Thinking With Socio-Mental Filters:
Exploring the Social Structuring of Attention and Significance*

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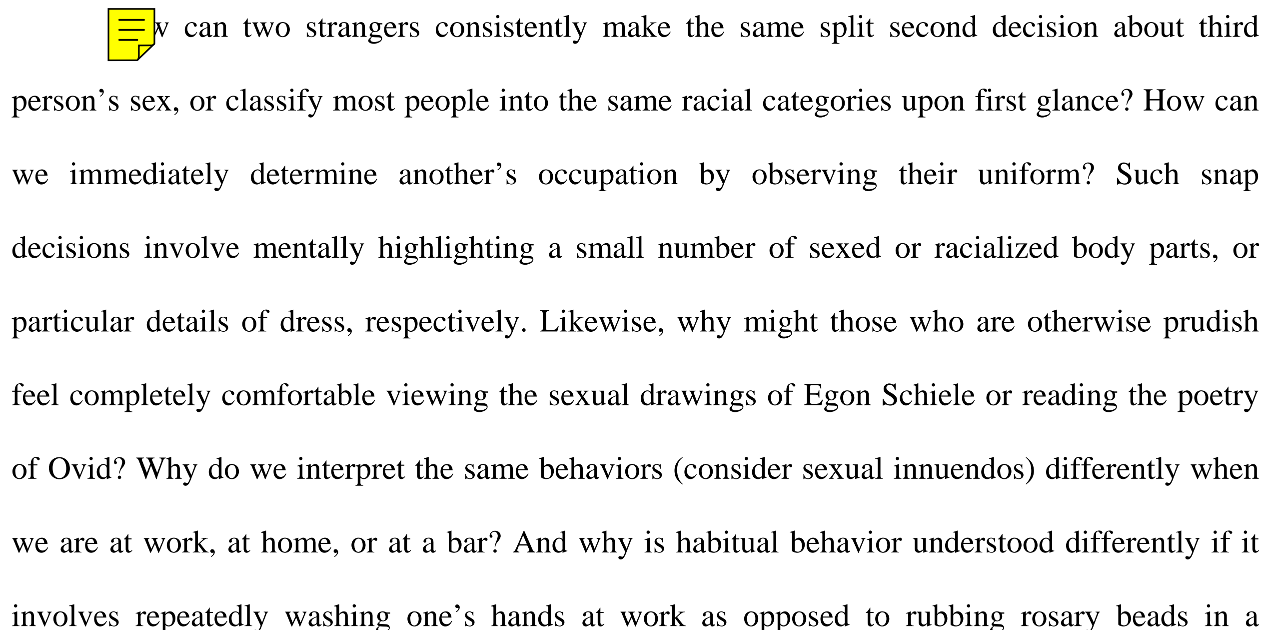
This paper considers the function of socio-mental filters, cultural mechanisms structuring attention and significance that shape empirical reality into intersubjective experience. As a metaphor, filter brings to mind a perceptual "colander" that the world passes through when it is perceived and given meaning in social context, highlighting the vast amount of technically perceivable data that is normally blocked from our awareness, as well as the socio-mental concentration of the information that passes through to be perceived. Thinking with the metaphor of the filter thus directs our attention to what is normally disattended and therefore rendered insignificant. The acknowledgement of this perceptual residue is one of the strengths of the filter metaphor. A further strength of the metaphor is that, as both noun and verb, filter is evocative of multiple dimensions of socio-mental perception. As a noun, filters suggest cognitive constraint, as the material substance of a filter comprises the blockages, rather than the holes, and as such embodies what is not allowed to pass through. As a verb, filter directs our attention to the dynamic character of the empirical world when understood as always created through a process of filtration. We highlight the ways that both foundational and contextual cultural influences on the structuring of experience, identity, and collective memory can be fruitfully understood as processes of filtration. We further draw attention to the intentional and often strategic use of filters in social life.

I. INTRODUCTION: CULTURE, FILTERS, AND COGNITION

What are Socio-Mental Filters?



