

# Symbolic Boundaries

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## Abstract

'Symbolic Boundaries' are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others. These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term 'symbolic boundaries' also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular. This article focuses on boundaries within and between groups. It discusses the history, current research, and future challenges of work on this topic.

## Definition and Intellectual Context

'Symbolic Boundaries' are the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others (Epstein, 1992: p. 232). These distinctions can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural attitudes and practices, and patterns of likes and dislikes. They play an important role in the creation of inequality and the exercise of power. The term 'symbolic boundaries' also refers to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions in particular (Wagner-Pacifci, 2000; Zerubavel, 1997). This article focuses on boundaries within and between groups. It discusses the history, current research, and future challenges of work on this topic.

The literature on symbolic boundaries has gained importance since the 1960s due to a convergence between research on symbolic systems and indirect forms of power. Writings by Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias, Erving Goffman, and Michel Foucault on this topic have influenced several disciplines internationally, particularly anthropology, history, literary studies, and sociology. In North America, a renewed cultural sociology has produced wide-ranging empirical research agendas on symbolic boundaries and inequality. In other fields including community, cognition, deviance, gender, immigration, knowledge and science, nationalism, professions, race and ethnicity, and social movements, boundaries issues have gained analytical prominence.

## History

Two of the founding fathers of sociology played central roles in shaping the literature on symbolic boundaries: Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. We review their contributions before turning to the 'neo-classical' writings of Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias, and Thorstein Veblen, which illustrate the lasting influence of Durkheim and Weber on this literature up to the 1960s. While Durkheim emphasized classification systems and their relationship with the moral order, Weber emphasized their impact on the production and reproduction of inequality. (For a more encompassing historical overview, see Schwartz, 1981.)

One widely used example of symbolic boundaries is taken from Durkheim's work, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1965[1911]). Durkheim argues that the religious experience is distinct from other types of experiences because it involves a symbolic distinction between the realms of the sacred and the profane (pp. 234, 250). The meanings of these realms are mutually exclusive and are defined relationally, through interdictions and rituals that isolate and protect the former from the latter (e.g., a Roman-Catholic sinner cannot receive communion until he is purified through confession) (p. 271).

The distinction between the sacred and the profane extends to the whole universe of objects and people in which it takes place. For instance, the status of members of a community is defined by the types of relationship they have with sacred objects (e.g., Roman Catholic women cannot celebrate mass). In this sense, religious systems provide a cosmology, i.e., a general interpretation of how the world is organized and how its elements relate to one another and to the sacred. This cosmology acts as a system of classification and its elements are organized according to a hierarchy (e.g., counterposing the pure with the impure). The belief invested in this 'order of things' structures people's lives to the extent that it limits and facilitates their action.

Durkheim also points to the existence of a moral order (i.e., a common system of perception of reality that regulates, structures, and organizes relations in a community). This system operates less through coercion than through intersubjectivity (p. 238). In fact, Durkheim defines society by its symbolic boundaries: it is the sharing of a common definition of the sacred and the profane, of similar rules of conduct and a common compliance to rituals and interdictions that defines the internal bonds within a community. Hence, he posits that the boundaries of the group coincide with those delimiting the sacred from the profane.

Unlike Durkheim, Max Weber focuses on the role of symbolic boundaries (honor) in the creation of social inequality rather than social solidarity. In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*, 1922/1956), he describes human beings as engaged in a continuous struggle over scarce resources. To curb competition, they discriminate toward

various groups on the basis of their cultural characteristics, such as lifestyle, language, education, race, or religion. In the process, they form status groups whose superiority is defined in relation to other groups. They cultivate a sense of honor, privilege relationships with group members, and define specific qualifications for gaining entry to the group and for interacting with lower status outsiders (e.g., opposing miscegenation). They invoke their higher status and shared rules of life to justify their monopolization of resources. Hence, cultural understandings about status boundaries have a strong impact on people's social position and access to resources.

