From Contradiction to Coherence:
Theory-Building in the Sociology of Culture

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"Culture" is one of sociology's central theoretical concepts.[1] Though cultural explanations of social phenomena fell out of favor for a time (for a variety of various political and intellectual reasons) they have returned to a place of prominence in the discipline.[2] Despite this "cultural renaissance," however, wide variation in scholars' use of the term has made it difficult for non-specialists to understand what role it might play in their research. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, some of these different uses even seem to be logically contradictory, with a minority of scholars regarding culture as defining the *ends* of action and a majority regarding it as comprising a *means* for action.[3]

For the past several years, my goal has been to work toward a more accurate theoretical model of the ways in which culture can be a cause or consequence of conduct, judgment, and choice. The objective of this paper, however, is not so much to outline a new theory as a *fait accompli* as to advocate for a theory-building *strategy* that has yielded—and I believe will continue to yield—intellectual fruits. I want to begin the discussion in an unlikely way—by considering an example from physics.[4] Many social scientists are rightly wary of trying to model social science directly on natural science, so let me assure any skittish readers that I am not about to indulge in an ugly bout of "physics envy." Instead, I turn to a particular historical example in the development of physics because it represents the successful handling of the kind of problem that is, I believe, at the core of the conundrum faced by contemporary theories of culture in action—the problem of having too many "good theories."

Wave-Particle Duality

In the early decades of the 20th century, physicists were in the undesirable position of needing two separate, mutually exclusive theories to explain the behavior of light. "Corpuscular" theory, which regarded light as composed of infinitesimally particles, had been developed by Sir Isaac Newton in the 18th century and dominated for many years. In the early 19th century, however, an ingenious experiment demonstrated that light behaves in ways explicable only in terms of a wave flowing through some undetectable ether. The experiment found when a light source shines through two narrow slits, the light coming through the slits acts just like the waves from two rocks dropped next to each other in a pond. Like ripples of water crossing paths, the waves amplifying and dampening each other in the process, light diffracts through each slit and interferes with itself, producing alternating patterns of light and dark bands on the surface beyond. If light were made up of something like little billiard balls, as Newton had believed, the observed interference pattern would not occur. The evidence was so

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[1] I use the term culture to refer to patterns of meaning that are neither biologically universal nor personally idiosyncratic. For similar uses, see, among others, Kluckhohn and Murray, *Personality: In Nature, Society and Culture*; Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes*; Hitlin, *Moral Selves, Evil Selves*.

[2] See e.g., Patterson, "Taking Culture Seriously"; Lamont and Small, "How Culture Matters"; Wilson, *More than Just Race*; Vaisey, "What People Want."

[3] See Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action."

[4] For this discussion, I rely primarily on Gribbin, *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*. A technical note: though for simplicity's sake I confine my brief discussion of wave-particle duality to light, these same properties apply to all matter. A personal note: I am indebted to Rebekah Estrada Vaisey for suggesting the analogy between culture and wave-particle duality.

straightforward and compelling that by the end of the 19th century virtually no one took seriously the old particle theory of light.

No one, that is, until a new set of scholars turned their attention to some areas where the wave theory of light performed less well and began cobbling together a set of mathematical proofs and experimental evidence that showed that in some contexts, light could in fact *only* be understood as made up of discrete "quanta" or particles (later called photons).[5] In a variety of experiments designed to test this particle theory, light turned out to behave *exactly* as if it were composed of infinitesimally small billiard balls, bouncing into other particles and transferring their energy and momentum. Nevertheless, none of these experiments could overturn the implications of the two-slit experiment, which remained stubbornly explicable solely in wave-theoretic terms.

