despite the success of Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve*, the naturalization of racial inferiority via genetics remains unacceptable in many circles, at least at the level of public discourse. As suggested by theories of symbolic racism, moral themes have come to occupy the central stage in talks about racial differences, in part because they better accommodate universalistic rhetorics

than do biological differences.³⁶ We need to explore further the place of biological, traditional, religious, legalistic, humanitarian, or market-oriented arguments in the rhetorics that the men I talked to deploy to describe others. More work is also needed in understanding the salience of various dimensions of identity – here primarily morality and race, but also class, gender, culture, religion, and nationality – in boundary work. This is key to gaining a richer understanding of the mechanisms that allow racism to remain so alive and well in America today. If moral arguments are particularly central in racist discourse, it is undoubtedly in part because they sustain individual explanations of failure that are more compatible with the American Dream than more structural explanations.

Implications for cultural studies

This essay deals with issues that have been at the center of the cultural studies agenda: it analyzes alternative moralities as grounds for classification struggles. It also speaks to the process through which evaluation and identification, combined with spatial distance, leads to the naturalization of differences and to inequality. To conclude, I want to highlight the ways in which the study of boundary work can contribute to cultural studies.

Contrary to important currents in cultural studies, I resist adopting key aspects of poststructuralism, for instance, the fascination with intertextuality. I reject as empirically implausible the popular theoretical position, inspired by structuralism and deconstruction, that, by definition, texts take their meaning relationally within a global universe of interacting texts.³⁷ Instead, as illustrated here with morality, I trace empirically in relation to whom people define themselves with and against, and how different interpretations of reality meet one another (see also, for example, Schudson, 1993). In line with Lacan, Freud, Taylor, and others, who agree that identity is defined by contrast with the other,³⁸ I hope to document the salience and meanings of various categories through which the men I talked to define their identity. I accomplish this by getting them to describe their definitions of “us” and “them” through a set of questions aimed at tapping concrete and abstract descriptions of people they consider to be similar to and different from them, better and worse, higher and lower – focusing here on black/white relationships only, because of space limitations. In the larger project, I thereby document the salience of the category “whites” and its meanings for a large group of black workers, instead of positing that the meaning of race is “generally” relationally defined.

This approach does not privilege bounded or diffused identities, nor ascribed or achieved characteristics, as does some of the recent work on identity that focuses on the “race, class, and gender” triad. Also, contrary

to Bourdieu's (1984) writings on symbolic boundaries and to studies of symbolic racism,³⁹ this approach is resolutely inductive in that it does not predefine categories of evaluation/identification. Contrary to a large portion of the literature on identity politics, it draws on systematically gathered empirical data, bracketing or giving a backstage role to issues of self-reflexivity, while being critical of unreflective positivism.⁴⁰ And contrary to poststructuralist critiques of essentialism, it aims at documenting the full range of universalistic arguments that people make to describe differences (including biological, moral, civic, religious, political, and cultural arguments), instead of asserting the inadequacy of natural, ahistorical, or other universalistic arguments, prior to demonstrating empirically their relative salience (for an illustration, see Lamont, 1996a and 1996b).⁴¹ Finally, instead of positing that identities are unstable or fragmented as do postmodern theorists, this approach can, with the appropriate data, establish empirically the extent to which specific identities are fluid across a variety of contexts, and identify factors that might explain variation (cf. Stinchcombe, 1995; Lamont, 1992: ch. 5). For instance, in the present project, I find that the men I talked to often provide fairly consistent definitions of symbolic boundaries and that their identities appear to be relatively stable, in part because their social networks are largely family-based and their rate of professional or geographic mobility relatively low.