How can two strangers consistently make the same split second decision about third person's sex, or classify most people into the same racial categories upon first glance? How can we immediately determine another's occupation by observing their uniform? Such snap decisions involve mentally highlighting a small number of sexed or racialized body parts, or particular details of dress, respectively. Likewise, why might those who are otherwise prudish feel completely comfortable viewing the sexual drawings of Egon Schiele or reading the poetry of Ovid? Why do we interpret the same behaviors (consider sexual innuendos) differently when we are at work, at home, or at a bar? And why is habitual behavior understood differently if it involves repeatedly washing one's hands at work as opposed to rubbing rosary beads in a

church? Similar aspects of human behavior are perceived differently in different environments, as different details become highlighted and backgrounded in different contexts.

One might assume that all of the distinctions alluded to above are made based on clear-cut, objective features of empirical reality; but a close examination of any of these cases would reveal a surprisingly complex empirical reality with multiple potential interpretations, most of which we never even consider in the unproblematic functioning of daily life. Whether the details of a person's body or of a particular behavior, the meaning we attribute to the phenomena we encounter is largely determined by the particular details we attend while ignoring others.

In order to direct our attention to this dynamic structuring of our awareness, this paper considers the function of *socio-mental filters*, cultural mechanisms that structure attention and significance and shape empirical reality into intersubjective experience. Socio-mental filters refer to the cultural grid that shapes the perception of every experience and interaction we have. They are mechanisms of culture that exist between the natural world and the ways in which we experience it as social beings.

Notice the metaphor of the filter. There are filters in cars that allow some things to pass through and filter "impurities" out. There are filters that get added to cameras to allow different amounts of light (or only certain kinds of light) to pass through in order to create a particular visual effect. There are filters to remove toxic elements from water. Filters in general function to let "desirable" parts pass through a certain gateway, while blocking anything defined as "undesirable."

Just as a camera filter is the gateway between the subject and the film, and a water filter between water as it enters a processing plant and that which is suitable for drinking, socio-mental filters form social gates of perception. They mediate the transformation of the world outside of

us into the understanding of the world that exists in our minds, as "what we experience through our senses is normally 'filtered' through various interpretive frameworks" (Zerubavel 1997: 24).

Although they do mediate individual perception, the filters we are concerned with are the properties of cultural systems. Socio-mental filters work to let culturally approved details enter our awareness, blocking all information that does not fit the normative mold, so that we might share an understanding of day-to-day experience with those around us. Such a view is decidedly sociological, suggesting that we see things not simply as individuals (the position of empiricism) or human beings (the universalist view), but as members of particular social groups with "optical norms" (Zerubavel, 1997: 8-9). Thus filters structure the shared perceptions, beliefs, and meanings upon which social groups, from broad cultures to smaller sub-cultures, are grounded. Filters are shared gateways of cognition that are a fundamental part of the "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986) belonging to social groups.

Methodology:

Because filters are elements of culture functioning on a socio-mental level, and are mostly implicit in their operation, we cannot directly observe them at work or analyze them as we would a text, a cultural artifact, an interview, or other standard forms of data. Methodologically speaking, then, studying the operation of socio-mental filters requires unorthodoxy.

Accordingly, in this paper we bring together a variety of eclectic examples of filtration. Although the differences among these quite divergent examples are striking, in the spirit of Eviatar Zerubavel's "social pattern analysis" (2004) we focus on the similarities among them, the general social patterns we can uncover by comparing seemingly very different entities across

different levels of analysis. From specific examples of filtration, through comparative social pattern analysis, we attempt to illustrate some of features of filters in general.

Further, Goffman's notion of the social framing of human experience provided the conceptual foundation from which our analysis springs and, for that reason, we see ourselves as continuing to develop a strand of anti-empiricist theory that is directly traceable to him. The social construction of experience is not a new idea, nor did it entirely originate with Goffman (see also: Mannheim 1936; Shibutani 1955; Bateson 1955 [1972]; Berger and Luckmann 1967 [1966]; Kuhn 1970 [1962]; Schutz and Luckmann 1973; Fleck 1981 [1935]; Davis 1983; Zerubavel 1991, 1992, 1997, 2002; Chayko 2002). But we believe that the concept of filter, briefly but powerfully alluded to by others (Schutz and Luckmann 1973; Davis 1983; Zerubavel 1997; Prager 1998; Eyerman 2004), allows us to improve upon and extend the project Goffman began with his notion of frame. We hope to demonstrate the analytic breadth and depth that is possible when thinking in terms of socio-mental filters.