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1979) parallels Weber's writings. This American economist suggests that habits of thought ('classifying and demarcating') are central to the mechanisms that produce boundaries between status groups, and they are often organized around notions of superiority and inferiority concerning employment, consumption, and leisure. For instance, idleness symbolizes status because it signifies pecuniary status. He writes, "refined tastes, manners, and habits of life are useful evidence of gentility because good breeding requires time, application, and expenses" (p. 49) and are therefore not available to those "whose time and energies are taken up with work." Veblen also developed the concept of 'conspicuous consumption.' He argues that the possession and display of wealth confers honor: as an invidious distinction, it symbolizes ranking within a group. This way of manifesting superiority is more common when predatory aggression or war are less frequent. Veblen's analysis assumes that there is a tendency to change standards of sufficiency as one's pecuniary situation improves; one becomes restless with creating 'ever-widening distance' between herself and the average standard.

Also paralleling Weber's work, is the work of German sociologist Norbert Elias. In *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (*The Civilizing Process, 1982[1939]*), Elias analyzes the emergence of a boundary between civilized and barbarian habits using evidence from Western manner manuals written between the late middle ages and the Victorian period. He examines 'natural' bodily functions such as spitting and defecating to demonstrate the growing centrality of shame and embarrassment in instituting norms of behavior in public and private over time. More broadly, he argues that standards of behavior and feelings and personality structures (what he calls 'habitus,' or habits emerging from social experience) vary across hierarchical groups in society and that these variations are key to pacification and the exercise of power. In a later study, *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965/1994, with John L. Scotson), Elias shows how residents of one part of a town, 'the Village' had higher status than residents of another part of the town, 'the Estate,' because the former had the social cohesion and resources to stigmatize the outsiders and impose their own definition of self.

To turn now to the lasting influence of Durkheim's work, in *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas examines the order-producing, meaning-making and form-giving functions of classification systems and the role of rituals in creating boundaries grounded in fears and beliefs. In *Natural Symbols* (1970), she describes how the structure of binary symbolic systems reflects group structures. Like Elias, she also probes the moral order and focuses on the system of social control as

expressed through the body and through observable artifacts of everyday life (food, dirt, and material possessions). She argues that the basis of order in social life is the presence of symbols that demarcate boundaries.

One of Douglas's main concerns is how communities differentiate themselves from one another and how they are internally differentiated. She distinguishes groups on the basis of their degree of social control and of the rigidity of their grid (i.e., the extent to which their system of classification competes with other systems). In societies with high social control and great cultural rigidity (i.e., what she calls high grid and group), there is a concern to preserve social boundaries; the role structure is clearly defined; and formal behavior is highly valued and well defined in publicly insulated roles. Through 'the purity rule,' formality screens out irrelevant organic processes.

## Current Theory and Research

In the contemporary literature on symbolic boundaries, both the neo-Weberian and neo-Durkheimian heritage remain strong. The question of how boundaries intersect with the production of inequality has attracted interest since the publication of Pierre Bourdieu's impressive corpus. In the United States, cultural sociologists have assessed Bourdieu's theoretical claims and used his work to illuminate the cultural aspects of class, gender, and racial inequality. Other developments concern the study of identity through boundary work, and research on moral order, community, symbolic politics, and religion. While some of this research is reviewed in Pachucki et al. (2007) and in Lamont (2012), the discussion below considers new contributions as well as less recent ones.

## Culture and Inequality

In the last 30 years, a large neo-Weberian literature emerged about processes of closure. Frank Parkin (1979) drew on Weber to study the distributive struggle for monopolizing or usurping resources within and across classes. He emphasized the right of ownership and credentialism, i.e., the use of educational certificates to monopolize positions in the labor market. Equally inspired by Durkheim, Collins (1998) extended his earlier work on credentialism and interaction rituals to analyze how intellectuals compete to maximize their access to key network positions, cultural capital, and emotional energy, which generates intellectual creativity. These contributions coincide with those of Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators.

In *Reproduction* (1977[1970]), Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron proposed that the lower academic performance of working-class children cannot be accounted for by their lower ability but by institutional biases. They suggest that schools evaluate children based on their familiarity with the culture of the dominant class (or cultural capital), thus penalizing lower-class students. Extensive vocabulary, wide-ranging cultural references, and command of high culture are valued by the school system and students from higher social backgrounds are exposed to this class culture at home. Lower-class children remain under the spell of the dominant class culture. They blame themselves for their failure, and

consequently drop out or sort themselves into lower prestige educational tracks.

