7 Standing Out and Blending in: Differentiation and Conflict

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A major development in psychology since the 1960s has been an increase in theorizing on the self and identity. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has fueled the most sustained theoretical and empirical efforts in this area. A central assumption of social identity theory is that individuals universally strive to achieve and maintain a positive and distinct social identity. While the centrality of 'positive' identity seems intuitively obvious and generally agreed upon (after all, positive evaluation seems so universally desired), that distinctiveness is desirable is a more complex and intriguing proposition. Distinctiveness can be rewritten as too different, alien, and bizarre. How do we handle the delicate balancing act between standing out and blending in to achieve a comfortable state, the 'optimal distinction' that Brewer (1991) postulated? In this chapter, we take up this relatively neglected topic and show how positioning theory offers a new understanding of social differentiation, one that can inform the study of intergroup conflicts. We will illustrate our perspective by presenting two empirical studies on the role of differentiation in social conflicts.

Previous Research

Lemaine's (1974) studies remain seminal in the social differentiation literature. He created 'open situations' where research participants could introduce their own criteria of social comparison. For instance, children at a summer camp were organized into two groups and competed to build the best hut. One group was 'disadvantaged.' It had less suitable building material, an unclear division of labor, unstable leadership, and comparatively poor organization. This group planted a garden and argued with the judges and other team for recognition of this 'new criteria' of comparison. Lemaine interpreted these actions as the disadvantaged team's attempt to gain equivalence to a superior opponent, to be different but of equal value. Because one team had a garden and the other did not,

an 'apples-to-apples' comparison was contestable, a situation the disadvantaged team tried to exploit.

In a second study by Lemaine (1974), psychology students wrote two job applications, one before and one after they were given information about their competitor. The competitor was either very similar to subjects, had unique work experience, or studied at a highly regarded university (Grande Ecole) in France. Participants who competed against the latter two types of opponents used a compensatory differentiation strategy; they added the criterion of 'clinical' knowledge to their original job application letters and also emphasized their positive personality traits. Both new criteria are difficult to measure and thus prevent easy comparisons between candidates.

In 'open' comparison situations, Lemaine (1974) remarked, those with disadvantaged positions may try to gain equal recognition for new dimensions of comparison by 'bringing into play the appropriate verbal strategies' (Lemaine, 1974, p. 36). Though Lemaine did not analyze these 'verbal strategies' in detail the way discursively-oriented psychologists might today, he did explain the team's behavior by relying on the team's account of its intentions. We can elaborate on Lemaine's remark and note that planting a garden is not in and of itself a compensatory social differentiation strategy. The disadvantaged team's 'verbal strategies' provide the indispensable evidence for this interpretation. Had this team built a garden but then proceeded to deride it as a useless addition, it would have been inappropriate for Lemaine to have labeled their actions as a compensatory differentiation strategy.

Our more general point is that one observable activity can take on many different meanings, and to understand which is in play, we need to consult with the social actors themselves. As Lemaine noted, the garden-planting team members 'engaged in a vigorous discussion with the children in the other group and the judges – the adults – to get them to admit that what they wanted to do was legitimate (ibid., p. 35).' The children displayed what value and function they wanted assigned to their garden. While Lemaine's brief comment above can be criticized – for tending to use discourse as a transparent 'window' into motives and for ignoring the role judges and the opposing team played in upholding or undermining the disadvantaged team's claims – his attention to how participants assign meaning to their activities afforded him insights that escape the purview of the dominant research paradigm.

With few exceptions (see e.g. Branwaithe, Doyle, & Lightbrown, 1979), nearly all experimental studies of differentiation to follow Lemaine's (1974) have precluded research participants from explaining their behavior in their own terms. Instead, they are asked to rate pre-formulated statements or distribute points in ways that are pre-categorized by the researcher as denoting such and such intergroup strategy. Pre-formulated statements are treated as participants' own utterances, though only rarely is inquiry made into participants' interpretation of such statements or their reasons for circling 'mostly agree' versus 'completely agree.' Just as one activity (building a garden) can take on many variety

of meanings depending on the context and perspective of the social agent, so too can a pre-formulated statement.

Assigning a single, universal interpretation to an act (or statement) abstracts situated activities from the specific circumstances and normative concerns of the agent. 'Responses' are treated in purely representational terms, e.g. as merely denoting a pre-existing and rigid social identity. In this way, social identity and intergroup strategies are reified into things as concrete and unchanging as the 0 to 5 scales with which participants are required to communicate. Intergroup strategies become divorced from the evaluative process by which actors select one course of action over another. Since research participants usually complete these questionnaires in solitude, there is also a tendency to presume that relations of self to others (or even self to self) are built uni-directionally rather than relationally.

Despite their tendency to reify and atomize social identity as an entity existing in individual minds, the predominant experimental methods do not conduct individual level analysis. Instead, the ratings participants give to various statements are aggregated, though even earlier work questioned the meaningfulness of group means. Branthwaithe et al. (1979) for instance, pointed out that group means obscured the bimodal distribution of intergroup behavior in the minimal group paradigm – discrimination on the one hand and fairness on the other. Such convenient and conventionalized statistical manipulations erroneously transform mean scores into mean strategies for managing intergroup relations. Lost in these calculations are the strategies of actual persons.