If the theoretical goal of cultural studies is truly to go further in our understanding of the intermingling of meaning and inequality, it would benefit from infusion from this approach, which can be more pointed and can open new roads in the study of naturalization of differences. Indeed, studying identity politics should mean more than deconstructing categories, showing that they are related to one another, that something is nonuniversal about them, that power is discursively constructed, that politics is about contestation over meaning, or that agency is expressed through micropractices. Our understanding of identity politics might be richer if we were to document the salience of various dimensions of identity across populations, the degree of cultural distance between dominant and dominated groups, and the process by which various groups are able to diffuse their representation of the other in mainstream culture. Again, instead of denouncing universalism and providing an epistemological critique thereof, we need to identify which types of universalistic logics people – not academics – use in their definitions of the other and how beliefs about these universalisms are distributed in the population. In other words, instead of deconstructing hierarchies in scholarly or popular culture texts, we need to focus on how people – more than cultural producers – define hierarchies. Confronting the power/culture/inequality nexus surely means refocusing our attention away from ourselves – being less egocentric and more absorbed in other realities.

NOTES

My research was supported by a fellowship from the German Marshall Fund of the United States and grants from the National Science Foundation (SES 92-13363) and the University Committee for Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, Princeton University. I gratefully acknowledge comments from Jason Duell, John Hall, Elizabeth Long, Kathryn Newman, Angela Tsay, and Maureen Waller.

- 1 Symbolic racism "represents a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience and discipline" (Kinder and Sears, 1981: 416). This theory suggests, for instance, that "resistance to busing may be as intense as it is in part because it conjures up images throughout the white population of innocent white children being sent far from their safe white neighborhoods into schools jammed with academically unmotivated, disorderly, dangerous blacks" (ibid: 429). Symbolic racists do not necessarily view any black individual as immoral, but they draw broad conclusions about blacks as a group and their lack of morality. McConahay and Hough (1976) identify several dimensions of symbolic racism: blacks are viewed as too pushy and as not playing by the rules applied to earlier generations of a deprived minority. They violate the sense of propriety and do not deserve further advance: "Welfare, black anger and militancy, black mayors, riots in the streets, affirmative action programs, public officials sensitive to black demands, fair housing laws – all symbolize the unfair advance or demands of blacks at the expense of the values that made this nation great" (ibid: 38).
- 2 Massey and Denton (1993) showed that in 1980 the average black person in the ten largest US cities lived in a neighborhood that was at least 80 percent black and that the vast majority reside in areas that are 100 percent black (ibid: 160). Spatial isolation leads to social isolation which means that blacks are less likely than members of any other groups to report friendship with anyone else but members of their own group. There is a genuine lack of social connection with mainstream society that translates into growing cultural autonomization.
- 3 By boundary work, I refer to the process by which individuals define who they are by opposition to others, and to traits associated with others. This use of the term differs from that of Gieryn (1983), who refer to "boundary work" to describe how scientific disciplines compete for resources at the organizational level by increasing their sphere of competence.
- 4 In their study of a Washington DC black high school, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) argue that blacks "develop a sense of collective identity and a sense of peoplehood in opposition to the social identity of white Americans because of the way white Americans treat them in economic, political, social, and psychological domains." They found that the students they studied identify as distinctively white, behaviors such as speaking standard English, listening to white music and white radio stations, going to opera and ballet,

spending a lot of time in the library studying, working hard to get good grades in school, getting good grades in school, going to the Smithsonian, going to a Rolling Stones concert at the Capital Center, doing volunteer work, camping, hiking, or mountain climbing, having cocktails or a cocktail party, having a party with no music, listening to classical music, being on time, reading and writing poetry, and putting on airs. Besides this study, few social scientists have addressed black definitions of white culture. But from a historical perspective, see Bay (1989).

