The Sociology of the Symbolic Landscape: Meaning and Context in the Study of Race

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Abstract: The study of meaning is a cornerstone of sociology, but the context-dependence of meaning is also a challenge for sociologists, especially sociologists of race. This article offers the Sociology of the Symbolic Landscape (SSL) as the theoretical solution to the challenge of studying meaning and applying the concept of race within and across contexts. SSL focuses on the relationships between symbolic categories within a context and their positions in the core/periphery distinction. Incorporating insights from Durkheim, Interpretive Sociology, the study of Symbolic Boundaries, Civil Sphere Theory, and Postcolonial Theory, SSL makes it possible to identify and categorize positions, thereby identifying the way meaning acts as a source of constraint and of creative possibilities, and enabling cross-contextual comparison of culture-structures and forms. Through application of SSL to data on categorizations in Sweden, we demonstrate the analytical traction SSL provides. SSL offers a portable understanding of the racial other as “outsider within,” a distinct position of enduring alterity and persistent difference within the symbolic landscape. Unlike outward-looking categories defined on the basis of a pre-existing religious attachment, ethnic group, or non-native nationality, the outsider within is an internally referenced category defined in negation – social membership with problematic and atypical belonging.

Introduction

As Durkheim and Mauss (2009 [1963]) point out, a society's system of classification reflects its social and cultural realities –who one can and cannot be in one's social world, and, as a result, how the encounter between the personal and the social world is felt, lived, reproduced, and challenged in everyday life. In light of the inescapable contextuality of social life, sociologists struggle with building and employing cross-contextual concepts. Nowhere are these challenges of context more obvious than in the literature on race and ethnicity.

The purpose of this article is to present a general approach to meaning-focused sociology we call the Sociology of the Symbolic Landscape (SSL). Our response to the challenge of contextuality, SSL begins with a basic premise: every cultural world is built upon a symbolic landscape. The symbolic landscape is a system of meaning consisting of social categories, feelings of similarity and difference, and the establishment of belonging or the lack of belonging. As the context of social action, the symbolic landscape incorporates both agency and constraint. SSL makes the symbolic landscape visible, and because it focuses on relationships between the aforementioned elements of the symbolic landscape, SSL enables the construction of cross-contextual concepts.

In the following pages, we present SSL and demonstrate its value by applying it to the idea of race, an amorphous concept that has been critiqued for its grounding in the US context (e.g. Wimmer 2015). The article comes in three parts. In part 1, we begin with discussion of the problem of the contextuality of race and conclude that the problem arises because race is first and foremost a cultural concept tied to social meaning. In part 2, we describe cultural sociological insights from Durkheim, the symbolic boundaries approach, civil sphere theory, interpretivism, and postcolonial theory that shed light on social meaning and its impact.

Using illustrative examples from the existing literature on race in the United States, we explain how we synthesized these theories to develop SSL, an approach that emphasizes describing categories, identifying the factors in the perceptibility of those categories, charting the relationships between categories, and uncovering indeterminacy, complexity and power in the operation of the categories. In part 3, we demonstrate the cross-contextual efficacy of SSL by using it to examine race in the Swedish context – a context where racial categories are not generally used. Through this application we show that SSL makes it possible to understand race as a cultural form we, following Collins (1986), call the outsider within. The outsider within is a sui generis cultural-structural position of simultaneous inclusion and marginality associated with a unique categorization that is not reducible to any particular ethnic, religious, or other group category. Identifying the position of the outsider within provides a new perspective on power and agency, as we show by applying SSL to the salience of a unique Swedish subgroup categorization.

Re-Thinking the Global Racial Order

In this section we review the existing sociological thinking on race and describe how SSL complements the dominant lines of thought on race: context-independence, colorism, racial structures, and race as cognition. We argue that, while race categories are context-dependent, the concept of race can be applied as a sensitizing concept (Bulmer 1954) that highlights the contextual construction of a particular type of difference and corresponding inclusions and exclusions.

As two sociologists, one white Swedish female and one white American female, studying immigration and education in Sweden, we frequently wrestle with the challenges of deploying sociological concepts such as race and racism, multiculturalism, and immigrant

incorporation. For example, in an English-language interview with a Swedish high school principal, Voyer, who was new to Sweden at the time, posed what she assumed to be a clear and benign question: “What are the different ethnic and immigrant populations in this school?” Since, in the United States such a question was common, Voyer expected the principal to describe the diversity of the student body (e.g. languages spoken at home, percentage requiring Swedish-language services, nationalities, race and ethnic groups represented), and, possibly, in anticipation of such a common question, offer some printed statistics on the school. Instead, it was as if a cold wind blew through the room. The principal, who had been polite and friendly until that moment, suddenly crossed his arms over his chest and pursed his lips. “That,” he said, “is a racist question.” Voyer reported this interaction to her Swedish colleagues, who tended to agree with the explanation the principal supplied when Voyer followed up during the interview: the concept of race was taboo and did not apply in the Swedish context; people are individuals and to assume that they can be known or defined by imagined group characteristics is both inaccurate and morally offensive; and emphasizing race and looking for it in social life is racist.

What could be taken for a momentary faux pas was not just a cultural misunderstanding. The principal and Voyer’s colleagues held viewpoints that were widely shared in the Swedish context. The principal’s not-so-deeply buried moralizing rested on a belief in the truth of a particular type of egalitarian individualism (Berggren and Trädgårdh 2015, Lund and Voyer 2019). Such cross-cultural challenges do not merely reflect differences in what is and is not appropriate to say. Voyer’s use of racial and ethnic categories and the principal’s refusal of them is the point: racial inequality and marginality are possible even in contexts where the idea of “race” is discredited.

Refusing the presumptuousness of the imposition of US folk categories in other contexts may be reasonable. However, race is not *only* a folk concept grounded in the particular history of the North America (Smedley & Smedley 2012, Wacquant 2005). Race is also an analytical concept that sensitizes researchers to particular aspects of social life – social, political, institutional, and cultural mechanisms that construct and maintain a category of people denied full civil inclusion (Wacquant 2005). In other words, racial and ethnic categories are no exception to the context dependence of social categorization. Cross-national differences in the names and meanings of racial, ethnic and majority/minority categories can be found in both academic and everyday contexts. But, while the names and contents of racial categories are context-dependent, the fact that all social categories stand in some relation to majority/minority, established/outsider, core/periphery distinctions is widely accepted and provides crucial explanatory leverage on the social world (e.g. Alexander 2006, Durkheim 1995, Elias 1994, Simmel 1971).

The Contextuality of Race

The extant body of work on race and ethnicity includes a plethora of theories of race relations, racial inequality, racialization and racism, and stigmatization – all offering an account of the role of race in social life (for reviews of the literature, see Brubaker 2009, Golash-Boza 2016, Winant 2000). Much of the existing theoretical work on race and racism comes from the United States because, more than many other nations, the United States wrestles with the ramifications of its long history of inconsistency in claiming ideals of liberty and equality while maintaining a highly stratified society (Myrdal 1944, Wacquant 2005) and relying upon the economic and industrial largess produced by a color-based caste system (Bonacich 1972). If we consider race as a cultural concept with strong ties to the history of slavery in the United States, it may explain why in other national and cultural

contexts there is a reluctance to adopt the concept. In Sweden where we conduct our research the idea of race is widely believed to be tainted by its association with eugenics, forced sterilizations, and mass killings (Hubinette et al. 2012).

