

# Literature Review

**A**ny system of classification—from the taxonomy of species, to the organization of books in a library, to the stratification of social classes in society—uses boundaries to demarcate categories. In the case of social class, these boundaries exist both physically and conceptually, on the maps of our cities as well as in the minds of our citizens, in the forms of both spatial and symbolic boundaries.

## Spatial Boundaries and Segregation

**E**conomic segregation—the spatial separation of people’s residency by social class—is made possible by the existence of economic inequality. Over the last half century, economic inequality in the United States has risen. Since 1950, the percentage of the total income earned by the lowest fifth of income-earners has decreased, while that earned by the highest fifth has steadily risen (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The poor are becoming poorer; the rich, richer. And the poor are becoming increasingly likely to live in homogenously poor communities; the affluent, in affluent communities (Jargowsky 1996; 1997; Mayer 2001; Massey 1996; Fischer et al. 2004; Fischer 2003; Abramson et al.

1995).<sup>1</sup> Between 1970 and 1990 the number of high-poverty census tracts—that is, the number of tracts characterized by a homogeneously poor population—more than doubled (Jargowsky 1997). As the concentration of poverty increased, so too did the concentration of affluence (Fischer et al. 2004; Coulton et al. 1996; St. John 2002; Massey and Eggers 1993; Blakely and Snyder 1997). The well-to-do are increasingly moving both to specific metropolitan areas across the country and to specific neighborhoods within those areas, thereby sequestering themselves from the rest of the population (Fischer et al. 2004). However, income, is not the only measure of social class by which society is becoming more residentially segregated; segregation by educational attainment is following suit, meaning people without college degrees are less and less likely to have neighbors with them (Domina 2006). So drastic is the current state of class-based residential polarization that Massey (1996) labeled today’s society an “age of extremes.”

Any discussion of economic segregation cannot ignore its pernicious and well-documented sibling, racial segregation (see Logan et al. 2004; Logan et al. 1996; Fischer et al. 2004; Farley 1997; Fischer et al. 2004). Increased income and education levels are not enough for many minority families to integrate into primarily white neighborhoods (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Villemez 1980), indicating the persisting relevance of race irrespective of class. However, there are reasons to focus primarily on economic rather than racial segregation. Most notably, although it is a deeply troubling and enduring problem, racial segregation on the whole is decreasing (Iceland et al. 2002; Glaeser and Vigdor 2001; Fischer

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<sup>1</sup> Different studies tend to use quite different operationalizations of economic segregation, and therefore report that it is increasing to differing degrees. See Kim and Jargowsky (2005) for a discussion of the difficulty of operationalization.

et al. 2004). Economic segregation, on the other hand, continues apace, becoming more and more a fixture in the layout of American cities.

Many explanations have been offered to explain the persistence and growth of economic segregation in the face of fair housing policies, integration projects, and rent subsidies. Many attribute the segregation to limited opportunity structures (Jargowsky 1997; Swanstrom et al. 2002, Hagan and Peterson 1995; Land et al. 1990; Massey and Denton 1993). According to these theories, low-income areas provide few educational or occupational opportunities for residents to raise their socioeconomic status. The children of low-income families are, like their parents, limited by the dearth of opportunity in their neighborhoods, which perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage. Focusing specifically on the role of local economies, Wilson (1987) described the how the gradual transition from an economy centered on urban manufacturing to one of decentralized service pulled jobs out of lower-income areas and furthered their economic and social isolation.

In addition to structural economic explanations, theorists have posited more cultural explanations for the persistence of economic segregation, describing the role of various attitudes held by both the advantaged and the disadvantaged in perpetuating segregation. On the side of the advantaged, cultural explanations stress prejudice and discrimination. The attitudes of people in privileged neighborhoods can be as much of a hurdle as official policies promoting segregation in preventing the integration of neighborhoods (Charles 2000, 2006). Out-migration, or “white flight,” describes the pattern of middle-class whites moving to new neighborhoods when minority families begin moving into their

former neighborhoods. Though this concept originated in the context of racial segregation, the idea of out-migration can be applied to economic segregation as well. Once lower-status families are able to afford homes in a higher-status neighborhood, those families financially able to are likely to move to an even higher-status neighborhood, in part motivated by fear of declining property values (see Perin 1988: 104). Even when individuals reject prejudice in theory, their attitudes towards actual policies in their own neighborhoods are often much more complicated. Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985) found that even though higher levels of education correlated with higher levels of support for hypothetical housing antidiscrimination policies, when it came to specific, actual policies, the correlation became ambiguous, suggesting implicit prejudice even among those who in theory profess acceptance.

