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Status Distinctions and Boundaries

Handbook of Cultural Sociology

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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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and editorial matter; individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Bembo by Taylor & Francis Books
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe Ltd., Chippenham

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Handbook of cultural sociology / edited by John R. Hall, Laura
Grindstaff and Ming-Cheng Lo.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Culture. I. Hall, John R. II. Grindstaff, Laura. III. Lo, Ming-Cheng.

HM621.H344 2010

306-dc22

2009049917

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-47445-0 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-89137-7 (ebk)

Status distinctions and boundaries

Murray Milner, Jr.

The thesis of this essay is that both general theories and attention to cultural variations are needed to understand patterns of social behavior. Such patterned behavior in turn reproduces and changes the form and content of the culture. I will illustrate this thesis by focusing on the operation of status systems. After defining a few key terms and outlining a general theory of status relationships, I show how the processes and tendencies identified by the theory are accentuated or retarded by the content of the particular culture in which they operate. Proposing a general theory does not imply that culture is simply derived from or a reflection of structural relations.

What is status?

Although status has several meanings in social science (see Milner 2006), as used here it refers to the distinctions of rank or stature attributed to a person, group, idea, or object. Such distinctions are rooted in the accumulated expressions of approval and disapproval of other actors in a social environment. For individuals, these are typically the expressions of approval and disapproval of one's friends, family, and co-workers. But a person's status can also be affected by more indirect expressions of approval and disapproval such as educational diplomas or criminal records. Organizations such as colleges, businesses, and voluntary associations can also have higher or lower levels of status. The same is true for cultural concepts and objects. Some are relatively abstract categories (e.g. occupation, ethnicity, gender) or principles (e.g. values, norms, or rules). Others are more concrete physical objects (e.g. automobiles, paintings, buildings, or cities). Status is a form of power and, like economic and political power, can become a generalized social resource, which can be thought of as a form of capital. (I do not attempt to deal with the notions of social and cultural capital since they are considered elsewhere in this handbook.)

Having economic power or wealth can give one status, but this is not necessarily the case. People may admire a successful entrepreneur, but they do not generally praise successful burglars and embezzlers. Tyrants and rich robber barons may receive deference, but they seldom have high approval ratings. The focus in this essay is on status that is

relatively independent of economic and political power. This is a kind of power in its own right. The ability of the Pope, Martin Luther King, or John Dewey to influence people is not primarily because of their economic or political power. Hence, in addition to economic and political power, there is status power.

What are status systems?

Status is a relational concept: A person or thing has high or low status compared to someone or something else. Usually such relationships form a system, arena, or field. (Bourdieu's concept of "field" is widely used. It has, however, been subject to a number of critiques [e.g. Hall 1992] and is, in my opinion, unclear and problematic.) Each status system has its own specific status criteria. The attributes that give chess players high status are different from the ones that give a boxer high status; these are two different status systems, even though the same individual may be both a chess player and a boxer. Status systems vary in (1) how well defined their boundaries are, (2) how precisely they make status distinctions, and (3) how much these distinctions coincide with other forms of social inequality. For example, in most modern professional armies, the boundaries of the organization are quite clear, positions are unambiguously ranked, and these ranks are very highly correlated with how much people are paid and how much authority they have over others. In a baseball league, the win-loss rankings and boundaries of the league are clear. The ranking of a team may or may not be strongly correlated to the wealth of the team owner or the salaries of the players. For artists in a local community or for public intellectuals, the system boundaries, individual rankings, and correlation of ranking to income and authority are seldom unambiguous. Max Weber's notions of "status group" and "social class" both refer to status systems. The boundaries and rankings of the first are usually better defined than the second, while the second is more clearly linked to economic inequality.

How do status systems work?