- 5 Waller (1995) critiques this reluctance to study the cultural dimension in research concerning poor single parents.
- 6 See Durkheim (1965). On cultural repertoires, see Geertz (1973), Swidler (1986), Wuthnow (1988). For more recent work using this approach, see Emirbayer and Mische (1995), Hall (1992), Lamont (1992), Sewell (1992).
- 7 The blue-collar workers studied by David Halle (1984) in his excellent ethnography of a New Jersey chemical plant use the term "working man" to describe themselves. By symbolic communities, I refer to groups of individuals that are socially defined as showing a certain symbolic cohesion and as having at their disposal similar categorization systems to differentiate between insiders and outsiders, as well as common vocabularies and symbols through which they create a shared identity. On this concept, see Gusfield (1975).
- 8 For a cognate perspective on identity and cultural repertoire, see Somers (1994), White (1992), Tilly (1994, 1995). These authors are variously concerned with the use of repertoires in the construction of identity and with the ways in which this use is shaped by contexts or relational settings defined more or less broadly as "institutions, public narratives, and social practices," including social networks (Somers, 1994: 626).
- 9 While African-American blue-collar workers comprise 2.3 percent of the total US population, they represent 32 percent of the African-American labor force and 36 percent of the employed African-Americans. In contrast, Euro-American blue-collar workers make up 16 percent of the population. They represent 27 percent of the total US labor force and 29 percent of the employed white labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistic, 1989).
- 10 The 40 white upper-middle-class men interviewed for this earlier project also reside in the New York suburbs. They were randomly sampled from the phone books of towns such as Madison, Summit, and New Providence, New Jersey, and Massapequa and Merrick, Long Island. For more details, see Lamont (1992).
- 11 As was the case in the upper-middle-class study, respondents were asked to concretely and abstractly describe people with whom they prefer not to associate, those in relation to whom they feel superior and inferior, and those who evoke hostility, indifference, and sympathy. They were also asked to describe negative and positive traits in their co-workers and acquaintances, as well as their childrearing values. The criteria of evaluation behind their responses were systematically compared to recreate a template of their mental map of their grammar of evaluation.

- 12 This is part of a larger project based on 150 interviews with low-status white-collar workers and blue-collar workers and on 80 interviews with professionals and managers residing in the Paris and New York suburbs. The goal of this study is to analyze the relative salience of dimensions of identity in France and the United States, comparing white and blue-collar workers, lower-middle-class and upper-middle-class workers, North African immigrants and *français de souche*, as well as African-American and Euro-American workers.
- 13 These workers have been working full-time and steadily for at least five years. They do not supervise more than ten workers.
- 14 Hundreds of letters were sent to potential respondents living in working-class suburbs in the New York area. In a follow-up phone interview, these men were asked to self-identify themselves racially and we chose interviewees who categorized themselves as black and whites and who meet other criteria of selection pertaining to occupation, age, nationality, and level of education. I take the terms "black" and "white" to be categories that are the object of some intersubjective negotiation, but analyze black and white subpopulations at a specific point in time. I focus on the relationship between blacks and whites because both groups occupy polarized positions in American society, symbolically as well as economically. However, while both groups often define themselves in opposition to one another, they often take into consideration other racial and ethnic groups in so doing.
- 15 By using in-depth interviews instead of ethnographic observation, I sacrifice depth to breadth. However, by choosing respondents in 12 different communities, I maximize the likelihood of tapping internal differences within both populations. Furthermore, while interviews cannot tap class consciousness "in action," they can tap broader cultural frameworks that are transportable from one context of action to another.
- 16 Space limitations prevent me from dealing with the complexity of the changing social, occupational, and economic characteristics of the working class. On these issues, see Stacey (1989), Dudley (1994), and Rubin (1994).
- 17 The black and white samples are somewhat comparable in terms of level of education and household income, although the African-Americans I talked to generally fare less well than white respondents. Some 63 percent of the Euro-Americans have completed a high school degree or a GED. This is the case for only 40 percent of the African-Americans. However, while 30 percent of the Euro-Americans have completed some college, it is the case for 50 percent of the African-Americans – only one respondent in each group has less than a high school degree. Some 36 percent of the African-American households make \$39,000 or less a year, compared to 22 percent of the Euro-American households; 39 percent of the African-American households have incomes between \$40,000 and \$59,000 a year, compared to 36 percent of the Euro-American households. Finally, 10 percent of the African-American households have incomes above \$60,000, compared to 40 percent of the Euro-American households. Half of both the white and black households are two-income households and 60 percent of the interviewees are married or cohabiting. African-Americans have more children; 33 percent

