

Socrates, Skinner, and Aristotle: Three Ways of Thinking About Culture in Action¹

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The cultural turn has been one of the major shifts in sociology over the last two decades. Though nearly everyone now agrees that culture matters, how it matters is not terribly clear. What, exactly, is culture supposed to do? In this essay, I articulate two ideal-typical—though often implicit—ways most sociologists have thought about culture’s role in action. Although no single sociologist or piece of research fully embodies either ideal type, I believe they are real tendencies in the field that have real consequences for how research is designed, undertaken, and understood. After outlining these approaches, I subject them to an engagement with cognitive science. This is not out a desire for reductionism but, as I will show, because a crucial difference between these perspectives is their implicit model of how human beings perceive, acquire, store, retrieve, and act on the symbolic information that surrounds them every day. This exercise will lead to the conclusion that both perspectives are incomplete and will point toward a synthetic approach that can shed new light on how culture matters for action.

KEY WORDS: action; cognition; culture; situation; values.

INTRODUCTION

The cultural turn has been one of the major shifts in sociology over the last two decades. Culture is everywhere, from studies of bar patrons to the welfare state, in subfields from social movements to stratification. Nearly everyone now agrees that culture matters, but how it matters is not terribly clear. What, exactly, is culture supposed to do? If, as Weber claims, sociology is “a science concerned with the subjective meaning of action,” and if culture refers to the social webs of meaning that help organize these subjectivities, then we can justly claim that understanding how

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culture matters is imperative for all sociologists, not just those who “do culture.” But given the sometimes arcane debates engaged in by cultural sociologists, scholars outside the subfield may be even less clear about how to think about the role of culture in their work.

In this essay, I want to articulate two ideal-typical—though often implicit—ways most sociologists have thought about culture’s role in action. I hasten to add that while no single sociologist or piece of research fully embodies either ideal-type, I believe they are real tendencies in the field that have real consequences for how research is designed, undertaken, and understood. After outlining these approaches, I subject them to an engagement with cognitive science. This is not out a desire for reductionism but, as I will show, because a crucial difference between these perspectives is their implicit model of how human beings perceive, acquire, store, retrieve, and act on the symbolic information that surrounds them every day. This exercise will lead to the conclusion that both perspectives are incomplete and will point toward a synthetic approach that can shed new light on how culture matters for action. I will spend the rest of the essay sketching this perspective and considering how it could improve sociological research. A final note: as a heuristic device, I associate the three approaches I discuss with a famous name that suggests something of its central organizing principle. I have found this useful, but I hope it is not taken further than is warranted.

SOCRATES: ACTORS AS DELIBERATORS

The first perspective on culture in action is based in Parsons’s interpretation of Weber’s value-rational action. Because of the propositional and discursive character of this approach, I call it the *Socratic model*. In the most general terms, it holds that people have beliefs about good and bad, right and wrong, worthy and unworthy that they have internalized from their societies and that these beliefs and values in turn motivate the choice of some actions over others. This view was formed in direct contrast to neoclassical economics, which regards preferences as idiosyncratic; nevertheless, they both rely on a means-ends framework for understanding action and motivation (see Joas, 1996). One can see a number of traces of this model in sociology, from Weber’s sociology of religion, to Parsons’s *Structure of Social Action*, to more contemporary exemplars like sociological rational choice theory, identity theory, and research using the World Values Study. And while not in sociology per se, many sociologists have been influenced by Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (itself explicitly “Socratic”) and by Rokeach’s and Schwartz’s work on values (see

Hitlin and Piliavin, 2004). I am grouping together a number of very different things here, but at core of these perspectives are two ideas: first, that *people acquire particular values through a process of socialization* and, second, that *these values play a vital role in causing behavior*.

SKINNER: ACTORS AS SENSE-MAKERS

Though it has not disappeared, and in some ways remains our baseline understanding, the Socratic view of culture in action has fallen out of favor. In fact, the “cultural turn” has been founded on a different understanding of culture in action altogether. I want to argue that the organizing principle of this new take on culture is that *culture’s primary role is to justify or “make sense of” constraints and pressures imposed by situations, social networks, and institutions*. Because the emphasis is on the action-shaping power of the external environment and the post hoc, epiphenomenal role of cultural reasoning, I label this the *Skinnerian model* of culture in action. This label is undoubtedly going to make some people uneasy. And admittedly, it is meant to be a bit of a caricature that will call attention to some of the (perhaps unintended) consequences of this view. I will nevertheless take care to justify this name.