Let me emphasize that it was *not* the case that "some evidence" existed for wave theory and "some evidence" existed for particle theory. *Only* wave theory was consistent with the results of the two-slit experiment and *only* particle theory was consistent with (for example) the existence of the photoelectric effect. The problem was, of course, that no simple model of physical reality could easily incorporate these true but seemingly mutually contradictory facts—we can't envision something being "wave-like" and "particle-like" at the same time. Thus, in 1924, Einstein concluded that "there are there therefore now two theories of light, both indispensible … without any logical connection."[6] Though some social scientists seem to believe that progress in natural science happens in a straightforward, linear manner, the overwhelming consensus in 1925 was that, "physics is at the moment very muddled."[7]

How was this seeming paradox resolved? The older generation of physicists (including Einstein, incidentally) never really came to terms with the implications of these contradictions, and many attempted to reconcile them using classical (what we now call "Newtonian") theory. But a new generation of scholars, unencumbered by training in classical theory, began to realize what was really needed: "not to decide between two theories … but to find … one theory with the capacity of both."[8] By abandoning the idea that "wave" and "particle" were opposite and mutually exclusive options and embracing the inherent strangeness of the atomic world, this new generation established what is now known as "quantum theory," a theory that integrates—at its core—the true but seemingly impossible idea that *everything* is both wave and particle at the same time.

None of this means that conflict or debate ceased in physics—they didn't. My point is that the shift that enabled progress was accepting that no single simple model nor any single type of empirical evidence could adjudicate once and for all between these seemingly contradictory theories. Only by wrestling directly with the seeming paradox of wave-particle duality could new insights be discovered and new problems be addressed. In exactly the same way, I believe sociologists need to wrestle with their own "two-theory" paradox if they ever want to understand how culture shapes people's lives.

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[5] The most well known of these are blackbody radiation and the photoelectric effect.

[6] Gribbin, *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*, 85.

[7] Ibid., 99, quoting Wolfgang Pauli.

[8] Ibid., 86, quoting W.H. Bragg.

Two Theories of Culture

      Cultural sociology in 2009 is "very muddled" for the same reasons physics was in 1925—we also have two theories, "both indispensible [yet] without any logical connection." As a shorthand, I will refer to these theories as the *Seamless Web* model of culture and the *Toolkit-Repertoire* model of culture. The Seamless Web model holds that culture is a coherent force that powerfully shapes people's thoughts and actions. The Repertoire model treats culture as a disorganized collection of strategies that people use to solve life's problems.[9] Both are intuitively plausible and—what is more—both are supported by good empirical evidence. As with physics a century ago, the problem is that researchers seem determined to establish the correctness of one or the other of these theories in a *confirmatory* mode without stepping back to ask, "What kind of model can make sense of *all* of the data?" This is a less-than-satisfactory state of affairs.

      Before proceeding to an analysis of these two theories of culture, it is worth clarifying exactly what I mean by "theory" in this context. In Abend's useful typology of the meanings of the word, the theories involved here are probably theories$_5$—ways of "looking at" or "talking about" a particular phenomenon.[10] Such theories can also be thought of as "models," because they are simplified representations of reality that attempt to highlight the essential elements of a class of phenomena while treating other elements as ignorable. They do not provide general statements about the relationships between variables (i.e., Abend's type 1 theories) nor explanations of particular phenomena (i.e., type 2 theories) but rather provide the *categories of explanation* that should be included in these other types of theories.

      The risk in developing a two-theory typology is that I leave myself open to the related critiques of oversimplification and straw-manning. As a response to the first, I am quite happy to agree that the typology is simplified or even *highly* simplified, but I cannot agree that it is *over*simplified. That would imply that I have distorted, rather than merely condensed, the basic logics of the perspectives under scrutiny. As with all theoretical models, the core principles of each theory can be distilled considerably without a great deal of loss. And though such an exercise inevitably ignores some local variation and nuance, I believe such analysis can reveal more than it obscures.

      As a preemptive response to accusations of "straw-manning," let me be clear that my typology addresses what these theories *actually do* rather than what their several proponents acknowledge a complete theory *must* do. This distinction is crucial. If a theoretical physicist asserted that there is certainly *some* way for particle theory to explain the two-slit experiment and acknowledged that a complete theory *must* ultimately do so, this would not be a substitute for offering a successful model of *how*, exactly, it can do so. In the same way, Seamless Web theorists' occasional acknowledgements of fragmentation and inconsistency and Repertoire theorists' sporadic references to thematicity and motivation are not substitutes for integrating these trouble spots into a coherent model. The theorists whose work I discuss are intelligent

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[9] DiMaggio, "Culture and Cognition."