The theory of status relationships is aimed at explaining the patterns of relationships that emerge when status is an important resource. The theory has two key assumptions. First, status is not simply reducible to economic or political power. Put concretely, the influence of Albert Schweitzer, Bach, Jesus, and Nelson Mandela is not primarily due to their economic or political power. Second, for someone or something to have a social status, it must have some level of social visibility. John Dewey has no social status in most Indian villages and the Hindu god Vishnu has no status in most American communities.

The theory has five elements. The first two elements focus on how status differs from other social resources.

Inalienability: Status is relatively inalienable. Although a person can give someone else their money, they cannot give away their status—nor can others simply appropriate it by force or purchase it with money. Hence, once a status is acquired—whether it be high or low—it tends to be relatively stable. This is why, in part, those who acquire new wealth or political power usually attempt to translate at least some of it into status, and why the status of those with "old money" may last longer than the actual money.

None of this is to suggest that status is absolutely stable. The approval ratings of politicians can change quickly; most movie idols and fashion models have relatively short careers; sports stars convicted of serious crimes are no longer seen as heroes. The stability of status is affected by other factors including the degrees of (1) institutionalization (i.e. being part of a long-organized, taken-for-granted pattern), and (2) insulation from economic or political rewards (e.g. politicians or preachers who become extravagantly rich lose their status and legitimacy). The key point is that holding other factors relatively constant, inalienability contributes to the stability of status. (For further clarification of the sources of status stability and the role of inalienability, see Milner 2004: 32, 206–07).

Inexpansibility: Status is relatively inexpansible compared to wealth or political power. If everyone is given a Nobel Prize or is made a member of the aristocracy, these are no longer bases of distinction. In contrast, the income of everyone can triple and their objective circumstances change significantly, even though their relative status remains unchanged. This relative inexpansibility of status has two important implications. First, if someone moves up in the status structure, someone else is likely to have to move down. Therefore, those with higher status tend to restrict and regulate upward mobility. If anyone could add their name to the Social Register or join the National Academies of Science, this would erode the status of all of their members. Second, one way of moving up is to put others down. This is the reason that teenage cliques, Indian upper castes, and country-club members often disparage those below them. It is also part of the reason that “critique,” which, in part, is putdown by another name, is such an important element of intellectual life and high culture.

The next two elements of the theory focus on the sources of status.

Conformity: A key source of status is conforming to the norms of the group. As used here, this means not simply conforming to a set of rules, but also expressing the right values and beliefs, and using the proper symbols. Conformity to one set of norms may mean violating another set. The teenager who too enthusiastically follows official school norms violates the norms of his peers. That conformity to the group’s norms is a source of status is obvious; it has a less obvious implication. Those who already have high status often complicate and elaborate the norms to make it difficult for others to conform. The elaborate manners and rituals of aristocracies are an obvious example. When it is relatively easy for those of lower status to copy the norms of higher status groups, those with higher status may change the norms frequently. This is why fashion is often important in status systems.

Association: Associating with higher-status individuals, groups, and objects raises one’s status, whereas associating with people and things that are low reduces status. Especially important are intimate, expressive relationships as contrasted to instrumental relationships—particularly when the intimacy is officially recognized (e.g. a marriage versus an affair). Living in a Frank Lloyd Wright house gives more status than taking a tour of one. The status of one’s parents has more impact than the status of one’s third cousins. Sharing food and sex are near-universal symbols of intimacy. Hence, who you marry and who comes to your dinner parties has more effect on your status than which plumber you use. Nor is it accidental that teenagers are often preoccupied with who their peers are “going with” and who eats with whom in the lunchroom; they know these associations have much more impact on status than who sits next to you during class.

Pluralism: The theory also has implications for the sources of cultural pluralism. The larger the status system becomes, the greater are the pressures to develop subcultures

or countercultures. In part this is because of the inexpansibility of status, but sheer numbers are also important. In a high school of two hundred, 10 percent, or twenty students, can constitute an elite "popular crowd." Virtually everyone in the school knows who they are. In order for other students to improve their own status, they often copy the behavior of the popular crowd and adopt their style and symbols. Moreover, a number of students have direct interpersonal associations with members of this elite: they were friends in elementary school or they attend the same church youth group. Such connections make the popular crowd seem less remote. These relatively intimate connections with a popular person can raise the other student's status. Some combination of such associations and careful copying of the elites' behaviors and symbols might lead to actual membership.

