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Conceptualizing cultural groups and cultural difference

The social mechanism approach

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ABSTRACT   The aim of this article is to present a conceptualization of cultural groups and cultural difference that provides a middle course between the Scylla of essentialism and the Charybdis of reductionism. The method I employ is the social mechanism approach. I argue that cultural groups and cultural difference should be understood as the result of cognitive and social processes of categorization. I describe two such processes in particular: categorization by others and self-categorization. *Categorization by others* is caused by processes of *ascription:* the attribution by outsiders of certain characteristics, beliefs, and practices to individuals who share a specific attribute. *Self-categorization* is caused by processes of *inscription* and *community-building:* the adoption of certain beliefs and practices as a result of socialization and enculturation. I therefore shift the focus from groups to categories, and from categories to processes of categorization. I show that this analytical distinction between categorization by others and self-categorization can clarify an ambiguity in dominant debates in contemporary multiculturalism. I conclude by indicating how injustices, commonly associated with multiculturalism, can better be understood as socially generated injustices, and how government should deal with these injustices.

KEYWORDS   categorization ● constructivism ● multiculturalism ● social categories ● essentialism

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, cultural diversity has become a subject of major interest in political theory. Although the normative importance of multiculturalism

has been widely recognized, it is less clear how cultural difference can be conceptualized while avoiding the pitfalls of essentializing cultural groups.[1] The normative theory building in multiculturalism also encompasses the descriptive debate: there seems to be an equilibrium between differential conceptualizations of cultural groups and the normative claims made on behalf of these groups. For example, the debate on Will Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995) not only concerned his normative emphasis on culture as the context of individual choice. Many critics also focused on his conception of societal culture and cultural difference, in particular, his 'categorical distinction' between multinationality and polyethnicity (1995: 11–14).[2]

In this article, I seek to contribute to these normative debates in multiculturalism by focusing on the underlying descriptions of cultural groups.[3] Despite its centrality in normative multiculturalism, the term 'group' is seldom analyzed in its own terms (Brubaker, 2002: 163). Cultural groups are taken for granted as distinct entities, internally homogenous, externally bounded, and seen as basic constituents of social life. Such a conceptualization runs the risk of falling prey to the culturalistic fallacy:

> The culturalistic fallacy may be said to be committed when one defines culture as an ideational abstraction and then proceeds to convert or reify this *ens rationis* into an independent ontological entity subject to its own laws of development and conceived through itself alone. (Bidney, 1953: 51)

We can distinguish three aspects of the culturalistic fallacy. First, the *reification* of culture: to regard something abstract as something material or concrete. Second, the *compartmentalization* of culture: the tendency to view cultures as discrete entities with sharp borders. Third, the *essentializing* of culture: the tendency to see culture as an autonomous and immutable entity, in which its individual members are regarded as only the passive bearers of culture. The extreme essentialist and naturalized descriptions are nowadays generally dismissed.[4] Over time, we have seen a shifting emphasis from 'natural' to 'cultural' descriptions of groups, phrased in terms of 'blood' via 'race' and 'ethnicity' to 'culture.'[5] It is generally accepted now that culture is a socially constructed concept.

On the other hand, constructivism dissolves into *reductionism* when it denies that culture is a real phenomenon in society, and merely sees it as a 'narrative discourse,' a 'process,' or as an 'identity.'[6] It might be true that the essence of culture and cultural difference is better captured in a narrative approach (cf. Preston, 1995; Somers and Gibson, 1994). However, such an approach means that we cannot generalize about cultural difference within our political institutions, and therefore undermines a normative discussion of these issues in political theory (Bader, 2001).

The aim of this article is to present a conceptualization of cultural groups and cultural difference that provides a middle course between the Scylla of

essentialism and the Charybdis of reductionism. The method I employ is the social mechanism approach. I argue that cultural groups and cultural difference should be understood as the result of cognitive and social processes of categorization. I describe two such processes in particular: categorization by others and self-categorization. *Categorization by others* is caused by processes of *ascription:* the attribution by outsiders of certain characteristics, beliefs, and practices to individuals who share a specific attribute. *Self-categorization* is caused by processes of *inscription* and *community-building:* the adoption of certain beliefs and practices as a result of socialization and enculturation. I therefore shift the focus from groups to categories, and from categories to processes of categorization. I show that this analytical distinction between categorization by others and self-categorization can clarify an ambiguity in dominant debates in contemporary multiculturalism. I conclude by indicating how injustices, commonly associated with multiculturalism, can better be understood as socially generated injustices, and how government should deal with these injustices.