The prevailing research paradigm also mislabels phenomena occurring in very specific laboratory conditions as generalizable. This situation results from allowing methods to drive theory. Revealing just such a mistep, Mummendey and Schreiber (1983) demonstrated that ingroup favoritism, theorized as a basic means of positively distinguishing one's group, is an artifact of the experimental procedures used to study this phenomenon and not a universal human tendency. Specifically, they showed that when people are allowed to evaluate ingroup and outgroup on different criteria, they do not exhibit ingroup favoritism. Hence, outgroup derogation might conceivably only arise when ingroup members are forced to compare themselves directly to an outgroup on identical criteria. If given the option – as is frequently the case in life outside the laboratory – people might tend to evaluate in- and outgroup members on different dimensions, allowing members to position their groups as different but equivalent. Mummendey and Schreiber (1983) suggested that a norm of fairness may guide such differentiation: 'As soon as a good result is possible for both groups at the same time ... it appears that the judgements are influenced in the sense of fairness (ibid., p. 395).' At the same time, the authors cautioned that positively judging an out-group's performance on a less valued dimension can be a subtle form of discrimination. This point underscores crucial to any analysis of differentiation is the meaning that participants themselves ascribe to comparison dimensions.

(Mummendey, Simon, Dietze, Grünert, Haeger, Kessler, Lattgen, & Schaferhoff, 1992) identified a second means by which ingroup favoritism vanishes, namely when people are told to distribute punishments rather than rewards. They referred to this phenomenon as the positive-negative asymmetry in social discrimination (Mummendey, Brown, & Smith, 1992). In an attempt to explain this pattern, Blanz, Mummendey, and Otten (1997) studied how onlookers judged the normative appropriateness of various positive and negative outcome allocations. Participants rated equal distribution as the most appropriate allocation of both rewards and punishments. Ingroup favoritism, i.e.disproportionately allocating negative outcomes to an outgroup, was deemed the least appropriate response within the minimal group situation. Blanz, Mummendey, and Otten (1997) suggested that people may apply a norm of fairness when distributing punishments. Their research again demonstrates how tried-and-true research methods may so narrowly limit participants' options that they foreclose meaningful, realistic alternatives and tempt psychologists to overgeneralize. Part of this situation results from adopting an unwaveringly causal account of human actions in the laboratory.

Mummendey and Schreiber (1983) are exceptional in that they explain social differentiation in the laboratory setting in normative terms. Most such research treats the person as a conduit of forces (independent variables) rather than a social actor oriented to cultural norms. This causal framework is built into the way that social differentiation is operationalized as a dependent variable, whose characteristics are fully determined by causally powerful independent variables. Indeed, the empirical research on differentiation has been so prolific that meta-analyses have already been conducted that measure the influence on intergroup differentiation of such proposed causal forces as level of intergroup distinctiveness (see Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004), size and nature of groups (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Mullen, Migdal, & Hewstone, 2001), self-esteem (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000), and the legitimacy, stability and permeability of status relations (Bettancourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001).

Intergroup Strategies As Self and Other Positioning in Normative Space

Positioning theory begins from the proposition that in social situations people are active (agentic) and oriented to norms that are socially upheld and historically situated. Hence, we can view intergroup strategies as acts of mutual positioning, i.e. evaluating the characteristics and actions of self and other in moral terms and with respect to relationally negotiated norms. The potentially reified notion of 'social identity' can be re-theorized as the positions people occupy (whether forced or willfully) in the 'local moral orders' (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003) brought about through mutual positioning. Achieving a positive social identity thus involves claiming positions – in a field of alternatives and in concert with relevant others – that are normatively upheld as morally good. This rendering is a direct descendant of Harré's (1984) identity projects.

This perspective challenges those approaches that treat the person as a passive medium through which independent variables exert causal force. The positioning theory approach to intergroup relations treats intergroup activities as intentional activities: people select from among a range of alternative actions that are granted moral valence and have moral implications. To understand how one intergroup strategy is chosen over another, we inquire into social actors' account for their actions with respect to alternative actions and to the people they deem relevant. The current convention of matching manipulated variables to outcome variables involves just the opposite, as this practice grants interpretive hegemony to the researcher's presuppositions about the social actor's apprehension of what was at stake during the episode under study.

The normative approach espoused by positioning theorists also recognizes that the meaning of people's activities are socially and historically contingent. This theoretical perspective is not inimical to laboratory experimentation as a method of inquiry. Even in a laboratory setting, actors position themselves in relation to relevant others (the researcher, other participants) and attend to perceived norms. Again, 'relevant context' is defined by the participant, rather like the 'psychological field' recognized by Gestalt psychologists. Although the respondent may complete his questionnaire in solitude or perform activities in a barren observation room, he does not cease to be a socially-embedded and normatively-oriented actor. In nearly all of the social differentiation literature, though, responses are analyzed strictly with respect to the manipulated independent variables picked out by the researcher. This practice enables precise statistical manipulations, but it either underplays or outright ignores the possibility that participants' activities are contingent on concerns not operationalized as independent variables or not obviously present in the experimental setting, either temporally or spatially. From here, it is a short step to interpreting laboratory-based responses as resulting mechanistically from factors endogenous to the brief episode under study.