Though of course no one has come out and asserted a straightforwardly “Skinnerian” view of culture in action, there is ample evidence for interpreting contemporary trends in strongly environmentalist terms (see Campbell, 1996). The clearest evidence is the explicit claim that internalized values or beliefs do not motivate behavior. Swidler (2001:86–87) states simply that “values are not the reason why a person develops one strategy of action rather than another.” Jason Kaufman (2004:340), summarizing this view, concludes that cultural values are simply “rationales for predetermined ends” and “a repertoire [people] use to make sense of their thoughts and actions.” This perspective does not hold that values play *no* role in action. After all, if someone realizes prospectively that she would not be able to justify a particular action to herself or to others in terms of some subjectively mastered and intersubjectively shared cultural script, then the action will be much less likely. The logic of values is a logic of presumptive justification rather than of moral motivation (see Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Mills, 1940; Scott and Lyman, 1968).

If values play no role in motivating action, then why *do* people move toward some “predetermined ends” rather than others? One solution is to argue that people are constrained by the fact that they cannot use cultural scripts that they do not know. This makes sense. But since one of this perspective’s main contributions is the insight that people know more culture

than they use, this “constraint” explanation is underdetermined. The main approach to solving this problem has thus been to look outward to the social environment. DiMaggio (1997:265, 274) argues that cultural repertoires are “situationally cued” to produce particular actions and grounds cultural schema activation in the “cues available in the environment.” Swidler (2001:202, 204) takes this environmental logic up a level, invoking institutions and their ability to control departures from the norm via “some set of rewards and sanctions” as well as through “monitoring and enforcement.” Thus, while one’s internalized repertoire of cultural knowledge or skills may impose limits on the range of possible actions, the new view of culture places the impetus for action outside the person.

ENGAGING WITH COGNITIVE SCIENCE

I have presented two ideal-typical views of culture in action, one that emphasizes the importance of motivating internal states and the other external pressures and constraints. Since the primary contrast between these perspectives regards their assumptions about the role of mental states in action, it makes sense to examine them in light of cognitive science. As DiMaggio (1997:266) rightly asserts, “such assumptions, while metatheoretical to sociologists, are keenly empirical from the standpoint of cognitive psychology” (see also Bergesen, 2004; Cerulo, 2002, 2006; Ignatow, 2007; Lizardo, 2007; Wuthnow, 2007).

Appropriately enough, DiMaggio’s main reason for preferring the environmental approach is cognitive: since we now know that much of the cultural information we internalize is contradictory and stored away without reference to truth value, it follows that it cannot (being contradictory) provide coherent motivation. Though framed in less cognitive terms, Swidler’s reasoning is similar. In accordance with the long tradition of Kohlbergian moral psychology, Swidler assumes that if cultural beliefs were motivational, they would have to be grounded in articulable cognitive structures. She further assumes that if beliefs were motives we would find consistency between the beliefs people articulate and their subsequent actions. (That is, if people *really* believed in the romantic model of marriage, they would divorce the instant their marriage no longer promised fulfillment—which most people do not). Failing to find either pattern, Swidler concludes that the (contradictory) beliefs her informants articulate must be causally unrelated to action itself.

These critiques are warranted. And they do, in fact, seriously problematize a straightforward value-rational model of action. Nevertheless, I want to argue that the case against internalized motives has been taken

too far. I will support this claim with two brief discussions from the literature on cognition. The first concerns *dual-process theories* of cognition, which allow for both conscious and nonconscious processes of learning and judgment. The second regards the debate surrounding *person-situation interactions*, a body of work that can help us to theorize better how cultural dispositions and environments reciprocally shape one another over time.

Dual-Process Cognition

Dual-process theory holds that humans have two basic cognitive systems, System 1, which is fast, “hot,” automatic, and unconscious, and System 2, which is slow, “cool,” reflexive, and conscious (see Evans, 2008). Building on this research, Jonathan Haidt (2005) contends that human cognition is less like a computer (the most common metaphor) and is in fact more like a rider on the back of an elephant. The rider, who represents our conscious processes, is the part of ourselves we know best—he can talk, reason, and explain things to our heart’s content. Yet, for the most part, he is not in charge. The elephant, which stands for our unconscious processes, is larger and stronger than the rider and totally unencumbered by the need, or ability, to justify itself. As the metaphor implies, while the rider may be able to train the elephant over time, he is no match for it in a direct struggle.

This view has implications for understanding how culturally shaped evaluations might influence action. In distinction to the Kohlbergian tradition (and the Socratic view more generally), there is mounting evidence that moral judgment occurs primarily through intuitions and emotions rather than through conscious reasoning (Ignatow, 2007). A new synthesis is emerging in moral psychology that finds that people make strong moral judgments (e.g., about consensual “safe sex” incest or dog eating) even when unable to provide coherent (or indeed any) reasons for those judgments (see Haidt, 2007). These moral intuitions and emotions are neither human universals nor purely situational in character, but covary with sociological factors like country of origin, level of education, and political affiliation. The value of this research is that it helps us understand that people’s judgments and actions can be shaped by substantive moral codes to which they do not have conscious access.