THE SOCIAL MECHANISM APPROACH

The social mechanism approach is a methodology that emerged in reaction to the frustration about the unfruitfulness of the quest for universal laws in social sciences.[7] Mechanisms are explanatory devices halfway between description or storytelling and universal laws of the form 'if and only if A then B.' Social mechanisms are explanatory devices that seek to explain the relations between (complexes of) interactions among individuals and aggregate social regularities. The social mechanism approach is a *qualitative* (instead of a quantitative) approach in which one seeks to find an explanation that provides a plausible account of how one phenomenon can be explained as a result of other(s) (Hedström and Swedberg, 1999: 7). Moreover, it is an *analytical* approach: it does not intend to provide a complete historical or anthropological account of social reality as it actually happened – no theory can ever give such an account. Instead, it intentionally aims to present an abstract and intelligibility account of the relation between the explanans and explanandum (Hedström and Swedberg, 1999: 13–14). Elster (1999: 1) gives the example of the effect of an alcoholic environment on children. It is impossible to construct a general law of what becomes of the child of an alcoholic. He or she might turn into an alcoholic, or, quite the opposite, a teetotaler. Here the mechanism approach can be helpful: we can we can think of very plausible explanations for both reactions.[8]

Virtually no single phenomenon in the social sciences can be explained in terms of general or universal laws – including the genesis of cultural

groups. Jon Elster and others have emphasized the usefulness of social mechanisms for the explanation of such complex psychological and social phenomena (Elster, 1999: 32). I will explain the genesis and existence of cultural groups in terms of *transformative mechanisms:* mechanisms that explain the emergence and existence of social phenomena on a macro scale as the aggregated results of individual behavior on a micro scale (Hedström and Swedberg, 1999: 21). In general, such social phenomena cannot be explained in terms of one single mechanism, but, instead, need to be explained by a combination of several elementary mechanisms (Hedström and Swedberg, 1999: 21, 24; Elster, 1999: 6).[9] In this article I will explain the genesis of cultural groups as a result of (the interactions between) three elementary mechanisms: inscription, ascription and community-building.

SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION, CULTURAL GROUPS, AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

In this section I conceptualize the genesis and existence of cultural groups and cultural difference in terms of cognitive and social processes of categorization. Although one may not expect it at first sight, the act of categorization and the use of categories play an important role in day-to-day life. The world consists of an infinite number of objects and differences and similarities between them, and without the ability to categorize, 'we could not function at all, either in the physical world or in our social and intellectual lives' (Lakoff, 1987: 5–6).[10] Jerome Bruner concludes that:

> There is, perhaps, one universal truth about all forms of human cognition: the ability to deal with knowledge is hugely exceeded by the potential knowledge contained in man's environment. To cope with this diversity, man's perception, his memory, and his thought processes early become governed by strategies for protecting his limited capacities from the confusion of overloading. (1979[1962]: 65)

Knowledge about one's environment is the result of (mentally) organizing it in categories.[11] Animals, for example, are categorized in species: mammals, reptiles, amphibians, etc. Survival in the forest may depend upon a correct categorization of animals into classes such as 'dangerous' and 'innocent.' Categorization can be defined as the ordering or arrangement of objects into groups or sets on the basis of their observable or inferred relationships (Sokal, 1974: 1116). The purpose of categorization is to reduce the infinity of possible differences to workable proportions, while maintaining relevant discriminations between classes (Rosch, 1978: 29; Starr, 1992: 159). All kinds of things and situations can be and are actually categorized and classified in this way. For the purpose of this article, I will

concentrate on the categorization of persons – as distinguished from the categorization of animals, material goods, situations, etc. A *category*, then, is a set of individuals that are considered equivalent on a specific attribute. An *attribute* is a feature that is (seen as) uniform among the individuals in the category, for example, occupation, skin color, sex, etc. An attribute can be invariable, e.g. eye color, date of birth, ethnic origin; or variable, e.g. favorite film, shoe color, weight. It can be the result of a choice, e.g., the membership of a football club; or unchosen, e.g., being part of a family. During processes of categorization the emphasis shifts from individuals – manifesting a multitude of characteristics – to categories – individuals pigeonholed in distinguished classes (Minow, 1990: 53). Rogers Brubaker concludes from research in cognitive anthropology and social psychology that our overall mental architecture is such that we find such social categories 'easy to think':

> The evidence suggests that some common sense social categories – and especially ethnic and racial categories – tend to be essentializing and naturalizing. They are the vehicles of what has been called a 'participants' primordialism' or a 'psychological essentialism'. (Brubaker, 2002: 165–6)

Although categorization is a cognitive process, it is not necessarily an idiosyncratic process. Individuals can invent innumerous categories, some important for their personal or professional life, others totally random, such as the subcategory of persons that I admire: those who ran a marathon *and* read Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* from cover to cover. Other categories are not idiosyncratic at all; instead, they are *social categories*, used generally in society: women, Catholics, Muslims, Pakistanis, philosophers, gays, and so forth.