Many theories of race and ethnicity are further imperiled because race and ethnic categories change over time. Consider for example the changing racial categories in the United States census. Over more than 200 years of decennial censuses, a variety of different racial and ethnic categorization schemes have been used to classify and count the American population. Imagine in the contemporary US applying the 1890 national census categories for race – black, mulatto (half black), quadroon (one fourth black), and octoroon (one eighth black) – which drew upon ideas from eugenics and race science to specify degrees of blackness that were considered continuous with degrees of moral, mental, and social fitness. The racial order of that time was grounded in a particular social/moral order consisting of beliefs, feelings, and perspectives that shaped even the scientific “objectivity” of eugenics (Selden 1999). If past racial logics and classifications do not apply to the present, on what grounds can it be assumed that contemporary American race concepts and categories are less susceptible to folk wisdom and less grounded in their own time and place?

Many prominent scholars of race claim that, despite local particularities, race is a structuring principle of social organization around the globe (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Feagin 2014; Smedley and Smedley 2012; Winant 2001). For example, Emirbayer and Desmond theorize a “global racial order” consisting of “organized social relations, symbolic classifications, and even collective emotions in terms of a white/non-white polarity” (p.15). They argue for the broader applicability of their approach to theorizing the global racial

order, stating that, at the level of theoretical abstraction, local particularities “evinced certain shared, essential features” (p.16):

It may be the case that racial structures and dynamics vary across space and time. But it also is true that there exists no advanced society in which the racial order found, say, in the United States is inverted or altered beyond recognition. Darker people are disadvantaged the world over” (p.60).

Such claims about the universal character and significance of the race have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, if racial categories fail to transcend the limits of time and space, what is the logic in persisting with the use of the concept of race (Nayak 2006)? Might it be possible, as Wimmer (2015) suggests, that underlying assumptions of a “race-centric” view – including the assertion that race is the foundational axis of inequality in the United States and around the world – are not borne out by the evidence?

Colorism

An international body of work on colorism challenges the assumption that we can observe a racial binary across contexts (see Dixon and Telles 2017 for a thorough review of the literature). Research demonstrates that, in different national and historical contexts, skin tone, which is generally measured in gradations from light to dark, varies in its relationship to extant racial categories (Banton 2012; Garcia and Abascal 2016; Monk 2015). Skin tone operates as one among many factors (e.g. occupation, religion, culture, language/dialect, other physical features) influencing the racial categorization of individuals (Sen 2014). While the relative advantage of lighter skin tones is fairly consistent globally and appears to be converging toward the dominance of a white/Western standard, evidence suggests that, particularly outside of the reach of Western colonialism, lighter skin color preferences do not always hold (Jablonski 2012). Furthermore, there is very little research on the meaning of skin tone in Europe, and what little exists suggests historical and gender variations in skin tone preferences (Dixon and Telles 2017).

Racial Structures

Some sociological work on the topic of race decouples the concept from phenotype and connects it to social structure, social organizations and social institutions (Bhatt 2013, Bonila Silva 2014, Omi and Winant 2014, Ray 2019, Wooten and Couloute 2017). In this area of work, scholars of race emphasize the institutionalism of racial ideas and racial inequality in social organizations and social structure. For example, in the well-known American case of redlining rules for assessing the desirability of neighborhoods for home loans established that “low-risk” neighborhood were the newer areas inhabited primarily by whites, while the older “high-risk” neighborhoods were inhabited primarily by people of color who were often barred from buying property in new developments. These risk designations reinforced existing inequality by making it easier for white people to get mortgages with good terms, and making it more difficult for people of color to get similar terms on mortgages (Hillier 2003).

We agree that race is an element of social life that has impacts at the micro, meso, and macro levels. However, we maintain that theories of racial structures depend upon a theory of the meaning context of social life. For example, Ray 2019 argues that race becomes an element of social structure when racial schemas are connected to resources in ways that advantage some racial groups over others. Schemas are habits, assumptions, associations, “templates for action... an unwritten rule book explaining how to write the rules” (p. 31). Once formed, racialized structures can reproduce or rewrite race, they can legitimate it or obscure racial inequality, but, as Ray makes clear, this way of theorizing race is only possible when “placing broadly shared racial schemas at the center of a structural theory of race” (p. 35). As

outlined below, SSL bring the elements included in schemas (e.g. categories, practices, and associations or interpretations) to the center of explicit race theorizing.

Race as Cognition

Some scholars argue against academic use of the concept of race because of its context-dependence and status as a folk concept. This resistance has taken many forms – from the strong stand that the idea of race is problematic because it creates racial divisions and must be abolished before there can be a world without racial hierarchies (Gilroy 2000), to more moderate claims that race-categorical thinking is too rigid (Parker and Song 2001), to the argument that the use of folk categories of race by social analysts essentializes and homogenizes human experience (Loveman 1999), to the claim that the concept of race ultimately privileges the white/nonwhite polarity of the colonial episteme (Spivak 1988). Theoretical concerns aside, still others challenge the empirical accuracy of the race concept. For example, Wimmer (2015) argues that neither the historical record nor contemporary data support “Atlanto-centric” arguments for the historical and operational distinctiveness of racial discrimination as opposed to, for example, discrimination on the basis of religion, or region. In light of the challenges associated with the concept of race, Brubaker et al (2004) call for a cognitive turn in recognizing race, ethnicity and nationalism as analytically undifferentiated categories used to see the world, act in it, and make sense of it.

While we agree with Brubaker’s emphasis on categories, we advocate a cultural instead of a cognitive turn (Jacobs and Spillman 2005). Brubaker et al. (2004) assert that everyday ethnicity is “done” in the moment, and within interaction. They acknowledge that ethnicity is cultural: “there are of course important aspects of ethnicity that are continuous” including “embodied schemas of interpretation;...discursive forms, repertoires of contention, and

objectified symbols such as flags, maps, and monuments,” but dismiss the significance of the shared meaning of ethnicity and claim that everyday ethnicity is “fundamentally intermittent and episodic” (p. 208, note 3). Such an interactional approach to race and ethnicity emphasizes fleeting moments and immediate circumstances while neglecting shared categories, meanings, and practices (Alexander 2006) and dismissing the significance of knowledge and perspectives that individuals accumulate through their experiences in the lived, everyday world (Smith 1987). After all, social meaning, not modes of interaction, makes it possible for people interpret and reinterpret their social experiences as “racial,” “ethnic,” or “nationalistic” instead of just awkward, conflictual, or routine encounters (for an example of the tension between racial meaning and problems of “doing” of race, see Garfinkel 1941).