[10] Abend, "The Meaning of 'Theory'."

and perceptive people. They know and acknowledge that their models—like all models—are imperfect and incomplete. Sensing this, they often come up with brilliant insights that are not really integrated into the overall logic of the their model. My critiques of these two paradigms are not claims of gross negligence or ignorance, but of simple insufficiency. Arguing that a model does not handle X adequately is not same thing as saying that its creator never considered or mentioned X. I hope readers will keep that in mind.

The Seamless Web Model

A popular definition of culture is that it involves (1) meaning that is (2) social in origin and (3) shared with others. In the early days of social-scientific inquiry, most scholars took the social and shared aspects of meaning to apply to societal groups (e.g., tribes, nations) as a whole and equally to all members of each particular group. This tendency to regard cultures as seamless wholes was likely due to the fact that, by the late 19th century, anthropologists had collected a great deal of data on "primitive cultures" from around the world. From the standpoint of European anthropologists facing smaller, less-differentiated societies and without the "local knowledge" that would allow them to see nuances, culture seemed to be a powerful, shared, integrating force that completely shaped the lives of those living within it.

Emile Durkheim constructed his theory of the relationship between society and culture largely through an examination of aboriginal cultures in Australia.[11] Durkheim, along with his collaborator and nephew, Marcel Mauss, treated culture as a set of integrating symbols, beliefs, and ideas that were the result of ongoing social interaction between members of a group. Culture, on this understanding, is what brings people together and unites them as members of a group. This orientation set the stage for one of the most common tendencies of the Seamless Web tradition—to identify "groups" and "cultures" in a one-to-one fashion: Group 1 "has" Culture 1, Group 2 "has" Culture 2, and so on. It is this implicit model that undergirds the tendency for people to talk about "Eastern culture" or "Western culture" as if they were coherent, discrete, and well-defined entities.[12] A closely related assumption, imported from the Weberian tradition of sociology, is that the "values" or "ideals" that people internalize as members of a culture inevitably lead to conduct consistent with them.[13]

The Seamless Web fusion of coherent cultures and value-driven motivation lasted well into the 20th century and remained the dominant model of culture until well after the Second World War. Although there were nuances and debates within this tradition, the overarching goal of the Web paradigm was to uncover those ideas, beliefs, worldviews, and so on that formed the basis for group solidarity, collective behavior, and individual conduct. Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, two leading proponents of the Seamless Web tradition in the postwar period, argued that even though "the overt or explicit culture almost always appears fragmentary at first… it is necessary for the student of culture to uncover the implicit culture and to detect whatever common premises may underlie apparently diverse and unconnected

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[11] Durkheim and Mauss, *Primitive Classification*.

[12] See e.g., Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*.

[13] Spates, "The Sociology of Values."

items of orientation."[14] Because research in this tradition downplayed observed cultural incoherence as an artifact of failing to look "deep enough," it is unsurprising that the Seamless Web tradition strongly emphasized the degree to which national, class, or ethnic cultures can be thought of as analytically discrete entities that shape individual thought and conduct.[15]

The Seamless Web consensus began to fall apart dramatically in the late 1960s, but some had criticized its assumptions much earlier. One major criticism was empirical: ethnographers and other researchers found that people typically work with a number multiple, competing, and even contradictory cultures rather than being steeped in just one, coherent culture.[16] Another critique was psychological: the "internalization of norms" approach favored by so many sociologists at this time was not consistent with the observed dynamics and tension of the human psyche.[17] In addition, psychological and sociological research had found something much less than perfect consistency between values or attitudes and behavior, casting doubt on the notion that internal states cause action.[18]

Anthropologists Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, considering the downfall of the Seamless Web model in their own field, provide a concise summary of its problems that applies equally well in sociology:

> [D]escriptions of "the culture of the X" seem old fashioned. In part, this is because we have learned how problematic it is, in a world of shifting and multiple identities, to label any set of people as "the X." But to a greater extent the problem lies with the phrase "the *culture* of the X"... [S]uch descriptions have too often made it sound as if all the X thought, felt, and acted the same way...[19]