Social categories obtain their own meaning by the stereotypical generalizations about the persons within such a category: Canadians are polite, women prefer motherhood above a career and blacks are lazy. Like categories, such stereotypes are cognitive devices that, by relying on categories, help us to make faster and more efficient perceptions, inference and decision-making. The term 'stereotype' is used here in the non-pejorative form and refers to the beliefs or expectations about the qualities and characteristics of specific social categories (Nelson et al., 1996: 14). These generalizations are assumed to apply to all members of the category. Such stereotypes are very influential because of the human tendency to infer strong interferences from surface similarities: 'our thinking about social categories gives disproportional strength to category differences correlated with physical appearance' (Rothbart and Taylor, 1992: 26–32, quote on 26). Categorizations and generalizations are thus two sides of the same coin: categories are known by their generalized labels, and generalizations enable us to distinguish a specific social category from others. The generalizations reinforce the differences between the different categories.

Based on this account of categories, I propose to define cultural groups in terms of categories:

- A cultural group is a set of individuals who are categorized by an individual attribute.
- In society, this category of individuals is recognized as distinguished from people in general because of their actual or inferred characteristics: beliefs, attitudes, practices, or modes of behavior.
- These beliefs, attitudes, practices, and modes of behavior are generally attributed to individual members of the set.

The shared attribute is not only described in its capacity as a tool to *categorize* individuals, but also as a tool to make *generalizations* about these individuals within the category. This approach enables us to understand cultural groups, as discussed in normative debates in multiculturalism, within the terminology of social categorization. They can be seen as sets of individuals that are considered equivalent on a specific attribute. Consider Table 1 that gives a tentative list and can be supplemented with other attributes, e.g. age or occupation and the related cultural groups.[12] Notice that all citizens in a relevant society can be categorized according to all the attributes as enumerated in the table. Moreover, it is not by default the case that categories coagulate. For example, the well-known category of 'Wasps' is more heterogeneous than generally assumed: not everyone who has a western lifestyle is also European–American and protestant.

Cultural difference is thus not only embedded in individual cognition, but also in the basic structure of society. We can distinguish idiosyncratic categories from social categories in the sense that the latter are social

Table 1 Attributes and their related social categories

Attribute	Examples of related social categories
Comprehensive lifestyles	Western, Amish, Native, Hutterites
Ethnicity	European-Americans, African Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos (in the USA)
Religion	Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, Atheists
Gender	Males, females
Language	English, French, indigenous languages (in Canada)
Sexual orientation	heterosexuals, gays, lesbians, bisexuals

phenomena and the result of social processes: well-established and frequently occurring patterns of behavior in society. The effects of such social processes, e.g. the social construction of categorical differences between cultural groups, cannot be reduced to discernable individuals and their considerations and preferences. Instead, they must be understood as the aggregated and accumulated result of social interactions guided by cultural beliefs: norms and conventions emphasizing 'accepted' and 'deviant' behavior for individuals in general and sub-categories thereof. These conventions and norms are passed on to new members of the society by processes of socialization before the age of reason, and over time become internalized. Categories and stereotypes can therefore be seen as non-conscious or unconscious cognitive devices. Research in cognitive social psychology has shown that individuals inevitably rely to some extent on stereotypes when making judgments (Nelson et al., 1996).

Over time, the whole of crosscutting social categories has crystallized into a social structure. The social structure is the way in which social life is organized into predictable relationships and patterns of social interaction, and includes distinctions between social categories (e.g. between men and women, and categorizations along ethnic lines), the socially generated role differentiations, and status differentiations between categories. The social norms and conventions, patterns of behavior and interaction, social categories, and social structures can be separated analytically; however, they stand in a dialectical relation towards another (cf. Bader, 1995: 94–5). Their relations are mutually reconfirming: norms direct patterns of behavior, while the existence of these behavioral patterns reconfirms the norm. Cultural beliefs structure cultural practices, and cultural practices embody cultural beliefs. The social structure is the result of behavioral patterns, but the structure endorses and strengthens the behavioral patterns and the underlying norms in society.

NEITHER ESSENTIALIST NOR REDUCTIONIST

Cultural difference should thus be interpreted as the result of cognitive and social processes. This approach, focusing on processes of categorization, is neither essentialist, nor reductionist. It is not *essentialist* because cultural difference is seen as the result of sociality, social cooperation, and inter-action. Describing cultural difference in terms of social categories is not ex post identifying phenomena that were already (essentially) there, for example as a natural fact. Cultural diversity can only be acknowledged after social categories have been 'constructed,' mentally and socially. For as much as culture is reified, this reification process does not take place in the phase of theory building; instead, this reification is a social process: cultural

difference is the result of social processes of categorization that are reconfirmed and reified over time (cf. Brubaker, 2002: 166).

Moreover, it does not *compartmentalize* a multicultural society. A multicultural society is not neatly sub-divided into a certain number of sharply bordered and mutually exclusive groups; it is not a 'multichrome mosaic of monochrome cultural blocks' (Brubaker, 2002: 164). Instead, Table 1 shows that cultural difference is a whole range of crosscutting and overlapping cleavages. Describing cultural difference in terms of historical processes of social categorization makes clear that the basic structure is not a univocal essence. Instead, different societies are structured differently, and the basic structure can change over time. Different countries have different historical backgrounds, and thus different dominant categorization processes. The Canadian history with Inuit peoples scattered around the country and Anglophone and Francophone immigrants is very different from the US history dominated by slavery and racial conflict, the British, dominated by colonization, or the European countries in general and their (former) guest workers. As a result, the multicultural composition of different countries is dissimilar and their dominant multicultural debates differ in character. Finally, the basic structure can change over time. Noel Ignatiev (1995) describes in his *How the Irish Became White* how the first wave of catholic Irish immigrants in the USA around 1840 were first seen as a distinct race – comparable to African Americans – but were, over time, 'accepted' as whites.