The Race Concept

Accepting race *categories* as folk ideas that vary across social and historical contexts, does not require that the *concept* of race cannot be used across contexts. Although there is no single accepted academic definition of race, in contemporary usage the sociological concept of race as a social fact generally includes several key components: 1. *Symbolic construction of otherness*: race as a social, cultural, and/or symbolic construction without a basis in biological or genetic determination (e.g. of intelligence or behavioral propensity); 2. *Legitimizing ideology*: the racial frame includes an ideology of difference that justifies the social exclusion, subjugation, exploitation or extermination of racialized others; 3. *Perceptibility*: racial categories are generally experienced as recognizable through associations with phenotype, style of dress or manner of speaking, neighborhood, or some other observable characteristic; 4. *Institutionalized Practices*: racial categories may be assigned and enforced by the institutionalized practices that segregate and subordinate

racially designated groups (e.g. legal systems which determine criteria for racial categorization and legislate racial and ethnic relations); 5. *Identity*: one's race may also be asserted as a collective social and political identity (see, Table 1. For different examples of race concepts that contain many of these components see Bonilla-Silva 1999; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Essed 1991; Feagin 2013, Smedley and Smedley 2012, Omi and Winant 2014, Wacquant 2005).

Table 1. Key Components of Race	
1. Symbolic Construction of Otherness	What categories designate "otherness?"
2. Legitimizing Ideology	What ideas legitimate exclusions?
3. Perceptibility	What characteristics make category membership recognizable?
4. Institutionalized Practices	How are symbolic categories and exclusions institutionalized in structure and action?
5. Identity	How are categories adopted and expressed as political and social identities?

In seeking to understand the race concept and apply it across contexts, the question is not whether or not races exist, nor what the boundaries between race, ethnicity, and nationalism are, but instead, what are the key components of race *within* context, and how do they compare *across* contexts?

The Cultural Grounding of the Race Concept

These five key components of race are rooted in meaning, not biological determinism, interactions, materialism or social structure. SSL recognizes the centrality and independence of meaning as a relatively autonomous and analytically independent aspect of social life (Alexander 1990). We now turn to the many theoretical resources available for making sense of race as a cultural construction.

The Structure of Meaning in SSL

We now describe SSL by beginning with the sociological insights upon which the approach is built and highlighting their applicability to subject of race. As we develop the theory we will provide key illustrations from the United States context, a context which is at least a little familiar to most readers. When we turn to demonstrating the theory, we will draw our examples from the Swedish context. The theory relies on key sociological insights, including the centrality of categorization and symbolic boundaries; the construction of civil belonging and exclusion as a particularly relevant boundary; the emphasis on meaning as the context of action; and the ambiguity of meaning as a source of power and agency.

Categories and Symbolic Boundaries

Classification and categorization reflect social boundaries and social groups whose existence is grounded in shared meaning and collective sentiment. According to Durkheim and Mauss (2009 [1963]), the process of classification is a social process in which the structure of social relations (e.g. distances, economic ties, political influence) in a society also forms the basis of its classificatory systems. Tied to the symbolic aspects of society and collective consciousness, systems of classification are not grounded in the characteristics of the things that are classified, but instead reflect the collective sentiment of the social order.

For example, to return to the discussion of 1890 United States race categories, the rise and fall of such categories conveys little information about the Americans being classified, but quite a bit about scientific racism during the era in which the categories arose. It was the end of post-Civil War Reconstruction when the political, economic, and social gains made by African Americans at the end of slavery were being undone by Jim Crow era laws and codes of conduct, and the transition to the “one drop rule” that made anyone with any black ancestry black (Davis 2010). In other words, the racial classificatory system of 1890 US

reflected a set of beliefs that legitimated civic exclusion of black Americans and set the stage for policies and practices (e.g. voting restrictions in the South, and eugenics programs in the North) that quickly reversed many civil rights gains of the prior era (Davis 2010).

Although systems of classification reflect collective sentiment instead of the characteristics of the people who are classified, the classification process produces symbolic boundaries between those who are classified differently. According to Lamont, symbolic boundaries are feelings of similarity and difference arising from struggles over meaning (Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000; Lamont 2016; Lamont and Molnar 2002). Because they have their root in categorization, symbolic boundaries are distinct from social boundaries created by differing access to material resources and social segregation. Symbolic boundaries shape the social world when they are inscribed in economic, and institutional arrangements; built into cultural repertoires such as national mythologies, shared ideologies, and subgroup cultures; and lead to the classified groups' social isolation (Lamont 2016).

While symbolic boundaries are felt as similarity and difference, people don't generally recognize that those feelings are produced by social classification. Instead, people reinterpret symbolic boundaries as moral boundaries highlighting perceived group differences in norms and practices (Lamont 1992, 2000). For example, in her study of working-class men in the United States and France, Lamont (2000) finds that, depending on the national context and racial or ethnic identity of the workers, they construct different models of the "good" person. In terms of the racial boundaries of working class males of the United States, white working-class men tend to interpret their distinctiveness from African Americans by emphasizing the morality of "disciplined" selves who are reliable, effortful and honest, while black working men tend to emphasize the morality of "caring" selves who are kind, giving, and collectivistic

(Lamont 2000). Thus, both groups reinterpret the symbolic classification of race as a moral classification.

The Boundary of the Civil

In a categorized social world a sense of moral superiority arises along with feelings of similarity and difference, but not all categories and symbolic boundaries are the same. As an expression of collective consciousness, a society's system of classification reflects and animates relationships *within* a society, as Durkehim and Mauss and Lamont demonstrate so well. However, SSL incorporates a second dimension of classification: a category that also reflects collective sentiment regarding the *boundary of the social context itself*. Alexander refers to this as the boundary of the civil sphere – a fundamental moral distinction between the us/not us of a social context. The civil sphere has no necessary relationship to other symbolic boundaries such as boundaries between racial and ethnic categories (Voyer 2013b).

Like other social categories and their moral boundaries, the civil sphere consists of a collective we-ness that is interpreted through the application of moral values. Unlike the symbolic boundaries described by (Lamont 1992, 2000), however, the moral boundary of the civil sphere is built through the application of supposedly universal democratic virtues instead of group particulars. Included groups and individuals are connected to civil ideals such as open, trusting, critical, altruistic friendly relations, while the binary counterpoint to those ideals finds expression in a negative, anti-civil pole – a marking and rejection of all that is seen as secretive, suspicious, deferential, self-interested, and calculating. Those judged to be civil are interpreted as active, autonomous, rational, reasonable, calm, self-controlled, realistic and sane. Meanwhile, those seen as uncivil are ascribed anti-civil characteristics

such as passivity, dependency, irrationality, hysteria, savagery, distortion and madness (Alexander 2006).

Ideally the civil sphere would realize the universalism of its values, but in reality its “universalism will always be contradicted by particularities of space, time, and function” (Alexander 2006: 265). Civil spheres are flawed by the weight of their histories as

part of political regimes that are founded by conquest, immigration, and revolution... In the historical construction of civil societies, therefore, one finds that the primordial qualities of these founders are established as the highest criteria of humanity, that they are represented as embodying a higher competence for civil society. Only people of a certain race, who speak a certain language, who practice a certain religion, and who have immigrated from a certain part of the globe – only these very special persons are believed to actually possess what it takes to be members of our ideal civil sphere (Alexander 2001: 241).