This work extends Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' (1848/1960) 'dominant ideology thesis,' which centers on the role of ideology in cementing relations of domination by camouflaging exploitation and differences in class interests. However, Bourdieu and Passeron are more concerned with classification systems than with representations of the social world itself, i.e., with how representations of social relationships, the state, religion, and capitalism contribute to the reproduction of domination. Implicitly building on Gramsci (1971), they focus on the control of subjectivity in everyday life through the shaping of common sense and the naturalization of social relations. They broaden Marx and Engels by suggesting that crucial power relations are structured in the symbolic realm proper, and are mediated by meaning. They *de facto* provide a more encompassing understanding of the exercise of hegemony by pointing to the incorporation of class-differentiated cultural dispositions mediated by both the educational system and family socialization.

In *Distinction* (1984[1979]), Bourdieu applies this analysis to the world of taste and cultural practice at large. He shows how the logic of class struggle extends to the realm of taste and lifestyle, and that symbolic classification is key to the reproduction of class privileges: dominant groups define their own culture as superior. Thereby they exercise 'symbolic violence,' i.e., impose a specific meaning as legitimate while concealing the power relations that are the basis of its force (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977[1970]: p. 4). They define legitimate and 'dominated' cultures in opposition: the value of cultural preferences and behaviors are defined relationally around binary oppositions (or boundaries) such as higher/lower, pure/impure, distinguished/vulgar, and aesthetic/practical (p. 245). The legitimate culture they thereby define is used by dominant groups to mark cultural distance and proximity, monopolize privileges, and exclude and recruit new occupants to high status positions (p. 31). Through the incorporation of 'habitus' or cultural dispositions, cultural practices have inescapable and unconscious classificatory effects that shape social positions.

A large American literature applying, extending, assessing, and critiquing the contributions of Bourdieu and his collaborators developed in the wake of their translation in English (for an early review, see Lamont and Lareau, 1988.) For instance, DiMaggio (1987) suggests that boundaries between cultural genres are created by status groups to signal their superior status. DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) found that levels of cultural capital influence higher education attendance and completion as well as marital selection patterns in the United States. Lamont (1992) critiqued Bourdieu (1984) for exaggerating the importance of cultural capital in upper-middle-class culture and for defining salient boundaries a priori, instead of inductively. Based on interviews with professionals and managers, she showed that morality, cultural capital, and material success are defined differently and that their relative importance vary across national contexts and by subgroups. Lamont also showed variations in the extent to which professionals and managers tolerate the lifestyles and tastes of other classes, and argued that cultural *laissez-faire* is more important in American society than French society. High social and geographic mobility, strong cultural regionalism, ethnic and racial

diversity, political decentralization, and relatively weak high culture traditions translate into less highly differentiated class cultures in the United States than France (also see Lamont, 2010).

Other sociologists also argue that cultural boundaries are more fluid and complex than cultural capital theory suggests. Hall (1992) emphasized the existence of heterogeneous markets and of multiple kinds of cultural capital. He proposes a 'cultural structuralism' that addresses the multiplicity of status situations in a critique of an overarching market of cultural capital. Crane (2000) analyzes how social change disrupts the relationship between cultural capital and social class strata during nineteenth- and twentieth-century France and the United States. In separate studies of visual art consumption, Halle (1993) and Banks (2009) show how meanings attached to artwork in the home are influenced by factors afield of class. For Halle's participants, art consumption does not necessarily generate social boundaries, and he finds that the meaning attached to living room art is somewhat autonomous from professional evaluations. Banks explores how middle-class blacks feel they contribute to black cultural advancement through patronage of black artists and cultural institutions. Pachucki (2012) explores how art professionals make symbolic distinctions in their everyday work with art, and shows how these boundaries shape status hierarchies across museums. Lareau (2003) analyzed how middle- and working-class parents socialize their children for middle- and working-class jobs. Researchers have continued to provide a more complex approach to cultural capital through ethnographies of how teenagers learn status and privilege in elite boarding schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011) and an ethnography of hiring practices in elite professional firms (Rivera, 2012).

Research on cultural omnivorousness suggests that cultural breadth is a highly valued resource in the upper and upper-middle classes, countering Bourdieu's postulate that the value of tastes is defined relationally through a binary or oppositional logic between upper- and lower-class cultures. Studies of musical tastes (Bryson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Peterson and Rossman, 2008), familiarity with popular culture (Erickson, 1996), arts participation (Alderson et al., 2007; DiMaggio and Mukhtar, 2004), and food consumption (Johnston and Baumann, 2010) are among a growing body of scholarship that highlights the complexities of how individuals distinguish themselves through the diversity of what they consume. Lena's (2012) work on music genres suggests that aesthetic boundaries are only one element in a complex interplay with audiences and industry forces. Her careful analysis shows how types of music share similar trajectories in their emergence and transformation.