On the other hand, the fact that cultural groups and cultural difference are not 'essences' but socially constructed regularities does not make them superficial or perishable either. Categories always emerge for a reason. Some reasons are personal and idiosyncratic – my marathon/Parfit category – others are generally shared in society. Certain attributes, the related social categories, and the resulting generalizations and categorical distinctions are deemed to be important, and are treated as such. Julie Novkov concludes about the development of the concept of 'race' that: 'the choice of characteristics was historically contingent (as thinkers discussing the genesis of race have shown) but once the set characters has become embedded in the Western mind, they became reified as race' (Novkov, 2002: 6). In such cases, labels, even arbitrary ones, are based on social convention, are imbued with deep meaning (Rothbart and Taylor, 1992: 23). In taxonomy, it is generally acknowledged that social categorizations are an expression of a deeper social or symbolic structure in society (Starr, 1992: 157). Thus, the assertion that cultural difference is socially constructed does not imply the reductionist position, claiming that culture is contingent, easily changeable, or merely a theoretical concept (Bader, 2001: 254–5). I emphasized the historical character of this social construction: over time, culture and cultural diversity is 'materialized:' (subconsciously) internalized by individuals and embedded in interactional patterns, the institutional order, and the basic structure of society (Jenkins, 2000; see also Jenkins,

1997: 56). Social categories are interwoven in the fabric of society and state. We do not ordinarily think *about* nor act *upon* the categories of social life; instead, we act and think *within* them (Starr, 1992: 155).

However, since social processes are so imperceptible, their results – the socially constructed categories – appear to us as if they were always there as 'brute facts:' independent entities with their own meaning in social interaction. As Paul Starr argues:

> Social classifications take on a life of their own apart from the claims initially advanced with them. They become diffused and standardized, even on an international scale. This diffusion may obscure their origins and make them appear to be objective, natural, and self-evident. (Starr, 1992: 176)

For individuals, using these categories does not need to be a conscious act. Instead, categories are embedded in habit and institutions and using categories is internalized and usually subconscious. Since they are internalized, social categories appear to be independent 'things,' disconnected from the social processes that generated them. For example: racial categories in the USA were once developed to distinguish slaves from (free) persons.[13] Although the official racial classification was abandoned some 140 years ago, such categories are still manifest. Martin Gilens concludes that racial generalizations are still very much present in contemporary American society. 'In particular, the centuries-old stereotype of blacks as lazy remains credible for large numbers of White Americans.' This stereotype grew out of, and was used to defend, slavery and it has been perpetuated over the years by the continuing economic disparities between black and white Americans (Gilens, 1999: 3).

A final advantage of this conceptualization is that it enables us to bridge the distinction between the socially situated self and unencumbered self (Sandel, 1984) or to distinguish 'structure' form 'agency' (Bader, 2001: 260–4). For the individuals involved, the 'constructed' character of the social structure must be taken as a given. Membership of a social group has the character of 'thrownness:' one finds oneself a member of a group, whose existence and relations one experiences as always having been (cf. Young, 1989: 260). At the same time, a person's agency implies that he or she can identify with one or more of these cultural groups. For example, a woman could choose to neglect her female identity because her lesbian identity or black identity is much more important to her. Moreover, the crosscutting character of the social structure can result in conflicting identities, e.g. being a Catholic feminist. At the same time, someone's agency enables him or her to make choices to resolve these internal conflicts. As such, this approach provides an exit option from the classic dichotomy between the socially situated self and unencumbered self. Regardless of the structure they live in, persons always have agency to influence their destiny, but, at the same time, it is limited. Someone cannot escape being socially categorized and

labeled as a woman, or as a person of color, simply because these categorical distinctions are embedded in the social structure. Gender inequality results from the clash of stereotypes and norms associated with masculinity and femininity. The distinctions between cultural groups are 'produced' and 'organized' by a history distinguishing between social categories, based on labeling and stereotyping. In this sense, cultural groups work as a pre-reflective background. This explains the elusive character of these distinctions within social structures.

SELF-CATEGORIZATION AND CATEGORIZATION BY OTHERS

Up to now, I have conceptualized cultural groups and cultural difference in terms of cognitive and social processes of categorization. In the following sections I will distinguish two different types thereof: self-categorization and categorization by others.[14] The description in the following sections is an ideal-typical and analytic sketch of these separate processes as basic mechanisms (cf. 'The 'Social mechanism approach' earlier). Such a separate presentation is an analytical separation of the indivisible, useful for heuristic purposes. In 'From basic mechanisms to an integrated explanation' later, I will give some examples of how actual social categories can be described in terms of (combinations of) these social processes.