SSL takes up this theorizing of the link between categories and the boundaries of the civil sphere. Individuals are associated with social categories that place them in various social relations, and those categories may or may not also influence whether or not they are seen as true members of the civil sphere who “deserve to be treated with respect and recognized as having basic human rights” (Alexander 2013:537). In the play between inclusionary and exclusionary processes, struggles for justice and solidarity as well as the cultural construction of differences and similarities unfold in negotiation regarding what and who will be deemed civil and uncivil. (Kivisto and Sciortino 2015: 17; Alexander 2006: 198). Symbolic inclusion or civil repair occurs when members of excluded categories achieve the unqualified inclusion of categorically designated groups by “translating their particular injustices in to the more universal language of civil justice” (Alexander 2006: 277).

For example, the widespread participation of symbolically and socially excluded racial, ethnic and immigrant groups in the American war efforts during World War II prompted their

symbolic inclusion in the civil sphere (Takaki 1993). This symbolic inclusion was dissonant with the ongoing segregation and repression of African Americans. Social movement leaders activated their civil inclusion (Alexander 2006) and, with the mobilized resources of the black community (Morris 1984), produced the Civil Rights Movement, which expanded to include other racial and ethnic minority groups. In other words, in the symbolic landscape non-white Americans were first included within the expanded symbolic “we” of the civil sphere, leading to the reinterpretation of long-standing violations of the rights and integrity of non-whites as anti-civil acts. This gave crucial support to Civil Rights claims for social inclusion in the form of dignity, equal opportunity, and other important social reforms (Alexander 2006).

The Multidimensionality of Classification

In this brief discussion of categories, symbolic boundaries, and the civil sphere we see the cultural roots of groupness, identity, and the connection between group norms and moral distinctions. Systems of classification express public sentiment, which means that categories reflect the characteristics of the social world instead of the characteristics of the categorized things. Alternatively, one may be assigned a categorization that is either antagonistic or orthogonal to one’s identity. Remember that symbolic categorizations are inherently affective, hierarchical, and neutral in relationship to the content of the category (Durkheim and Mauss 2009 [1963]). Therefore, instead of being grounded in some objective reality of group differences, symbolic categories are analytically distinct from identities. The categories incorporate, and thus display, implicit social assumptions regarding variations in similarity and closeness. At root, the reality of social categories is a socio-cultural reality grounded first and foremost in collective consciousness.

However, the process of classification creates symbolic boundaries – feelings of similarity within categories and differences between categories. In the social world, symbolic boundaries are reinterpreted as moral distinctions resting on the presumed significance of real or imagined inter-group differences in selected social norms, which are deemed relevant. Meanwhile, the boundary of the civil sphere is the boundary of the “we” of the social context. Here the distinction between categories and identity is relevant. One may have an identity, that is a sense of self and group belonging, that is exceedingly salient to one’s everyday life but, yet, carries no weight as a social symbolic category determining one’s position relative to the “we” of the civil sphere. In theory, this boundary is independent of categories and symbolic boundaries within the context, but in practice the civil sphere fails to attain its supposed universalism. SSL calls for the exploration of these components of social categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Key Components of Social Classification in the Symbolic Landscape	
System of Classification	Networks of categories reflecting collective sentiment and the structure of social, political, and economic relations
Category	Element of system of classification reflecting the social order, not the characteristics of the thing that is classified
Symbolic Boundary	Feelings of similarity and difference within and across categories
Moral Boundary	Moral evaluations attached to symbolic boundaries
Relevant Norms	Real or imagined behavioral differences used to legitimate moral evaluations
Civil Sphere	Feelings of similarity and differences within and across the boundary of the social context.
Civil Values	Supposedly democratic moral universals attached to the boundary of the civil sphere.
Primordialism	Contradictions of the universalism of civil values arising from the idea that some people are better able to uphold civil values.
Civil Repair	Renegotiation of the boundary of the civil sphere to include excluded categories and the groups denoted by them.

Meaning as the Context of Action in SSL

The preceding discussion of social classification demonstrates the relevance of symbolic categorization for meaning-focused comparative research. However, categories and their boundaries do not just produce feelings of moral similarity and difference, they are also elements of the cultural context of action. In order to more fully uncover the way meaning

shapes social life within a context, we must understand how action unfolds in a classified, categorized, symbolic and morally-bounded world. SSL takes the relationship between meaning and action into account.

Interpreting Motivations

Interpretivism connects meaning and action through the concept of landscapes of meaning - the historically grounded, discursive sense-systems motivating people to action and forming the ways in which people act upon their motivations (Reed 2011). We incorporate this insight into our approach, but the symbolic landscapes of SSL differ from Reed's (2011) landscapes of meaning in one important way. Reed adopts a Weberian focus on the way meaning works through individuals – their goals and their value rational action in pursuit of those goals. SSL focuses instead on meaning and its impact while neither requiring or prohibiting consideration of individual subjectivity and intentionality (see also Voyer 2017). Landscapes of meaning are the context of individual action, but the symbolic landscape consists of the classificatory system, symbolic boundaries, expected behaviors (social norms) associated with particular categories, and expected goals and manners of achieving them, which can all be studied without focusing on individual subjectivity. As Jepperson and Meyer (2011) point out, social action can often be explained without recourse to special intentions or extraordinary motives, and may instead be seen as the result of the Symbolic Landscape, i.e. people unproblematically doing what people like them in places like theirs do:

It is one thing to be a capitalist if that implies the social role of pariah or alien or thief— perhaps some very distinctive values and orientations are necessary, requiring much socialization (religious or otherwise). It is quite another thing to be admired as a capitalist carrier of progress, and quite routine motives may suffice to encourage individuals to want to be recognized as successful. One does not need to assume very much about values or personality to understand that young persons in the 1990s might have seen investment banking as an attractive career. (Jepperson and Meyer. 2011: 54-73.).

Incorporating the interpretive insight that meaning is the context of action, SSL maintains an emphasis on the details of the symbolic landscape – categories and their symbolic boundaries, and the way those categories and boundaries shape social life, even as they are reflected in the action of individuals. For example, Okamoto's (2014) study of the emergence of the panethnic solidarity among Asian Americans shows the significance of the symbolic landscape of action. Asian American is an overarching category spanning many phenotypes, religions, and ethnic and national origin groups (in some cases groups with a long history of mutual animosity). While the category Asian American may have made sense to a white majority who cared little to understand the differences masked by the label, it was not a foregone conclusion that panethnic Asian American political mobilization would emerge. As Okamoto (2014) shows, the idea of Asian similarity and the view emerging in the late 1960s that racial and ethnic identities could be grounds for shared political interests and action shaped both intentions and modes of action by making panethnic organizing possible as a legitimate social undertaking and feasible as a mode of political action. Many individual political leaders stuck to intraethnic organization building, but others adopted the novel enterprise of building panethnic Asian organizations.