Out-migration and discrimination attempt to explain segregation from the standpoint of the privileged. Other cultural explanations, though, are based on the attitudes of inhabitants of poor neighborhoods. Stemming from Lewis' (1966, 1968) culture of poverty theory, these explanations describe a value system in poor communities that is incompatible with conventional paths to material success. While this theory can be misappropriated to blame the disadvantaged for their position, it has also formed the basis of understanding differing cultural norms across communities. Deriving from Lewis' work, Harvey and Reed (1996) emphasize the "adaptive mechanisms" needed to survive in a low-income area in response to structural challenges. These mechanisms, they claim, are needed for basic survival in low-income areas, but are not valued by the privileged class who

controls access to opportunity. In a similar vein, in his well-known ethnography of inner city adolescents, MacLeod (1995) described the difficulty of maintaining aspirations for mainstream material success when confronted by limited opportunities, daily challenges, and the absence of conventional role models. These works suggest an alternate set of values stemming from the adverse external conditions of life in low-income neighborhoods. Though cultural in their content, they arise from the structural conditions of economic segregation. Other theories of class-based cultures and values, though, focus on the internal experience of class identity. Rather than beginning with the structure of segregation, these approaches begin with the conceptual processes of symbolic boundary work as a means of reinforcing class divisions.

## Symbolic Boundaries

Whereas the spatial boundaries of economic segregation are physically present in the layout of neighborhoods, symbolic boundaries can be much harder to detect. These boundaries are “conceptual distinctions” people make in their minds, categorizing “objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont 1992: 9; Lamont and Molnar 2002: 168). Here, borrowing from Lamont (1992: 9) I focus on the “subjective boundaries [people] draw between [themselves] and others.” Symbolic boundaries are tools of inclusion and exclusion, mentally constructed in people’s minds to separate themselves from some people and draw similarities with others. Just as there are different groups between which people can draw boundaries, there are different criteria by which

those boundaries can be drawn. As outlined by Lamont (1992), symbolic boundaries can be divided into three general types: socioeconomic, cultural, and moral.

When people draw socioeconomic boundaries, they divide people by income, wealth, occupational prestige, educational attainment, or other explicit measure of social class. Such explicit boundaries are rare. The hesitancy to tie symbolic boundaries explicitly to class, even when they are drawn along class lines, is in accord with the overwhelming tendency for people to deny the role class background has played in their own lives (see Savage 2000; Devine 1992; Reay 1998a; Reay 1998b; Skeggs 1997; Sayer 2002; Vanneman and Cannon 1987; Coleman and Rainwater 1978). In her interviews with upper-middle-class American men, Lamont (1992: 78–79) found that respondents “almost never referred to class, race, gender, and ethnicity when asked about their feelings of inferiority and superiority” and instead distinguished between classes “indirectly, by mentioning qualities often attributed to specific groups.” Sayer (2005: 93) extended this observation to note that although people are highly sensitive to cues of others’ social status, they often cannot distinguish between types of boundaries, and often attribute socioeconomic differences to other criteria.

One of these criteria is culture, including tastes, preferences, practices, and attitudes. Classifying oneself with others who share a taste for abstract visual art, improvisational jazz, or reality television is a process of cultural boundary work. The idea of culture as a basis for class distinctions has a rich tradition, inspired by Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualization of culture as capital—a resource

of tastes, preferences, or attitudes possessed disproportionately by the dominant class, imbued with symbolic value for that class and therefore able serve as a barrier to entry for the disadvantaged. Although Bourdieu described hierarchically organized cultural tastes in France, a similarly rigid structure does not exist in the contemporary American context. The content of elite culture is constantly in flux (Fuller 2003). According to Holt (1997), how culture is consumed—the mindset with which it is consumed—can be as important as what exactly is being consumed. Along these lines, research has suggested that displaying varied taste and an open mind towards cultural preferences is more important than any particular preference, a trend often described as cultural omnivorousness (Peterson and Kern 1996; Erickson 1996; Holt 1997; Coulangeon and Lemel 2007; Alderson et al. 2007). Omnivorousness, though, need not undermine entirely the role of specific tastes. Examining musical preferences, Bryson (1996) found that although higher status individuals appreciated more types of music, those types they devalued were those most appreciated by lower status individuals, allowing them to appreciate diverse tastes while still excluding particular preferences. Bryson’s project focuses on exclusion—an example of cultural boundaries drawn along class lines.<sup>2</sup>

Cultural boundaries, though, are not the only symbolic boundaries that can reinforce class divisions. Moral boundaries deal with values and personal characteristics such as honesty, selflessness, or integrity, and out of all the types of boundaries described here, are least connected to material wealth or poverty.