Filters and Filtration: Grammatical Flexibility

One of the beautiful things about thinking with the metaphor of filter is that it encompasses both the process of using the attention structure and the structure itself. Used as a noun, the concept of socio-mental filters directs our attention to the perceptual grid that the world passes through when it is perceived and given meaning in social context, the pre-defined system of pathways and blockages through which we view reality. In this sense, filters can be seen as producing a state of *cognitive constraint*, requiring us to notice some details at the expense of others and requiring certain meanings be adopted while rendering others outside the range of our *cognitive options* (DeGloma 2003). Thinking with the metaphor of the filter thus directs our

attention to what is normally *disattended* and therefore rendered insignificant. The acknowledgement of this *perceptual residue* is one of the strengths of the filter metaphor; this important element of socio-mental perception has not been highlighted using other similar concepts, for example the social-psychology concept of schema.

Used as a verb, the concept of filter (as in *to* filter) directs our attention to both the active employment of such a cultural tool as well as to the dynamic character of the empirical world when understood as always created through a process of filtration – the *process* of pushing reality through the pre-defined holes of the noun filter, fitting it into the available forms, shapes and categories. The meaning of nakedness, for instance, undergoes a transformation when filtered through different social contexts, such as an art gallery, a dark park, a nudist retreat, and a bedroom. In each context, certain details of nudity are highlighted (its aesthetic qualities, its threatening qualities, its universal, mundane qualities, and its sexual qualities, respectively)—while other details, those that would lend themselves to the alternate meanings, are ignored.

None of these meanings are undeniable or given in a fixed empirical reality; quite the contrary, these meanings are the result of the active structuring of perception through a process of filtering out a large quantity of potentially perceptible details while concentrating our focus on a particular few. Here we may talk of culture in action – the process of eliminating some elements, and thus concentrating others, that results from passing the world through a "cultural colander," disputing the common notion of a fixed, undeniable, and obvious reality, and instead revealing reality as a socially determined process.

II. FILTERS AND FILTRATION IN SOCIAL LIFE

Whereas frame analysis (Goffman [1974] 1986) focuses on the distinction between a particular content (a painting, for example) and what it is not (the surrounding wall), socio-mental filters direct our attention to a culturally determined structural lattice that allows some information to pass through while blocking the remainder. Keeping this distinction in mind, and highlighting other distinctive features of the filter metaphor as we proceed, we will now briefly discuss the functioning of foundational and contextual filters in social life, emphasizing their impact on the construction of experience, identity, and collective memory in each case. We will further address the intentional manipulation of these filters by individual agents and social movements.

Foundational Filters:

The concept of socio-mental filters allows for an analysis of what we will call "foundational" levels of perception, emphasizing the structure of perception within Goffman's radically under-explored "framework of frameworks" ([1974] 1986: 27), directing our analysis to the ways that culture, in a macro-level Durkheimian sense (Durkheim [1912] 1995), impacts the attribution of meaning in social life by blocking some information from our awareness while allowing other information to "pass through." We are considering the ways in which broad cultural systems and worldviews serve to mediate between the natural world and our experience of it, determining which "raw data" is relevant while filtering out the remainder. The concept of *foundational filters* allows us to consider the structure of attention associated with such macro-level phenomenological standpoints.

Foundational filters are true to their name, in that they form a foundation for unproblematic everyday functioning within a given culture, spanning times, spaces, and contexts.