Agency and Power

While the symbolic landscape is the context of action, we cannot forget that that landscape is inhabited by people whose social action unfolds within a messy, unstable, contested, and overlapping assortment of categories – some imposed from outside, and others asserted as identities. SSL adopts insights from postcolonial theory to make sense of the potential for power and agency arising from the indeterminacy and dynamism of categories. Postcolonial theory establishes that the symbolic boundaries creating an “us” simultaneously create an “other,” which is an inhabited social location that must also be theorized. Ambiguities and

interstitialities arise in the space between categories and lived reality. Individuals may experience this categorical world as pre-given but contingent (cf. Lund 2017). Therefore, important social dynamics are not just unfolding as groups jockey to be seen as “civil”, but equally important are also the ways in which the civil sphere’s counterpublics engage categorical ambiguity in order to contest and shape categories and their symbolic boundaries (Fraser 1990).

Postcolonial theory notes the central role of a fundamental binary division between “us” and “them.” However, postcolonial theory does not merely mirror civil sphere thinking, but instead provides crucial insight into the way agency arises from the imperfect relationship between assigned categories and possible identities. Postcolonial thought seeks to make visible what is often obscured: the subaltern, inside or outside the West, that has been categorized and diminished as “other” and thereby purifying the Western “us” or “core group” (Go 2016). The imposition of the border between “us” and “other” creates a lived experience of subalterity. Both Fanon (2004, 2000) and DuBois (2008) contend that there is a specific subjectivity or self-consciousness that arises among the subaltern. DuBois calls this double consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity... (DuBois 2008 [1903]: 12).

To apply these insights to the concept of race, postcolonial theory gives further support to the idea that, although racial categories are not biological facts, they are necessary to understanding social processes and people’s experiences (Bhabha 1994, Said 2003). Categories are also a potential source of agency and social transformation. As Lamont’s “working men” demonstrated, abstract binary divisions between “us” and “them” include

presumed behavioral components even when they also incorporate exclusions on the basis of essentialized factors like skin color or national origin. The behavioral components of categories make it possible for the subaltern to challenge the limits of binary divisions by enacting the behaviors of the colonizers. Among these behavioral strategies, the concept of mimicry typically connotes a negativity associated with assimilation and inauthenticity as individuals reject their group to take on the practices of the majority. A common example being the unproven assumption that American minority children who work hard in school will be ridiculed for “acting white” (Carter 2005). Another strategy is “hybridity,” in which the subaltern reinterpret and incorporate colonial practice and culture as elements of subaltern practice and culture, the subaltern can subvert the excluding power of the colonizers (Bhabha 1994; Go 2016). For example, the rise of black professionals after the Civil War prompted the growth of an etiquette literature which reinforced and disseminated the unique codes of conduct that blended elements of mainstream white elite practices and sensibilities with historically black culture, identity, and practices. This amalgam created a new social and cultural space for well-off African Americans (Smith 2006). Importantly, mimicry and hybridity focus on mastering the practices and behaviors of the colonizers, not adopting their categories (Rutherford 2003). Meanwhile, “strategic essentialism” is the calculated adoption of subaltern categories for the purpose of political claims making (Spivak 1988), as, for example, in the case of pan-ethnic Asian organizing described above.

The Sociology of the Symbolic Landscape

Relying on the theoretical insights just described, SSL observes processes of social inclusion and exclusion unfolding as social categories are negotiated and assigned; perceived similarities and differences are interpreted and enacted within the symbolic landscape; the contested application of moral universals is used to designate the civil boundary, and

dynamics of ambiguity and interstitiality produce the power of the center and the agency of the excluded. Therefore, an SSL investigation of any particular context seeks to:

- Uncover the active symbolic classifications in that time and space, noting common usage, differences in usage, and implicit and explicit meanings
- Identify the behaviors, demeanors, locations, appearances, and any other factors in which symbolic classifications are rendered visible
- Map those classifications on the basis of their relationship to the boundary of the civil sphere by identifying the established relationships to relevant moral and social values.
- Illuminate the social complexity obscured by classification
- Identify ways in which the indeterminacy of categorizations and their intersections with social life shape the potential for agency and/or protect the position of the dominant.

We demonstrate SSL through its application to select data from our research on immigrant youth in Sweden.¹ Although our research is qualitative, involving both interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, SSL may also be used with other types of data that can be analyzed interpretively. For example, Voyer is currently conducting research that combines computational sociological methods and traditional content analysis of etiquette books to identify and trace the historical development of symbolic classifications, their relationships, and their perceptibility (Voyer et al. 2018). Before we begin a few details on the Swedish context are in order.

The Swedish Context

In recent years, immigration has increased in many countries that are not typically seen as diverse, immigrant-receiving nation states. Sweden is one such country – a place that, until the 1940s, was typically considered a homogenous nation² experienced a rapid increase in its

¹For the purposes of the present article, our brief treatment of these investigations illustrates SSL. The research projects are *Children and Youth's Living conditions* (2018-2023), financed by Gålöstiftelsen, *An Educational Dilemma: Multicultural Incorporation and School Achievement* (2010–14) and *Opportunity structures for inclusion and successful schooling of newly arrived youth* (2017-2020). The two latter projects were financed by the Swedish Research Council (VR Ref Nos. 90615201 and VR Ref Nos. 2016-04231). See publications Lund 2015, Lund 2017, Lund & Lund 2016, Lund & Trondman 2017, Lund & Voyer 2019, Voyer 2018.

² The indigenous Sami population is frequently overlooked. For more information, see Skille and Broch 2019.

foreign born population (Migrationsverket 2018a). In 2017, 18.5% of the population was born outside of Sweden (Statiska Centralbyrå 2018c). There is also a substantial immigrant second generation. In 2016, 13% of children under age 21 had two foreign born parents, and an additional 12% of children had one foreign born parent (Statistiska Centralbyrå 2018b). Sweden's immigrants come from many nations. In order of population size, the top ten countries represented in Sweden's new immigrant population in 2017 were Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Poland, Iran, Eritrea, Somalia, China and Finland (Statistiska Centralbyrå 2018a).

Newcomers to Sweden arrive in what is generally considered one of the most well-functioning of the modern democratic societies, a country recognized as exemplary in its pursuit of class and gender equality and a high quality of life (Esping-Andersen and Wagner 2012). In recent years, and coinciding with the dramatic increases in immigration, increasing residential and school segregation and the rise of a segmented labor market indicates that social inequality and stratification are testing the social welfare state (Trygged and Righard 2019). Anti-immigrant right wing politics and a mainstream desire to limit and control migration are also on the rise (Rydgren and Van der Meiden 2018).

As discussed above, in Sweden there is a general aversion to racial or ethnic markers and identities. This makes it hard to acknowledge the cultural identities of immigrants, because ethnic and cultural groupness is frequently seen as in tension with the ideal of equality (Lund & Voyer 2019, Voyer 2016). Yet, this explicitly anti-group ethos belies the racial undertones of Swedish primordialism that long upheld the view of the Swedish race as "beautiful and physically and aesthetically perfect" (Hubinette & Lundström 2012: 45). Such views and programs existed alongside feminist social movements, the cold war and the social

revolution of 1968, through which Sweden emerged as an international voice for inclusive democratic values (see Enroth and Henriksson 2019). The idea that Sweden is a “paradise on earth and an accomplished utopia for human rights, democracy, gender equality, and anti-racism” flourished, and, as a result, race as a category was constructed as socially “irrelevant and obsolete” in the Swedish context (Hubinette & Lundström 2011: 45).

