

**From Heterogeneities to Inequalities:
Looking at Social Mechanisms as an
Explanatory Approach to the
Generation of Social Inequalities**

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DFG Research Center (SFB) “From Heterogeneities to Inequalities”

Whether fat or thin, male or female, young or old – people are different. Alongside their physical features, they also differ in terms of nationality and ethnicity; in their cultural preferences, lifestyles, attitudes, orientations, and philosophies; in their competencies, qualifications, and traits; and in their professions. But how do such heterogeneities lead to social inequalities? What are the social mechanisms that underlie this process? These are the questions pursued by the new DFG Research Center (SFB) “From Heterogeneities to Inequalities” at Bielefeld University, which was approved by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as “SFB 882” on May 25, 2011.

In the social sciences, research on inequality is dispersed across different research fields such as education, the labor market, equality, migration, health, or gender. One goal of the SFB is to integrate these fields, searching for common mechanisms in the emergence of inequality that can be compiled into a typology. More than fifty senior and junior researchers and the Bielefeld University Library are involved in the SFB. Along with sociologists, it brings together scholars from the Bielefeld University faculties of Business Administration and Economics, Educational Science, Health Science, and Law, as well as from the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) in Berlin and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. In addition to carrying out research, the SFB is concerned to nurture new academic talent, and therefore provides doctoral training in its own integrated Research Training Group. A data infrastructure project has also been launched to archive, prepare, and disseminate the data gathered.

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From Heterogeneities to Inequalities: Looking at Social Mechanisms as an Explanatory Approach to the Generation of Social Inequalities

Martin Diewald · Thomas Faist

Abstract: Various fields of research on social inequality, such as studies in education and social mobility, pursue sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches and have produced a wealth of relevant empirical findings on specific aspects. Nonetheless, research on social inequalities is nowadays extremely fragmented along theoretical, conceptual and methodological lines across which there is little communication and cross-fertilization. There are no comprehensive accounts which would bundle the numerous empirical findings. Therefore, inequality research in the social sciences needs to be conceptually reoriented. Towards that end we have to take advantage of the significant theoretical and methodological advances in the different fields, such as education, labor markets, justice, migration and gender. Our programmatic contribution rests on two pillars. First, we go beyond the conflation of heterogeneities and inequalities and draw a clear conceptual distinction, whereby both terms are always used in the plural. Second, we identify and systematize social mechanisms. The concept of social mechanisms helps to track the genesis of inequalities out of heterogeneities. In this way heterogeneities constitute the point of departure, and inequalities the outcome of a social mechanismic approach. Social mechanisms can be fruitfully connected to approaches such as boundary making.

Keywords: Social inequalities · Heterogeneities · Social mechanisms

Des hétérogénéités aux inégalités: les mécanismes sociaux comme approche explicative de la genèse des inégalités sociales

Résumé: les différents domaines de la recherche sur les inégalités, tels que la sociologie de l'éducation et la sociologie de la mobilité sociale, sont féconds aussi bien du point de vue théorique qu'empirique. Ils sont à l'origine d'une série d'études sectorielles sur différents aspects de l'inégalité. Cette fécondité s'accompagne toutefois d'une fragmentation thématique et théorique de la recherche sur les inégalités en plusieurs lignes de recherche communiquant à peine les unes avec les autres. Par ailleurs, il n'existe pas d'état des lieux complet des recherches synthétisant les résultats des études empiriques sur le développement des inégalités. Ainsi la recherche sur les inégalités a besoin d'une réorientation conceptuelle. Les tentatives allant dans ce sens devraient tirer parti des progrès théoriques et méthodiques considérables réalisés par la recherche sur les inégalités dans des domaines aussi variés que l'éducation, le marché du travail, la justice sociale, les migrations ou le genre. La proposition soumise dans cet article repose sur deux piliers: premièrement, une distinction nette entre hétérogénéités et inégalités; deuxièmement, une tentative d'identification et de systématisation des mécanismes sociaux transformant de simples hétérogénéités en inégalités sociales. nous considérons les hétérogénéités comme le point de départ de ces mécanismes et les inégalités comme leur point d'aboutissement. À titre d'exemple, les approches basées sur les phénomènes de „démarcation“ (*boundary making*) offrent des points d'appui pour le programme esquissé.

Mots-clés: Inégalité sociale · Hétérogénéité · Mécanismes sociaux

1 Introduction: On the Dilemmas of Inequality Research

Observations and analyses of social inequality are not just currently subject to particular attention, but consistently count among the primary tasks of the social sciences. Theoretical and empirical studies in individual fields of inequality research such as education and mobility research have brought forth a wealth of studies into various specific aspects of inequality of a very high theoretical and methodological standard. At the same time, however, inequality research is highly fragmented. Both thematically and theoretically, it comprises several methodologically segregated strands of research such as income, employment and mobility research, symbolic representations of social inequality, justice research – to name but a few – that hardly intersect. There is still no encompassing theory of social inequalities to which all these strands can relate. It is not surprising, therefore, that perceptions and appraisals of inequality on the one hand and empirical analyses of inequality structures on the other are sometimes highly divergent, so that comprehensive syntheses of the development of inequality appear to be very complex and often reflect controversy rather than consensus (Mayer 2006; Diewald 2010). The debate over the culturalist turn in inequality research testifies to this (Eder 2001).