If, however, the school has two thousand students, the situation is quite different: 10 percent is two hundred individuals—far too many to be highly visible and known to everyone. Moreover, the odds of having any direct contact with members of the elite, much less being admitted to their group, are much lower. Consequently, excluded but talented individuals often attempt to create their own alternative crowds and cliques with different norms, values, beliefs, and symbols. This may involve reversals of previous values: white superiority is rejected and replaced by "black is beautiful." The restrained tailored elegance of the preps is countered by the "in your face" eclectic exhibitionism of punks or Goths.

The development of such alternative subcultures can lead to a near-complete rejection of the dominant subculture, and of the larger social entity. In the case of teenagers this can result in groups of resentful, alienated students or school drop-outs. Perhaps a parallel at the societal level is to be found in the 1960s protestors who became revolutionaries or emigrated to other countries. Such subcultures can obviously also lead to significant conflict between groups. Conflicts between ethnic, religious, and language groups are common within schools, prisons, and whole societies. The creation of such alternative cultures need not, however, result in total rejection and withdrawal. Rather, it can lead to a multicultural school or society in which individuals affirm being both Americans and African-Americans or both Frenchmen and strong supporters of the European Union. The key point: Expanding the size of status systems produces structural pressures toward cultural differentiation and pluralism. Globalism and the reactions to it are a contemporary example.

Finally, pluralism is one of the ways in which the inexpansibility of status is qualified, but not eliminated. Multiple status systems emerge: Being in the popular crowd is not the only way for teenagers to receive respect and appreciation. Different individuals may receive respect in different status systems or the same individual may participate in several status systems. Nonetheless, the different systems themselves often develop a status; in the broader culture, it is more prestigious to be a grandmaster in chess than the domino champion.

Boundaries

The notion of boundary suggests an especially strong distinction that includes and excludes. A social boundary is a mechanism for reducing ambiguity. Intense conflict is one motivation for eliminating such ambiguity: "Are you with us or against us"? There are physical boundaries and symbolic boundaries. Sometimes these are strongly correlated

(e.g. Jewish ghetto walls) and sometimes they are not (e.g. the state lines in many areas of the US, which do not demarcate social and cultural boundaries).

The boundaries of status systems vary greatly in their precision and rigidity. In most societies there would be little consensus about where to draw a clear line between smart and dumb, pretty and ugly, or moral and immoral. Of course people could be so categorized by some coercive authority, but such categories have little legitimacy. That is to say, the status of such status boundaries would be low.

As indicated above, intimate, expressive associations usually involve much stronger boundaries than instrumental ones. High-status executives may work closely with a wide array of relatively lower-status assistants—receptionists, computer support personnel, chauffeurs, etc. They may be on friendly terms with many of them. Rarely, however, are such subordinates invited home for dinner or to play golf. If they are invited to the superior's home, it is probably to assist with some urgent company project that requires working on the weekend. In racist societies, members of the dominant group may regularly interact with members of the subordinated group—but they do not intermarry. Stated another way, the manipulation of associations is a central mechanism of creating and maintaining social and cultural boundaries. As Michele Lamont (1992) has pointed out, the same culture may have different symbolic boundaries depending on whether the focus is on distinctions that are moral, socioeconomic, or cultural (in the sense of art, music, manners, etc.). The centrality and rigidity of status boundaries also vary with the cultural context, and we will consider such variations shortly.

So far, I have focused on processes that shape the structure and operation of status systems in most, if not all, cultural contexts. Now let us turn to how the content of cultures affects these processes.

What are the effects of culture?