Dual-process theory also helps us make sense of how culture is differentially internalized. Although there is evidence that people file away bits and pieces of cultural scripts and draw on them strategically (say, to justify layoffs or their divorce), cognitive anthropologists have also

concluded that people *do* internalize some cultural schemas more deeply than others. D'Andrade contends that while more superficial levels of internalization concern classification, cultural knowledge, and social reasoning, the deepest levels are truly motivational: “[the] cultural shaping of emotions gives certain cultural representations emotional *force*, in that individuals experience the truth and rightness of certain ideas as emotions *within* themselves” (1995:229, emphasis in original). In other words, certain judgments can come to “feel right” to us, even if we cannot explain why. The fact that we then go on to mobilize a number of reasons—even contradictory reasons—to support our judgments does not mean that the initial judgments lack a substantive internal basis nor that they are incapable of motivating action.

The Person-Situation Dynamic

Of course, the fact that certain ideas seem important to us would hardly matter for a theory of action if situational pressures were consistently able to override or deactivate them. And there is, in fact, a growing literature on the power of subtle environmental signals to shape behavior in nonconscious ways (e.g., Wilson, 2002). Since many microsociologists hold a strongly situationalist view that regards persons as interchangeable within structures (e.g., Collins, 2004), the appeal of this research is understandable. But it is not the whole story. Examples of how the person and the situation both contribute to behavior can be found in a number of places (see Mischel, 2004), but I want to focus here on two: Milgram's obedience experiments and the Stanford Prison Experiment. I chose these because they are hammered into sociology undergraduates (or at least they were into me!) as paradigmatic cases of how social context can override individual dispositions. Even here, however, there is considerable evidence for both person and situation effects.

In his review of Milgram's experiments and subsequent research on obedience, Blass (1991) compiles a number of underappreciated results. He finds, for example, that when converted into the more familiar metric of R^2 , even Milgram's most powerful situational manipulations only explain between 13% and 18% of the variance in behavior. Furthermore, in both Milgram's original studies and subsequent replications, a number of dispositional constructs, such as moral development stage, authoritarianism, social responsibility, locus of control, and beliefs about religious and scientific authority, were found both to matter in their own right and to moderate partially the situational manipulations. Even in this archetypical “strong” situation, dispositional differences mattered.

However, these observations ignore a potentially more relevant point, which is that people can select into (or out of) many situations in their lives. This point was highlighted in a recent study that replicated the recruitment phase of the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) (Carnahan and McFarland, 2007). The authors used the text of the original SPE advertisement to recruit participants for a “psychological study of prison life” at three different universities. In a novel twist, however, they used the same ad—omitting only the words “prison life”—to recruit participants at three other universities. What they found was that the volunteers for the prison life study scored significantly higher on scales of aggression, authoritarianism, Machiavellianism, narcissism, and social dominance, and lower on scales of empathy and altruism than those who volunteered for the generic study. Based on these findings, the authors suggest that the original SPE is probably best understood as a person-situation interaction between individuals with tendencies toward aggressive behavior and a situation that facilitated the mutual reinforcement of these tendencies. Taking these strands together, the larger point here is that rejecting or minimizing dispositional effects on behavior is unwarranted, even in the strongest situations.

ARISTOTLE: TOWARD A “DUAL” DUAL-PROCESS THEORY

We can now step back and consider how we might incorporate these insights into a model of culture in action. What would such a theoretical model look like? Following the discussion above, I think it would incorporate two sets of dual processes: first, it would include a better understanding of conscious and unconscious processes and their relationship to cultural learning, cultural judgment, and social behavior; and, second, it would more adequately specify the dynamic relationship between the person and the environment. Because it incorporates unconscious learning, moral habits, and situated judgment, I call this the *Aristotelian model* of culture in action. To be clear, my reference to Aristotle here is *formal*, not substantive; that is, while I reject many specific aspects of his ethics (say, regarding slavery), I think Aristotle’s basic model of learning and action is quite consistent with what we know about human cognition (see Casebeer and Churchland, 2003). I want to explore some of the conceptual and methodological consequences of such a model, and argue that it would significantly improve our understanding of how culture matters in social life.