- of them have four or more children, compared to only 10 percent of the Euro-American sample.
- 18 I have no privileged relationship with workers, black or white. Cultural studies proponents are increasingly sympathetic to "alloidentified" studies produced by non-group members, and encourage, for instance, studies of blacks by whites or of female cultures by males. The effect of my own identity on the interviews was to some extent mitigated by my attempt to present myself with a blurred national and professional identity, for instance, as a foreigner to the culture I studied. On this topic, see Lamont (1992).
 - 19 Among the men I talked to, 76 percent of the Euro-Americans and 67 percent of the African-Americans stress morality in their discussion of child-rearing values. In contrast, only 1 percent of the Euro-Americans and 7 percent of the African-Americans stress socioeconomic achievement, while respectively 12 percent and 22 percent stress cultural values.
 - 20 Some 78 percent of the Euro-Americans and 75 percent of the African-Americans put a premium on moral values in the qualities they appreciate. Less than 10 percent of both samples put a premium on cultural and socioeconomic values together. Similarly, 75 percent of the Euro-Americans and 65 percent of the African-Americans stress moral values when discussing the traits they dislike in others; less than 10 percent of both groups value cultural and socioeconomic traits.
 - 21 When asked to define success, 49 percent of whites and 43 percent of blacks use moral references of one type or another. In contrast, 38 percent in both groups stress socioeconomic achievement; 8 percent of the whites and 11 percent of the blacks use cultural criteria, such as being educated, to define success.
 - 22 Social scientists have stressed the importance of solidarity for blacks by discussing fictive kinship and loyalty. Fordham and Ogbu (1986: 185) describe fictive kinship as "not only a symbol of social identity for blacks, it is also a medium of boundary maintenance *vis-à-vis* white Americans."
 - 23 This description is evocative of the traditional African-American figure of "the race man" described by St-Clair and Clayton (1962).
 - 24 In a descriptive ethnography of a predominantly black community located in a large industrial metropolitan city of the Northern United States, Jacqueline Mithun (1973) found that cooperative networks were predominant in the lives of the people she studied. She argues that family and church continue to emphasize cooperative behaviors and that greater time and consideration are taken for human interaction and polite inquiry than in mainstream culture. "Blacks invest as much interest in human relations as in the business at hand if not more."
 - 25 Lomax Cook (1979: 106-9) compared the willingness of African-Americans and Euro-Americans to support social services for a variety of potentially needy groups. She found that blacks are more likely than whites to support an overall increase in service for each of these groups. Blacks show a slight tendency to prefer to help poor persons and persons of working age, whereas whites would give more support to the disabled and elderly, suggesting that whites put more emphasis on responsibility when judging deserve. Further-