Categorization by others: Ascription

Categorization by others is a form of categorization that is caused by processes of ascription. *Ascription* is the attribution by outsiders of certain characteristics, behavior, and beliefs to a social collective of individuals who share a certain attribute. As a result of processes of ascription, individuals who share a certain attribute are categorized in specific categories. Those who wear glasses are seen as intellectual; blond, pretty girls are seen as dumb. Italians are assumed to be romantic and passionate, while the Dutch are assumed to be rational and standoffish, etc. The emergence of social groups can also be understood in terms of ascription. The best example is the situation of African Americans. They do not necessarily share specific common cultural beliefs, norms, or values. Instead, African American people display the same range of conceptions of the good life as the rest of society. There are left-wing African Americans and right-wing African Americans; religious African Americans and atheist African Americans; gay African Americans and heterosexual African Americans. Still, the category of African Americans has a different position in a social structure – especially in the USA – which can be explained by social processes of

ascription. Americans often have different stereotypical images of different ethnic groups. Asian Americans are regarded as productive, hard-working, and obedient. African Americans are regarded as good at sports and music, but less suitable and reliable as employees (Gilens, 1999: Chapter 6). These categorical differences are the result of social processes: generations of implicit and explicit generalizations, stereotyping, etc. These influence chances of individual Asian Americans and African Americans, regardless of their individual skills and attitudes. Processes of ascription definitely influence an individual's situation: all African Americans face certain barriers in their everyday lives that members of other social categories do not face. They do not necessarily identify themselves with the attribute, the category, or the expected norms or behavior. Nevertheless, generally speaking, they are categorized into these social categories.

Self-categorization: Inscription and community-building

Self-categorization is a form of categorization in which certain beliefs, characteristics, and behavior are passed on to new members of social collectives by socialization and enculturation before the age of reason. Sometimes this process occurs imperceptibly and implicitly. This process could be called *inscription*. Inscription is the process in which social norms and expectations are transferred to children through socialization and enculturation in the family, peer groups, and school. For the person involved, inscription implies the internalizing of the shared beliefs on distinctions between social categories. *Shared community-building* refers explicitly to self-categorization of social collectives around a shared sense of belonging. Examples are certain religious or linguistic communities within society, e.g. Muslims or the Québécois. Such cultural communities share a conception of the good life or a native language that distinguishes them from others. Newborn members are introduced into and socialized within such communities. This shared community-building is strongly dependent on inscription: this is the way in which the concept of a good life is passed on to the newborn members. Members of religious minority groups associate with each other precisely because they share cultural beliefs, which differ from the larger society. Members of the larger society have no interest in or desire to act upon these beliefs, since they do not share and sometimes even do not accept them.

From basic mechanisms to an integrated explanation

I have described the two basic mechanisms of categorization in their ideal-typical appearance: self-categorization (inscription and community-building) and categorization by others (ascription). Analytically these processes can be neatly separated, and such an analytical division is helpful

for our understanding of the basic mechanisms in themselves. After all, only by abstracting from the complexities of the real world can we devise a conceptual schema that can illuminate it. However, actual cultural groups will never be the exclusive result of one of these processes. Cultural groups as discussed in contemporary multiculturalism (see Table 1) are social categories, resulting from combinations of these social processes: ascription, inscription, and community-building. For a descriptive analysis, it is not relevant which of the processes has been dominant for a specific cultural group. Sometimes community-building dominates: certain communities emphasize certain practices as essential to the culture and its survival: rituals, religious rites, religious prescriptions, initiation rituals, etc. Sometimes the ascription component is more forceful: for centuries it was thought that women did not have the intellectual capacities to satisfy the demands of citizenship – they did not have the right to vote – or to an intellectual job – they were not admitted to university.

At the same time we can see that the three processes interact. African Americans in the USA, for example, were described as an example of the process of *ascription*. But there are also *inscriptive* tendencies: that the racial stereotypes also affect the self-image of blacks (Gilens, 1999). A striking example is the emergence of *GangstaRap*, a term describing a certain type of music and related scene, mainly performed by African Americans. The distinguishing feature of GangstaRap is the use of images of criminal behavior. Both the music and the performing of it play with the images of African Americans as criminals, gang members, and ghetto-dwellers. In this way, black rappers like Snoop-doggy-dog co-opt an image or stereotype for their own purposes, taking control of the image, and transforming it into a positive image and a source of pride. By satirizing and exaggerating the negative images of African Americans, GangstaRap turns an *ascribed* negative image into an *inscribed* token of pride. We can also find more positive interpretations of the black self-imaging (Jenkins, 2000: 13), for example the clothing brand 'FUBU' (For Us By Us). This company was set up by couple of young blacks, selling jeans made by young black designers and marketing those items that are popular within black culture. After finding it difficult to market their clothing through traditional advertising channels, FUBU succeeded in promoting its products by using black celebrities and hip hop artists. However, shared *community-building* does not seem to be the main distinguishing characteristic for blacks as a category.[15] Although some Afrocentrists claim blacks to be a cultural community, shared around the value of Kwanza or other aspects of the African heritage, this seem to be a marginal movement. The social category of Muslims is clearly associated with community-building, based on processes of inscription. The shared ideas of the good life that distinguish this cultural community form from others are passed from one generation to the next through socialization. However, especially in the aftermath of

the September 11 events, we can encounter clear ascriptive processes with evident negative results for individual Muslims.