The concept of frame does not account well for this foundational level of social influence; by definition, foundational influences are those that one cannot put a frame around. They do not have defined beginnings or endings. Given their foundational character, exiting foundational filters is not so common or easy to achieve. Beyond entirely changing one's cultural habitat, exiting foundational filters requires significant immersion in an alternative cultural system. One of the reasons that paradigm shifts (Kuhn 1970 [1962]) and "culture shocks" are actually so shocking is that they involve switching foundational filters, and thus altering the structure of attention with which one makes sense of the world.

For instance, one's experience of sex (as taboo activity or natural phenomenon, for example) largely depends on which "worldview, paradigm, belief system, ideology or ethos" (Davis 1983: 166) one subscribes to, and thus through which one filters otherwise undefined sexual content. While an exposed penis at the beach will be shocking and highly marked from the "Jehovanist" perspective, under which its differences from the rest of the body and its sexualized meaning are emphasized, it is likely to be hardly noticeable from the "Naturalist" point of view, under which such differences are "irrelevant." Each sexual belief system filters the human body through a different "cognitive-normative grid" (ibid: 165-172).

Further, the foundational "cognitive framework" through which we filter our experiences largely determines our experience of safety and danger, as the "Cautious," the "Confident," and the "Neutral" worldviews determine what is marked as dangerous and what is not (Simpson 1996). Like the sexual filters mentioned above, these foundational filters mediate human experience by determining some information to be relevant, and thus meaningful, and other information to be relatively mundane.

We likewise filter our experience of organic material through broad cultural filters in order to determine what is (and what is not) edible. As Zerubavel points out, for instance, it has nothing to do with intrinsic empirical differences why we eat chicken but not parrot and cow but not horse. We only experience cow and chicken as more edible than horse and parrot because we filter our perceptions of these animals through the foundational categories "pet" and "food," which lead us to highlight the differences between them and ignore the similarities (Zerubavel 1997: 54). Similarly, our culture often determines what we do, and do not, experience as laughable (Davis 1993). Such foundational filters can be particular to certain cultures and can also span cultures, being associated with larger worldviews, most notably religion; the exposed parts of the female body, for example, take on radically different meanings for Islamic fundamentalists and Unitarians.

Foundational filters are further used both to ascribe identity and are shared properties of collective identities. In the first case, we attribute identity to others, such as a sexed identity, based on the foundational filters through which we perceive them (Friedman 2004). When viewing the human body, for instance, a very small number of parts are highly marked determinants of another person's sex. The much larger number of body parts which are "unsexed" in our culture are ignored or otherwise unnoticed, essentially filtered out of our perception. Whether we are dealing with sex, race, beauty, or cleanliness, a focus on the filtration process highlights the way that socially shared structures of attention and disattention contribute to the ascription of identity, and thus to our culturally founded understanding and classification of others.

In the second case, which focuses on the subjects as opposed to the object of identity construction, identity is constructed around shared foundational filters. Catholics, for example,

share particular worldviews through which experiences (such as pregnancy) are filtered. In perceiving a fetus, traditional Catholics highlight its human biological characteristics in order to ascribe a particular meaning to the fetus (life). Such a foundational filter has become fundamental to the Catholic identity. Pro-choice atheists, on the other hand, highlight the non-living characteristics of the fetus (lack of development and lack of sentience, for example). An understanding of the construction of identity as taking place around shared socio-mental filters highlights the ways that "thought collectives" (Fleck 1981 [1935]) share particular ways of filtering experience, jointly recognizing specific details as relevant, and thus sharing common meanings. With this framework in mind, cultures, as well as religions and schools of thought, can be defined as large collectives that share a set of foundational filters.

Finally, foundational filters are as relevant to the interpretation of the past as they are to experience and identity in the present. Cultural groups attend to specific events (Baumeister and Hastings 1997) and personas (Schwartz 1987, 1990; Frisch 1989) despite others, and this structure of mnemonic attention comes to define the present day collective and contribute to its solidarity. Shared filters are thus fundamental features of macro-level "remembrance environments" (Zerubavel 1997: 81), as the structure of what is attended and what is disattended determines the meaning we attribute to past experiences and events. American slavery takes on a different meaning, for example, when filtered through the progressive/modernist narratives of the Harlem Renaissance as contrasted with the tragic/redemptive narrative associated with the teachings of Marcus Garvey (Eyerman 2004: 92). A different meaning is also attributed to slavery (as well as the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, or child sex abuse) depending on whether one filters this historic experience through a *culture of survivorhood* (DeGloma 2004) or a traditionalist perspective. Survivor movements, for example, highlight events that signify

perpetration and atrocity, emphasizing negative affect as opposed to any aspect of the past that might present it in a more favorable light. In each case above, different aspects, details, and ramifications of the past become prominent depending on which filter is employed.