Ideologies of equality and hierarchy

Perhaps the most obvious effect of a culture on status relations is whether its ideology emphasizes egalitarianism or hierarchy. Two polar examples are the US and traditional India. The American Declaration of Independence declares: "all men are created equal." Of course, it took from 1776 to 1964 before American ideology made explicit that this included women and Blacks; it still does not include homosexuals. Nonetheless, outside observers from Tocqueville on have noted that Americans are relatively egalitarian in their ideology and their interpersonal interactions compared to people in many other parts of the world. In contrast, throughout most of India's history, not only was a hierarchy of castes assumed, but a hierarchy of rulers existed, with the most powerful kings seen as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. In contemporary India, this is much less the case. Maharajas lost their political power in 1946 and their wealth, influence, and prestige have steadily eroded over time. Strongly egalitarian notions are incorporated in the Indian Constitution and regularly articulated by politicians. Most contemporary ideology in India is about the glory and solidarity of the nation and incorporates notions of equality of opportunity. Although conservative Hindu public figures often implicitly support traditional hierarchical assumptions about castes, in the public arena these ideas are articulated in relatively disguised form. Open expression of suspicion and hostility toward non-Hindu minorities is, however, not uncommon.

Similar contrasts have been noted between the US and Europe (Lipset 1996). Of course, there can be tremendous gaps between ideologies and actual social patterns, but there are limits to such contradictions. There is no question that the opportunities for upward mobility in the US have been much greater than in India—though this may be changing. The key point is that although the structural tendencies outlined in the theory of status relations are operative in most societies, their intensity is modified by the extent to which the culture legitimates equality or hierarchy.

The status of status and its correlation with economic and political power

Societies and other social units vary in the relative importance (i.e. the status) of political power, economic power, and status power. Political power was central in the Soviet Union; economic resources are the predominant form of power in most capitalist societies. Throughout much of the history of India and Tibet, religious and ritual status were central forms of power in their own right. The power of Brahmins and Tibetan monks was not reducible to whatever economic and political power they exercised.

Closely related but logically distinct from the relative importance of a form of power is its correlation with and convertibility to other forms of power. In traditional India, wealth could not easily overcome the stigma of being born into a low caste. Brahmins were ritually superior to others, but only in a few regions were they the richest or most powerful caste. That is, caste status was an important form of power, but it was loosely correlated with wealth or political power. In contrast, in a number of aristocratic societies, status and political power were highly correlated (Geertz 1980; Elias 1983). Similarly, in the Soviet Union political power was usually converted into status and economic privilege. Other forms of status, such as artistic accomplishment, might be converted into economic privilege, but were seldom the route to political power. In the US, new wealth can gain great respect relatively quickly, with Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and George Soros being obvious examples.

To a very significant degree, these variations in the relative importance of forms of power, and their convertibility and correlation with other forms of power, seem to be rooted in historical cultural particularities. In India, caste status depended in large measure upon ritual purity and impurity (Dumont 1980; Milner 1994). In China, admission to the mandarin political bureaucracy was based on passing examinations on the Confucian classics. Differences in the levels of technology or wealth do not explain the centrality of caste in India or the centrality of the mandarin system in China. In each case, these key institutions were legitimized by particular ideological constructs, assumptions, and symbols that were both relatively unique and linchpins of their whole culture.

The content of culture

The different historical and cultural traditions of India and China meant that the content of their status systems was quite different: knowledge of Confucian classics was irrelevant in India and copying Brahmin purification rituals would do nothing to improve one's status in China. Less apparent is the way that relatively specific cultural notions can shape the details of social interaction and relationships and patterns of social change.

I will illustrate this with two examples. The first concerns the key symbols of intimacy, food, and sex.