Uncovering The Symbolic Classifications and Factors in their Visibility

While typical American race categories may not be used in Sweden, there are categories that designate “us” and “others.” In applying SSL to our research in Sweden, we uncovered active symbolic classifications. It is possible, even likely, that symbolic classifications may match some other social classifications. For example, in the United States, citizen is a political classification that provides access to the vote and financial aid for higher education, but “citizen” is also a symbolic category designating other implicit and explicit social meanings, such as evoking the idea of commitment to the nation, and a feeling of privileged mutuality with other citizens (Bloemraad 2017). A one-to-one relationship between the boundaries of symbolic category (e.g. those recognized as “citizens”) and the boundaries of the category in some other sphere of life (e.g. legal citizenship) cannot be assumed.

In SSL, therefore, categories should be identified inductively. We used established methods of grounded theory to code the interview transcripts and fieldnotes for common categorizations (Kelle 2007), but this type of analysis could be conducted using other methods, for example, through corpus analytic techniques (Rubtcova 2015). While this activity turned up many categories, for the purposes of illustration, we present a selection of

categories.³ In table 3, we list each category and note the general meaning or meanings of the category and the factors that made that category visible.

Table 3. Selected Common Categories		
Categories	Meanings	Visibility Factors & Stereotypes
Human being (människa)	An overarching category of similarity.	N/A
Immigrant (invandrare)	A category designating non-white/Western people born outside of Sweden or with parents born outside of Sweden.	Living in neighborhoods with fewer ethnic Swedes Accented or imperfect Swedish Possibly darker hair color and complexion Non-Swedish or Western name Not from a country in Western Europe or other English-speaking nation from the global north.
Refugee (flykting)	A category referring to immigrants fleeing violence.	Do not speak Swedish Lack of employment High use of social services Darker hair color and complexion. Not dressing in modern Swedish or Western clothing.
Muslims (muslimsk)	A category designating Muslim immigrants and their descendants.	Separate organizations (e.g. setting up own schools) Married women staying out of the workforce Praying and wearing religious markers (e.g. the veil) in public Darker hair color and complexion Non-Swedish or Western name
“Blatte”	A hybrid identity that incorporates both positive and negative poles of belonging.	Young Longer residence or lifelong residence in Sweden “Urban” style and culture Living in or socializing in immigrant neighborhood Speaking dialect associated with neighborhood Attending vocational programs or schools with many immigrants
“Svenne ₁ ”	A derogatory term for unintentional and nationalistic ethnic Swedes, evoking the idea of conformity and groupthink.	Being a proponent of a correct way to be “Swedish” Claiming Swedishness is under threat. Right wing or nationalist views and party affiliation. Lighter hair and complexion
“Svenne ₂ ”	A term used to describe immigrants who adopt conventional Swedish behaviors. Mimicry	Speaking unaccented, standard Swedish School achievement Joining mainstream Swedish activities and organizations Not being engaged in social life of immigrant neighborhoods

³ For more information, see Lund & Voyer 2019.

Swedish ₁ (svensk)	Membership in Swedish society.	Participating in the Swedish welfare state (working, school, paying taxes, using welfare benefits as intended). Speaking good Swedish Avoiding subgroup expressions and attachments
Swedish ₂	Ethnic Swedishness or Swedish by heritage.	Generally white or mixed race with generally lighter colored hair

Human being is an overarching category of similarity with the underlying idea that one's background should not/does not provide information on who they are or be relevant for their self-identity or experience in the world. In our data the category of human being often arose when school staff were asked questions about how many languages are spoken or how many individuals with immigrant backgrounds attend a specific school. Use of the category "human being" relegated ethnicity, religion, culture, and identity to the private realm and denied the immigrant identities and experiences of immigrant background students as worthy of recognition or inclusion in public life. For example, in a conversation between a male student with an immigrant background and an ethnic Swedish principal, the student said, 'I feel Swedish.' The headmaster responds almost in a correcting, didactic manner, 'The most important thing is that we are humans, and we all have different qualities, some are good at soccer while other is better at music.' In other words the emphasis on "human being" obscures the closed and privileged position of the category Swedish in social life.

Immigrant is a category generally designating non-white/Western people born outside of Sweden or with parents born outside of Sweden, and the places associated with these people. In our data, the category is associated with the idea of disorder, isolation, and underachievement. For example, the principal of a high school we studied reported that every year when the fall semester is about to start she receives phone calls from parents that are worried about rumors that the school has a lot of immigrant students, and that the majority of

the teachers themselves are ‘immigrants’ and that many of the students ‘are criminals,’ suggesting a chaotic school environment. It is crucial to note that research on immigrant students in Sweden is in conflict with the stereotypes. Instead, ethnographic and quantitative data from our research in Malmö only confirms the great importance of educational achievement among immigrant students and their parents, even when they lack economic and educational resources (Trondman 2016a: 272-273; Lund & Trondman, 2017). In this lack of fit between meaning and social reality, we see that the characterization of the categories is not a true assessment of the content of the categories (Durkheim and Mauss 1963), but instead stands as a symbolic marker of difference. This category is more likely to be applied to people who speak accented and non-fluent Swedish, who are living and engaging primarily with others who are not considered to be ethnic Swedes, and who are not “ex-pats” from a country in Western Europe or another English-speaking nation from the global North. People categorized in this way may have a darker hair color and complexion, but these things would not be a reliable indicator if other factors were not present.

Refugee is a category frequently used by those who are considered Swedish as well as by those who are considered immigrant but have been in Sweden for a longer period. Sweden’s commitment to human rights demands that the country is at least nominally open to those seeking refuge and asylum from the atrocities. However, refugee reception in Sweden incorporates the sense that refugees are in need of care and shelter, and that they should be pitied on account of the difficult lives they experienced prior to their arrival. The category evokes pity, a sense of deficiency, infantilization, and sometimes deceit. For example, see the quote below from Karin, who is the former principal of a school with many immigrant-background students. In addition to providing further evidence that the categories are need not be presentative of their contents, her perspective provides a good example of the needy

and damaged refugee classification – a classification that she applied to students who were not actually refugees:

Some of the other students are very noisy. They are totally nuts. They are not mentally well. Some of them are traumatized. We thought from the beginning that several of them are traumatized by war. But when we asked them if there had been war in their home countries and very, very few said yes. Most of them were born here.

This category is typically applied to those who are darker in complexion and/or hair color, who do not come from the global North, who tend to dress traditionally, who are not working and receive public benefits, and who do not speak Swedish with fluency.