This situation is increasingly perceived to be problematical. It would not be exaggerated to claim that this fragmentation lessens the scientific and sociopolitical significance of inequality research. Although it has been noted in current academic and public debate in Germany that the consistency paradigm in inequality research has been broken (Müller 2007, p. 192), an integrative analysis that goes beyond a diagnosis of the current crisis has yet to be produced. In international inequality research, too, despite a marked degree of confidence about the progress that has been made, there is a degree of disillusionment with regard to the synthesis of universally valid inequality-generating processes accomplished so far. After several years of debate on this theme at various congresses of the Research Committee 28 of the International Sociological Association, Hout und DiPrete (2006) encapsulated this scepticism in a verdict of “uncertain generalizations” that are too remote from the processes that actually generate inequality. This causal analytical weakness has a negative impact not only on the persuasiveness of sociological findings in general, but especially on its significance as a *political* science that is expected to provide a coherent, generally accepted body of knowledge for socio-political measures (ibid.). There is, moreover, a lack of comprehensive evaluations that categorize the empirical findings on developments in inequalities along different dimensions and between different population groups, and then systematically match these findings with established reality constructions and the perceptions and evaluations that they contain. Thus the unfulfilled desideratum of comprehensive, cumulative advances in the field of inequality research remains a problem for social policy, which relies on consistent information and guidance.

In order for inequality research to be of relevance not only to the specialised disciplines of inequality studies but also to social theory and social policy, a knowledge is needed of the rules that govern the production of inequalities in different societal subsystems, and of how they relate to each other in terms of temporal order and interdependencies. This holds not for only the social structure of inequality, but also for the congruence between sociostructural situations, subjective perceptions and assessments of these situations, the resulting courses of action as well as the representations of social inequality in politics (Barlösius 2005). It is a widely held view, however, to which we also subscribe, that individual theories do not have the capacity to accomplish this on their own. On the

contrary, focussing on a single perspective within the whole complex of the generation of inequality can result in inadequate assessments of inequality. Several authors have lamented this in the light of the persistence and even aggravation of severe sociostructural inequalities despite the emphasis of cultural differentiation and pluralization of milieus (see e.g. Geißler 1996; Kreckel 2004; Eder 2002). And while Wehler's critique (2008, p. 117f.) of the sociological analysis and interpretation of developments in inequality in post-war Germany is far too selectively interpretative and clearly exaggerated, it does show that especially in the context of interdisciplinary discourse there is a need for an integrated analysis of inequality that draws a finer balance between addressing new trends and the long-term observation of stable patterns of inequality (Diewald 2010).

Social scientific inequality research thus needs a conceptual reorientation. Endeavours to this end, however, if they do not seek salvation in a new grand theory, should not neglect the substantial theoretical and methodological advances made in specialised fields such as education, employment, justice or gender, but should make use of and build on them. In the following we present a proposal that is based on two pillars. The first is the strict distinction between *heterogeneities* and *inequalities*; the second is the endeavour to identify and systematize the *social mechanisms* that generate social inequalities from what are at first simply heterogeneities.

A theoretical approach via the identification of *social mechanisms* is not new, but has already been propagated by, among others, Bunge (2004), Hedström and Swedberg (1998), Hedström (2005) and, relating especially to the generation of social inequalities, by Tilly (1998) and Therborn (2006). It is currently the focus of growing attention in inequality research (cf. Fiske 1991; Black et al. 2003; Risman und Tomaskovic-Devey 2000). However, a broad discussion has yet to take place over how a systematic taxonomy of different mechanisms that generate inequality could meaningfully be drawn up; more importantly, such a comprehensive empirical taxonomy has yet to be implemented.

We link this approach with the caveat that it is essential to a process-oriented mechanistic procedure that the start and end points of social mechanisms are determined with care. In the field of inequality research we advocate in this respect the consistent definition of heterogeneities as the starting point and inequalities as the end point of the mechanisms, i.e. not to juxtapose or confound them. It is thereby important to conceive of attributes of heterogeneity and inequalities in the plural in order to take account of multidimensionalities and possible interdependencies. In section 2 the terms heterogeneities and inequalities will be defined in more detail. Sections 3 and 4 deal with the central concept of social mechanisms. In the fifth section we discuss specifically the aspects of multidimensionality or overlapping of both heterogeneities and inequalities, focussing especially on more recent approaches in "boundary making" as connecting factors for the outlined programme.

2 Understanding Heterogeneities and Inequalities

2.1 Heterogeneities¹

Heterogeneities comprise the carefully determined starting point of our approach to analysing inequalities, i.e. we focus on *inequalities between groups* rather than on abstract distributive inequalities (cf. Jasso and Kotz 2007; Tilly 1998). In the first instance, heterogeneity simply means *difference*, and does not infer social inequality as such. The heterogeneity of a society refers in principle to everything that constitutes the variety and diversity of individuals. Heterogeneities thus touch on two fundamental questions of any analysis of inequality, namely, on the one hand, who is considered to belong to the society under analysis in the first place, and on the other, between which population groups deemed relevant (within a society) should social inequalities be investigated.

We distinguish four major groups of attributes:

1. *ascriptive* attributes such as distinguishing physical features, gender, age, nationality, ethnicity;
2. *cultural* preferences, ways of life, lifestyle, attitudes, orientations and world views;
3. *competences, qualifications and characteristics* that are regarded by a society as legitimate mechanisms for the allocation of opportunities, or at least discussed as such;
4. the differentiation of *activities* in the context of social division of work.

In our understanding, different activities are the primary basis for the generation of social inequalities, but they should not be equated with inequalities. In working societies, this differentiation is primarily made between activities in the context of paid employment. However, unpaid work such as domestic work and childcare should also be included.

With regard to the four groups of attributes, there have been shifts of meaning in recent years, giving rise to the perception of greater, more complex heterogeneity. Four developments can be distinguished each of which primarily relate to one of the groups of attributes. These are:

1. As a result of the pluralization of ways of life and lifestyles and the heterogenisation of value milieus, senses of belonging and of shared identities, interests, behaviour and capabilities as well as conflicts no longer alone or primarily adhere to the classic distribution patterns of inequality (Fischer and Matteson 2009). Different preferences as to lifestyles mean that, firstly, heterogeneities are in part perceived and assessed differently (Berger and Vester 1998; Smith 1997). Secondly, as new lines of differentiation, such heterogeneities can themselves become the basis for material preferences or discrimination, or superiority or inferiority in status, for instance when certain work division patterns in the household are valued differently. Thirdly,

¹ We have decided on the term 'heterogeneity' because it seems to be altogether the most neutral term. Other conceivable terms, diversity and difference, are used in research and in practice in a more restrictive sense and refer to cultural differences. In the US debate, moreover, 'diversity' is a somewhat vague term for inequality and implies exactly what should be avoided here, namely a blurring of the difference between heterogeneity and inequality.

heterogeneities not only stand alongside employment-related inequalities, they also have an effect on chances and risks of employment because they have a bearing on recruitment and promotion even though they are not directly related to the demands of the job. However, not all forms and manifestations of heterogeneity lead to the generation or reproduction of inequality. For example, it is contingent whether and to what extent religion is relevant to inequality (Faist 2010).