The political context of the late 1960s gave these critiques additional weight. The social upheavals of that era were difficult to square with strong claims about cultural consensus or about the ways people internalize and act on social norms. If people learn values and norms from parents, schools, and churches, where did things like "hell no, we won't go" and "free love" come from? Politically conscious scholars also reacted strongly against what they saw as attempts to "blame the victim" for crime, family breakdown, and poverty in urban areas. To many, talking too much about "culture" and using "values" to explain crime, single parenthood, and welfare dependency was tantamount to blaming the poor for their own problems.[20]

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[14] Parsons and Shils, *Toward a General Theory of Action*. In reality, this work was much more nuanced on the level of theory, though its subtler insights were rarely put into practice. For instance, Parsons and Shils (pp. 7-8) argue that culture can be both "an *object* of orientation" as well as "an *element* in the orientation of action," and that even the most shared elements of culture were subject to "varying degrees of conformity, idiosyncrasy, creativity, and persistence" (21).

[15] See e.g., Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*; Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture*; Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*.

[16] See e.g., Hannerz, *Soulside*.

[17] Wrong, "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology."

[18] Swidler, "Culture in Action."

[19] Strauss and Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, 3, emphasis in original.

[20] Patterson, "A Poverty of the Mind"; Lamont and Small, "How Culture Matters."

Given the conceptual (and political) pitfalls associated with its dominant tradition, cultural analysis fell out of favor almost entirely, at least in sociology. Nevertheless, some scholars continued (and continue) to examine differences between national and intranational groups in the spirit of Seamless Web tradition. Recent research on the "culture wars" is very much within this tradition, though it takes liberals and conservatives rather than discrete social groups as its subcultures of interest.[21] Many sociologists who study religion also continue to take seriously the power of internalized "moral directives" and their research strongly supports the claim that such internalized states influence behavior.[22] Nevertheless, unlike its postwar heyday where such ideas were at the center of social research, the remnants of Seamless Web theory remain toward the margins of contemporary sociological theory. A mainstream focus on "culture" did not return in force to sociology until nearly two decades later, and by then its take on the subject was radically different.

The Toolkit-Repertoire Model

After exiling it to the wilderness for a decade or two, many sociologists began to realize that culture was something that they couldn't quite do without.[23] At the same time, memories of the deficiencies of the Seamless Web model were fresh enough—and its perceived political implications understood well enough—to make scholars wary of returning to it.[24] By the mid-1980s, the Seamless Web model—with its assumptions of simple internalization and value-based motivation—was not only out of fashion, but also seemingly inconsistent with the existence of cultural change and conflict as well as with empirical evidence of multiple and shifting individual identities. What sociology needed, it seemed, was a way to think about culture that did not treat people as belonging to single, bounded, cultures, nor that relied on a model of people as "cultural dopes" who automatically internalize and act on the values and beliefs that society instills in them.

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[21] For recent examples of sociological work connected to the broader Seamless Web tradition, see Inglehart and Baker, "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values"; Baker, *America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception*; Ryle and Robinson, "Ideology, Moral Cosmology and Community in the United States"; Davis and Robinson, "The Egalitarian Face of Islamic Orthodoxy: Support for Islamic Law and Economic Justice in Seven Muslim-Majority Nations." For examples of "culture wars" research that treats liberals and conservatives as distinct cultures, see Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*; Lakoff, *Moral Politics*. This work often differs from classic Seamless Web thinking in that it allows for different individuals within a particular society to possess different worldviews (e.g., absolutist or relativist, modernist or orthdox). Its main assumptions about the overall coherence and operation of culture, however, remain squarely in the Seamless Web tradition. Cultural psychology, for its part, continues to identify cultures in a "Group 1 has Culture 1" fashion. For a review demonstrating this tendency, see Cohen, "Many Forms of Culture."

[22] For example, see Smith, "Theorizing Religious Effects among American Adolescents," 20; Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. For a review of the research on religion and adolescent outcomes, see Regnerus, "Religion and Positive Adolescent Outcomes: A Review of Research and Theory." For a study that explictly attempts to separate out the effect of internalized, subjective states on behavior, see Longest and Vaisey, "Control or Conviction: Religion and Adolescent Initiation of Marijuana Use."