Food, sex, and segregation

Racial segregation in the Old South of the US was frequently compared to the traditional Indian caste system (Cox 1948). In both cases there were rigid hierarchies that in principle allowed no mobility across race or caste lines. These lines were reinforced by notions of the purity of "superiors" and the impurity of "inferiors." In both situations, intermarriage and eating together were barred. In the Indian case, notions of social and physical purity were closely linked (Marriott 1976). Eating impure foods changed the nature of one's physical substances, which in turn decreased one's social standing. Consequently, who prepared the food was very important because the impurity of the cook was transferred to the food and in turn to those who ate the food. For the purity of a caste or an individual to be preserved, food must be prepared by someone of the same (or a higher) caste. At public events involving different castes, it was common for the cook to be a Brahmin, so that no one would be contaminated. Unsurprisingly, although such notions were common across most castes, they were emphasized much more by upper castes than lower castes. In Swidler's (1986) terminology, the idea that social and physical purity were inextricably linked—and even conflated—was part of the general cultural toolkit, but upper castes used this tool much more often and consistently than lower castes.

Now let us turn to America's Old South. Although restaurants, water fountains, and restrooms were segregated, a much clearer differentiation was made between social purity and physical purity—at least with respect to preparing and serving food. Who prepared the food was largely irrelevant and cooks were frequently black servants. Upper-class whites even competed to employ blacks who were noted for their culinary skills. With respect to sex and procreation, however, physical and social purity were less distinct. Although sex between white men and black women was common, whites had great concern about the status of the offspring of such liaisons. The result was the "one-drop" rule, which declared that anyone who had even "one drop of Negro blood" was considered black, and hence had low status. This rule was not restricted to conventions and prejudices, but was incorporated into many state laws. In contrast, in much of Latin America notions of pure and impure "blood lines" existed, but there was no "one-drop" rule: various mixtures of "racial" ancestry were recognized. These mixtures may have been ranked, but they did not result in the rigid racial boundary of the Old South. The point of these examples from traditional India, the Old South, and Latin America is that, although they all share the tendencies outlined in the theory of status relations, important differences in patterns of behavior are often shaped by seemingly esoteric variations in cultural concepts.

The market, individualism, and the therapeutic society

For the second example of how the content of culture affects patterns of behavior, I will focus on how psychotherapy moved from being a low-status marginal activity to a high-status central aspect of American culture. Not only does the status of individuals, groups, objects change over time, but worldviews (i.e. fundamental cultural assumptions) rise and

fall in status. This section looks at such a change—specifically, a change concerning how one core cultural assumption is affected by the status and legitimacy of other core assumptions. My argument is that the early acceptance of psychotherapeutic perspectives in the US was due to the therapy's compatibility or elective affinity with the core economic and political assumptions of liberal capitalism.

Philip Rieff (1968) has noted and criticized what he calls "the triumph of the therapeutic"—the erosion of social and personal morality and an emphasis on individual choice and adjustment. Christopher Lasch (1978) shows that notions of therapeutic adjustment are not only applied to the mentally ill. Rather, they have become a widespread and even dominant cultural orientation that shapes the discourse in many realms of social life, including TV talk shows, self-help books, religious pastoral counseling, and interpersonal interactions. The result is a culture centered on personal fulfillment and thin notions of morality. Reiff and Lasch see this culture as having disturbing consequences—though others see the developments more positively (Marcuse 1974; Ziguras 2001). This is a well-known story that has been recounted more fully by others (see, e.g., Woolfolk 2003; Hall *et al.* 2003).

Here I do not want to debate the consequences or merits of these developments, but rather to highlight how they represent an enormous change in the status of alternative sets of core cultural norms and assumptions. This change was largely unopposed because the therapeutic perspective conformed to and was implicitly associated with the key assumptions of free-market capitalism, which had already become deeply institutionalized in the US. There have been moral ambiguities in every era, but certainly most Americans in the nineteenth century had a pretty sure sense that some things were "right" and some things were "wrong." Stated another way, it was relatively clear what would receive approval and disapproval—as were the moral boundaries that resulted. Arguably, the shift from Victorian morality to a therapeutic society is a more fundamental shift in the cultural ideas and norms than was the Protestant Reformation. Victorian cultural hallmarks such as Kipling's "You'll be a man, my son," Henley's "I am the captain of my soul," or Buchman's "moral rearmament" imply radically different moral stances than such late-twentieth-century maxims as "Go with the flow," "I'm okay, you're okay," "I am comfortable with that," or "Whatever." Second, compared to the resistance faced by other major cultural innovations (e.g. Darwinism or legalizing abortion), the shift to a therapeutic culture has been almost subliminal. Criticism and resistance were modest given the scope and implications of the cultural change. How do we explain why there was so little resistance?