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<sup>2</sup> See Lamont and Lareau (1988) for a discussion of the fundamental importance of exclusion to the concept of cultural capital.

However, like cultural boundaries, these boundaries often relate directly to class relations. Like culture, the substance of morality varies across groups; the characteristics valued by one group may be devalued by another (Alexander 1992; Sayer 2005; Swidler 1986). Different schemes of morality, each with different understandings of what is “good,” can be impossible to hierarchilize, meaning different groups can develop different systems, allowing proponents of each to view themselves as morally superior. The working class has been found to give moral boundaries especial significance. Research has suggested that when lacking in economic capital, members of the working class stress morality as a means of maintaining status honor, or a sense of superiority compared to other groups (Lamont et al. 1996; Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005; Pellerin and Stearns 2001). At the same time, there exists a tendency for those in privileged positions to attribute negative moral qualities such as laziness and lack of work ethic to those in less privileged positions (Ehrenreich 1990; Kinder and Sears 1981; Kinder 1986; Sayer 2005). Schwalbe et al. (2000) labeled the mutual denigration of opposing classes “oppressive othering,”

Moral boundaries are drawn not only to exclude others, but also to define insiders. In talking to working-class residents of a Cincinnati suburb, Halperin (1998) noted that they defined themselves largely by shared values of communalism and interdependence, values they did not consider wealthy outsiders to share. Another example of moral values differing between classes was described by Lareau (2003) in her detailed ethnography of working- and upper-middle-class parenting styles. While disadvantaged families were likely to



focus on developing close kinship ties and respect, middle class families valued self-actualization and the fostering of diverse interests. Kusserow (1999) had similar findings in her study of New York City parents, labeling the different values “hard and soft individualism.” These differing parenting styles, and the values connected with them, indicate the distinct moral codes of different classes, upon which strong moral boundaries can be drawn.

## The Intersection of Spatial and Symbolic Boundaries

**S**ymbolic boundaries shape who we consider to be like us and unlike us, who we claim to like and dislike. The spatial boundaries of neighborhood segregation determine who our neighbors are and what our communities look like. The research described above shows the extent to which both spatial and symbolic boundaries are drawn along class lines. Comparatively little research, though, has been done combining the two types of boundaries. What research has been done indicates this is a rich area of inquiry.

A number of European scholars have examined the connection between personal values and housing attributes. Lindberg et al. (1987) interviewed Swedes about both their values and the housing attributes they desire. The study found a correlation between particular housing attributes—such as size, amount of property, level of upkeep, and distance to the countryside—and values such as freedom, comfort, excitement, or harmony. In interviews, respondents often connected the two through a desire for a particular activity. For example, people

who valued excitement stated that they desired plenty of parking in order to host large parties. Similarly, people who valued a healthy lifestyle stated a desire for a large lawn in order to facilitate exercise regimens. More recently, Collen and Hoekstra (2001) conducted a similar study, examining specifically the chains of reasoning by which a small sample of Dutch respondents attached values to housing attributes. Their findings supported Lindberg et al.; respondents made rather direct links between values and attributes. Although these studies are interesting in so far as they demonstrate the process of connecting morality to specific housing attributes, they make no attempt to tie these connections to judgment making or boundary work. In addition, the respondents' socioeconomic backgrounds were ignored, preventing the studies from suggesting anything about class-based values.

Gullestad (1986), another European scholar, did venture into the realm of class differences when he interviewed both working- and upper class individuals about their feelings towards fences, both literal and symbolic, in their Norwegian neighborhoods. Asking people to define themselves against their neighbors, he found that the ways in which people drew boundaries differed by class. He described the boundary work of the working-class as "defending;" they described rather clear criteria for belonging in a neighborhood. The upper class respondents, in contrast, made exclusions on much more vague criteria, on a "wide range of spatial signs" that allowed "a more graded, indirect subtle rejection" (1986: 66). Gullestad's work suggests that both classes use boundaries to include and exclude people from their neighborhoods, but that they determine these boundaries in

different ways. However, his discussion was very limited, focusing only on fences and neighborhood belonging. In addition, due to the Norwegian focus of his analysis, which he ties largely to Norwegian cultural norms, the study has limited applicability in the American context.