[23] See also Strauss and Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, 4.

[24] Patterson, "A Poverty of the Mind"; Lamont and Small, "How Culture Matters."

The "Toolkit-Repertoire" model was sociology's answer to the limitations of the Seamless Web. In what has become a foundational statement of this new paradigm, Ann Swidler claimed that

> [in the Seamless Web tradition] values are abstract, general, and immanent in social systems. Social systems exist to realize their core values, and values explain why different actors make different choices even in similar situations… [V]alues are essences around which societies are constituted. They are the unmoved mover in the theory of action.[25]

This was not intended as a compliment. In place of thinking of culture as a Seamless Web, Swidler recommended that we instead think of culture as a "'tool kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems."[26] She later elaborated on this theme:

> To describe how culture works, we need new metaphors. We must think of culture less as a great stream in which we are all immersed, and more as a bag of tricks or an oddly assorted tool kit containing implements of varying shapes that fit the hand more or less well, are not always easy to use, and only sometimes do the job… [Or] as a repertoire, like that of an actor, musician, or dancer… It is in this sense that people have an array of cultural resources upon which they can draw.[27]

As with Seamless Web theory, there are nuances and complexities in Repertoire theory that I do not have space to address here. For the moment, however, what is essential is understanding the *core tenet* of this paradigm—that culture is not "values that suffuse other aspects of belief, intention, or collective life [but rather] complex rule-like structures that can be put to strategic use."[28] Thus, the most basic difference between these perspectives is this: *whereas the Seamless Web paradigm sees culture as the source of the* ends of *action, the Repertoire paradigm sees culture as providing the* means for *action.*[29]

By "turning culture on its head," Repertoire theory solved a number of problems that had plagued the Seamless Web paradigm. First, the Repertoire model allowed a more compelling and empirically consistent interpretation of cultural division and conflict. Rather than regarding cultural conflict as something that "must be" undergirded by more foundational shared assumptions, or as a disturbance in an otherwise stable system, scholars began investigating culture as a domain of conflict in its own right. Michèle Lamont has demonstrated, for example, that men in different positions in the middle class rely on different sets of cultural

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[25] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 274.

[26] Ibid., 273.

[27] Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 24.

[28] DiMaggio, "Culture and Cognition," 265.

[29] Swidler acknowledges this explicitly in *Talk of Love*: "my focus is on 'means' rather than ends" (p. 82).

standards to reinforce their own sense of worth and to devalue others. Highly educated (but less highly paid) knowledge workers, for example, use their knowledge of art and literature to delegitimize those in more lucrative fields as crass social climbers; top earners "value" economic success because it allows them to feel superior to those who have not achieved as much; and church-goers barely hanging on to middle-class status look down on both groups for (respectively) their pretention and their greed, patting themselves on the back for their "traditional" values.[30] Culture is a tool for "making meaning"; cultural tools provide "a rich variety of rationales" for "support[ing] and justify[ing] a given way of life."[31] One way of making meaning is to use cultural standards selectively to define oneself as superior to others. This is one of the key insights of Repertoire theory.[32]

Repertoire theory also seems to deal successfully with the observed fact that "[p]eople profess ideals they do not follow, utter platitudes without examining their validity [and allow] gaps between the explicit norms, worldviews, and rules of conduct [they] espouse and the ways they habitually act."[33] Instead of seeing inconsistency and incoherence as problematic pieces of data for cultural analysis, Repertoire theory integrates these observations at its core. If culture is a repertoire containing many options, then we should *expect* inconsistency. In fact, personal inconsistency is helpful because it allows people to keep multiple cultural resources "on tap" to deal with different sorts of problems.[34] I can say "look before you leap" when I'm feeling cautious and "he who hesitates is lost" when the situation seems to call for action.