2. External factors such as globalisation and transnationalisation have also contributed to increased heterogeneity through processes such as migration and transborder ties arising from it. The relevance of national institutions and national citizenship has nevertheless remained unchanged (Firebaugh 2003). These developments can be addressed by examining different manifestations of heterogeneity in social contexts between and beyond nation-states. Their relevance for the production of inequality lies in the particular opportunities, but also the restrictions and conflicts that can arise out of multiple citizenship. The perception and appraisal of social inequalities also shift and change when comparable social groups are no longer restricted to the confines of one national state but live in cross-border social spaces (Faist 2000; Furia 2005; Delhey and Kohler 2006). Through multiple memberships – be they *de jure* as in multiple citizenship, or *de facto* as in the case of members of diaspora groups, individuals can have different social statuses in different national societies; the heterogeneities relevant to inequality can thus be variable. At the same time, this means that perceptions of attributes relevant to the evaluation of inequality can change, for example by activating ascriptive attributes (such as ethnicity and gender) or implementing universal criteria (such as membership of certain professions). Of particular significance here is the connection between changing cultural interpretations of multiple memberships and related opportunities. The opportunities for political, cultural and economic participation arising out of the transnational activities of individuals and organisations generate new inequalities and conflicts at the same time.
3. Clearly, both the generation and the effect of different cognitive and non-cognitive competencies and characteristics in combination with formal qualifications have changed. Through structural economic changes, but also through a social and cultural shift towards more personal responsibility and capabilities, the significance of general competencies and personality traits for the employment market and for success in life as a whole has grown. These can only be acquired to a limited extent through formal qualifications (Baethge 2007; Borghans et al. 2008). This makes an enquiry into the genesis and effect of cognitive and non-cognitive competencies and personality traits – which has been neglected in sociology for a long time – into a major cornerstone of the large-scale theoretical and empirical undertaking called for here in order to be able to adequately investigate the interplay of inclusion and exclusion mechanisms within the triad of background, education and inequality (Jackson et al. 2005). The definition, operationalisation and interpretive differentiation between functional capabilities and cultural capital, which in conflict theoretical terms can be interpreted as social closure, play a key role here (Lareau and Weininger 2003; Goldthorpe 2007).
4. The employment market has seen a number of changes. On the one hand, it has changed in terms of occupational structures. In OECD countries, there has been a decline in jobs with low qualification requirements and jobs with higher qualification requirements are on the increase. On the other hand, jobs themselves are undergoing changes. For

example, in terms of technological and organisational change in general, international networking and competition, and variable teamwork instead of fixed structures give rise to new job requirements in addition to formal qualifications that may harbour opportunities, but also risks. More demands are also made on employees that manifest themselves above all in psychological pressures and unlimited availability for work. Destandardization and flexibilization of paid employment are the common generic term for the heterogenisation of different attributes of employment.

Increasing heterogeneities heighten the complexity of requirements for an adequate theoretical and empirical inventory of attributes that may be the starting point of inequality. It is increasingly argued against essentialist notions of “given” heterogeneity attributes that distinctions between social categories within a social field are only made after classificatory struggles and negotiations have taken place between different agents in that field (Wimmer 2008; see also Barlösius 2005). The relevance of ascriptive attributes such as ethnicity or gender for individuals thus differs according to the respective social context. Boundaries between groups can be shifted (Butler 1991), reinforced or weakened, or new boundaries can emerge, particularly under conditions of legal and factual material equality (Parsons 1977). Accordingly, cultural, political and identificatory self-categorizations or categorizations by others can by all means disintegrate – within and between different social contexts. This is true not only of classic ascriptive attributes such as gender or ethnicity, but also to a greater or lesser degree for the definition of such capacities that are regarded as legitimate allocation criteria for coveted positions.

2.2 Social Inequalities

Social inequality is a multi-dimensional phenomenon the complexity of which can only be incompletely grasped from one perspective only. Inequalities between population groups can therefore only be adequately appraised if examined in the plural. It is necessary to go beyond the unequal distribution of the classic resources of power, prestige and money and factor in the following perspectives:

Inequalities have a bearing on all needs relevant to well-being. Rejecting an approach to inequality that focusses on uneven distribution and redistribution alone – thus creating a direct causal link to heterogeneities as the point of origin of inequalities – Fraser und Honneth (2003) advocate the recognition of cultural diversity and the opportunities for societal participation arising from this as key criteria. More comprehensive systematization has also been proposed by welfare researchers relating to spheres of life (Zapf 1984) and by social production function theory in terms of intermediate instrumental objectives (Ormel et al. 1999).

One prerequisite for such results are patterns of *participatory chances in different spheres of life*. Positions in hierarchical employment structures to a large extent determine the pathways of classic inequalities in terms of power, autonomy, prestige and income. While it can be still be assumed that modern inequality systems are employment-centred (Kreckel 2004), for more extensive observations of social inequality it is essential to include other spheres of life, as they sometimes meet comparable needs, and sometimes other needs: integration in social relations, social and political participation and, specifically, the combination of multiple affiliations across and beyond national societies.

