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Durkheim and the Social Character of the Categories

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) proposed that the most basic categories of thought, including space, time, class, and causality, are social in character. Their thesis – that language and experience are structured by categories that are social in character – had a profound impact on twentieth-century thought, especially in the social sciences. Among sociologists and anthropologists in particular, it was a major source of inspiration for the popular and heady doctrine that people construct culturally specific perceptual realities through the use of culturally variable sets of categories. For these social scientists, the term "category" took on a very different signification than the original meanings we find in either Aristotle or Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). They treated the categories as belonging to some sort of conceptual scheme or framework through which we perceive the world, rather than as Aristotle's highest predicables or Kant's concepts that are logically presupposed by experience. To understand how this change in the conception of a category came about, we have to consider how Kant was interpreted in the nineteenth-century philosophical tradition from which Durkheim's sociological theory of the categories emerged. That is the purpose of this book.

In arguing for the social causes and origins of the categories, Durkheim was responding to the way in which Kant's philosophy was understood in the Third Republic. Academic philosophy in nineteenth-century France had been shaped by the eclectic spiritualist tradition of Victor Cousin (1792–1867) and Pierre Maine de Biran (1766–1824), who had bequeathed to Durkheim the legacy of interpreting Kant's theory of the categories as part of a philosophical psychology of the individual human

mind. In this tradition, it was thought that the universality and neces-
sity of the categories could be epistemologically grounded in a Cartesian
introspection of the self as active being. Durkheim, in proposing that
the categories were instead derived from our experience of the patterns,
rhythms, and forces of collective life, thought that he was offering a su-
perior explanation of these characteristics of the categories.

Durkheim hoped to show that a person's ways of thinking and commu-
nicating about such things as space, time, and causality owed a lot more
to his or her culture than had previously been thought, and that these
concepts played an important role in helping to hold society together, for
instance through making moral rules possible. His sociological project is
distinct from Kant's philosophical project of determining the concepts
that are presupposed by and necessarily found in experience. Durkheim's
project is worthy of pursuit in its own right, provided that it is not only
kept separate from the Kantian project but also freed of the encumbering
mentalistic assumptions about meaning that Durkheim inherited from
his philosophical tradition. Although beginning with Cousin the eclectics
had endorsed Thomas Reid's (1710–96) common-sense rejection of the
philosophy of representative ideas, Paul Janet (1823–99) subsequently
brought back this concept in his account of the meanings of general
terms. Durkheim adopted and expanded this philosophy, dividing these
representative ideas into two sorts, individual representations and collec-
tive or shared representations, identifying the meanings of the categories
with the latter. Of course, the meaning of a concept can no more be iden-
tified with a kind of mental representation than with a kind of physical
representation. However, there is an alternative account of the meanings
of the categories implicit in Durkheim's sociology of knowledge, accord-
ing to which the categories take at least part of their meaning from their
role in organizing social life as well as individual experience. If we link
the meanings of the Durkheimian categories with their social functional
roles rather than with their collective representations, it becomes easier
to see how different cultures can have different ways of representing the
same set of categories. Understanding what concepts different cultures
may have in common is then the first step to sorting out the relative con-
tributions of culture and individual psychology to our mental and social
lives.

The Durkheimian Tradition

In a 1903 paper titled "On Some Primitive Forms of Classification,"
Durkheim and Mauss drew on ethnographic studies from Australia, North

America, and elsewhere to argue that classificatory concepts such as genus and species were originally constructed on the model of human social groupings. According to Durkheim and Mauss, the Australian native considers everything in the universe to belong to his or her tribe. The entire tribe thus provided the archetype for the category of totality, the class that includes all other classes. Just as the members of the tribe are divided into phratries that are subdivided into clans, each thing in nature has its place in this nested hierarchy of phratries and clans. That is, all living and non-living objects, including the sun, the moon, the stars, the seasons, and even weather phenomena, belong to a particular clan as well as to a more inclusive phratry. This system of social organization thus serves as the origin and the prototype of the concept of classifying things by genera and species (Durkheim 1912a: 201, 205–6, 630, t. 1995: 141–2, 145–6, 443). What has come to be known as the Durkheim–Mauss thesis thus states, "the classification of things reproduces the classification of men" ([1903a(i)] 1969c: 402, t. 1963b: 11).[1]