In short, the concept of foundational filters allows us to explore the important relationships between the broad cultural structuring of our awareness and the meaning we attribute to our experiences in the world. Furthermore, in structuring knowledge and meaning, foundational filters further provide for the socio-mental classification of people, things, and experiences into categories and orders of hierarchy. Foundational filters are thus fundamental to the discursive or productive power (Foucault 1978) inherent in the production of knowledge and categories, in that they structure our attention to facilitate the creation of degrees of significance as well as similarities and differences.

Contextual Filters:

While the concept of frame focuses our attention on the organization of the boundaries *around* any given context, such as a bedroom, an art museum, or a television show, the concept of *contextual filters* shifts our focus to the organization of attention and relevance *within* particular contexts. Even within a particular frame, certain details are noticed at the expense of others, rendering, for example, a child's toy sword more relevant than his hair color within a play-fighting frame (see Bateson [1955] 1972), or violent and disturbing details of details of one's past more relevant than countless other details in the context of a psychotherapy session (see Prager 1998: 1-16). Stated another way, filter analysis heightens our focus on how context determines what we see and what we ignore within any given frame of reference. As Davis has put it, the concept of socio-mental filters "directs attention to the *modifications* experience undergoes as it passes through a contextual scheme" (Davis 1983: 285 n. 17, emphasis added).

If the concept of foundational filters has Durkheimian roots, then the concept of contextual filters is rooted in Weber's theory of value spheres (Weber 1946 [1915]), as our analysis of contextual filters emphasizes the logics associated with multiple realms of activity in society, focusing on their respective attention structures. Such an analysis thus runs counter to the logic of Goffman's concept of "primary frameworks," defined as a base perspective without any "prior or 'original' interpretation" ([1974] 1986: 21), focusing instead on an ever-present and multifarious variety of possible interpretations *without* any "base" or "original" interpretation. We mean *context* broadly to include places, environments, times, institutions, or situations that establish a clear *field of relevance* within which our awareness is structured and meaning is attributed. Whereas exiting foundational filters is difficult (if not impossible), we exit contextual filters all the time as we enter and leave different "contexts." Contextual filters get layered on top of foundational filters, temporarily altering the shape and pattern of the lattice that experience passes through.

The concept of contextual filters allows us to conceptualize the ways that different contexts provide socio-mental filters through which our experiences become meaningful. Thus we experience food and money differently depending on whether we are at home or at work (Nippert-Eng 1995: 60-67) and genital touch differently depending on whether we are in the context of the bedroom or the gynecologist's office (Emerson 1970), in each case emphasizing different characteristics of otherwise empirically quite similar sensory experiences. Likewise, any time we enter an institutional building we adopt a contextual filter. Thus, yelling is unnoticed on floor of the stock exchange (though not in the bathroom of the building) or at a sporting event because it is "irrelevant"—unmarked—whereas yelling in a library or doctor's office is impossible not to notice. The empirically identical act of yelling takes on entirely

different meanings in the different contexts. Our interpretation of any given experience, then, is the result of the context, specifically the contextual filter, which instructs us in what to highlight and what to ignore.

The notion of filter once again specifically directs our attention to questions about relevance and irrelevance, or what elements are "filtered out" and what elements are allowed to pass through a filter and thus become significant to meaning. We must disattend the similarities between libraries and the Stock Exchange and accentuate their differences in order to "properly" ascribe meaning to yelling in the different contexts. Similarly, we are mentally primed to seize on cues that signify the differences between running away from danger and running just for the sake of running. We must apply a contextual filter to the act, filtering out the similarities and highlighting the smaller number of differences, in order to ascribe a different meaning to each case.