Fundamental to Freudian theory is the idea that mental illnesses are caused by the repression of painful experiences. Individuals so traumatized cannot act rationally because they live in a world of distorted information and reality—in the form of neuroses, obsessions, and even psychoses. Psychoanalysis enables people to recover the past experiences that deformed them and face up to the present situation that actually confronts them. The choices they face may involve unavoidable tragedy (e.g. becoming alienated from a domineering parent or spouse), but the healed patient can now make such choices rationally. Other types of psychotherapy may attribute irrationality to other sources or propose other forms of therapy, but virtually all seek to help people overcome distorted and unrealistic ways of thinking by enabling them to have more and better information about themselves and their situation.

This is the same situation that the individual faces in the market: rational choices are dependent upon both opportunities to choose alternatives and receiving accurate

information about the cost and consequences of the alternatives. These options may not be appealing—sell now at a loss or sell later at a bigger loss—but the better the information available, the more rational the decision. My argument is that both realms promote the ideal of the rational individual making choices that are undistorted by false information or irrational emotions.

In Weber's terms, there was an elective affinity between these two understandings of what constituted optimal circumstances. The resistance to the rise of therapeutic perspectives was so modest because "the Great Transformation" (Polanyi 1957) of earlier centuries had already overcome cultural resistance to the notion of individuals making free, rational choices in the economic and political realms. The "triumph of the therapeutic" simply extended this conventional wisdom to the emotional and moral realm. Stated in terms of the theory of status relations, the therapeutic perspective involved conformity to norms and values that already had enormous status in other realms of the culture. Similarly, "rationality," "freedom," and "choice" in the emotional and moral realm were given added legitimacy by their association with the same high-status notions in the economic and political realms.

The above argument suggests how existing cultural assumptions can shape the likelihood of new cultural innovations being accepted, that is, gaining a relatively high status. A more extensive test of the hypothesis would require not only much more detailed analysis of American society (e.g. Illouz 2007), but comparative analysis with other societies. There are existing studies of the reception of psychoanalysis and psychotherapies in India and Russia. Freud's ideas were enthusiastically accepted in the early years of the twentieth century in some intellectual circles in pre-Revolutionary Russia. Even after the Russian Revolution, Freudianism was initially respected, though eventually banned. The Indian Psychoanalytic Society was officially recognized by the International Psychoanalytic Congress in 1922—before there was a recognized branch in France. But in both cases, Freudian thought ran up against cultural assumptions that were antithetical to notions of the independent individual and the nuclear family, as well as other important cultural incompatibilities (Miller 1990; Hartnack 1990), and the overall impact of notions of psychotherapy was quite limited. This section, then, has had three key points. First, even extensive macro changes in cultural content can usefully be seen as cases of status transformation—a rise in the status of a set of core cultural assumptions. Second, such changes occur by various forms of conformity and association. Third, the likelihood of such a transformation is shaped by the content of cultural assumptions that already have high status and legitimacy.

Conclusion

- An adequate sociological analysis must conceptualize status as a distinct form of power, not reducible to economic or political power.
- It is useful to consider not only the status of and the relationships between individuals and groups, but also the status and relationships between cultural objects—from particular commodities to core cultural assumptions.
- Both general theories that focus on near-universal structural relationships and careful attention to the details of particular cultures, including the history of their development, are the best strategy for understanding the nature of status relations in concrete historical settings.

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