Though it has enabled resolving a number of the problems that plagued Seamless Web theory, Repertoire theory's recasting of culture as ends rather than means has also been the source of its greatest difficulty. If Seamless Web theory was unable to deal with conflict, tension, and contradiction, it at least had the advantage of positing a coherent (not to say true) account of why people want the things they want and do the things they do (i.e., values and norms). Repertoire theory, on the other hand, deals very well with conflict, tension, and contradiction, but struggles to account for why people use culture to do some things rather than others. Because they lack clearly stated assumptions about why people do what they do, critics have claimed that Repertoire theorists default to something like a *homo economicus* model of action, using money, status, or power as implicit motive concepts and treating culture as a set of effective rationalizations.[35] Patterson, perhaps the clearest on this point, has argued that "the conception of culture as a 'toolkit' … [is] a mere supplement of rational choice theory."[36]

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[30] Lamont, *Money, Morals, and Manners.* See also Bourdieu, *Distinction.*

[31] Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 30.

[32] This does not necessarily mean that actors are cynical in their use of culture. The tendency to make a "virtue of necessity," as Bourdieu puts it, may be grounded in something like the "endowment effect" identified by behavioral economists—people tend to value what they have more than what they don't.

[33] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 280.

[34] Swidler, *Talk of Love.*

[35] Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*; Alexander, "The Reality of Reduction: The Failed Synthesis of Pierre Bourdieu"; Patterson, "Taking Culture Seriously."

[36] "Taking Culture Seriously," 203.

Repertoire theorists themselves, however, have offered a different model of action comprised of two related features. First, since a person's culture repertoire can be more or less extensive and its elements more or less well mastered, people have a tendency to go with what they know; that is, in order to avoid "costly cultural retooling," people "act in ways that utilize their skills."[37] Cultural skills are therefore *necessary conditions* for action. If, for example, I never learned how to use a planner or to badger a teacher to change my grade, I wouldn't be able to finish college—"valuing education" has nothing to do with it.[38] But Repertoire theory also holds that people "have in readiness cultural capacities they rarely employ" and that "all people know more culture than they use"[39]; so what explains why some skills rather than others are brought to bear in a particular instance?

This brings us to the second feature of Repertoire theory's model of action—its "inherently situational" character.[40] Swidler, for example, argues that "core situations or problems provide contexts within which [using] particular pieces of culture make sense" and that "[p]eople run through different parts of their cultural repertoires, selecting those parts that correspond to the situation or exemplary problem that currently holds their attention."[41] She is not alone in this. DiMaggio has similarly argued that "cues embedded in the physical and social environment" are what activate cultural tools and that some scripts rather than others are "invoked in response to particular contextual cues."[42] Situations, however, are not presented to us in a haphazard fashion, but are structured into larger assemblages—institutions—that confront people with "exemplary problems." For example, the institution of marriage, Swidler argues, creates the twin problems of *choice* (monogamous partner selection) and *commitment* (making marriage last). The institution of choice (and the situations it entails) requires cultural ideals like passion, romance, and "soul mates" while the problem of commitment (and the situations it entails) requires cultural concepts like friendship, compromise, and mutual respect. It is not that some people think of marriage one way and some another; despite the fact that "romantic" and "prosaic" conceptions of love are in many ways contradictory, people switch freely from one to the other depending on what kind of situation they are in.[43]

Repertoire theory is more nuanced than it is often given credit for; more nuanced, in fact, than I have acknowledged in my previous work.[44] But it cannot quite fill the analytical gap

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[37] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 277; Swidler, "Comment on Stephen Vaisey's 'Socrates, Skinner, and Aristotle'," 616.

[38] For a version of this argument, see Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Michele Lamont and Mario Small have recently made this point about culture as a necessary but insufficient condition for action. See Lamont and Small, "How Culture Matters," 81.

[39] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 277.

[40] Swidler, *Talk of Love*, 82.

[41] Ibid., 25.

[42] DiMaggio, "Culture and Cognition," 267-268.

[43] Swidler, *Talk of Love*.