In contrast, we see participants as actively negotiating intergroup positions for selves and others in a normative context. 'Intergroup strategies' are 'achieved through social interactions, collective discourse, and collaborative negotiation' (Moghaddam, 2006, p. 166). This process is inherently relational, a quality underscored by reframing 'social identities' and 'intergroup strategies' in positioning theory terms. Viewing social identities as positions in local moral orders helps illuminate how concerns about social identity are bound up with concerns about intergroup relations. Approaching intergroup strategies as mutual positioning in local moral orders emphasizes how strategies for securing 'positively distinct social identities' are also intergroup strategies.

Because we view people as invariably oriented to norms, we also see mutual positioning as an ongoing activity, a perpetual identity project (Harré, 1984). One's social identity concerns are ever present in social situations, even though empirical studies often create the opposite impression by reporting on 'results' and 'outcomes.' Our view is that there is no stepping outside of the continuous process of social identity construction, to view social identity [illegible] intergroup

relations as 'completed,' because each attempt at capturing 'social identity' or 'intergroup strategies' is a new act of construction carried out in a new context. Participants' reports (including questionnaire ratings) are enactments rather than mere representations of intergroup strategies; they are still photos of an ongoing and interactive process. While patterns may be discerned, specific instances are not 'instantiations' of transcendental causal laws. Instead, following Davies and Harré's (1990/1999) 'immanentist' perspective, orderliness in human activities is evidence of the normative orders that people actively negotiate.

In reframing intergroup strategies as interactive positioning and social identities as positions, we substitute a parlance that has tended to reify and mechanize activities like social differentiation with one that unequivocally treats humans as agentic, evaluative beings who continually position self and other in relation to relevant others and according to communally negotiated understandings of right and wrong, good and bad. While patterns may be extracted from people's actual interactive positioning practices, these patterns are always abstractions whose meaning and effects can only be discerned in locally situated activities as experienced from the participant's vantage point.

Differentiation and Social Conflicts

The concept of differentiation has been discussed in relation to economic production, following Adam Smith, the search for vacant spaces, following Charles Darwin, and the division of labor, following Emile Durkheim. In dialogue with these early thinkers, Mulkay and Turner (1971) developed a concept of social differentiation in their analyses of North African Islamic religious leaders, 19th Century French paining, and the scientific community. More recently, Moghaddam (1997) developed a critique of specialization in academia, the economy, and civic culture. Below, we report on two empirical studies that address a relatively neglected topic: differentiation as a means of managing conflict.

Study 1 – Job Applicants

In this study we used traditional experimental methods minimally supplemented with a free response task that allowed participants to communicate their understanding of the experimental manipulation. Following Lemaine (1974), we looked at how men (n = 34) and women (n = 52), Georgetown students, competed with fictitious 'higher' and 'lower' status opponents for a prestigious summer internship. Recruits were placed in one of four conditions. They either competed individually or were paired with either a local community college student or a Columbia University student. Profiles of the Columbia University or community college students' GPA and work experience were provided to participants. Students were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = little / no importance, 9 = highest importance) how much consideration the prospective

employer should give to each of three dimensions: academic institution, work experience, and grade point average. Students also rated the degree to which they were better than and different from their competitor (or partner) along these three dimensions on a scale of 1 to 9 (1 = not at all, 9 = completely). For each dimension, participants were asked to explain (in essay form) their ratings.

We will limit our discussion here to how Georgetown students rated themselves in comparison to a Columbia University student competitor or partner on the dimension of 'institution attended,' as this situation was thought to best exemplify the canonical one in social differentiation research, whereby a participant orients to a presumably higher status target. The Columbia student was described as having a GPA of 3.9 (of 4.0) and two previous internships at high profile organizations similar to the one for which they were applying. We were curious to see how Georgetown students would mutually position themselves in relation to this high status reference person. Based on similar work by Lemaine (1974) and Branwaithe et al. (1979), we predicted that Georgetown students would emphasize unique aspects of themselves and position these as assets. Previous literature provided less guidance on how Georgetown students would behave when paired with a high status partner to win a competition. Two possibilities seemed likely: 1) Georgetown students would distinguish themselves from their high status partner in order to complement the partner, or 2) Georgetown students would rate themselves as highly similar to the partner, so as to 'blend in' with the high status partner.

On average, Georgetown students gave their institutions similarly high importance ratings in both competitive and cooperative conditions (see Table 7.1). As predicted, Georgetown students who were told to compete with a Columbia student rated their own institution as more 'different from' than 'better than' Columbia University ($t[19] = -1.85$, $p<.10$). Only four of the twenty participants (20%) in this condition gave their institution a higher 'better' than 'different from' rating. Georgetown students' accentuation of difference rather than superiority was even stronger when they partnered with the high status Columbia student ($t[21] = -2.86$, $p<.01$), although average difference ratings were higher in the competitive versus the cooperative condition ($t[40] = 1.75$, $p<.10$). In the

TABLE 7.1. Mean scores (and standard deviations) of ratings given to academic institution as a job application criteria when partnered or competing with Columbia University student.