Knowing that people have both conscious and unconscious cognitive systems can help us make sense of the motivation/justification paradox in

cultural sociology. My interest in dual-process theory was inspired by my research on the moral cultures of U.S. teenagers. Much to my surprise, I found that even though teenagers choosing “do what makes me happy” on a survey question about moral decision making behave very differently from those who choose “do what God or scripture says is right” (even holding other factors constant), the way they *talk* in interviews about their judgments is remarkably similar. Both sets of teenagers claim to follow their “gut instinct,” “just feel,” or “just know” how to act before—predictably—offering various and sometimes contradictory moral justifications to back up these judgments. My research suggests that *everyone* does “what feels right,” but the substantive content of those feelings varies a great deal. In my case, the forced-choice survey question was better able to detect the moral biases underlying the rhetorical similarities because *recognizing* a moral script that “sounds right” is cognitively easier than articulating it from scratch. Put another way, talking about our mental processes with an interviewer is something like describing a criminal suspect to a sketch artist and answering a forced-choice question is something like picking a suspect out of a lineup. Given the right “lineup,” such questions may provide more reliable access than interviews to the cognitive processes most relevant to action. Using both methods together was vital, however. The interviews alone scream “cultural tools!” The surveys alone suggest that people act on their beliefs. But looking at both yields a new insight: that cultural biases at different levels of cognition can both motivate and justify action.

Where does this practical sense come from? For sociologists interested in this question, Bourdieu’s work is an obvious place to start.³ Formally, there are parallels between my findings and Bourdieu’s: the teenagers I talked to “just know” what is morally right in the same way Bourdieu’s respondents in *Distinction* (1984), for instance, “just see” what good art is. Research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience is in fact remarkably consistent with much of Bourdieu’s work (Ignatow, 2007; Lizardo, 2004, 2007). I have only two hesitations that prevent me from fully adopting Bourdieu’s model: first, it does not seriously consider the possibility that “discursive consciousness” (in Giddens’s terms) can, under the right conditions, override the habitus (see Haidt, 2001). Second, it overemphasizes the importance of *stratifying* structures—like the distribution of economic and cultural capital—as shapers of cultural bias. My own research on teenagers suggests that family structure, religious experiences, and media consumption are more important than factors like income and education

³ It is worth remarking in this context that Bourdieu opens *Logic of Practice* with a quote from Aristotle.

for shaping the moral sense (see also Sayer, 2005; Strauss and Quinn, 1997).

Because the relationship between internal states and external states is more complex than either Socratic or Skinnerian theory credits, a better understanding of this relationship is also vital. The “Aristotelian” model holds that experiences and relationships can shape one’s cultural biases, but also that these biases shape the kinds of situations and relationships toward which a person will gravitate (Thompson *et al.*, 1990). Most contemporary cultural sociology relies on the language of “mutual constitution” to think this through, which mixes culture and structure together and rules out distinguishing them on metatheoretical grounds (Archer 1996). It seems to me that language like this, though it sounds sophisticated, gets us very little in the way of understanding. A more grounded account of the social and psychological mechanisms involved can help us better understand the analytically distinct processes of how what’s “outside” gets “in” and vice versa. Margaret Archer argues persuasively that only by taking this temporal “morphogenesis” seriously can we really understand how these processes work. Some recent work on culture and networks suggests that prying these “mutually constituted” pairs apart can yield empirical fruit. Omar Lizardo (2006) shows, for example, that musical tastes can shape the structure of networks. David Smilde (2007) finds that some of his Venezuelan respondents actively put themselves in evangelical networks prior to conversion. Similarly, my own recent research following teenagers into adulthood has found that moral biases and social networks shape each other interactively over time in specific ways. Again, as was true with moral judgment, this process seems driven mostly by “practical consciousness” rather than conscious reasoning, with clear patterns in the data that are most often opaque to the respondents themselves.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that cultural sociology could benefit from an “Aristotelian” view of culture in action that better integrates dual-process theory and the person-social structure dynamic. Although I have stressed the limitations of current theory, I should note that some of the points I am making come directly out of the work I have critiqued. Swidler (2001), for example, acknowledges that culture can “use us”; the model presented here simply shows how automatic cognition might play a role in that. She also talks about habit; I extend this idea to include substantive habits of moral judgment as well as those related to particular strategies of action.

DiMaggio (1997) acknowledges the importance of dual-cognitive processes; I build on those insights and consider their implications for understanding motivation and justification. We are all working on the same problems, and I am grateful to have their shoulders to stand on. That said, understanding “culture in action” is more important to sociology than it has been in a long time, and we cannot rely on theories that obscure the ways that cultural dispositions actively shape behavior and the evolution of social structures. We need a theory that goes beyond being “open to” or “compatible with” these processes, but instead integrates them at its very core. I hope this essay is a step in that direction.

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