Although Durkheim and Mauss's 1903 paper was concerned largely with classification, the authors suggested that similar sociological accounts could be provided for space, time, cause, substance, and the other categories ([1903a(i)] 1969c: 461, t. 1963b: 88). Their collaborators on the journal *L'Année sociologique* soon followed with works that attempted to do just that. These included Henri Hubert's essay on magical and religious conceptions of time (1905), the essay by Mauss and Henri Beuchat on conceptions of time among the Eskimos (1906), Célestin Bouglé's account of classification in the caste system of India (1908), and Robert Hertz's account of the role of right- and left-handedness in classificatory systems (1909). At around this time, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939), who was loosely associated with this group, produced the first of his many works on what he called "primitive mentality" (1910).

Durkheim drew on works such as these in formulating his sociological theory of the categories in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912a). According to this theory, the categories of time, space, number, cause, substance, class or genus, totality, personality, and so on are all social in origin. The category of causality derived from our experience of social forces and moral obligation. The category of time was formed from the seasonal and daily rhythms of social life, and the category of space was patterned after the spatial distribution of social groups. The Zuñi, for example, conceive space as having seven directions, each named for the clan that occupies the corresponding section of the circular campsite when the entire tribe gathers (1912a: 16, t. 1995: 11; Durkheim and Mauss [1903a(i)] 1969c: 425ff., t. 1963b: 42ff.). For Durkheim in *The Elementary*

Forms, such categories as causality, space, and time were necessary for our ability to form judgments about objects:

There are, at the root of our judgments, a certain number of essential notions that dominate our entire intellectual life; they are those that philosophers, since Aristotle, have called the categories of the understanding: notions of time, space, genus, number, cause, substance, personality, etc. They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like the solid framework that encloses thought; it appears that it cannot free itself from them without destroying itself, because it seems we cannot think of objects that are not in time or space, which are not numerable, etc. Other notions are contingent and changeable; we conceive that they may be lacking to a person, a society, an epoch; the former appear to be nearly inseparable from the normal functioning of the mind. (1912a: 12–13; cf. t. 1995: 8–9)

In spite of the Kantian-sounding language about the categories of the understanding being at the root of our judgments, what Durkheim meant by the categories is not exactly what Kant meant. First of all, Kant did not include space, time, or personality among the categories. Also, Durkheim identified the categories with culturally variable collective representations that make it possible for the members of a society to think and communicate about spatial, temporal, or causal relations and thus permit important social functions to be carried out. Social life as we know it, he thought, would not be possible if people did not share certain conceptions of time, space, causality, and classification. Convocations to feasts, hunts, and battles require that a system be established for fixing dates and times so that everyone conceives time in the same way. For people to cooperate with the same end in view, they must agree upon a causal relationship between that end and the means to achieve it. In addition, individuals must be classified into groups that are then classified in relation to each other. To avoid conflict, space must be divided among these groups according to a system of directions recognized by everyone (1912a: 629–32, t. 1995: 441–4).

Durkheim also distinguished his usage of the term "category" from what he took to be its acceptance among the philosophers of his day. As he explained elsewhere, for "the recent disciples of Kant . . . the categories preform the real, whereas for us, they recapitulate it. According to them, they are the natural law of thought; for us, they are a product of human art" (1909d: 757 and n. 1, t. 1982: 239–40 and n. 1). Of course, neither of these senses is what Kant meant by the categories. To say that the categories "preform" the real is to suggest that they are part of a psychological account of the formation of experience, which is not what

Kant intended for his theory of the categories, as I will explain in the following chapter. Durkheim's categories actually depend upon whatever psychological capacities he thought were responsible for "preforming" reality. For instance, he said that even the most primitive systems of classification presuppose the ability to recognize resemblances among the particular things the mind perceives (1912a: 206, t. 1995: 146). In the conclusion to *The Elementary Forms*, he distinguished the categories of space, time, causality, and class from the individual's sense of space, duration, regular succession, and resemblance. According to Durkheim, an individual human being has no more need than an animal does of the category of space in order to orient herself. Nor does an individual human being need the category of time in order to satisfy her needs. Similarly, a human being does not need the category of genus and species to recognize that one thing resembles another or the category of causality in order to seek her prey and avoid her enemies. Purely empirical regularities of succession among our representations will suffice to guide our actions (1912a: 632, t. 1995: 444). According to Durkheim, "the relations that the categories express exist, in an implicit manner, in individual consciousnesses" (1912a: 628, t. 1995: 441).