	The level of **importance** I want a prospective employer to give this dimension is	I am **better** than my partner / opponent on this dimension	I am **different** from my partner / opponent on this dimension	t
Competing (n=20)	6.7(.80)	4.95(2.06)	6.15(2.37)	-1.85*(df = 19)
Partnering(n=22)	6.73(1.03)	3.45(2.06)	4.91(2.22)	2.86**(df = 21)

*p<0.10, **p<.05

cooperative condition, only four of 22 (18%) participants assigned Georgetown a 'better' rating that exceeded its 'difference' rating. Georgetown students who formed cooperative pairs with the Columbia student also rated themselves on average as more equal to this high status reference person than did Georgetown students who competed with the Columbia student ($t[42] = 2.34$, $p<.05$). In future research, it would be interesting to investigate the reasoning of those participants who deviated from the mean pattern. For now, we will focus on those who conformed to the central tendencies of each condition.

Many studies on intergroup relations report statistical tables with mean scores as we have in Table 7.1 The conventional next step is to discuss how comparison with a competitor results in greater social differentiation (as measured by the difference ratings) than does comparison with a partner. Notice in this assertion the presumed cause-effect relationship between the manipulated independent variable and the participants' ratings: the social agent disappears from view. Furthermore, the 'finding' is discursively constructed as decontextualized and generalizable. To better understand how recruits actively managed the social comparison situations into which they were placed, we now turn to the participants' own explanations for their ratings.

Case 1: Distinguishing Oneself from a High Status Competitor

The Georgetown student below assigned high importance (7 of 9) to this aspect of her profile, although she did not rate Georgetown as far superior to Columbia (5 of 9). She did, though, rate her institution as more different from (6 of 9) than superior to her competitor's. Her ratings are in line with the aggregated results reported in Table 7.1. Given the pattern of her ratings, one might guess that she constructed 'difference' as a positive attribute. She did assign high importance to her institution even though she did not rate herself as far superior to the competitor in this regard. Her written justification displays her account of the experimental situation:

> Student A – I would like this trait to be given somewhat of a high importance because I think that people should be rewarded for hard-work & accomplishments. I do not think, however, that too much emphasis should be based on the prestige of the university attended b/c personal characteristics should also be taken into account.

This student briefly relates her avowed principles for how hiring decision should be made. First, she deems 'university prestige' as indicating 'hard-work & accomplishments.' This reading is evidenced by her contrastive use of 'however' in her second sentence. On the one hand, 'people should be rewarded for hard-work & accomplishments,' but on the other hand, 'prestige of university attended' (i.e. a symbol of hard-work & accomplishments) should not overshadow 'personality characteristics.' Her use of depersonalizing language – 'people' should be rewarded rather than 'I should be rewarded,' and disembodied 'personal characteristics' rather than 'my personal characteristics' – helps her caste her point of view as a general principle or rule rather than her own personal opinion.

We can observe how she uses these principles to her competitive advantage. While she rates herself as not much better than her competitor along the dimension of university prestige, she can be heard mutually positioning herself as having positive personal characteristics that can overrule any disadvantage along the 'university prestige' dimension. It is notable that Student A spontaneously draws attention to a dimension of evaluation that is difficult to measure, just as did Lemaine's (1974) job applicants.

Students B also rated her institution as more 'different' (8 of 9) than 'better' (6 of 9) than her competitor's, and she assigned very high importance (8 of 9) to this criterion. Her justification was as follows:

Student B – Although admission to Columbia is lower than to Georgetown, both are highly respected universities. Depending on the career field of the internship, Georgetown might have prepared me better than Columbia prepared the other candidate.

She can be heard refining the definition of a 'better' academic institution. While she submits that Columbia is more competitive, she subsumes both universities under a flattering, superordinate category of 'highly respected' schools. She bolsters the value of Georgetown too by suggesting that the fit of educational preparation to career field matters more than the pedigree of the educational institution. Thus, student B can thus be heard introducing a new, complex criterion of comparison that affords her potential advantages over her high status competitor. Hence, she mutually positions herself as positively distinct from her competitor.

Georgetown students who competed with Columbia students frequently positioned themselves as positively distinct from their opponent. While Table 7.1 shows that students reported being more 'different from' as compared to 'better than' their competitor, these ratings do not constitute unequivocal proof that Georgetown students positively distinguished themselves from competitors. Instead, participants own written justifications provide some a modicum of evidence for this interpretation.

Similar to Lemaine's (1974) job applicants, Georgetown students introduced and argued for the value of new comparison criteria that are difficult to measure. Georgetown students were also explicitly invited to supplement the three dimensions chosen by us (institution, GPA, and job experience) with up to three evaluative criteria of their own choosing, and to which they also assigned 'importance' ratings. Personality (n = 12, Mean = 8.0, STD = .4), extracurricular participation (n = 10, Mean = 6.5, STD = 1.1), and career goals (n = 6, Mean = 8.3, STD = .80) were the most popularly cited additional criteria. The high importance ratings assigned to these self-selected criteria suggest that students used these new dimensions to enhance their competitiveness, although we do not pretend to have access to the students' reasoning at the time.