- more, Sigelman and Welch (1991: 143) show that blacks are in general more supportive of increased welfare spending and government action.
- 26 A few interviewees deplore the lack of solidarity among blacks. A chemical operator says, "One thing with black Americans [is that] when we do make it we don't pull our brothers and sisters up that don't have at all." Similarly, a recycling plant worker says that "white people would rather hang out with their own. Blacks would rather hang out with probably anybody. I don't think, black people got that close ties amongst their race."
 - 27 Based on an ethnography of a black community located in Corona (Queens) that focuses on the effect of home ownership on boundaries, Steven Gregory (1992) found that home owners try to protect their community and quality of life against poor blacks, and that the segmentation of the black "community" is in part the product of the integration of middle-class blacks in mainstream politics.
 - 28 For a discussion of how white workers deal with the problem of worth, partly in relation to moral values, see Sennett and Cobb (1972).
 - 29 The point here is not that African-Americans have no work ethic, but that the black men I talked to value it slightly less than their white counterparts. It is also possible that they define work ethic differently, focusing more on the effort that individuals provide than on other aspects of the work ethic. On the commitment that poor African-Americans have to work ethic, see Anderson (1979). For a discussion of the importance of responsibility and honesty for black working-class men, see Duneier (1992).
 - 30 Richard Butsch (1991) shows that between 1956 and 1990, more than two thirds of the families depicted on television were middle class.
 - 31 Commitment to community, individual work ethic, and responsibility play somewhat opposite roles in the moral rhetoric of white and black workers. On this topic, see Gans (1988).
 - 32 Lamont (1995) argued that evaluative frameworks valued by symbolic communities can be viewed as illustrative of aspects of national cultural repertoires that exist to a certain extent (to be assessed empirically from group to group) above specific contexts because they are transportable from one situation to the next (although enacted in context). These symbolic boundaries are determined over time by both the supply side of culture (the macrocultural repertoires that are made available to people) and the factors that make individuals more likely to draw on some dimensions of these repertoires rather than others (these factors include the broad characteristics of the society in which they live and the structural characteristic of their own social position as well).
 - 33 On the widening inequality of wealth between whites and nonwhites between 1983 and 1990, see Wolfe (1995).
 - 34 Collins (1979) and Davis (1982) argue that the college-educated population continues to show a high degree of similarity in its cultural practices and attitudes over a wide range of areas.
 - 35 On this point, see note 2. Only 11 percent of African-Americans had a college degree in 1990, compared to 22 percent of the Euro-Americans (Department of Commerce, 1990: 151-4).

- 36 On the properties of moralist rhetoric, see Jasper (1992). Lamont (1996b) analyzes how respondents draw on universalistic and particularistic principles when justifying their evaluations of others, but I will not address this subject here. Particularly useful on this topic is the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).
- 37 One of the reasons for rejecting the poststructuralist position is that the universe of texts used to define meaning being infinite, the analyst is bound to focus on idiosyncratically chosen relationships in analyzing the production of meaning. For an elaboration of this point, applied to the use of literary evidence in historical studies, see Peter Laslett (1976). This criticism has often been addressed to structuralism, reflection theory, psychoanalysis, and even to Bourdieu's field theory. For a critique of structuralism in this regard, see Mark Schneider (1993: ch. 4).
- 38 For a perspective from cultural anthropology on the self and the other, see Renato Rosaldo's (1989: 28) discussion of the importance of shifting attention to human differences and of studying boundaries between groups.
- 39 Using Lickert scales, theorists of symbolic racism measure how strongly people believe in certain statements representative of symbolic racism. They predefine the moral shortcomings that whites attribute to blacks (e.g. their pushiness) instead of analyzing inductively the exact content of this boundary work. One of the contributions of this essay is to expand the theory of symbolic racism by spelling out how whites and blacks perceive each other in moral terms.
- 40 For a discussion of the issue of self-positioning, see Chicago Cultural Studies Group (1994: 120). On the issue of bracketing, see Griswold (1990).
- 41 Drawing on Rorty's antifoundational pragmatism and on Derrida's understanding of signification as unstable and shifting, cultural studies is concerned with the fixity/fluidity of dimensions of identity and the extent to which they presume foundational artifice that allows dominant groups to make universal statements. On this point, see Lash (1992: 14.) A research program on "Symbolic Boundaries and Modes of Justification in Comparative Perspective" has been jointly proposed by myself and Laurent Thévenot to develop a collective agenda focusing on the forms of evaluation that are used in France and the United States to assess people, events, and situation. This project pays special attention to the place of the various types of rhetoric discussed above and brings together researchers from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and from the Department of Sociology, Princeton University.

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