Just as different environments (churches, bedrooms, and dark alleyways, for example) provide for contextual filters, so do different times. Consider the way in which traditional western families experience meals at 7:00 a.m. and meals at 7:00 p.m. differently, which requires ignoring all of the similarities between the meals, including the purpose of the experience (eating), the use of the same plates and utensils, and possibly even the consumption of the same exact food (bread and potatoes, for example, are staples of both breakfast and dinner). Note also the differences associated with "night-time" and "day-time" in terms of both the compensation adults receive for work (Zerubavel 1985 [1981]) and the way children experience visits by magical beings (Clark 1995). Further, consider the differences in the experience of 11:59 p.m. on December 31st and 11:59 p.m. on August 14th. In each case, the different experiences are created through a process of filtration: we mentally focus on the differences between the two time

periods and disattend all of the potential similarities. Different time periods thus provide socio-mental filters through which otherwise similar experiences take on different meanings.

Further, specific contexts can provide socio-mental filters that render certain aspects of identity (whether of self or other) relevant and, by necessity, others irrelevant. For example, we ascribe different identities to people depending on where we meet them. This socio-mental process involves constructing others' identities by highlighting certain details while ignoring others. Female-to-male transsexuals, for example, are often read as “male” in small towns. But in metropolitan areas, where the context provides the category "butch," they can also be read as "butch-females.” The difference lies not with the individual’s gender performance, but rather the shape, structure, and quantity of the holes in the contextual filter. Similarly, we are likely to have a different interpretation of someone if we met them at a party as opposed to if we had met them at a business meeting, since each context demands that we recognize (and ignore) different details of a person's appearance and personality.

In addition to their role in the ascription of others' identities, contextual filters are also used in order to formulate our own identities at times through emphasizing certain contextually shared characteristics at the expense of differences. Individuals often come to identify as survivors in the context of group therapy sessions and consciousness raising meetings by emphasizing the traumatic details of their past (DeGloma 2004). Similarly, problem-drinkers come to identify as alcoholics in the context of A.A. meetings (Howard 2000), emphasizing common problems, turning points, and recovery trajectories.

Finally, the concept of contextual filters allows us to consider the structuring of attention involved when the past is viewed through different social contexts. Like foundational filters, contextual filters provide for “remembrance environments” (Zerubavel 1997: 81), but at a

different level of permanence (more transitory and fleeting in experiential terms) than those associated with broad cultures and macro-level thought communities. Thus different facets of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods are portrayed in African-American history texts as compared to more general history text books,[1] and different details of American slavery are highlighted in African-American owned versus white-owned plantation museums, giving the past different meanings (Eichstedt and Small 2002). Further, one's autobiographical past often takes on different meaning in the context of psychotherapy as compared with other contexts, such as when constructing a resumé. Upon engaging these various contexts, different aspects, details, and ramifications of the past are promoted at the expense of other possibilities.

Environments, times, fields (consider science, art, or religion), and institutionalized interactions (consider the context of being pulled over by a police officer, no matter where the geographic location!) all provide us with contextual filters that structure our attention, and thus our understanding of significance, in socially shared ways. Given the temporary and fleeting nature of contextual filters, we can come to understand our daily lives as involving a relatively constant transformation of meaning. As we move from context to context, we interpret our experiences according to the respective filters that each provides. What is highly marked in one context becomes unremarkable in the next, and so on.

Intentional Filtration:

The concept of *intentional filtration* allows us to consider the ways in which actors and groups knowingly reference and employ foundational and contextual filters in order to attribute meaning to particular experiences. Such an intentional use of these cultural tools involves the

[1] Based on a preliminary review of several history texts. Inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Propaganda of History." Pages 711-729 in *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*.

conscious attempt to produce an intersubjective reality for specific purposes. When two lovers, for example, “play doctor” they are mutually adopting a medical-professional filter to temporarily transform the character of their interaction for sexual purposes. Such an active employment of context to transform experience also provides for the appeal of baseball fantasy camps, Mormon handcart treks, and Civil War reenactments. In each, the contextual filter through which the activity is perceived involves playing-up certain details of experience and identity (those that support the fantasy) and playing-down other features and details (particularly those that would signify a continuity with quotidian life) in order to transform the experience itself.