Participation not only brings returns, however, but also requires that *efforts* are made and *burdens* are borne. These can, on the one hand, have a negative impact on the overall balance within a particular sphere of life, on the other hand they can also restrict participatory chances in other spheres of life (Diewald 2003). In the light of increasing uncertainties and pressures, including and especially in highly qualified professions, shifting roles in gender relations and multiple affiliations especially in transnational contexts, the significance of opportunity costs of commitment seems to be on the increase. Consequently, the classic assumption of chiefly positive connotations associated with participatory chances must be scrutinized anew. International migrants for instance sometimes have different social statuses in societies of emigration and immigration, e.g. relatively low status in an immigration country and relatively high in the context of emigration (Faist 2008). The assumption of positive correlations therefore seems to be plausible particularly in closed societies with a high degree of system integration, as is the case in a classic working society.

Perception and appraisal of participatory chances as capabilities: Referring to the term “capabilities”, Sen (1999) points out that participatory chances do not necessarily have the same meaning for all members of a society but must be assessed in the light of inter-individually different leading concepts of how individuals want to live their lives.

With regard to leading concepts at the individual and societal level, notions of justice play a decisive role in terms of how individuals perceive and appraise social inequalities and their own position of inequality (Liebig and Schupp 2008). Though justice is a normative category, in fact very diverse perceptions and validity claims are associated with it that determine the acceptability of social inequalities and help ensure that attention is drawn to inequalities and that they are addressed and discredited. Quite different and sometimes competing connotations of justice can be applied as normative points of reference in different spheres of life – in the family, among friends, at work or on the markets. These different notions of justice and the question as to which form of justice should be valid in which sphere of life also have a bearing on socio-political debate with the effect that, for example, while to some people large income differentials are an adequate reflection of heterogeneity among members of a society, to others they are an expression of social inequalities that must be tackled.

Finally, an enquiry into social inequalities must take their nonlinearity into account. Through closure concepts and the incidence of critical life events and deviations (see e.g. Schoon 2006), in the lower spectrum of social inequalities circumstances are defined that indicate not only few opportunities, but also decidedly problematic social positions. As studies have shown, it appears that for the incidence of such thresholds it is not necessarily the same social mechanisms that generate inequality as in other areas of uneven distribution (e.g. Wiborg and Hansen 2008).

3 Social Mechanisms as an Explanatory Approach to Inequalities

The identification of mechanisms has attracted increasing attention as an explanatory programme in recent years, both in the natural sciences and in the social sciences (see e.g. Machamer et al. 2000). In the latter case, this explanatory programme is in the first instance

a counter-proposal to what is deemed not to be a promising explanatory programme (cf. e.g. Bunge 2004, Hedström 2005, Elster 2007), namely:

- the commitment to a grand, purely philosophical theory that explains everything;
- a strictly deductive explanation by means of universally valid laws in a stricter sense, treating the concrete cause-effect chains as a “black box”, and thus contributing little to a better understanding;
- an empiricism that – notwithstanding frequent problems with spurious correlations, endogeneity and confounded variables – seeks primarily to derive and validate laws and principles from correlations between variables.

As yet there is no widely shared, positive definition of social mechanisms (Mahoney 2001; Brante 2008). We nevertheless refer to social mechanisms as theoretical brackets for the analysis of inequalities, the reason being that the (in principle) openness and clarity of this theoretical approach offers a number of significant advantages. Some widely shared fundamental ideas as to what constitutes mechanisms are the following:

- the identification of mechanisms is not bound to a certain theory or methodological approach;
- mechanisms refer to *generative processes* that under certain circumstances produce certain outcomes. Thus, mechanisms refer to concrete explananda under certain concrete, specifiable circumstances. Insofar as mechanisms reliably produce similar outcomes under similar circumstances, they can be said to be regular (e.g. Elster 2007). This distinguishes mechanisms from principles in a strict sense;
- This qualification does not imply the neglect of the objective of *abstraction*, however. Rather, concrete mechanisms can, by way of analogies and abstractions be packaged into types of mechanisms (Bunge 2004, p. 195). Such mechanisms then have a higher degree of generalizability and are less bound to certain contextual circumstances, and can be related to a wider range of social phenomena (Elster 2007, p. 44; see also Reskin 2003; Gross 2009).

Understood thus, a social mechanistic approach offers the following advantages:

- The idea of identifying concrete substantial mechanisms is allied to the orientation to an explanation that is as accurate as possible and empirically founded on the basis of a cause-and-effect relationship.² This precludes the reductionist claims of closed theories to universal validity or studies on correlative variables that remain unclear despite statistical models of the activities and processes that prove such correlations.
- By relating concrete substantial mechanisms to general, abstract mechanisms, a high degree of generalization can be achieved without losing sight of the specific processes

² The following example may serve to illustrate what is meant here: Instead, say, of simply assuming mechanisms that generate inequality on the basis of large categories such as exploitation or social exclusion (cf. Grusky and Sørensen 1998), the underlying mechanisms, which are constitutive for the applicability of such typologies, should be verified and localised within social contexts.

that generate inequalities. In other words this approach builds a bridge between theoretical abstraction and solid empirical evidence.

- In this way it is easier to take up the strength of existing specific theories and the precision of specific empirical findings in the different fields and levels of inequality research, to discuss them comparatively and to integrate them wherever possible.

4 Social Mechanisms and the Generation of Inequality

Inequality research is one area in the social sciences in which the mechanistic approach has drawn a lot of attention in recent years (see e.g. Tilly 1998; Reskin 2003; Therborn 2006; DiPrete und Eirich 2006). Proceeding from the general benefits of the mechanistic approach described above, more specific objectives of this approach are:

1. to identify social mechanisms that are empirically concrete, directly observable and context-specific – and thus relevant to political influence –, and that generate and give rise to social inequalities (concrete, substantial mechanisms), and
2. in the longer term, to arrive, by comparison and abstraction, at a “generative social grammar of inequality” (Therborn 2006, p. 1) that is generalizable throughout different areas of society.