To conclude: so far I have used the social mechanism approach to explain the genesis of cultural groups and cultural difference. I have given a qualitative and analytical description of three processes of social categorization as basic mechanisms: ascription, inscription, and community-building. Analytically these processes can be neatly separated. However, actual cultural groups are the result of interactions between ascription, inscription and community-building; no actual cultural group in society is exclusively caused by one of them alone. For a descriptive analysis it does not really matter which of these processes is dominant. The distinction between them therefore indicates a difference of emphasis, rather than of kind. However, the distinction between self-categorization and categorization by others is relevant for a normative analysis.

NORMATIVE DEBATES IN MULTICULTURALISM

We can use this description to clarify an ambiguity in contemporary normative debates on cultural difference. Although the term 'multiculturalism' suggests a singularity in the debate, we can clearly distinguish two different kinds of normative claims (Kymlicka, 2002: 330–1). Some social categories, let's call them social groups, mainly (not solely) prefer to integrate in mainstream society, but feel wrongly excluded because of their sex, sexual preference, skin color, etc. Other categories, let's call these *cultural communities*, differ significantly from mainstream society because of their different conception of the good life (e.g. religious minorities such as the Muslims in western societies) or the language they speak (e.g. the Québécois in Canada). They mainly (not solely) prefer to maintain the distinction between them and mainstream society to preserve their distinct collective identity: religion and its practices, a distinct language, etc. To oversimplify, we could say the former claims are mainly discussed in debates in the USA (e.g. by Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser), whereas the second category of claims dominate the Canadian debate (e.g. Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor).

Although both claims are put forward as multicultural claims, they seem to contradict: social groups prefer to integrate in the wider society, while cultural communities prefer to preserve their distinct collective identity. This section discusses them separately and shows that the distinction between categorization by others and self-categorization enables us to deal with these apparently contradictory claims.[16]

Distinguishing social groups from cultural communities

Although the distinction is not strictly categorical, the two normative claims can be associated with distinct social categories and distinct processes of categorization. The claim of integration is mainly voiced by social groups, which are mainly the result of processes of ascription. The claim of preservation of distinction is mainly voiced by cultural communities for which inscription and community-building are dominant.

Cultural communities are different from social groups in three respects: identity, social structure, and interdependence. The *identity* criterion refers to the collective awareness of the members of a cultural community as a distinct social entity; they perceive and define themselves as a community that shares a common identity. The criterion of *social structure* refers to the stabilized and organized relations between members. Moreover, a system of role and status differentiations exists and relations within such cultural communities are regulated by shared social norms and values that prescribe beliefs, attitudes and conduct in matters relevant to the group. The *interdependent* criterion implies that members should be positively interdependent in some way (Turner, 1987: 19–21). The transition of a social category to a cultural community implies a 'virtually organic moment' that occurs after the creation of a shared character 'strong enough to define a meaningful aspect of each individual member's social identity' (Mitnick, 2000: 191). As such, culture 'materializes' and becomes incorporated in cultural practices (Bader, 1995: 95; 2001: 257).

This implies that we have to distinguish 'looser' social groups from more 'close knit' cultural communities. Indeed, social groups like 'women' or 'African Americans' cannot be described as communities in this understanding: women as a category do not have a shared social structure; not all African Americans are positively interdependent upon one another. Processes of ascription do not result in cultural communities, since the persons involved do not share distinctive cultural beliefs or cultural practices; their main shared interest is to fight hegemonic norms. As Bader argues, 'people which are exploited, dominated, excluded or marginalized on the basis of ascribed criteria protest against these practices without developing a common cultural identity or a new common culture' (2001: 261). Of course, in society we find associations which manifest themselves in the name of these cultural groups: women are organized in feminist groups; Some Afrocentrists emphasize Kwanza as a shared identity-providing aspect of the African heritage. However, it is important in our conceptualization of cultural groups to distinguish social groups from these self-organized interest groups (cf. Brubaker, 2002: 166–7). Linguistic and religious communities, on the other hand satisfy the three conditions of cultural communities.

Of course, this reduction of the variety of cultural groups into two

categories might not do justice to the rich diversity of actual cultural differences. But this is also not my primary aim in this section. Instead of focusing on the social groups and cultural communities themselves, in the normative debate I will emphasize the two relevant social processes generating them.[17] How do processes of categorization by others and self-categorization affect the situation of individuals?