The category of Muslim is particularly coded as problematic vis-à-vis the boundary of the civil sphere. In Sweden and in other European countries, research shows that the category of Muslim is associated with the assumptions of incivility and an unwillingness to adopt the values and practices of European society (Heath and Richards 2016; Alexander 2013). In our data, the category of Muslim was frequently linked to assumed uncivil characteristics such as being group-oriented, non-rational, wild-passionate, abusing the welfare state, and patriarchal and misogynistic. However, there is also the sense that civil inclusion of Muslims is possible if individual Muslims adopt a secular approach and relinquish what are often seen as problematic collectivism and backward group practices. For example, Vilma, an ethnic Swedish student, suggests that she is comfortable with ‘acceptable’ Muslims, while upholding the symbolic exclusion of Muslims in general:

When I encounter a Muslim, I directly try to find out what kind of Muslim it is, instead of judging them, I get to know them instead. It need not to be the classic type of Muslim, that is hitting his wife and so. It is the mostly old-fashioned Muslims that beat their wives but not all old-fashioned Muslims do that either.

The category of Muslim is more likely to be applied to those with traditional Muslim names darker skin and hair, who wear religious clothing or in other ways visually indicate their religion. Being seen as stereotypically following different gender norms around women working and the ability of a woman to be in public on her own, and visibly participate in

designated Muslim institutions such as schools and Islamic community centers also cues the category.

Blatte, a slang term that can be used as a harsh insult, is a classification incorporating dozens of nationalities, ethnicities, and religions. For example, people categorized in this way may be Somali (Muslim), Serbian (primarily Orthodox Christian), and Chilean (primarily Catholic), but these national and religious differences tend to go unrecognized. The category of *Blatte* is ordinarily applied to those who are young, center their social lives in immigrant neighborhoods, adopt a particular “urban” cultural style, and use a distinct and regionally-inflected variant of Swedish that incorporates words from many languages including Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, Spanish and English (Kotsinas 1988; Quist and Svendsen 2010; Young 2014). *Blatte* evokes the stereotypes of lacking in ambition and motivation for learning, being boisterous, and generally exerting a detrimental effect on others and the context. *Blatte* is an example of hybridity and thus distinct from other active categorizations like “Muslim” or “Turk,” which are imagined to reference groups formed on the basis of a pre-existing religious attachment, ethnic group, or nationality. Instead of being an outward looking category that references some specific otherness predating immigration, *blatte* is an internally referenced category with characteristics defined in negation – in being Swedish, but not typically or unproblematically Swedish. Livia’s who was quoted above, put it this way: “*Blattar* – they’re immigrants who are kind of Swedish, but behave in a specific way. It is like a personal style they’ve adopted in their neighborhoods” (Lund 2015: 2-3).

Svenne is a category with two meanings. The first meaning, *Svenne1*, is associated with ethnic-Swedish group identification and criticized characteristics such as unquestioned allegiance to one correct way of being Swedish, falseness, conformity, calculating, and being

boring and deceitful. Thus, *Svenne*₁ evokes the idea of unthinking cultural conformity and authoritarian nationalism (Trondman 2006; Wiltgren 2017). The second meaning, *Svenne*₂ is often used by immigrants to characterize themselves who work hard in school and adopt mainstream Swedish tastes and practices. In this sense, *Svenne*₂ is similar to is an example of mimicry and similar to the concept of ‘acting white’ (Fryer and Torelli 2010).

The category of Swedish is also used in two senses. Swedish₁ is an open category associated with the Swedish civil sphere itself. In this sense, to be Swedish is to be an unproblematic insider. For example, in 2012 the Swedish Minister of Integration initiated a push to increase immigrant integration. He wrote “We want you to become a part of Sweden; we want you to start working and learn Swedish right away... Our goal is that immigrants feel that they are members of Swedish society” (Swedish Ministry of Labour 2012). Fedra, a high school student in our study, felt she could be both Swedish and Turkish: “As long as you feel Swedish, you are perhaps Swedish. But one should not think it's embarrassing to be non-Swedish. I am from Turkey. I am Turkish, but at the same time, I am also Swedish somehow.” However, this civil sense of Swedishness is laced with the primordialism of Swedish₂ – the same ethnic conception of Swedishness that holds immigrants at arm’s reach while enabling a primetime television programme in which Swedish-Americans “come home” to Sweden (Sveriges Television 2019). At minimum, this category may be applied based on behavioral indicators such as are participating in the social welfare system by speaking fluent Swedish, working in above-board jobs, paying taxes and collecting benefits (Voyer 2013).

Mapping the Classifications

Once the categories are identified, it is possible to map those classifications on the basis of their relationship to the boundary of the civil sphere. We did this by noting the way that categories related to whether belonging or presence in Sweden was questioned and the way that categories were associated with “Swedish” values as described in Table 3.

Figure 1 depicts a mapping of the categories in relationship to each other and the boundaries of the Swedish civil sphere in our data. Remember that this is a mapping of the categories, not the people who may be assigned to them in any particular moment. The drawing is not intended to be to scale. As described in Table 3, some symbolic classifications were used differently and took on different meanings in those alternative uses. A full mapping requires developing multiple maps to reflect the various meanings and uses associated with the symbolic classifications. Furthermore, a mapping of this sort is merely a static image. In reality the relationships are dynamic, situational, and varying with the perspective of individuals in the symbolic landscape. This particular mapping is illustrative, not exhaustive.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In Figure 1, categories are represented by shapes in the figure. The large square represents the category “human” – depicting that one could be included in that category and excluded for all of the other categories. Therefore, the category of human sets quite a low bar for recognition – a recognition that recognizes one’s existence without legitimating a claim to belonging in the Swedish context. The category Swedish₁, civil inclusion in Swedish society, is the large white oval backgrounded in the center. The relationship between all subsequent categories and Swedish₁ is pivotal to seeing the value of SSL to talking about race across contexts. As evident in Figure 1, categorizations may be fully or partially excluded from the Swedish civil sphere, or they may be completely included.

Whether, as described above, refugees are to be pitied and cared for, are traditionalist who are “fresh of the boat” and incapable of full participation in society, or are members of an unwanted, untrustworthy horde, the category of refugee is decidedly one that is excluded from the Swedish civil sphere. There is a temporal element to this exclusion, with the idea being that refugees have just arrived, but also the ideas of trauma, traditionalism, and deficiency for equal social participation as described above. The category of refugee overlaps the category of immigrant, with some applications of the category recognizing that some immigrants are refugees and that refugees may eventually develop self-sufficiency and become immigrants as a pathway into the civil sphere.

As depicted in Figure 1, the categories Immigrant, Muslim, Swedish₂, and Svenne₁ are partially included in the Swedish Civil Sphere. In the case of each category, exclusion and inclusion hinge on something different. We have observed that symbolic inclusion of the immigrant category occurs when there is judged to be evidence of Swedish language acquisition, residence outside of stigmatized immigrant suburbs, employment, adoption of Swedish practices around family and the rights of children, and not displaying and enacting subgroup commitments or attachment. In those instances, people who are classified as immigrant might still be unproblematically characterized as Swedish, although there is always the situational risk of exclusion as a result of the latent primordialism of Swedish₂ as described above.