The most convincing evidence for interpreting participants' judgment of their own 'difference' from their competitor as positive distinction is contained in their essay-form justifications. There, students argued for the relative importance of alternative as compared to original criteria. As in the case of Lemaine's

(1974) summer campers who employed 'verbal strategies' to gain recognition for their hut garden, our participants too deployed arguments that mutually positioned themselves as positively distinct from their high pedigree competitor. This strategy allowed them to avoid head-to-head competition along identical criteria.

Next, we will examine the pattern of responses from those Georgetown students who were partnered with a Columbia student to compete as a cooperative pair. We will then consider a field study and discuss the relevance of both studies to the general issue of social conflicts.

Case 2: Blending in with a High Status Partner

In this condition, Georgetown students were partnered with the Columbia student who had a GPA of 3.9 and two previous, relevant internships at high profile organizations. As in Case 1, after rating their academic institution along the three dimensions (importance, better, different), students were asked to justify the importance they gave to this aspect of their background. Students overwhelmingly emphasized how similar Georgetown and Columbia are. Comments included:

Student C (importance = 8, better = 5, different = 3) – University attended is important because there is a big difference between the education received at a very prestigious 4-year university versus, for example, a state school or junior college.

Student D (importance = 8, better = 2, different = 1) – I would [like an employer to give high importance to institution attended] because Georgetown and Columbia are both prestigious universities.

Student E (importance = 8, better = 5, different = 5) – We would have an advantage since Columbia's a good school and Georgetown is a good school.

These students position their academic institution as equivalent to their partner's. They can be heard attempting to 'blend in' with their high status partner by creating a superordinate category ('prestigious university', 'good schools') that includes them both and puts them on equal footing. Ten of the eighteen students who wrote essay responses in this condition spontaneously positioned the two universities as belonging to one high status category; the other eight did not draw comparisons. Three of the ten who displayed the pattern could also be heard attending to the charge that Georgetown is not as prestigious as Columbia, a situation that threatened to make the Georgetown student a detriment to the pair's competitiveness.

Student J – Columbia U. is a very high prestige school, but Georgetown is as well. I would like to see it [academic institution attended] considered, but not of total importance. (importance = 5 better = 3 different = 5)

Student K – I am surely different in that I have attended a different university, but in many cases if the student is serious about their education it doesn't make much of a difference. However, Georgetown may have provided me with some expanded opportunities. (importance = 6, better = 7, different = 5)

Student L – We both attend prestigious universities and therefore deserve almost equal credit. (importance = 7, better = 1, different = 1)

Student J argues that Columbia University is not unique in having 'high prestige.' Her contrastive but (Schiffrin, 1987), 'but Georgetown is as well,' functions to rebut any assertion that Columbia is more prestigious than Georgetown. This student rates Georgetown as more distinct from (5 of 9) than superior to (3 of 9) Columbia, but her written justification downplays the universities' differences and allots them equal status. This case illustrates our earlier point about how mutual positioning is ongoing: providing ratings constitutes one positioning act and essay responses a subsequent one. For this reason, the ratings and written justifications must be seen as sequential acts of positioning. The essay is not a simple 'representation' of the ratings.

Student K positions herself as 'different,' however she immediately diminishes the significance of this difference in her contrastive 'but' clause. This discourse marker signals to us that the unit to follow ('...but in many cases if the student is serious about their education it doesn't make much of a difference') undermines any attempt to equate difference with inferiority. Student K argues that earnest study may mitigate her being from a 'different' (i.e. lower status) university. She constructs this contentious claim in depersonalized language ('if the student is serious...') but then applies this 'rule' to her specific case in arguing that Georgetown may have afforded her 'expanded opportunities.' Student L places Georgetown and Columbia into one category ('prestigious universities'), and she assigns them equal status (1 of 9) and complete similarity (1 of 9). However, she only demands 'almost equal credit,' displaying her reluctance to mutually position her university as equal in quality and kind to Columbia.

In sum, Georgetown students who partnered with Columbia students overwhelmingly emphasized their institutions' equivalence by assigning them to a superordinate category. As partners, some Georgetown students also countered the unspoken charge that their school was less esteemed than Columbia. In contrast, Georgetown students who competed with Columbia students emphasized their differences. They constructed this difference as either 1) compensating for disadvantaged positions along other dimensions (e.g. university's admissions rate or prestige) or 2) as new evaluative criteria that made direct comparisons more difficult and claims of equivalency more convincing.

'Difference' thus carried dual semantic potential, as either positive or negative distinctiveness. Students' could explain their ratings in an essay, which constituted a second act of positioning. Without these essays, the dual semantic potential of difference would have been unsubstantiated and likely overlooked. Indeed, the paucity of such qualitative data in the social differentiation literature may help explain why, in theorizing positive distinctiveness as a primary motivational force, to our knowledge no traditional empirical studies have examined how people use similarity claims to ward off negative distinctiveness. While our results show a pattern of positive differentiation in competitive situations and similarity claims in cooperative situations, calling out these patterns inevitably abstracts social activities from their local meaning and functions. By performing

a ground-up analysis using participants' own reports of their reasoning, we could identify patterns in function as well as form.