### Identity and Boundary Work

The literature on identity is another arena where the concept of symbolic boundaries has become more central. Sociologists and psychologists have studied boundary work, a process central to the constitution of the self. Thomas Gieryn originally proposed the concept of boundary work in the early 1980s to designate "the discursive attribution of selected qualities to scientists, scientific methods, and scientific claims for the

purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science" (1999: pp. 4–5). Since then, sociologists have analyzed this process by looking at self-definitions of ordinary people and in a range of contexts beyond science.

Social psychologists working on group categorization have studied the segmentation between 'us' and 'them.' Brewer's (1986) social identity theory suggests that "pressures to evaluate one's own group positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to differentiate themselves from each other." This process of differentiation aims "to maintain and achieve superiority over an out-group on some dimension" (Tajfel and Turner, 1985: pp. 16–17). While these authors understand the relational process as a universal tendency, sociologists are concerned with analyzing precisely how boundary work is accomplished, i.e., with what kinds of typification systems, or inferences concerning similarities and differences, groups mobilize to define who they are.

The study by Jenkins (1996) on social identity also contributes to the study of boundary work. He describes collective identity as constituted by a dialectic interplay of processes of internal and external definition. On one hand, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of community and a sense of shared belonging within their subgroup. On the other hand, this internal identification process must be recognized by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. These insights continue the early efforts of Du Bois (1903) who emphasized the work of managing the 'color line' or 'veil' that defines race and of Barth (1969) who analyzed the process of ethnic boundary making. They also mirror work on racial group positioning (Blumer, 1958; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996).

During the 1990s, seminal studies of self-definitions among ordinary people emerged. For instance, Newman (1999) analyzes how poor fast-food workers define themselves in opposition to the unemployed poor. Lamont (1992) studies the boundary work of professionals and managers while Lamont (2000) examines how workers in the United States and France define worthy people in opposition to the poor, 'people above,' blacks, and immigrants, drawing moral boundaries toward different groups across the two national contexts. Lichterman (1999) explores how volunteers define their bonds and boundaries of solidarity by examining how they articulate their identity around various groups. These mappings translate into different kinds of group responsibility, in "constraining and enabling what members can say and do together." Binder (1999) analyzes boundaries that proponents of Afrocentrism and multiculturalism build in relation to one another in conflict within the educational system. Becker (1999) studies how religious communities build boundaries between themselves and 'the public.' Finally, Gamson (1992) analyzes how the injustice frames used in social movements are organized around 'us' and 'them' oppositions.

Studies of boundary work and identity continue to flourish in the fields of race and ethnicity and immigration. For instance, Carter (2005) examines the diverse ways black and Latino youth manage ethnic boundaries in school and their peer groups and the consequences for their academic achievement. Warikoo (2011) analyzes how second-generation Indo-Caribbean teenagers negotiate ethnic boundaries in London

and New York and the role of hip-hop and other aspects of youth culture. Wimmer and Lewis (2010) use Facebook data to explore how racial homogeneity in Americans' social networks is linked with social stratification. Other scholars have considered the relationship between racial and class boundaries. Young (2006) focuses on the ways poor black men think about status mobility and opportunity. Lacy (2007) analyzed the boundary work of race and class among blacks across different types of middle-class neighborhoods. Pattillo (2007) considers boundaries between middle-class and poor blacks in a mixed income neighborhood and how they are negotiated as neighborhood residents promote black political action. In the area of immigration and ethnicity, Alba (2009) and Wimmer (2013) have focused on group formation processes. Also, Roth (2012) analyzes how migration and transnationalism influence definitions of panethnic identity among Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. Future research on the process of collective identity formation may benefit to focus on the dynamic between self-identification and social categorization.