4.1 Concrete, Substantial Generative Mechanisms of Social Inequalities

Inequality research initially requires an understanding of social mechanisms that focuses more on directly observable processes. To offset the uneasy premise of a variable correlation analysis of inequality – which merely implies that the actors have certain motives – theoretically driven, empirical research is required to pinpoint the specific processes that lead to inequalities with certain attributes that define different population groups (Reskin 2003; see also Black et al. 2003 for an explanation of intergenerational transmission). For the generation of social inequalities within organisations there already exist taxonomies that designate specific mechanisms to different aspects of heterogeneity among personnel that might explain how social inequalities arise in the context of jobs, professions and businesses (Skaggs and diTomaso 2004, p. 280-1).

Notwithstanding the specificity of the individual mechanisms with respect to different attributes of heterogeneity, dimensions of inequality and contexts, such a classification of different mechanisms also serves to overcome the prevailing “balkanisation” of the analysis of the generation of inequalities from heterogeneities. This overly essentialist tendency to restrict research to (only) one specific attribute of heterogeneity such as gender or ethnicity forestalls the discovery of more general generative processes (Reskin 2003, p. 5). To what extent this is actually possible, or how different the processes actually depending on the attribute in question, as Lieberon (1994) emphasizes, must in the light of the current state of research be seen as a question that still remains to be answered.

Thus, while social inequalities may in concrete terms be produced in disparate ways in different social contexts, it is nevertheless possible that their production may be governed by more general common principles. In order to determine whether this is so, however, two

things are necessary: firstly, comparative analyses that cover several heterogeneity attributes and dimensions of inequality and, secondly, if the specific context of social mechanisms is theoretically plausible, the studies should also reveal – besides individual attributes – the contextual circumstances of families, networks, organisations and supranational or transnational connections. They should, moreover, identify intrapsychological mechanisms, rather than making unvalidated assumptions about rationalities and their preconditions.

4.2 Analytical Abstract Generative Mechanisms of Social Inequalities

Although categorizations of concrete substantial mechanisms constitute a first step towards a systematization of mechanisms, endeavours to achieve a systematization either by this method or, conversely, through a theoretical discussion of abstract mechanisms, have up until now remained a postulate rather than an outcome of research. Within the field of inequality research, the theoretical debate has hitherto primarily focussed on the abstract mechanisms of exploitation and social closure already propagated by Karl Marx and Max Weber (summarized by Wright 2005), whereby above all the concept of social closure plays a prominent role in various general (Parkin 1983; Murphy 1996; Mackert 2004) as well as more specialised inequality theories (Collins 1979). Possible expansions on these two mechanisms to include further abstract mechanisms have seldom been the subject of theoretical endeavours.

One of the few exceptions here is Tilly (1998). Following the two classic theories of Marx and Weber, Tilly takes up the two primary mechanisms of exploitation and social closure in his volume *Durable Inequality* and postulates *relational* mechanisms as the decisive factors in the generation of social inequalities. Thus, exploitation arises in cooperative relationships when the more powerful party is in a position to secure a disproportionate share of the value created through cooperation. Opportunity hoarding, which mainly arises out of the process of social closure, is the monopolisation of access to resources and market opportunities, i.e. the exclusion of competitors. These two primary mechanisms are varied and propagated when actors in different social contexts adapt them to the specific conditions of the context in question and translate them into rules, routines and rituals (adaptation). They are diffused through the transfer of relational patterns between different categories of population groups into other arenas, whereby an awareness is promoted of cultural and identificatory distinctions between population segments and used to solve accessibility and distributional problems (emulation). While we are aware of the theoretical problems of situating exploitation and opportunity hoarding mechanisms on a level with emulation and adaption, our procedure is akin to this approach inasmuch as we also seek to examine the concretization of abstract social mechanisms of inequality production in different spheres of activity.

Therborn (2006) has presented a different, more comprehensive list of four main mechanisms including a list of field-specific permutations, which in our view, however, are in some cases not easy to follow theoretically and, moreover, not fully distinguishable from each other. Therborn defines distantiation as the rules of competition that yield a winner-loser gap (e.g. the Matthew effect); exclusion (including opportunity hoarding and social closure) refers to the division between insiders and outsiders and consequent discrimination and stigmatisation; by hierarchization Therborn means the structure of institutionalised roles and positions with their respective rights and resources, and exploitation refers to asymmetrical benefits that one side can draw from a cooperation. Overall, these are the only

two endeavours known to us that succeed in systematizing abstract generative mechanisms of inequality. In both cases, the two “classic” mechanisms of exploitation and social closure – though in part termed, categorized and weighted differently – play a central role. More explicitly than Therborn, Tilly’s relational approach already includes boundary making between different population categories as a precondition of unequal relations that at the same time serve to legitimize inequalities. Therborn, on the other hand, factors the structuring of positions much more clearly into the generation of social inequalities relatively independent of their allocation to certain individuals from different categories.

In the light of previous research the questions remain unresolved whether, firstly, regular, systematic homologies can be identified, and if so, whether these ensue from comparisons of heterogeneity attributes, dimensions of inequality, or contexts, or from combinations of the three. Secondly, it is still unclear whether clear, quasi-hierarchical concrete mechanisms can be derived from analytical abstract mechanisms or vice versa. If the objective is ultimately to identify both concrete, substantial mechanisms and abstract analytical mechanisms, it should be possible to achieve this in both directions. The exemplary synopsis of mechanisms of different degrees of generalization presented in Figure 1 below provides an orientation for research. By exemplary is meant that the differentiations specified here are by no means a definitive, universally valid taxonomy. The development of such is a long-term research task. Overall, the figure reflects a processual, heuristic approach and at the same time a comparative survey of different fields of activity that

1. is open to the special theories that mark the state of research in the respective fields of investigation;
2. clearly shows that there is no one-way, fixed causal relationship between heterogeneity and inequality, but that they are connected by parallel, interdependent and not always unidirectional processes (Cederman 2005);
3. the objective is to systematize and generalize specific findings.