Study 2 – 'Poor' Women Doing Beauty

The first study we reported involved university undergraduates in a constrained experimental setting, where they provided limited explanations for their differentiation strategies. We now turn to a very different cultural context, Caracas,Venezuela, and an open-ended interview method designed to elicit less constrained narratives reflecting differentiation. A total of 64 women were interviewed in Spanish by the first author. Our analysis here is based on ten interviews selected because the participants identified themselves as 'low class,' 'poor,' from a 'humble family,' or a 'slum' resident. Most interviews took place at a community clinic, where interviewees were patients and employees referred to us by a female gynecologist. One participant was approached at an open market. Interviews were transcribed by the first two authors, resulting in a 13,300-word document in Spanish. Analyses were conducted on the original Spanish transcripts, though our English translations are provided here.

The interview situation permitted participants to mutually position themselves and others in an on-going conversation with the first author. The general topic of conversation was a quotidian practice, female beauty. Venezuela has won more international beauty contests than any other country in the past 50 years, and its beauty industry flourishes. Venezuelans spend one-fifth of their income on beauty products (Sosa, 2001), and two-thirds of Venezuelan women report thinking about their looks 'all the time,' compared to under one-third of U.S. women (Society, 2001). However, as in other industrialized societies, female beauty in Venezuela is tightly linked to financial resources. The extracts below are from interviews with women who could not afford the costly beauty rituals of wealthier women. While it is tempting to presume from market research that our interviewees value beauty, participants' own talk provides the only evidence for what beauty signifies to them. In the following extracts we show how they positioned themselves using social categories in ongoing conversation about female beauty.

Case 1: Gaining Positive Distinction – Standing Out

After talking casually about Rosalinda's beauty rituals and her opinions about cosmetic surgery, the interviewer asks her how she justifies her expenses on beauty products.

Excerpt 1 [42.8:50]

1 Rosalinda: Well, I think he who has money, and he who can spend it however
2 he wants, can spend it however he wants. In that respect, (I) don::'t,

(continuing) to use money to be more attractive which is, or to be um, beautiful. If it has to be done, hey. If there is (money), that, that is each person's decision. If you have it, you spend it the way you want. Because those who don't have (it) restrain themselves in many ways, right?
Naomi: Yes.
Rosalinda: The same in my, in, in my particular case I don:::'t, don:'t, uh... don::'t . Since I don't have money to spend on that I don't, I just don't spend it. I spend it on things that are useful for me and for my children.

Rosalinda evades the interviewer's question. Instead of justifying her consumption of beauty products, she constructs a depersonalized narrative with two central characters: the 'haves' ('he who has money' in line 1) and the 'have-nots' ('those who don't' in line 6). Whereas the 'haves' are free to consume as they wish, the 'have-nots' 'restrain themselves.' In line 9 Rosalinda locates herself within this narrative as a 'have-not': she does not 'have money to spend on that,' where 'that' indexes beauty products. Instead of conforming or attempting to conform to wealthy women's beauty rituals, Rosalinda distinguishes herself as spending her money on 'things that are useful' for her and her children. She insinuates that beauty products are useless, and she contrasts these with her own rational and responsible purchases.

Thus, Rosalinda mutually positions herself before the interviewer and in relation to the characters she voices as a virtuous and devoted mother. While she may deviate from the beauty standards established by the 'haves,' she deflects this negative distinction by introducing a new criterion of social comparison – 'useful' consumption – that affords her positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis the 'haves.' Rosalinda's positioning move resembles that observed in Georgetown students who competed with higher status Columbia students and argued for the importance of personal characteristics, extracurricular activities, etc. Both introduce new criteria of comparison by which they may gain positive distinctiveness and compensate for shortcomings along other dimensions.

Rosalinda's strategy involves making a virtue of a necessity. Instead of, for example, complaining about the wealth inequalities that prevent her from conforming to the wealthy women's beauty practices, Rosalinda constructs her fiscal restraint as responsible mothering. She unwittingly neutralizes the injustice of economic inequalities.

Case 2: Averting Negative Distinction – Blending in

Excerpt 2 [43.5:45]

Naomi: And how often more or less do you go to the salon?
Marta: No ((I)) always. No, no, I hardly ever go to salons.

3 But I do try to have my hair a little like that.
4 I color it, I (blow-dry) it, I ( ).
5 Naomi: You do that?
6 Marta: Yes, I make myself a ( ) and I end up like this.
7 Naomi: Wow, fantastic.
8 Marta: So, I got to the salon on special occasions.
9 But the rest of the time I try to fix myself up a little.

Marta reports 'hardly ever' going to salons, an admission that introduces a threat to her positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987): Marta fails to value female beauty and willfully neglects her personal appearances. She counters this threat with a 'contrastive but' clause (Schiffrin, 1987): 'But I do try to have my hair a little like that (line 3),' where 'like that' indexes the 'look' acquired at salons. Her utterance functions as a defense to convince the interviewer that Marta at least tries to conform to culturally normative expectations of beauty. By blow-drying and coloring her own hair, Marta can look 'like this,' where 'this' is discrepant from 'that' salon look. In line 8 Marta again admits her infrequent use of salon services. Once again she follows a face threatening admission with a contrastive but clause (Schiffrin, 1987): 'But the rest of the time I try to fix myself up a little (line 9).'

