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## Formalizing symbolic boundaries<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Formal efforts to advance culture as an analytic concept can benefit from attending to the human disposition to categorize. I demonstrate this with regard to the concept of symbolic boundaries, which I conceptualize as dual classifications that describe what kinds of behavior or opinions are appropriate for different kinds of people and put forward a corresponding (mathematical) formalization. Drawing on insights from cognitive science about categorization, I develop an understanding of “boundary breaching,” that is, what happens when these dual classifications are violated. This allows me to derive a model of network influence that accounts for how people evaluate behavior in others based on cultural classifications. I demonstrate how this model can be implemented empirically using data from the National Study of Youth and Religion. By drawing on our cognitive disposition to categorize, symbolic boundaries mediate structural effects of social influence.

Recent efforts to develop a cognitively grounded understanding of culture have led many scholars to draw on insights from the cognitive sciences to “fill in the blanks where sociological work is misleading or incomplete” (DiMaggio, 2002: 275; also 1997; Cerulo, 2010; Ignatow, 2007; Lizardo & Strand, 2010; Martin, 2010; Vaisey et al., 2009). An important aim of this work has been to clarify the premises of related concepts and mechanisms and thus advance culture as a more general analytical resource for sociological explanation (Lizardo, 2017). In this paper, I argue that we can move even further in this direction by explicitly incorporating the idea of classification. The cognitive and social sciences consistently emphasize our cognitive disposition to categorize (e.g., Madole & Oakes, 1999; Younger, 2008) and culture fundamentally rests on classificatory logics that turn on categorization processes (e.g., Brubaker, Loveman, & Stamatov, 2004; Zerubavel, 1996). Attending to basic insights into mental categorization processes may therefore provide a useful strategy to advance formal models of culture and their workings in everyday life.

I will demonstrate this with regard to the concept of “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont, 1992). I will focus on the common understanding of symbolic boundaries as describing what kinds of behavior or opinions are appropriate for different kinds of people. I show that this dual classificatory logic can be represented in a specific kind of cultural matrix, thus providing a succinct (mathematical) formalization of the concept. Attending to these mental categorization processes, I will show how this formalization could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of network influence by theorizing heterogeneous peer effects as resting on cultural classifications.

I proceed in six steps: First, I will briefly discuss the relation between culture and categorization. Second, I will conceptualize and formalize an understanding of symbolic boundaries as a way to classify types of people and types of behavior or opinions. Third, I will draw on insights into our mental disposition to categorize from cognitive science. Fourth, I will use these insights to think through the concept of “boundary breaching”—the experience of seeing other people “like me” engage in behavior or express opinions that contravene what is expected and socially accepted for members of that category. This will enable an extension of existing network

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influence models by accounting for categorical variation in how people use cultural classifications to evaluate the behavior of others. Fifth, I will demonstrate how to implement these ideas using (network) survey data. Finally, I will conclude by describing limitations and possible extensions.

## 1. Introduction: culture and categorization

Recently, a set of scholars have begun to unpack the cognitive scaffolding of culture (e.g., Cerulo, 2010; DiMaggio, 1997, 2002; Ignatow, 2007; Vaisey et al., 2009). These efforts have proven highly useful in shedding light on underlying processes (e.g., Lizardo & Strand, 2010; Shepherd, 2011) and differentiating the plausible from the empirically impossible in sociological approaches to culture (e.g., Bergesen, 2004; Martin, 2010). What is more, providing such a cognitively grounded understanding of culture helps to clarify related concepts and mechanisms needed to advance the project of formalizing culture and thus culture as an analytical resource for explanation more generally (Lizardo, 2017).