If Durkheim's categories were not involved in what he regards as the psychological processes of preforming reality, there would then seem to be a sense for him in which the mind could function without these categories. This would explain the reason that, in the passage quoted earlier, he qualified his remarks by saying that it only "appears" or "seems" that the mind cannot function without the categories. The reason he added the qualification that the categories are "nearly inseparable from the normal functioning of the mind" is perhaps that he also thought that one could not be psychologically normal if one had not acquired certain ways of thinking about the categories from one's society.

If, as Durkheim argues, categories such as space, time, causality, and class are necessary for certain social functions to be carried out, it would seem that they would be found in all cultures. However, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, Durkheim appears to have reversed his position on the cultural universality of the categories in his lectures on pragmatism given in the year following the publication of *The Elementary Forms.* After this work, research on the sociological theory of the categories tended to emphasize their differences. Works in this tradition included Marcel Granet's analysis of Chinese categories (1934), Mauss's essay on the category of a person (1938), Maurice Halbwachs's account of the category of time in *The Collective Memory* (1950), and Lévy-Bruhl's numerous books

on primitive mentality (1922, 1927, 1931, 1935, 1938, 1949). Mauss, especially, defended the view that the categories were culturally and historically variable and that the list of categories was open-ended: "Above all it is essential to draw up the largest possible catalogue of categories; it is essential to start with all those which it is possible to know man has used. It will be clear that there have been and still are dead or pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason" (Mauss 1924, t. 1979: 32). Among the concepts that were formerly but are no longer categories Mauss included big and small, animate and inanimate, and right and left. He also suggested that the category of substance derived from the concept of food (ibid.). Claude Lévi-Strauss endorsed this passage from Mauss as a statement of the goals of ethnology (1950: 66). He added to the catalogue of categories such concepts as cooked and raw, fresh and rotten, and moist and dry (1964: 41).

Already with Mauss we find an ambiguity with regard to what is meant by a category. In one sense, a category is simply a classificatory concept, like plant or animal. In the philosophical sense of category that goes back to Aristotle, however, a category is only the highest classification into which a thing may fall. Hence, for Aristotle, "plant" and "animal" are not categories since both belong to the category of "substance." Space and time, however, are categories since they are not kinds of substances, or kinds of anything else, for that matter. For Kant, it was only the categories in this highest sense that structured human judgment and perception. When categories are not carefully distinguished from classificatory and other concepts, serious confusions may arise about purported cultural differences in the categories and the effects of these differences on perception and understanding.[2] Systems of natural classification and ways of dividing and measuring space and time may be culturally variable, while the categories themselves are not. For there to be cultural variability in the categories, there would have to be cultures that had no conception whatsoever of, say, space, time, causality, or classification.

Although Lévi-Strauss (1945) thought very highly of Mauss's work, unlike Mauss he emphasized what cultures held in common and thought that the analysis of social structures would reveal the universal structure of human thought. Also, unlike both Durkheim and Mauss, Lévi-Strauss (1966: 214) carefully avoided characterizing the relationship between social structure and the categories as a causal one. Subsequent thinkers were not always so careful or so clear. Influential philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard held that social structures external to individual consciousnesses shape our experience of the world. These

poststructuralist thinkers emphasized the historical and cultural variability of these structures and thus of the categories (May 1997: 26). Foucault (1966) and Jacques Derrida (Lilla 1998), for instance, share with Mauss (1938) the belief that the category of an individual human person is a product of history, culture, and language.