Thus, we can identify parallel structures in this excerpt. Marta's admission of counter-normative beauty practices (not attending salons) raises negative moral implications. She deflects these by positioning herself as striving to conform to beauty norms through at-home care. Her positioning strategy resembles that of Georgetown students who were paired with Columbia students and emphasized their similarity to their high status partner. Both Marta and the Georgetown students used similarity claims to combat negative distinctiveness.

Case 3: Standing Out and Blending in

The remaining excerpts from a conversation with Elena show how interactive positioning unfolds over a complex series of conversational turns. Elena was interviewed at a hot, congested street corner in the informal market, where she sells women's lingerie. The first interview question follows.

Excerpt 3 – Elena [38.0:40] Standing out

1 Naomi: Why do the Venezuelans win so many international beauty prizes,
2 for what reason do you believe?
3 Elena: But, well, apart from that beauty, to only be beautiful is not, is
4 not important. It's important to be a person who is lucky, and simple,
5 uh –intelligent, uh, and that one is interested in one's country's affairs.
6 Beauty isn't everything because, you see, what's it worth you to be
7 beautiful on the outside and on the inside you're a monster? And then
8 you don't think about anything and nothing is important to you.

Elena evades the interview question and, like Rosalinda in Excerpt 1, asserts the value of characteristics unrelated to beauty (i.e. 'luck,' 'simplicity,' 'intelligence,' and interest in one's country). External beauty and inner virtue are dichotomized, such that beauty is worth little if 'on the inside' one is thoughtless and indifferent, in short a 'monster.' Elena suggests a moral order in which women who lack beauty can positively distinguish themselves by possessing 'inner' virtues that compensate for or outweigh the value of beauty 'on the outside.' Such virtues provide an alternative basis for social comparison and moral evaluation, much as did 'responsible mothering' in Rosalinda's case or 'personality characteristics' for Georgetown students competing with Columbia students. In Excerpt 4, Elena is asked to personally confront normative beauty expectations.

Excerpt 4 – Elena [38.3:00] Blending in

1 Naomi: As a Venezuelan woman, do you feel pressured to look good?
2 Elena: Yes, I like looking good, uh. I have to say, I'm turning thirty-eight
3 and sometimes I look at my face in the mirror and see that
4 yes I have many little wrinkles,
5 but one goes out on the street to work and what happens (to
6 one) is that one gets full of the soot of car exhaust.
7 But one always has one day on which to
8 put:: on one's make-up, go about pretty, well-groomed.

Elena assents that as a Venezuelan woman, she likes to look good. Instead of claiming to embody her ideal, though, she complains about her 'many little wrinkles.' She indirectly explains her predicament by talking about the prototypical female street vendor (referred to obliquely as 'one') who 'gets full of the soot of car exhaust.' Elena attends to the implication that street workers are always full of soot in her second 'but' clause (lines 7–9): 'but one always has one day' (per week) to look beautiful. This clause can be heard to shield Elena from the insulting inference that she never looks any better than at present. Furthermore, by using the inclusive pronoun 'one', she positions all street vendors as complying with Venezuelan norms of beauty at least one day per week. Elena could have chosen a compensatory strategy and, for instance, argued that soot is the price responsible mothers must pay to support their children. Instead, Elena positions street vendors as 'blending in' with normative beauty culture when they can. Her strategy resembles Marta's, who admitted her infrequent salon visits but mutually positioned herself vis-à-vis wealthier women as also wanting to achieve a 'salon look.'

Notably, Elena's narrative is not a call to protest poor working conditions or social pressures to look attractive. Her use of the simple present tense ('one goes out on the street,' 'one gets full of the soot, 'one always has one day,' etc.) indicates repeated or usual activities and lends her narrative a timeless and naturalized quality (Thompson, 1990), as if the routines of working in grimy conditions and spending one's only day off 'going about pretty' have always been and will always be part of the natural order of things. While Elena's narrative

does not challenge economic inequalities, it does help female street vendors preserve a positive moral position: far from being social deviants, street vendors use the scant time and resources they have to look 'well-groomed,' i.e. to display that as Venezuelan women, they too 'like looking good.' Excerpt 5 continues from Excerpt 4 and exemplifies a more ambiguous series of positioning moves.

Excerpt 5 – Elena [38.3:30]

9 Naomi: Do you go to the salon, too?
10 Elena: Yes, I go to the salon once in a while.
11 Naomi: Frequently? Like, how many times a month, more or less?
12 Elena: Well, I go at least weekly to (blow)-dry my hair.
13 Naomi: Weekly? Wow.
14 Elena: Yes. I fix my hair, I (blow)-dry my hair.
15 But to color it, not, not, very often. I already have roots ( ).
16 At the very least
17 the Venezuelan woman likes to go about very well-groomed.
18 With any little detail but always well-groomed.

Elena positions herself ambiguously in relation to the prototypical street vendor she voiced in prior talk (in Excerpt 4). Initially, she responds that she goes to the salon 'once in a while.' After the interviewer's request for specification (Garvey, 1979), though, Elena aggrandizes this claim to 'at least weekly,' a frequency surpassing that of the prototypical street vendor voiced in Excerpt 4.