A normative analysis of ascription

Processes of ascription result in social groups that would like to integrate in mainstream society, but feel wrongly excluded because of their sex, sexual preference, skin color, or other 'ascribed characteristics that historically served as markers of inferiority and exclusion' (Young, 2001: 4). The color of one's skin or one's gender does not *in itself* determine someone's life inescapably, in contrast to the inability to see, which does. What does distinguish being black from being white is the 'web of socially generated expectations' in society. Institutional patterns of cultural value and labels of deviance constitute some social categories as 'inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible' (Fraser, 2002: 24). Specific attributes such as gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, etc., generate social categories whose membership is not chosen deliberately.

As *individuals*, persons experience the effects of processes of ascription because they are not judged on their individual character and behavior, but on their membership in a category. The problem with such stereotypes is that they encourage overgeneralized expectations: the ascription of specific qualities and characteristics only by virtue of his or her category membership. Earlier, I discussed the categorical distinctions between Asian Americans and African Americans. Let me elaborate here the example of women on the labor market. The ascribed part of gender inequality on the labor market can be explained in terms of statistical discrimination (Robeyns, 2001: 93). Statistical discrimination of women occurs when employers base their decisions on information about categories (here men and women), instead of using individuated information about specific applicants. If such an employer relies on categorical information, he or she will assume that a specific candidate has the average characteristics (and hence productivity) of the individuals in her category (women). When employers believe that women are less productive than men – in our societies women usually bear more responsibility for housekeeping and the care of children and the elderly – it is rational for an employer to discriminate against an individual woman. This is true even if this particular woman does not share the characteristics with the other women, for example because she prioritizes a career above children. Still, the characteristics of the average woman are *ascribed* to this person. She is not treated as a person with individual

characteristics, plans and preferences. On the contrary, she is treated as the average woman, locked into her category. These generalized expectations affect all members of a category, regardless of their individual character or preferences.

As *a category*, they feel wrongly excluded by mainstream culture and argue that society ignores diversity, because it is exclusively or mainly based on hegemonic norms, related to the financially independent heterosexual white male. Members of these categories would prefer to integrate in the larger society and inclusion in society's mainstream institutions, but want to renegotiate the basic rules. Gays and lesbians cannot participate as full members in a societal culture that sees them as inferior, and treats them as less worthy of concern or respect. Therefore they propose a range of policies and rights that undermine hegemonic norms and attack the status hierarchy resulting from these norms. For example, Janet Radcliffe-Richards argues for the gender division of labor that:

> If a group is kept out of something for long enough, it is overwhelmingly likely that activities of that sort will develop in a way unsuited to the excluded group. We know for certain that women have been kept out of many kinds of work, and this means that the work is quite likely to be unsuited to them. The most obvious example of this is the incompatibility of most work with the bearing and raising of children; I am firmly convinced that if women had been fully involved in the running of society from the start they would have *found* a way of arranging work and children to fit each other. Men have had no such motivations, and we can see the results. (Radcliffe-Richards, 1980: 113–14, as quoted in Kymlicka, 2002: 381)

Historic examples of such policies are the abolishment of the slavery system and opening the vote for women. Actual discussions concern affirmative action, opening up marriage for same-sex couples, or fighting barriers that formally or practically hamper the combination of work and parenthood.

A normative analysis of inscription and community-building

Processes of community-building result in cultural communities that differ significantly from mainstream society on one issue or a related set of issues, e.g. conception of the good life (religious minorities, e.g. Muslims in western societies, ethno-religious groups such as the Amish), or native language (Québécois in Canada). They mainly (not solely) prefer to maintain that difference between them and mainstream society to maintain their distinct religion and its practices, or the distinct language. Members associate to celebrate their shared beliefs and practices. Since these beliefs and practices are not shared by members of the larger society, cultural communities seek protection of their distinct cultural heritage and cultural practices via cultural rights.

How should government deal with these preferences of minority cultures? The default liberal answer is that government should be neutral to different ideas about the good life, and should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued (Kymlicka, 1989: 883; Hampton, 1996: 173). This neutrality is usually interpreted as a doctrine of restraint: government should take a 'hands-off' approach towards (collective expressions of) these differential conceptions of the good life, for example religious and linguistic groups. However, critiques argue that the basic structure of society is not a neutral framework but, due to nation-building processes, is 'hegemonically biased.' The fact that in the western world weekends do not include Friday shows which days are considered to be the 'normal' days for attending religious gatherings. Muslims who have a full-time job and want to visit the mosque for their customary Friday afternoon prayer have to make special arrangements to do so. The fact that English is the dominant language in Canada is understandable, but does affect Francophones who want to preserve the French-speaking Québécois community.