### Moral Order, Community, Symbolic Politics, and Religion

A third strand of work on symbolic boundaries presents more palpable neo-Durkheimian influences. Several studies have centered on moral order and on communities. Wuthnow (1987: p. 69) writes, "Order has somehow to do with boundaries. That is, order consists mainly of being able to make distinctions – of having symbolic demarcations – so that we know the place of things and how they relate to one another." A recent example of this neo-Durkheimian line of work is Alexander's (1992) semiotic analysis of the symbolic codes of civic society. The author describes these codes as "critically important in constituting the very sense of society for those who are within and without it." He also suggests that the democratic code involves clear distinctions between the pure and the impure in defining the appropriate citizen. His analysis locates those distinctions at the levels of people's motives and relationships, and of the institutions that individuals inhabit (with 'honorable' being valued over 'self-interested' or 'truthful' over 'deceitful' in the case of the democratic code).

The last decades have produced studies of status politics that documented how groups sharing a lifestyle made such distinctions, engaged in the maintenance of the moral order, and simultaneously bolstered their own prestige. Particularly notable is Gusfield (1963) who analyzed the nineteenth-century American temperance movement in favor of the prohibition and the Eighteenth Amendment to the constitution. Gusfield understands this movement as a strategy used by small-town Protestants to bolster their social position in relation to urban Catholic immigrants. Along similar lines, Luker (1984) describes the worldviews of antiabortion and pro-choice activists. She shows that they have incompatible beliefs about women's careers, family, sexuality, and reproduction, and that they talk past one another and define themselves in opposition to one another. Beisel (1997) has studied Anthony Comstock's nineteenth-century antipornography movement to protect the morality of children in the context of important social changes that threatened the reproduction of upper class privileges. However, she argued against the distinction between

symbolic and class politics and showed how the two often operate hand in hand, particularly in the drawing of moral boundaries. The literature on social movements includes studies that focus on the process by which categories of people are turned into categories of enemies (Jasper, 1997). Using the case of the 11 September attacks, Wagner-Pacifi (2010) also advanced a 'political semiosis' methodology for understanding the bounding and unbounding of events.

Scholars recently have shown how symbolic boundaries play a key role in issues around religious identification. Bean et al. (2008) offer a comparative-historical investigation of how Canadian evangelicals mobilize around moral issues, finding that in both Canada and the United States, political identification, beliefs, and religious group membership evolve in a path-dependent process. Religious boundaries and everyday interactions intersect for Tavory (2010), who explores how members of an Orthodox Hassidic group in Los Angeles signal Jewish identification. Yukich (2010) focuses on how the Catholic Worker movement, which considers itself inclusive, constructs exclusionary boundaries against other service and charitable organizations. For their part, Edgell and Tranby (2010) investigate how various types of sub-group identity relates with a shared American identification. They find three types of citizen that they term 'cultural preservationists,' 'critics of multiculturalism,' and 'optimistic pluralists.' Also, Edgell and Gerteis (2006) identify atheism as a salient group boundary in the United States.

### Challenges and Future Directions

A persistent challenge since the emergence of this field of scholarship is understanding the connection between objective boundaries and symbolic boundaries. As Lamont (1992) argued, symbolic boundaries are a necessary but insufficient condition for the creation of objective boundaries. Early research on objective social boundaries focused on topics such as the relative importance of educational endogamy versus racial endogamy among the college-educated (Kalmijn, 1991); racial hiring and firing (Silver and Zwerling, 1992); residential racial segregation (Massey and Denton, 1993); the relative permeability of class boundaries (Wright and Cho, 1992); and the creation of professional boundaries (Abbott, 1988). Tilly (2004) provides a synthesis of social boundary mechanisms. More recent theoretical consolidation has contributed to our understanding of links between symbolic and social boundaries. Lamont and Molnar (2002) issued a challenge to find similarities of boundary configurations across cases. These efforts have been extended to the study of ethnicity and race (see special issue of *Poetics*, Pachucki et al., 2007), immigrant and national identity (Zolberg and Woon, 1990; Bail, 2008; Rivera, 2008; Wimmer, 2013; Brubaker, 2009), evaluation processes (Lamont, 2012), and responses to stigmatization (see special issue of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012 and the special section of the *Du Bois Review*, Lamont et al., 2012).

*See also:* Art and Socialisation; Collective Identity; Cultural Capital and Education; Cultural Mediators and Gatekeepers; Cultural Participation, Trends In; Culture and Networks;

Culture, Cognition and Embodiment; Culture, Production of: Prospects for the Twenty-First Century; Globalization and World Culture; Leisure and Cultural Consumption: US Perspective; Nation-State as Symbolic Construct, Networks and Cultural Consumption; Social Inequality in Cultural Consumption Patterns.

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