Frame analysis falls short in accounting for how and why some individuals or social groups strategically highlight particular *details* of identity, experience, or history at the expense of others. When a political organization like Vietnam Veterans Against War attributes meaning to the Vietnam War, highlighting previously unattended details, such as the massacre of Vietnamese civilians or the psychological symptoms of American veterans, or when transgendered people perform identity by playing up certain sexed details of their bodies and downplaying others, particular socio-mental filters are strategically employed toward desired ends. Unlike Goffman’s discussion of “fabrications” (Goffman [1974] 1986): 83-123, 156-200), the filtration metaphor does not require that we think in terms of the “truth” or “falsehood” of contradictory perceptions. Stated differently, in Goffman’s formulation there is a Reality, and the fabricator is aware of it. What "fabrication" precludes, however, is the analysis of multiple equally "legitimate" competing perceptions.

Social movements, for instance, often strategically employ filters in order to attribute alternate meanings to political activity. One form such a strategic filtration can take is historical

analogy (Zerubavel 2003: 48-52). When a contemporary peasant-based socialist movement in Mexico calls itself the "Zapatistas," or when, in the year 2000, out-of-town college students working on an independent political campaign for City Council in New Brunswick, New Jersey call themselves "freedom-riders,"[2] they are not only bridging the past and present, but are strategically employing a socio-mental filter through which contemporary movement experience takes on meaning, deliberately highlighting continuities with particular historical precedents while downplaying potentially important differences. Further, the form that a social movement organization takes, such as a labor "union" (Clemens 1996),[3] a "survivor" movement (DeGloma 2004), an anarchist "collective," or an underground "cell structure," itself provides a distinct contextual filter through which movement activities become meaningful.

Intentional filtration can also provide a means for the rationalization of deviant behavior. Thus a Catholic Priest pedophile can explain his interactions with his children victims as being "like playing patty-cake with the boys in the sandbox" (Scheper-Hughes 1998: 303), filtering what is otherwise seen as sex abuse through a context that emphasizes the benign game-like attributes of the interaction (see also DeGloma 2003). Similarly, the Nazis strategically drew on a hygienic filter to engineer the meaning of mass killings in the death camps ("showers") as well as the elimination of the international Jewry in general ("social hygiene"). Such an intentional filtration, along with their use of other filters, such as a bureaucratic filter (Bauman 1989), helps to explain how such a system of genocide can be maintained, as well as how Nazis themselves were able to "split" their military selves from aspects of their lives grounded in different contexts, such as family (see Lifton 1896).

[2] New Brunswick People's Campaign for City Council. April – November 2000.
[3] In "Organizational Form as Frame: Collective Identity and Political Strategy in the American Labor Movement, 1820-1920," Clemens makes a similar argument using Goffman's language of frame analysis.

The concept of intentional filtration further allows us to consider the ways that actors consciously reference and manipulate contextual and foundational filters in both the performance and ascription of identity. When, for example, adults interact in teen chat rooms on the internet, they are intentionally drawing on a contextual filter in order to "pass" as younger. Other forms of "passing" can also be understood as examples of intentional filtration, as when a transsexual or transgendered person strategically highlights and disguises certain aspects of his or her body, or when someone deliberately emphasizes certain visual or linguistic cues, and de-emphasizes others, to pass as a different race or nationality. Likewise, other types of disguises call on contextual and foundational filters. When thieves and F.B.I. agents, for example, pose as garbage collectors, they deliberately highlight certain culturally recognizable cues to signal the application of the contextual filter "sanitation worker," thereby rendering unseen and irrelevant any perceptual information that would expose them.