The human disposition to categorize has not yet been fully used in this regard. As Lakoff (1990: 5) states, “[t]here is nothing more basic than categorization to human thought, perception, action, and speech.” Our ability to categorize is essential for us to reduce the complexity of our environment. It renders the world intelligible and communicable and is the basis of human action. By discriminating the array of objects, events, and people, it allows us to relate to things in terms of their categorical membership and thus to determine appropriate actions (Bruner, Austin, & Goodnow, 1986; also Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Cultural processes are intimately tied to the human capacity to categorize. In various forms, they provide and draw on socially shared classifications of things and related expectations (e.g., Strauss & Quinn, 1997; for an overview, see Patterson, 2014). Through “cognitive socialization,” these cultural classifications allow members of a thought community to “lump” and “split” experiences and expectations in intersubjectively agreed upon ways, providing a meaningful encoding of “groupings” such as classifications of people, practices and objects (Zerubavel, 1996, 1997). In invoking these systems of classifications, culture thus builds on the human cognitive disposition to categorize (e.g., DiMaggio, 1997; Lizardo & Strand, 2010).

Given this, an understanding of cognitive processes of categorization and re-categorization may help to clarify cultural concepts and related mechanisms, especially those that turn explicitly on classificatory logics. One such concept is that of “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont, 1992). As I will describe below, symbolic boundaries, as commonly understood, can be conceptualized as shared, dual classifications of types of people and types of behavior or opinions—a dual mapping that can be mathematically represented as a specific kind of cultural matrix. Together with insights gleaned from cognitive science, this enables thinking through related processes of social influence.

## 2. Symbolic boundaries as dual classifications

The concept of “symbolic boundaries” (Lamont, 1992) has seen a remarkable spread among cultural sociologists in recent years (for overviews, see Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass, & Pachucki, 2015; Pachucki, Pendergrass, & Lamont, 2007). Although scholars have emphasized various aspects of the concept, most follow an understanding of symbolic boundaries as widely shared mental maps that demarcate kinds of people, groups and things (Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Accordingly, symbolic boundaries are based on subjective and intersubjective classifications (Zerubavel, 1997) that are created, invoked, and negotiated in norms, cultural practices, and attitudes (Epstein, 1992). Classic examples include the distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane” (Durkheim, 2012[1912]), between the “pure” and the “impure” (Douglas, 1966), or between different “status groups” (Weber, 1978).

If we focus on symbolic boundaries between kinds of people, symbolic boundaries are commonly understood to demarcate what is or would be (un)worthy, (dis)honorable, and (in)appropriate for members of particular social groups (e.g., Fiske, 1998). Forming implicit and explicit understandings of what type of behavior is appropriate for what type of people, symbolic boundaries involve theorizing about experience based on perceived similarities and differences with others. We can account for this logic by conceptualizing symbolic boundaries as valued dual classifications of types of people (on the one hand) and types of behavior/opinions (on the other).

Depending on the particular research aim, scholars studying symbolic boundaries have taken various perspectives, including comparative historical (e.g., Wimmer, 2008) or macro-sociological perspectives (e.g., Bail, 2008). In this paper, I attend to symbolic boundaries as they are experienced in everyday life, that is, from the vantage point of the members of a particular group. Seen from this perspective, the shared dual classifications marked by symbolic boundaries play an important role in the process of self-categorization (Turner, 1982; Turner & Oakes, 1986). By providing an understanding of what type of behavior is and is “not for the likes of us” (Bourdieu, 1984:471), they primarily define one’s own group in relation to other groups (Brewer, 1999) and thus contribute to the formation of one’s social “sense of place” (Goffman, 1951, also Bourdieu, 1985:729f). In drawing on symbolic boundaries, people tend to rationalize between-group differences by positively evaluating their own group’s typical behavior and negatively evaluating the typical behavior of outgroups (see Brown, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Consider Lamont’s (1992) classic example of the symbolic boundaries French and American upper-middle class men draw to gain social status. To distinguish themselves from others, the French often use cultural status signals such as mobilizing a so-called “Cartesian skepticism” that values intellectual playfulness, abstraction, eloquence, and style in others. But symbolic boundaries not only mark what is desirable in others, they also mark what is repulsive in others. Accordingly, the French upper-middle class men in Lamont’s sample criticize a lack of sophistication in members of the working class or in Americans as “vulgar.” Such understandings do not need to be shared across members of different groups, nor does the same symbolic boundary need to be equally salient to them.

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