[44] See Vaisey, "Socrates, Skinner, and Aristotle: Three Ways of Thinking About Culture in Action"; Vaisey, "Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action."

left by Seamless Web theory. First, the structure of any society creates many opportunities for discretion, making an appeal to institutional causes alone less than satifactory. Marriage is actually an excellent example of how very different strategies of action (staying married or "moving on") can be equally institutionalized and equally available to most people in our society. Because Swidler illustrates her model of culture using interview materials with couples who have stayed married, she inadvertently generalizes from her sample and presumes that people share an overriding commitment to making their marriages work. But many couples do, in fact, get divorced and Repertoire theory cannot account for why some reach for this particular cultural tool. (At least in the case of first marriages, it cannot be because some are more skilled than others in getting divorced.) Beyond this specific example, Swidler's work—despite her claim that "what people want … is of little help in explaining their action"[45]—is full of allusions to "wishes" and "aspirations" that people use culture to fulfill, but whose origins are unexplained.[46]

A second major problem is that in the claim that people "act in ways that utilize their skills" cannot explain what I have elsewhere called "upstream" lines of action.[47] How, for example, does Repertoire theory account for things like religious conversion or "coming out of the closet"—cases where people abandon the cultural skills they have to pursue new ones? On this problem, Swidler has recently argued that "it is just because [cultural repertoires] are so crucial to being able to enact a line of action that those who want to become the selves that can embrace a new line of action often need to seek out a powerful social context that will give them the cultural equipment to become that new self."[48] This statement is consistent with Repertoire theory in that it treats culture as a set of skills and asserts the important of context. But why—if "drastic and costly cultural retooling" is something people avoid—does anyone ever *want* to become a new self or "embrace a new line of action"? In cases like these, Repertoire theory can only adapt by smuggling in new concepts like "wish," "want," and "aspire" that are "without any logical relationship" to the theory itself.

The Contours of Contradiction

The goal of the above is not to provide a complete, page-by-page critique of either model, but rather to sketch the essential features of two theoretical perspectives that—while highly useful and empirically supported—contain contradictory premises. Seamless Web theory is well suited to thinking about differences between broad social groups, about the cultural sources of goals and values, and about why people act in certain ways rather than others in similar contexts. It is poorly equipped, however, for understanding within-group conflict and within-person contradiction and inconsistency. Toolkit-Repertoire theory is invaluable for understanding conflict, contradiction, and inconsistency at multiple levels, but it comes up short in its attempt to think about why people are motivated to pursue some lines of action

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[45] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 274.

[46] Swidler, *Talk of Love*, especially ch. 4. See also Jason Kaufman, "Endogenous Explanation in the Sociology of Culture," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 355-387, who offers a similar interpretation.

[47] Vaisey, "Reply to Ann Swidler."

[48] Swidler, "Comment on Stephen Vaisey's 'Socrates, Skinner, and Aristotle'," 616.

rather than others. Like the wave theory of light in the early 20th century, Repertoire theory seems capable of handling most things on its own; yet it breaks down at a few key points and needs to integrate some pieces of its main competitor ("wishes," "wants," and "aspirations") in an ad hoc fashion to make it fully workable.

Anthropologists Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn have diagnosed a similar state of affairs in their own field:

> Most anthropologists today would probably agree … [both] that "cultures" are not bounded, coherent, timeless systems of meanings … *and* that human action rests of networks of often highly stable, pervasive, and motivating assumptions that can be widely shared within social groups while variable between them… The problem facing the discipline is not which account is right but how to explain the fact that both are right.[49]

So how *do* we explain that these seemingly contradictory ideas are both right? The way forward is definitely *not* to say simply that "both are important" and move on with our lives. This may be the simplest way to go in what John Levi Martin has called sociology's "era of good feelings," since it allows everyone to feel validated but to get back to their own research project.[50] It is true that if I am is studying *how* people use culture to draw social boundaries or keep their marriages together, I don't really need to know *why* they do some things rather than others. Or if I want to know *why*, say, some Muslims support economic redistribution and my data analysis shows that having an "orthodox cosmology" is a strong net predictor of pro-redistribution attitudes, I probably never need to think about the ways these respondents might contradict themselves or be inconsistent in different settings. But if we really want to develop a better *theory* of culture in action, we need to do better. We need to look at both aspects at the same time.