The figure is based on the four different types of heterogeneities described above as the starting point for the differentiation of four major abstract mechanisms, namely: exclusion/inclusion and opportunity hoarding as variants of social closure, and hierarchization and exploitation/asymmetric dependence. These are varied for different types of social contexts. As already summarized above, social closure is probably the least controversial mechanism in the pertinent debate so far. In order for it to correspond better to the processual character of social exclusion, this mechanism can be subclassified into *exclusion/inclusion* (cf. Therborn 2006) and *opportunity hoarding* (see Tilly 1998). In other words, access to networks, organisations and societies are addressed first, and then the respective practices *within* these social spheres. In the case of advantage seeking in the context of cooperation, we speak of *exploitation*. Hierarchization according to Therborn (2006, p. 13) initially means the existence of positions with different rights, obligations and resources in formal organisations, but it can also include informal role systems and cultural ranking orders.

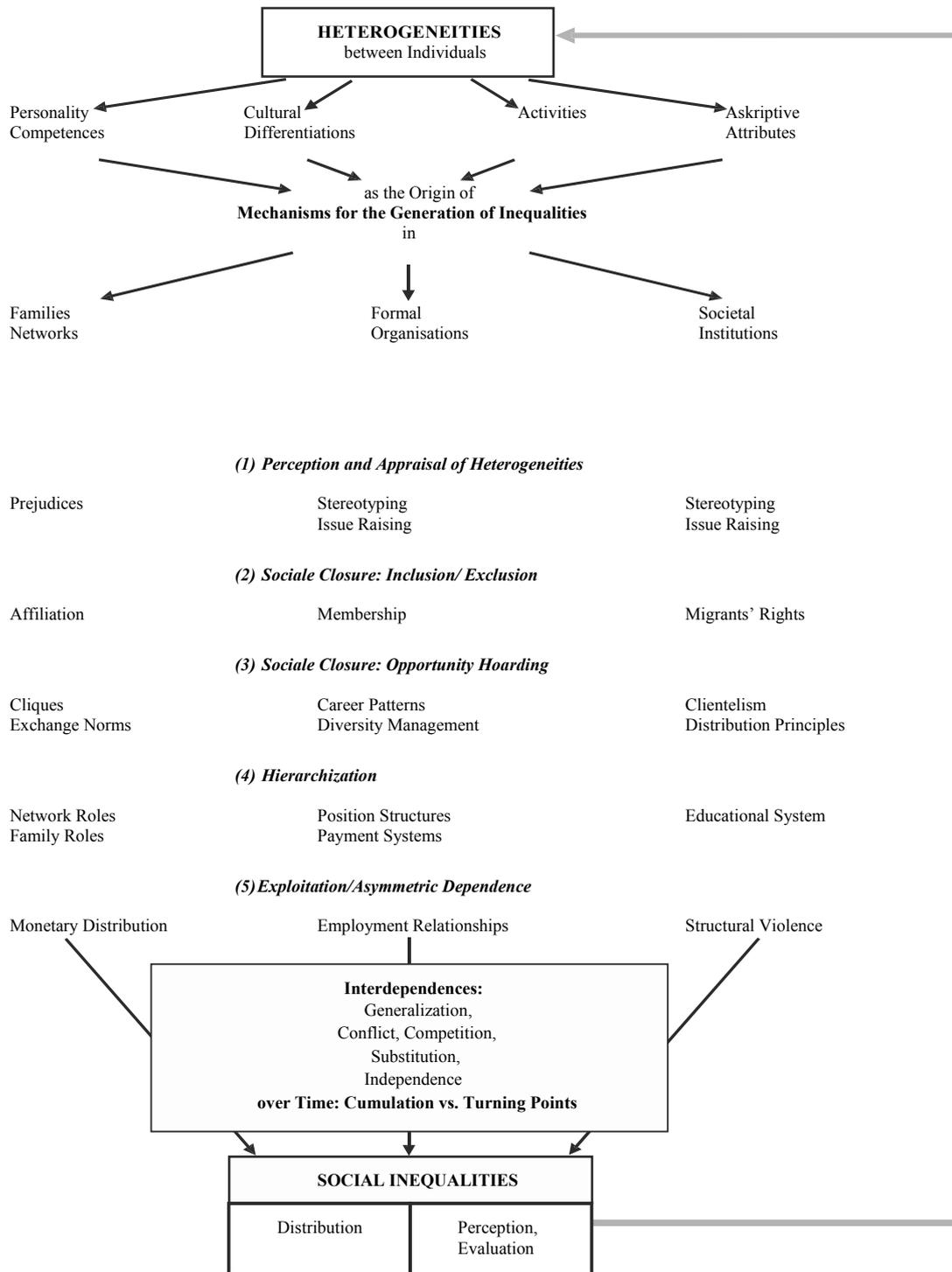


Figure 1: From Heterogeneities to Inequalities

Following up the above remarks on the conception of heterogeneity, we position the perception and appraisal of heterogeneities as a fifth class of mechanisms (the first class depicted at the top of in Figure 1) above the four aforementioned mechanisms. These mechanisms do not have a direct bearing on the generation of social inequalities, but already precede them.³ Heterogeneities are always perceived and appraised, there is always a historical backdrop of cultural representations and practices for dealing with them, and they are always invoked or engendered by actors in the generation of inequality. The generic name that can be used for such actor-specific and field-specific processes is the concept of “boundary making” (see e.g. Wimmer 2008). Thus, the significance of a certain ethnicity, gender, age or religion derives from the respective social and cultural context and varies accordingly in different social contexts.