Even more common is the invocation and manipulation of filters related to style. In certain geographic areas, wearing "gang colors" intentionally communicates that one is to be understood through a pre-defined set of categories and meanings, thus calling attention to certain aspects of identity and downplaying or backgrounding others. Wearing a certain style of jeans can also communicate identity, invoking foundational filters of race, class, and nationality through which one's appearance is then filtered. Similarly, when punks wear safety pins as jewelry, for example, they signify that the "punk" identity filter should be applied, but they also further invoke and refuse the hegemonic meaning of safety pins, which is that they are supposed to be hidden, not highlighted (see Hebdige 1979: 26, 90, 117).

Finally, the concept of intentional filtration allows us to consider the ways that individuals and groups manipulate contextual and foundational filters in order to attribute

meaning to history and construct collective memory. By highlighting different details of the past, John Kerry's presidential campaign and the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were able to engineer radically different personas for Kerry depending on whether they highlighted his heroic war activity (Purple Heart), for instance, or his anti-war activity (throwing back of the medals). Likewise, the Republican National Convention and Michael Moore's film “Fahrenheit 9/11” highlighted different historical details of September 11, 2001 in order impute radically different meanings to President Bush in his capacity as a leader.

In addition to the conscious emphasis of some historical details and ignorance of others, strategic mnemonic filtration also involves emphasizing a specific “causal nexus” (Baumeister & Hastings 1997: 290) through which a past event can take on meaning. Thus the American Civil War (ibid.) is conceptualized differently depending on whether the past is filtered through a southern or northern account of history, each side attributing blame to the other for starting the war. Similarly, the early history of Northern Ireland takes on a different meaning when filtered through the Republican accounts of the Sinn Fein and the Royalist accounts of the Ulster Unionists, each group emphasizing different national origins and historical turning points. Further, depending on the filter employed, certain “events” take on different beginnings and endings. The discovery of America, for example, takes place at a different time as perceived through the standard western foundational filter, which highlights the "discovery" and downplays the prior existence of other groups in America, as opposed to an Afro-centric filter or a Native American cultural filter (see Zerubavel 2003).

The potential application of different socio-mental filters to the “same” event can result in tension between alternative structures of attention, since such an act often takes on clear moral and/or political implications. Many situations where filters are intentionally applied, notably as a

social movement strategy, are thus marked by the potential for dispute or conflict concerning which meaning or identity ought to be appropriately associated with a given event, experience, or individual. Just as switching contextual filters leads us to perceive difference in otherwise empirically similar data, minor intentional variations in attention – playing up a specific detail or playing down another – can lead to radically different meanings associated with the same experience.[4] Thus two social movements with conflicting accounts of the past, for example, can agree upon more than they dispute and still be considered to be "in opposition" to one another.

Individuals also intentionally employ filters to ascribe a particular meaning to their biographical past. Such filters often take structured narratological forms (Hankiss 1981) and involve presenting a past that "fits" with one's contemporary presentation of self and present objectives. Whether a social movement or biographical strategy, intentional mnemonic filtration highlights important ways that individuals and groups employ socio-mental filters in order to consciously attribute meaning to past experience and "produce" the past for the objectives of the present.

Whether in service of the creation of experience, identity or history, intentional filtration involves *perceptual agency*; a deliberate deployment of foundational and contextual filters and a "working knowledge" of culturally available determinants of attention. As such, intentional filtration focuses our analysis on the manipulation of the acts of attending and ignoring the variety of details that are technically available to all who perceive a given subject matter.

Conclusion:

Frame analysis and social filter analysis each highlight different processes involved with the social organization of perception, and, as such, the metaphor of filter captures dimensions of

[4] Ann Mische. Personal Communication. Wednesday 9/22, 2004.

perception that the metaphor of frame does not. By directing our analytical focus to the structuring of our awareness, the concept of filter highlights the vast amount of potentially perceivable data that is normally blocked from our awareness, as well as the socio-mental concentration of the information that passes through to be perceived. As socio-mental "colanders" operating on a variety of levels of social organization, filters work to structure the perception of empirical realities and create intersubjective meaning. Thinking with socio-mental filters, we suggest, offers a number of theoretical advantages for our understanding of the socio-cultural structuring of cognition, and thus ought to be included in our theoretical toolkit.

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