Conclusion

I have argued that moving toward a better theory of culture in action can be greatly facilitated by looking more closely at the core principles and limitations of two seemingly contradictory competitors—the Seamless Web and Toolkit-Repertoire models. It is only by analytically maximizing the contrast between the two theories that synthesis becomes a possibility. Of course, there is nothing particularly novel about proposing this sort of "dialectical" method of theory construction; any credit for such an approach should go to Hegel (or Heraclitus). We, however, are in the rather fortunate position of being able to supplement such philosophical methods with empirical studies that can render more or less credible the truth-value of particular claims about the value of integrating particular concepts into a theoretical model. Combining an analysis of theoretical contrasts with empirical findings has led, for instance, toward more useful models that differentiate between culture's role as a

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[49] Strauss and Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning*, 4, emphasis added.

[50] John Levi Martin, *The Explanation of Social Action*, unpublished manuscript, 2009.

necessary or *sufficient*[51] condition for a particular pattern of conduct. For example, there is no contradiction in saying that possessing a particular type of cultural capital in one's repertoire is a *necessary* condition for finishing college while acknowledging that the value one has learned to place on education can also be a contributing cause among those who possess such capital.[52] Rather than taking some single body of evidence as an adequate test of whether culture is "really" about values or "really" about cultural capital, iterations of analysis and synthesis can help us move toward more measured, coherent, and empirically warranted causal claims.

So what would a "better theory" look like and how would we know when we had one? Recall that the theories in question here are models or frameworks rather than sets of propositions about the general relationship between variables or explanations of particular phenomena. Theories like these cannot be "tested" with single research projects; indeed, studies designed to confirm or refute wave and particle theories were precisely what fueled the wave/particle debate in early 20th-century physics. Though empirical research is vital, better theories are those that tie up the loose ends that occur systematically across a number of studies. This requires a broader vision than the one provided by a single case study or data analysis. Ultimately, however, there is no objective rule about what constitutes a successful theory. Charles Taylor nicely sums up the yardstick we must use to evaluate theories about the role cultural beliefs play in explaining human behavior:

> The terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of explanatory and life uses. The terms indispensible for the latter are part of the story that makes the best sense of us, unless and until we can replace them with more clairvoyant substitutes. The result of this search for clairvoyance yields the best account we can give at any given time, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside.[53]

The reason we need better theories of culture, in other words, is because thinking of ourselves as either "cultural dopes" or "skilled actors" is inadequate to make sense of our lives. Empirical research simply validates those intutions by showing that neither model alone is adequate to make sense of "what is going on." Better theories will simply be more phenomenologically satisfying to scholars who combine their experience as human beings with a knowledge of the existing empirical evidence that bears on the relationship between culture and action.

Finally, although I have used the example of theories of "culture in action," this general approach would yield fruit in any intellectual context with multiple theoretical perspectives. One of the great features of "post-Parsonian" sociology is its theoretical diversity. But this diversity can only be considered a strength if diverse theories are allowed—even required—to

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[51] Technically, culture could never be a true sufficient condition for any action, but it could be an "INUS" condition (an insufficient and non-redundant part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition). For one discussion of such causes, see Mahoney, "Toward a Unified Theory of Causality."

[52] See Vaisey, "Reply to Ann Swidler"; "What People Want"; compare Swidler, "Culture in Action."

[53] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58.

confront each other in light of a wide array of empirical evidence (i.e., not solely the evidence of a study designed to confirm or refute one particular theory). The emphasis on theoretical pluralism is problematic if we simply say that all theories are "right"—in their own ways. Of course, not all theories make competing claims in particular areas, and we should not attempt to manufacture debates where none exist. However, our naïve belief that "both" can somehow serve as an adequate response to, say, the structure-culture debate prevents us from making progress toward improved theoretical models of concrete phenomena. Of course both structure and culture "matter," but that's hardly the point. It's figuring out exactly *how* and *when* each matters that is the ongoing challenge for sociological theory. Taking an approach to theory development that focuses on contrasts and contradictions might make our section receptions a bit more tense, but they will likely make our ideas much better.

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