These abstract analytical generative mechanisms of inequality are depicted in the illustration as concrete, substantial mechanisms in correspondence with different social contexts. For the designation and localisation of such specific mechanisms we distinguish between the three contextual levels, namely 1) families and networks, 2) organisations and 3) societal institutions. These distinctions follow the logic that it is the designation of individuals with specific attributes (heterogeneity) to concrete positions and affiliations in informal and institutional orders that shapes the manifestations of social inequalities. We distinguish between networks and organisations not only because they differ in respect of the rules according to which inequalities are typically produced (Goedicke et al. 2007), but also because primarily different respective dimensions of inequality obtain. The level of societal institutions here is in line with a broad definition of institutions. Institutions are permanent social orders, whereby the permanence can be deduced from externally fixed behavioural expectations, internalised informal norms and conventions, formal rules or legal regulations, or legitimized leading concepts (Searle 1997; Rehberg 2002). Welfare state institutions and related social policy measures are a key component of societal mechanisms that generate social inequalities, as are educational, labour market and employment systems (Faist 2009). It would, however, be inappropriate to analyse societal institutions exclusively within national frameworks (cf. Wimmer und Glick Schiller 2003). Transnational approaches, by contrast, emphasize that national institutions are often overridden and undermined by regulatory systems that transcend national borders or are superordinate to those of nations or individual societies. This approach allows supranational institutions such as the EU and international institutions like the UN to be integrated into the analysis, too. Finally, generative mechanisms of inequality can also arise from a combination of two or more of these contextual levels. This is the case where for instance informal networks determine recruitment or promotion opportunities in businesses directly or indirectly on the principle of homophily (Marsden und Gorman 2001; Elliott 2001).

One research task for the future is above all to draw up a comparison and analysis of the interplay between different mechanisms that generate inequality for different population groups, contextual levels and dimensions of inequality. Beyond the respective mechanisms within each contextual level, a dynamic analysis must establish to what extent generative mechanisms of inequalities tend to offset or rather reinforce each other along

³ The boundaries are fluid, however. Boundary drawing per se and the negligence of respect or the sense of belonging are distinguished in theory rather than empirically.

heterogeneities in different fields of activity, and if the latter is the case – through lower conversion barriers in a horizontal perspective, such as over a lifetime – whether they then give rise to a further cumulation of, for example, opportunity hoarding or closures. An observed cumulative advantage or disadvantage can be based on various forms of interdependence between different concrete mechanisms that mediate between heterogeneities and inequalities: similar forms of discrimination owing to a certain attribute of heterogeneity in different areas of life or contexts (e.g. employment and housekeeping); recurring unequal treatment in successive life phases or institutional contexts (e.g. in apprenticeship and at work); an emphasis on differences in a key attribute that is central to the generation of inequality through interactions with contextual experiences over time (e.g. differences in intelligence); or path dependency, as in Merton's example of academic careers (diPrete und Eirich 2006).

Generalizations – i.e. where generative processes of inequality mutually reinforce or at least facilitate each other in different fields of activity – are considered to be almost the rule in inequality research (e.g. Therborn 2006, p. 9, 13). Tilly argues more cautiously (1998, ch. 3). He emphasizes that adaption is absolutely preconditional on the specific field of activity and is not a guaranteed mechanism. In life course research, moreover, doubts are growing as to whether the development of inequality, failure and success over the course of a lifetime should be considered to be deterministic and irreversible (Laub und Sampson 2003; Mayer 2009). With regard to possible interdependencies we therefore challenge the hitherto prevailing assumption in the literature of mutually supporting and reinforcing mechanisms and propose the inclusion of assumptions of competition, conflict and substitution as well (cf. Diewald 2007). We refer to competition when the required or intended commitments and demands in an area of activity are so high as to restrict commitments in other areas. Conflict is when demands in different areas of activity mutually exclude each other, and substitution is when an incapacity to act in one area of activity is compensated by stronger involvement in another, either to pursue similar objectives through other means or to pursue other objectives to those originally intended. Societal conditions and their development are a key determinant of the extent to which generalization, conflict, competition or substitution is brought to bear. Thus, in the “old working society” (Brose 2000), conflicts between eligibility for welfare benefits, working conditions, and conventional life models in terms of families and partnerships were constrained from the outset by a high degree of system integration. This can meanwhile no longer be presumed to be the case, and as a result interdependencies have become more contingent.

5 On the Multidimensionality of Social Heterogeneities and Inequalities

The strengths of a social mechanistic programme can be unfolded when heterogeneities and inequalities are conceived of in the plural, for the following reasons. Firstly, it is necessary to link socio-structural elements of inequality research with social-constructivist approaches. This takes into account the insight that perceptions and appraisals are a central component of the production of inequality, and in this way the focus shifts more to the question as to which heterogeneities become relevant for the generation of inequality and under what circumstances. The boundary-making approach appears to be an appropriate starting point here. Secondly, as already mentioned, it is important to scrutinize more closely the diverse combinations of attributes. Moving on from there, the question then

arises which conceptual strategies are useful for systematizing the various forms of heterogeneities and inequalities.

One shortcoming of inequality research up until now is undoubtedly the emphasis on large categories and groups. Methodological groupism, i.e. the espousal of group categories used in public debates, harbours the danger of essentialising identities and affiliations (Brubaker 2004). The current debate over Islamic migrants in Europe might serve as a cautionary example here. The question which boundaries and demarcations are relevant for the generation of inequalities must first and foremost be addressed empirically. The aforementioned concept of boundary making lends itself to this task, as it explores the mechanisms of boundary making. Boundary making is relevant to inequality by the fact alone that categorisations are an indispensable tool for the evaluation of inequality and at the same time can be used to legitimize established inequalities. At the same time, boundary making is linked to different strategies of the actors involved (Zolberg and Woon 1999), like for instance boundary crossing (where members of minority groups are accepted as members of majority groups), boundary blurring (where membership boundaries become more permeable, e.g. when access to full citizenship is facilitated) and boundary shifting (where whole groups come to be seen as belonging to the dominant group).