However, Elena signals that her beauty rituals are inadequate when she complains of her conspicuous 'roots' (line 15). As in Excerpt 4, she follows her personal complaint with a depersonalized narrative. The central character ('the Venezuelan woman') indexes the prototype of all Venezuelan women, not only street vendors. 'At the very least,' the Venezuelan woman 'likes to go about very well-groomed (line 16–17).' Elena can be heard constructing 'being well-groomed' as a normative preference – and not necessarily the achievement of Venezuelan women. This interpretation grants Elena moral cover: her roots may show, but she can still claim to like being well-groomed. However, this utterance is not univocal. Being well-groomed may also be heard as a Venezuelan woman's duty and a minimum social expectation, one that Elena fails to meet.

Elena's final utterance in Excerpt 5 is also rich in implications. 'With any little detail but always well-groomed' (line 17) may index the minimum virtue all Venezuelan women naturally possess (at the very least they are always well-groomed) or the minimum standard by which all are judged as deviant or compliant (they might have other accessories, but they should always be well-groomed). Elena's previously expressed complaints ('many little wrinkles' and exposed 'roots') threaten to locate her as a deviant woman before the interviewer, herself, and the ideal Venezuelan woman whom she voices. She can be heard mitigating this threat by characterizing the Venezuelan woman as requiring very little to qualify as 'very well-groomed': she needs just 'any little detail,' indexing perhaps Elena's own nominal salon expense (blow-drying). Elena is not fully

redeemed in this interpretation, though, because the prototypical Venezuelan woman is 'always well-groomed.' This achievement lies beyond the reach of the street vendor voiced in Excerpt 4, who has only one day to be 'well-groomed.' Whether Elena would argue for a position among the perennially well-groomed is conveniently left ambiguous.

General Discussion

Elena's interview illustrates our central reasons for suggesting a positioning theory approach to social differentiation, whereby social differentiation is understood as a form of interactive positioning, and achieving a positively distinct social identity is reframed as achieving a positive position in locally (i.e. in the conversation) negotiated moral orders. First, the extract demonstrates how people achieve their moral positions through mutual positioning, even in a research interview. Both Elena and the interviewer index characters from the social world, and together contribute to constructing normative beauty practices. Rosalinda too voiced characters and staged a dialogue among the 'haves,' 'have-nots,' interviewer and herself.

Second, Elena's interview demonstrates how positions often can not be univocally characterized as 'positive' or 'negative', 'distinct' or 'similar.' Elena could be heard both deviating from and conforming to normative beauty practices. Furthermore, normative expectations are left ambiguous. 'Any little detail but always well-groomed' can be taken either to indicate that Elena's beauty practices meet or fall short of social expectations. This ambiguity and Elena's indirectness (in using the third-person narratives) serve meaningful relational functions: she can make claims and assume positions without having to explicitly defend them and risk engaging in a mutually face-threatening debate with her interviewer (or with the narrative characters she creates). This socially useful ambiguity is obliterated in traditional social differentiation research, where participants are forced to take a fixed and univocal position, for instance by rating themselves as enduringly 'better' or 'different' from members of another group. Study 1 shows how even in a brief free response task participants mutually position themselves in more nuanced ways than traditional questionnaires lead one to believe.

A pattern present in both studies is that people displayed their concern to be positively distinct and positively similar, where 'positive' is normatively constructed in the local context. Stated another way, 'distinctiveness' carries dual semantic valence and is contextually contingent. Study 1 shows how, when placed in direct competition with a high status opponent, people construct themselves as positively distinct, whereas when paired with a high status partner, people position themselves as similarly 'high status.' In Study 2, Elena's excerpts serve as an exemplar of the complex maneuvers all interviewees employed in negotiating positive moral positions in conversations, where conformity and deviance are locally and mutually defined and redefined, often ambiguously. Interviewees confronted with [illegible] about beauty

at times introduce alternative dimensions on which to measure human worth, such as responsible mothering, intelligence, patriotism, humility, and generosity. Such criteria serve as compensation for shortcomings along other dimensions, just as in Lemaine (1974) and in the Georgetown competitors of Study 1.

What stands out most in applying positioning theory to actual conversations is that distinctiveness never completely ossifies as 'positive' or 'negative.' As long as the possibility exists for another turn in the conversation, for another act of mutual positioning, there is an open-endedness to intergroup relations and identity projects. It is this open-endedness that permits both mutual repositioning over time and entrenchment into set storylines. This potential can be harnessed by actors, including practitioners of conflict resolution, to avert conflicts or deepen them. As analysts of social conflicts, we can examine the moves of various actors and come to some reasonable interpretations of events. We can attach narratives that appear to fit. However, we should take care not to over-determine what may be intrinsically ambiguous acts, for we may be surprised by what the next positioning move brings.

Appendix: Transcription Notations

always	Underlining indicates stress or emphasis in the speech
don::'t	Colons indicate drawn-out speech
( )	Inaudible
(blow-dry)	Partially audible
((I))	Double parentheses indicate words not present in Spanish transcription
It's mostly from the –?	Hyphen indicates cut off word or phrase
But I do try	Bold indicates element(s) discussed in the analysis

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