Durkheim and the Cultural Construction of Reality

Among British social anthropologists such as Max Gluckman (1949–50), Edmund Leach (1964), and Mary Douglas (1970), Durkheimian sociology of knowledge was a major stimulus for the intoxicating belief in the cultural construction of reality. According to this doctrine, the way we perceive the world is shaped by culturally variable categories that are transmitted from one generation to the next through language and other cultural systems of representation.[3] Douglas (1970: 20) sees an affinity between Durkheim's sociological theory of the categories and the linguistic determinism of Edward Sapir,[4] which, through the work of Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf, may have been more directly influential in encouraging cultural constructionism in the United States.[5] However, Durkheimian sociology of knowledge may have actually contributed to the creation of an intellectual climate in anthropology in which the hypothesis of linguistic determinism would be seriously entertained.

Today, one tends to hear about the "social construction" more often than the "cultural construction" of reality. The phrase "social construction of reality" was introduced in 1967 by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. They conceived their work as a purely phenomenological analysis of the form or structure of our intersubjective experience of everyday life. The phenomenological method, they said, refrains from offering any causal hypotheses. Hence, they claimed that such concepts as space and time merely have a "social dimension" (Berger and Luckmann 1967: 20, 26). They never argued that these categories depend on social causes. Nevertheless, the word "construct" has definite causal overtones. After all, the literal meaning of "to construct" is to build or make something by combining parts. By the conclusion of the book, the authors themselves lapse into causal talk: "Man is biologically predestined to construct and to habit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definitive reality. Its limits are set by nature, but once constructed, this world acts back upon nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world the human organism is transformed. In

this same dialectic man produces reality and thereby produces himself"
(Berger and Luckmann 1967: 183). It should then come as no surprise
that subsequent writers have adopted Berger and Luckmann's terminol-
ogy of "social construction" to express what appears to be a causal thesis
with roots in Durkheim rather than a claim about the structure of human
thought with roots in phenomenology.

In Germany, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1997: 21) inter-
preted the Durkheim–Mauss thesis as indicating the dominating power
that society has over our thought, with even the deductive structure of
science yielding evidence of coercion and hierarchy. For these critical
theorists, human emancipation necessitates an alternative to this logic.
The connection between their thesis and the Durkheim–Mauss thesis
may not be immediately clear. Although Durkheim did suggest that the
very notion of logical contradiction depends on social causes (1912a:
17–18, t. 1995: 12), he did not subscribe to the view that different cul-
tures have different systems of logic. On the contrary, he argued that the
logic of modern scientific thought evolved from that of primitive reli-
gious thought. It was actually Lévy-Bruhl who advanced the hypothesis
that so-called primitives have an alternative to our logic and thus do not
recognize what we take to be contradictions. For Durkheim, on the other
hand, evidence that primitives group human beings, animals, colors, and
celestial objects together in the same totemic classes did not suffice to
support this hypothesis. He argued that to identify kangaroos with hu-
man beings is no more a contradiction than to identify heat with the mo-
tion of molecules or light with electromagnetic vibration (1912a: 339–42,
t. 1995: 239–41; cf. 1913a(ii)6&7, t. 1978: 145–9).[6] For Durkheim,
totemic systems of classification function like scientific theories in the
sense that what counts as a contradiction depends on what else one thinks.
Today, the primitive mentality thesis is perhaps best known through
Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard's account of the Azande's apparently in-
consistent beliefs about the heritability of the power of witchcraft (1937).
More recent sociologists of knowledge such as David Bloor (1991:
138–46) and Bruno Latour (1987: 186–94) cite this account as evidence
that logic is a variable social and cultural construction.[7] For the contem-
porary cognitive relativist, no culture's logic is superior to any other's
(Littleton 1985: vi). However, there is no clear evidence that different
cultures actually have different logics. Toward the end of his career, Lévy-
Bruhl decided that all cultures use the same logic and that what appeared
to be cultural differences in recognizing contradictions were actually due
to cultural differences in the categories.[8]

If logic, the categories, and even perceptual reality were culturally variable constructions, intercultural communication would not be possible, for who could make sense of the words and actions of people who lived in a different reality? We would be faced with an incommensurability of cultures much like the incommensurability of paradigms by which Thomas Kuhn characterized the history of the sciences. Kuhn proposed that the categories that shape perception or "world view" vary even among scientific communities. As these perceptual categories take their meanings from paradigms that are incommensurable with one another, "The proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. . . . Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction" (Kuhn 1970: 150).