Boundary making between groups on the basis of attributes of heterogeneity are very obvious, for example, in the case of migrants and ethnic minorities. Their incorporation depends not only on objective distributions and resource similarities, but also on notions of similarities between groups, e.g. among the majority or dominant population about minorities. The boundaries involved should unquestionably be seen as variable over time. This becomes clear in processes such as boundary shifting, which is a form of boundary making. In terms of changes in perception of similarity between the dominant and minority groups in Germany from 1996 and 2006, data shows that certain groups in their entirety, e.g. categories defined as “Italians”, “Spaniards” or “Greeks”, now count as belonging to the dominant population. No changes could be ascertained for the category “Muslims” in terms of perceived similarities on the part of the dominant population (Fincke 2008, ch. 5). Such changes, however, are only ever momentary. They provide no answers to the question which interactions are seen to be equal or unequal in status, or through which mechanisms perceptions of equality and inequality develop. It should furthermore be noted that not all boundaries are relevant to inequality and – as already pointed out – boundaries that are relevant to inequality are subject to change. For decades, in many countries in Western Europe, there existed inequalities in education among christian denominations. There has recently been a rapid decline in the significance of the attribute “christian denomination”, however, while the significance of other attributes such as membership in certain social classes has remained the same.

What is more, the individual attributes of heterogeneity frequently only acquire their respective significance or develop their specific effect in combination with other attributes (Collins 2000, p. 42 on the term “intersectionality”) and in the overall picture of different social contexts with different constellations of actors and interests. Gender inequalities are a classic example here, with families, networks, marriage markets and labour organisations each holding different mechanisms of preference and discrimination at the ready. These manifold interdependencies between heterogeneities and their implications for inequalities can be traced by the identification of social mechanisms. With respect to the generation of

social inequalities within organisations there already exist taxonomies that match specific mechanisms with different aspects of the heterogeneity of workforces to explain how they give rise to social inequalities in association with jobs, professions and enterprises (Skaggs and diTomaso 2004, p. 280-1). Specific mechanisms are thereby each attributed to contextual characteristics that for the most part can be found in Figure 1 above.

A careful consideration of the multidimensionality of social inequalities also broadens the analytical perspective significantly. This becomes apparent when the different contexts for individual attributes of heterogeneity and combinations of attributes are considered. The congruence of the respective mechanisms in respect of preferences and discrimination is decisive in terms of whether inequalities between different population groups are reinforced, cumulated or compensated. Findings from status inconsistency research (see e.g. Hradil 1987, ch. 3.2.1) have already established that even the classic dimensions of income, prestige, status, and class membership are only partly correlated and that therefore generalized statements on inequality as a whole on the basis of only one of these dimensions are unacceptable. As already mentioned above, moreover, for each of these dimensions different explanatory factors play a central role in the generation of inequalities (see e.g. Wiborg and Hansen 2008).

Finally, the consequences of breaking the old consistency paradigm after the end of the classic working society are well illustrated by gender as an attribute of heterogeneity. Numerous studies demonstrate that women are disadvantaged in the labour market. This is largely, but by no means exclusively, determined by voluntary gender-typical education and training options. Furthermore, women tend to regard lower pay compared to that of men as just (Liebig et al. 2009). Even though there are good reasons to suspect that psychological adjustment mechanisms are at play here, the question remains why women nevertheless have a seven-year longer life expectancy, which is to only a minimal degree determined by biology (Luy 2003). It would, of course, go way beyond the scope of this contribution and exceed our competences to list the mechanisms and concurrent interpretations applying across all areas and phases of life, to weigh them up against each other, attempt to synthesize them into an overall appraisal of gender inequality today, and offer a comprehensible account of the resource inequalities, wage differentials for comparable efforts and abilities, stress and participatory chances in different areas of life, and their subjective significance for a successful life. The fact that we are unable to simply provide a pertinent reference, however, speaks for itself. The question arises, moreover, whether a perspective that is reduced to one isolated attribute of heterogeneity is at all meaningful or to the point.

6 Conclusion

We consider the approach outlined above to be a promising endeavour to systematize and synthesize the theoretical and empirical findings of inequality research. It is promising inasmuch as it takes into account the theoretical plurality and empirical power of social science inequality studies without being stymied by disciplinary fragmentation. On the whole, it is essential to draw together the fragmented methodological strands of inequality research in order to construct a stronger synthesis of different perspectives and, hence, a

more integrated, comprehensive survey of structural inequalities, their changes, their perception and appraisal and their respective causes (cf. Mayer 2006, p. 22; Diwald 2010). In the light of the universality of social inequality in all human societies, the obvious question that arises is whether there are specific causes and consequences of certain forms of social inequality.

With respect to heterogeneities, we have shown that boundary making is a key mechanism (or a category of diverse concrete, substantial mechanisms) for establishing a meaningful definition of heterogeneity in a social context. But in research on socio-structural inequalities, too, this approach is gaining increasing significance. It can for instance be applied to use the mere metaphor of the Matthew effect as the basis for a research programme that examines contending explanations (diPrete und Eirich 2006). Another prominent example that refers directly back to the class debate is the question how exploitation and social closure take effect on the construction of social classes (Symposium on Class Analysis 2000). This in turn can facilitate a discussion over the level at which social closure actually takes effect: the professional level, as argued by proponents of the micro-class approach (Weeden und Grusky 2005), or rather the level of occupations or company-specific jobs. Here, specific contextual evidence on relevant actor constellations and practices replaces speculative – albeit theoretically plausible – conjectures about the underlying assumptions regarding correlations between variables and class typologies.

The long-term objective is to identify analytical abstract social mechanisms that stimulate the development of social inequality, thereby overcoming the static description of contemporary societies as well as the post-hoc historicist interpretation of social processes while exploring the empirically observable concrete social mechanisms within and between different social contexts and dimensions of inequality. Whether this will succeed is an open question at the present stage of research. But for a discipline like sociology, which is in itself highly fragmented but has numerous interfaces with other disciplines, the openness of the mechanismic approach is particularly appropriate for integrating dispersed bodies of knowledge and initiating mutual learning processes. Although data, methods and substantial theories are highly divergent from one field of study to another, more abstract, general mechanisms might enable us to compare and systematize the similarities and differences between different causal explanations.

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