While these European scholars included an array of visual cues in their discussion of neighborhoods, another strain of research has focused specifically on the cue of disrepair, stemming from Wilson and Kelling's (1982) "broken windows" theory. According to the logic of this theory, signs of minor disorder, including visual cues such as graffiti, abandoned cars, or broken windows, reflect a disinclination of residents to stop illegal activity, and so therefore passively encourage it (see Greenberg and Rohe 1986; Taylor and Hale 1986). Physical disorder has been correlated to a host of negative neighborhood characteristics, including feelings of powerlessness (Geis and Ross 1998), psychological stress (Hill et al. 2005; Ross 2000; Downey and Van Willigen 2005), mistrust among neighbors (Ross et al. 2001), and lack of perceived safety. This last correlation—between physical signs of disorder and perceived safety—has been documented by a number of projects comparing people's perceptions of disorder with their perceptions of safety and crime (Taylor et al. 1985; Perkins et al. 1992; Skogan 1990; Kelling and Coles 1996). Other findings, though, are contradictory, showing no significant correlation between prevalence of physical disorder and perceived crime (Perkins et al. 1993; see also Taylor 1996). Potentially accounting for this discrepancy, Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) denied a causal relationship between disorder and perceived crime, instead suggesting them both

to be the result of overarching structural disadvantage. Bringing prejudice into the work on disorder, Sampson and Raudenbush (2004) correlated perceived disorder to actual disorder, finding that minority and low-income areas were more likely to be perceived as in disorder, regardless of actual observed signs of disorder. In the context of this project, it is important to note that the visual cues used to identify physical disorder in these studies tend to be extreme and often directly related to illegal activity—things like prostitution, graffiti, and drug paraphernalia—instead of more minor signs of disrepair of individual homes (see Sampson and Raudenbush 1999: 608). In addition, these studies focus exclusively on cues of disorder, rather than neighborhood appearance broadly defined, and examine perceptions of specific variables, like safety or trust, rather than asking respondents to attach their own meanings to visual cues.

Whereas studies of physical disorder have centered on neighborhood appearance, a number of relevant ethnographies have focused instead on the interpersonal components of communities. Perin (1988) interviewed residents of neighborhoods across the country, exploring, among other things, how a sense of belonging is developed in a neighborhood. Talking primarily to middle-class homeowners, she described fences, hedges, and gates as having symbolic significance, protecting privacy and demarcating who is and is not family. In developing a sense belonging to a community, unspoken cultural norms were as important as any physical markers. Described as “magic circles,” these social norms include things like party etiquette or talking during carpool. Making entry into a neighborhood extremely difficult, these norms provide an example of

cultural codes unique to specific neighborhoods. Perin's analysis shows the importance neighborhood—both physically and immaterially—has in creating boundaries. Her focus, though, is more on drawing boundaries within a neighborhood—between friends and family, adults and children, humans and dogs—than on boundaries between neighborhoods or classes. Furthermore, her concentration solely on the professional middle class prevents a class-based comparison.

Like Perin, Baumgartner (1988) focused primarily on the middle class in her analysis of how moral order is maintained in a New York City suburb. Talking to residents and observing their actions, she concluded that residents highly valued their privacy, preferring to avoid conflict rather than address any perceived moral shortcomings of their neighbors. Though highlighting the existence of a “moral order” in suburban communities, Baumgartner did not question the construction of moral codes as much as the process of maintaining them.

In contrast to Perin and Baumgartner's middle-class focus, Halperin (1998) spent six years conducting ethnographic research of the working-class residents of the East End near Cincinnati, Ohio, examining how they create and talk about community. One of the most salient features she uncovered was the sense of support and interdependence. “A real East Ender will take a lesser job, quit a job, or drop out of school before denying help or money to family and community members who need support,” she notes (1998: 2). Halperin considers the discourse of community to be an important way in which the working-class

maintains a strong identity in the face of economic development and the entry of higher-status institutions into the area. The distinct and class-based culture of the community is a way “to control and maintain the community’s identity and autonomy” (1998: 44). Halperin’s deep and nuanced research shows the symbolic importance of a neighborhood in its residents’ construction of boundaries regarding to whom they are similar and to whom they are dissimilar. The study, though, does not connect these boundaries to the physical appearance of homes and neighborhoods. In addition, by focusing so rigorously on how residents define themselves as a community and build their own identities, Halperin leaves out an analysis of how they see others’ neighborhoods. Lastly, like Perin and Baumgartner, Halperin remains focused on only one class, again preventing a comparison.