The fact that hegemonic subcultures had an important moulding effect on the basic structure of any society cannot be changed retrospectively. But it should affect the way we interpret neutrality. The idea of the basic structure of society as a 'neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued' is overtly optimistic, because it is oversimplified. Members of hegemonic subcultures are in an advantaged situation because their practices are ingrained in the basic structure during the nation building process. The Christian feast days are firmly anchored in the Western calendar, unlike the Islamic. For government to be neutral implies having an eye for cultural differences and being aware of the 'hegemonic bias' in its basic structure. Joseph Carens concludes that in these situations a hands-off approach is inadequate and should be replaced by an approach of 'comparable support:'

> Now being fair does not mean that every cultural claim and identity will be given equal weight but rather that each will be given appropriate weight under the circumstances within the framework of a commitment to equal respect for all. History matters, numbers matter, the relative importance of the claims to the claimants matters, and so do many other considerations. (2000: 12–3)

Such an approach would emphasize evenhanded liberal policies, for example exemptions from laws which penalize or burden minority cultural practices, or assistance to cultural communities to do those things the majority can do unassisted.

CONCLUSION

In this article I used the social mechanism approach to explain the genesis of cultural groups and cultural difference. I have given a qualitative and analytical description of three processes of social categorization as basic mechanisms: ascription, inscription and community-building. I thus shifted the emphasis from cultural groups and cultural difference to the social processes that generate and maintain these phenomena. Moreover, I distinguished two such processes – categorization by others and self-categorization – and showed that this separation can clarify an ambiguity in dominant debates in contemporary multiculturalism.

Compared with other theories in the field, this approach has some advantages. For one thing, as argued earlier, the approach is neither essentialist nor reductionist. It conceives cultural groups as results of social processes, instead of seeing them as reified 'things.' It shifts the focus from cultural groups themselves to social practices generating cultural differ-ence, namely cognitive and social processes of categorization. Moreover, this approach offers a single theoretical basis for discussing a broad variety of sources of cultural diversity. Not only are the standard issues in multi-culturalism dealt with – linguistic and religious groups – but also cultural difference related to, for example, ethnicity, gender, and, sexual preference. Therefore, it offers a more subtle description of cultural diversity in contemporary Western liberal democracies than, for example, Kymlicka's distinction between multinationality and polyethnicity.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Although the normative relevance is not accepted unanimously, see Barry (2001). For critiques of Barry's position, see *Ethnicities* 2(2) and the contri-butions to Kelly (2002) and Pierik (2002), among others.
2 In the words of Iris Marion Young: '. . . two categories which are opposing and mutually exclusive' (1997: 50–1). On Kymlicka's conception of societal culture, see Carens (2000: 52–87).
3 For example, Seyla Benhabib argues that Kymlicka's work is based on 'a poor man's anthropology' (1999: 53–4).
4 The anthropological work of Franz Boas in the early twentieth century is generally seen as the turning point from a biological to cultural interpretation of 'race.' See Novkov, 2002: 3.

5 See Jenkins, 1997: 16–24, for a parallel shift in social anthropology from tribes to ethnic groups.

6 Bader sees this radical constructivism as an abstract overreaction against essentialism and cultural determinism (2001: 257–64).

7 For an overview of the social mechanism approach see Elster, 1989: 3–10; 1999: 1–47 and Hedström and Swedberg, 1999.

8 Many examples of social mechanisms have become standard elements in the canon of social science. For example, the prisoner dilemma describes a social mechanism that unintentionally generates suboptimal results as a result of rational behavior of self-interested agents. The market mechanism describes prices, demand and supply in terms of individual economic behavior and the equilibrium between individual production, distribution and consumption. The seminal example of a social mechanism is a self-fulfilling prophecy: a forecast that might be true or untrue, but by the very fact that it is publicly stated, has the effect of bringing about what it claims, thereby making it more 'true' than it would have been without the public articulation. For example, if people think that a bank will go bankrupt, they will massively withdraw their money, and therefore a bank will indeed fail (Merton, 1968: 476–7).

9 Sometimes these basic mechanisms are mutually reinforcing, sometimes they are counteracting.

10 The (mental) processes of categorizing and classification are studied within an academic sub-field called taxonomy, bringing together biologists, linguists, and psychologists. For introductory texts, see: Sokal, 1974, Douglas and Hull, 1992, and Rosch, 1978.

11 'A basic task for all organisms (indeed, one mark of living things) is a segmentation of the environment into classifications by means of which nonidentical stimuli can be treated as equivalent' (Rosch and Lloyd, 1978: 1).

12 Conditional upon one's interpretation of the relevance of different social categories.

13 Eric Mitnick gives an overview of categories of human beings that have been deemed 'non-persons' (2000: 195). For a discussion of the origin of racial classification, see Stuurman, 2000. For a historic overview of the legal constitution of race in the United States, see Haney López, 1996.

14 A similar distinction between 'self-identification' and 'categorization by others' can be found in Jenkins (2000). Jenkins pays more attention to power issues (1997: 52–73; 2000).

15 One could claim that a religious shared community-building was an important cause for the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. However, this has lost its importance nowadays.

16 For an account of the relation between liberal egalitarianism and multiculturalism as two complementary interpretations of the ideal of equality, see (Pierik, 2004).

17 Rogers Brubaker (2002) proposes a similar shift of emphasis from 'groups' to 'groupness.'

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