At the time of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1970: vi) acknowledged an intellectual debt to Whorf's hypotheses about the relation between language and world view. In more recent writings, he described his position as "a sort of post-Darwinian Kantianism" (Kuhn 1991: 12; 2000: 104). He saw his position as Kantian insofar as he regarded taxonomies of kind concepts, like Kantian categories, as preconditions of possible experience. For Kuhn (1991, 1993, 2000: passim), these taxonomies include natural kinds, artifactual kinds, social kinds, kinds of personality, and so on. His position is post-Darwinian insofar as it allows for variability in these categories: "But lexical categories, unlike their Kantian forebears, can and do change, both with time and with the passage from one community to another" (Kuhn 1991: 12; 2000: 104). Although he denied that the world is merely constructed (1991: 10; 2000: 101), it is not clear how he could reconcile his post-Darwinian Kantianism with this disavowal of constructionism. Kuhn (1993: 337–8; 2000: 251) even asked us to set aside the notion of a "fully external world" that is independent of the practices of the scientists who investigate it. Gürol Irzik and Teo Grünberg (1998) suggest the somewhat charitable reading that for Kuhn only the phenomenal and not the noumenal world is constructed. However, as they point out, on their reading of Kuhn the relationship between the phenomenal and the noumenal worlds is once again as mysterious and unintelligible as it was for Kant (ibid., 219–20).

Other philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, and linguists have come to question the claim that people in different cultures perceive the world through incommensurable sets of categories. Donald Davidson (1974), for example, argued that the assertion that there are fundamentally different conceptual systems amounts to the statement that there are

languages that are not intertranslatable, which he found to be inconsistent with the notion that languages can be used to make true claims about the world. Dan Slobin (1971: 120ff.) found the claim that linguistic categories shape our thought to be ambiguous between the lexical sense of category and grammatical categories such as parts of speech. The ethnographic evidence for cultural differences in the structure of language and thought has also been questioned. Rodney Needham (1963: xi–xxix) has objected that Durkheim and Mauss's evidence does not support their thesis that classification systems vary with social structure. Similarly, Eric Lenneberg (1953: 464–5) and Roger Brown (1958: 231ff.) have argued that Whorf's evidence for fundamental conceptual differences between Hopi and English speakers turns on literal, unsympathetic translations from the Hopi (cf. Devitt and Sterelny 1987: 177 and Pinker 1994: 60ff.). According to Maurice Bloch (1977: 290), Ladislav Holy, Milan Stuchlik (Holy and Stuchlik 1983: 10ff.), and Pascal Boyer (1994a: 112), the ethnographic evidence adduced for cultural differences in thought reflects a misplaced emphasis on religious beliefs and ritual discourse. The case is quite different when one turns to more practical matters. Ethnographers continue to find increasing evidence of a high degree of consensus across languages and cultures regarding color terms (Berlin and Kay 1969), biological taxa (Atran 1987, 1990, 1994, 1995; Berlin 1992; Berlin, Breedlove, and Raven 1973), and even patterns of legal reasoning in land disputes (Hutchins 1980). The psychologists Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner (1974) have questioned whether anything about human cognition can be inferred from ethnographic evidence for cultural differences in beliefs and language. Boyer (1994a: 22, 27; 1994b: 396), Christopher Hallpike (1979: 70–1), John Tooby, Leda Cosmides (Tooby and Cosmides 1989: 41–3; 1992; Cosmides and Tooby 1994), and Steven Pinker (2002) criticize the cultural constructionist position for assuming that the human mind is a blank slate that passively acquires a set of ready-made categories from a culture. This assumption, they argue, runs counter to current research on learning, perception, and other psychological processes. Tooby and Cosmides (1989: 44) also find this assumption suspect from an evolutionary point of view.

With the wealth of conceptual and empirical criticisms of the cultural constructionist thesis that have already been offered, one might be tempted to think that it has been put to rest and that we can move on to other topics. However, the thesis that reality is socially and culturally constructed continues to be supported by countless scholars in the humanities and social sciences. The very popularity of social constructionist