The previously neglected connection between symbolic boundary work and neighborhood physical appearance was made by Maria Kefalas (2003) in her study of the working-class Beltway neighborhood of Chicago. Her project examines how moral boundaries are constructed from neighborhood upkeep and appearance, or, in her words, how “the neighborhood symbolizes everything its working-class residents value—hard work, honesty, patriotism, and respectability” (2003: 5). Interviewing residents of the neighborhood, she described how they use meticulous and orderly upkeep as a visual manifestation of their felt moral distance from nearby lower-status neighborhoods. The members of the Beltway display their honesty and respectability through their homes, through clean-cut lawns and waving flags. Those who did not were seen

as lazy, dishonest, or disrespectful. The framework provided by Kefalas—that the physical neighborhood is a symbolically significant place in the construction of boundaries—is an important component of this project. Kefalas’ work, though, has several limitations that this project hopes to address. Her project is highly defined by circumstantial specifics; it centers on how one neighborhood comprised of one class distances itself from a particular lower-status class. The result is a rich but limited portrayal. This project attempts to extend the framework, to include boundaries drawn by and between both working-class and upper-middle-class homeowners.

Perhaps the study best approximates a comparative examination of the role of neighborhood appearance in constructing moral boundaries was Southerton’s (2001) examination of various communities within a British town. He talked to men and women in working class, lower middle class, and upper-middle-class<sup>3</sup> neighborhoods about the economic, cultural, and moral distinctions they draw between “us” and “them.” For the working class, moral boundaries were strongest, with respondents in this neighborhood describing themselves as down-to-earth, average, honest people. The lower-middle class centered much of their discussion on neighborhoods, describing how everyone in their neighborhood obeys cultural customs regarding upkeep and style, as compared to lower or higher status neighborhoods. Southerton found less consensus among the upper-middle class, though they generally distinguished themselves through refined cultural tastes, with morality playing hardly any role. Though a small sample size

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<sup>3</sup> These categorizations were not provided by the author, but made based on his descriptions of each neighborhood and its resources.

and focus on one town limits the generalizability of results, and the British context cannot necessarily speak to American trends, Southerton's study highlights the ways in which neighborhoods can serve as a spatial representation of moral and cultural boundaries across classes. People in each neighborhood clustered themselves with other people in their neighborhood, and defined themselves against those in other neighborhoods. In his conclusion, Southerton notes how strikingly his respondents connected their moral distinctions to particular neighborhoods, what he calls "consistent use of local housing status divisions as a reference point for the identification of...social categories" (2001: 191). His study, however, does not examine neighborhood characteristics themselves as significant in the construction of boundaries. Instead, it examines boundaries drawn from any criteria, one of which happened to be, for some respondents, neighborhood appearance. The morals and cultural tastes discussed by respondents are not connected to the neighborhoods themselves; neighborhoods provide a framework within which to discuss other differences. The exception to this is the lower-middle-class respondents, who commented on the tendencies of people in their neighborhood to respect cultural norms through the upkeep of their homes. The patterns of this subsample suggest the need for a more specified examination of the connections between home and neighborhood appearance and cultural, moral, and economic boundary making.

Taken together, the work that has been done on the connection between housing and neighborhood appearance and the construction of symbolic boundaries makes powerful suggestions, and provokes further questions. The



previous research suggests that people attach symbolic significance to the appearance of homes and neighborhoods, and that they construct class-based boundaries to distinguish themselves conceptually from those of other classes, in parallel with the spatial boundaries of economic segregation. This project offers a systematic study of whether and how people use home and neighborhood appearance in the construction of class-based moral boundaries, by addressing the following questions:

- 1. What values or moral qualities do people consider to define a good neighborhood? Do these definitions differ depending on people's social class?*

Past research provides examples of differing values among people of different classes, from their definitions of success (Lamont 1992, 2000; Sayer 2005) to the values with which they approach parenting (Lareau 2003, Kusserow 2004). Based on these findings, I expect the moral qualities that people of opposing classes feel define a good neighborhood to likewise differ.

- 2. What visual cues or signals are attached to these values or qualities? How do these differ by social class?*

I expect people to tie specific visual attributes of homes and neighborhoods to particular values and normative conclusions, based on Lindbergh et al.'s (1987) and Collen and Hoekstra's (2001) interviews revealing that people link the housing attributes they desire to their values,

and Kefalas' (2003) and Southerton's (2001) evidence of the symbolic significance of neighborhood in the construction of boundaries.

*3. Do people tie these values or visual cues to specific classes? If so, are they used to draw moral boundaries and to reinforce class boundaries?*

Given the tendency of individuals to believe themselves morally superior compared to those in opposing classes, I expect them to likewise consider their neighborhoods morally superior, reinforcing the spatial boundaries of economic segregation and perpetuating both the physical separation and conceptual antagonism that characterize class relations today.