For the category of Muslim, inclusion hinges upon establishing a visible distance from the stereotypes associated with the category. For example, an established and successful

politician who is a Muslim man was giving a television interview with a female reporter. When she extended her hand to shake his, he declined and instead placed his hand over his heart. He later explained that he declined on account of a religious prohibition of cross-gender contact, but that he was still capable of extending a civil greeting: “The most important thing is to show respect by seeing each other, to meet each other... to respect each other” (The Local 2016a). This reasoning proved insufficient to protect him from public condemnation for his unequal treatment of men and women, and ultimately led to his resignation and retirement from politics.

We observed Swedish² exclusion from the civil sphere cases where were people of Swedish descent out of country, or in the case of uncivil commitments of “svennel” – a category that is a subcategory of ethnic Swedishness. Svenne₁ is partially excluded from the Swedish Civil Sphere on account of the association of Swedish racism, conformity and groupthink with right wing nationalism – an ideological stance that is widely considered to be amoral, anticivil, and shameful. For example, in the September 2018 elections, the right wing nationalist political party the Swedish Democrats (SD) took 17.5% of the popular vote, giving the party 62 of 349 seats in parliament. However, citing the group’s morally problematic nationalism, all of the other parties, including other conservative and right of center parties consistently refused to include SD in their proposed governing coalitions (The Local 2016b). In 2018, this choice cost right and center parties greatly and meant that the left-of-center Social Democratic Party retained leadership of the government (The Local 2019). A plausible SSL interpretation of these events is that the civil exclusion of Svenne₁ incivility took priority over parties’ goals and even the democratic inclusion of the voice of a substantial portion of the Swedish electorate.

Only two categories are fully included in the Swedish civil sphere: *Svenne2* and *Blatte*.. “*Svenne2*” indicates immigrants who are “acting Swedish” and are thus considered to be quite socially integrated, potentially establishing distance from the category of immigrant while still excluded from primordial Swedishness, but perhaps blurring that primordial boundary through behavioural conformity. Lina, who is cited above, suggests the blurring of this boundary to describe the Swedishness of a friend from Iraq: He “speaks good Swedish, he works and is a real Swede...” Like *Svenne2*, *Blatte* is wholly included in the Swedish civil sphere, and excluded from the category Swedish. However, *blatte* also remains completely included in the category of immigrant and, thus makes no incursions on the boundary of *Swedish2*. *Blatte* therefore occupies a position we refer to as the “outsider within” – a group within the civil sphere yet defined in negation to the primordial category. As a result of the position within the civil sphere, *blatte* may also be asserted as a social and/or political identity that indicates belonging in Sweden (Trondman et al. 2012; Voyer 2016; Voyer & Lund 2018). For example, in our data, an immigrant background student named Ibra first asserts that he is a *blatte*, but he also claims he is Swedish. When teacher asks him, “So, when will you become Swedish?” Whereupon Ibra responds, “I already did...” If *blatte* were not included in the Swedish civil sphere, Ibra would not be able to claim belonging.

Returning to Race

Within the symbolic landscape, the outsider within is an abstraction that adequately accounts for that which is typically implied by the concept of race. As Wacquant (2005) notes, in the United States race emerged as a category that enabled the extension and expansion of democracy and equality in a slaveholding society. To be a racial other is to be an internal problem in one’s nation, not a problem coming from somewhere else. As DuBois put it:

“Being a problem is a strange experience... I remember well when the shadow swept across me... It dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world

by a vast veil. ... Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" (Dubois 2008 [1903]: 11-12).

There are many categories that can designate problem groups that are perceived as less capable or less worthy, but an outsider within, a category like *blatte*, is something completely new –the symbolic construction of a new kind of otherness, the development of a legitimating ideology that the people placed in the category are a persistent source of difference. In our research, for example, the view that people classified in this way are perceptible in their attachment to particular immigrant neighborhoods, practices, and cultural tastes. Along with this categorization in our research we observe the rise of institutionalized practices that segregate and subordinate “Swedes” from “blattar” (Voyer 2016; Voyer 2018), and the emergences of this identity as a shared identity and expression of belonging and pride, incorporating its own manners of speech, music, and other social and artistic expressions (Lund 2017; Trondman, Taha, & Lund 2012; Voyer 2016; Lund & Voyer 2019, Schall 2019).

If our assertions that the outsider within is a cultural structural position of internally referenced difference that stands as an exception to the general rules of democracy and equality and that, in Sweden, the category of “*blatte*” is such a category, that makes it possible to compare and contrast this category with similarly situated categories in very different social contexts. In this way, SSL makes a “race” analysis possible even in settings where, as in Sweden, explicit race categories are not actively employed.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present a theoretical solution to problem of conducting research that can transcend the cultural contextuality of social life, in particular when it comes to the sociology of race. By merging theoretical insights from theories of meaning, boundaries, and

action we suggest a new theory: *the sociology of the symbolic landscape*. SSL illuminates processes of social categorization and civil inclusion and exclusion.

SSL's focus on the elements of cultural context provides new insight. The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie and her encounter with the racial order in the US context illuminates the significance of the contextuality gap as people, ideas, and practices move across contexts. Adichie points out that being "African in America" is not the same as being African-American. Before Adichie arrived in U.S. she didn't think of herself as black, because as she puts it, "I didn't have to. I thought of myself as Igbo, which is my ethnicity" (Adiche 2013). But one day, strolling down a street in Brooklyn, an African-American man greeted her as "sister". Evoking a sense of "us" – a familiarity and mutual recognition borne out of the presumption of a shared cultural structural position of the outsider within. When Adichie heard the familiar greeting from a stranger, her emotionally charged reaction was: "I am not your sister." (ibid.) Over time, however, just on the basis of her presence in the symbolic landscape of the United States, Adichie was drawn into a historical context of U.S., into the "middle of conversations" of a different cultural meaning-making, of sharing the burden of being othered, of slavery, of white guilt, and more. She grew to understand the experience of American blackness. Years later, when asked if she would respond differently now, Adichie admitted she would respond with warmth to man who had called her sister. She had not understood it at the time, but there was a bond between them (Adichie 2018).

Nigeria has its own categorizations as well. In both contexts, how "otherness" is designated is a question for an inductively performed analysis. Illuminating the imperfect relationship between categories, their markers, and identities and boundaries, reveals cultural processes of exclusion and inclusion and indicates sources of that challenge stigmatization and can build

civil solidarity. Adichie came understand her blackness in a new way as a result of her encounter with the American symbolic landscape. However, in addition to the new connection described above, there were also those moments in which she became aware that she was being seen through a gaze of inferiority. In her undergraduate studies in U.S. she was a very competent writer but by the atmosphere in class she “realized that the person who wrote the best essay wasn't supposed to look like me” (Adiche 2013). The weight of exclusion falls even on those who know the categories that carry it have no purchase in other times and places.

It is just these sorts of nuances of complex we aim to uncover. SSL focuses on race as a cultural-structural position that may have a different name and be applied to different people across time and place. Race is a symbolic construction that depends on meaning-making within a symbolic landscape. Freeing the concept of race from the putative content of American racial categories creates new possibilities for cross-contextual knowledge and understanding. If struggles for justice and solidarity play out in light of perceived similarities and differences, SSL gives clues as to how individuals and groups can work toward solidarity and inclusivity, or toward reproducing the unjust, but culturally-legitimized, boundaries between us.

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