

Models, Morals, and Motives¹

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NOTE: citations are incomplete

The point of my talk can easily be summarized by a brief reflection on the phrase “I’m just saying.” As you are probably aware, the phrase “I’m just saying” has become a part of our popular culture over the past several years (or couple of decades) and it does a lot of work, socially-speaking. One thing it does is to remove offense after you’ve already said something out loud. Here’s an example I found on the internet (which I changed to be slightly less offensive than the original):

Guy #1: That girl is really hot.

Guy #2: Dude, that’s my sister!

Guy #1: I’m just saying...²

My wife, Rebekah, has five brothers, and the last time we got together, they were were playing a game they had made up where the idea was to say outlandish things followed by “I’m just saying.” For example, “Wow, you’ve really gained a lot of weight. I’m just saying”; or “You know, your voice is really annoying. I’m just saying”; or “Look, you don’t have a job and you spend all your time playing World of Warcraft. I’m just saying.”

I’m sure there are other uses and implications of this phrase, but one reason that “I’m just saying” is a useful cultural tool, it seems, is that it enables you to distance yourself from the *evaluative* or *directive* implications of what you’re “just saying.” In the first example, it seems like Guy #1 is attempting to defuse Guy #2’s objection by claiming that his statement is merely an observation, that he’s not actually going to hit on his sister or anything. So Guy #2 should relax. My brother-in-laws’ examples are funny because they stretch this logic to the breaking point. A person wouldn’t point out a major weight gain or an annoying voice unless they saw it as some kind of problem worth noting. Similarly, the World of Warcraft “observation” obviously contains within it the idea that the speaker thinks it would be better if the unemployed gamer spent some time looking for a job. The idea that a person would “just say” phrases like this without any underlying judgment is silly.

Today, my argument is that many sociologists apply something like the logic of “I’m just saying” to the study of culture and that this poses a big problem for understanding why people act the way they do. In more technical terms, my argument is that many sociologists (particularly in the study of culture) have

¹ Substantial parts of this talk are taken from a previous paper (Vaisey forthcoming)

² “I’m Just Saying.” Urban Dictionary. www.urbandictionary.com. Accessed 6 August 2009.

erred in trying to exclude the normative dimension of life and its implications for evaluation and motivation.³

To try to persuade you of this, I'm going to outline what I believe are the reasons that many sociologists' reject the motivating power of the normative, and at the same time, argue that they are bad reasons. Then I will argue for an approach to explaining action that I think can recapture the value of taking the normative seriously without losing the other theoretical gains that sociology has made in the past few decades.

My own interest in the exile of normativity from sociology comes from my early experiences in graduate school or perhaps earlier, during the last year of college. It seemed very strange to me that people were so invested in trashing this guy, "Parsons," who, as far as I could tell, was guilty only of the crime of being a really, really bad writer.

In the work I started in graduate school critiquing the Toolkit-Repertoire model of culture (e.g., Vaisey 2009), I began by thinking that the exclusion of norms and values was basically a giant oversight rather than a positively motivated rejection. But while I was on the job market, Dave Harding asked me to contribute to a volume on "poverty and culture" (see Vaisey forthcoming). I agreed, mainly because you agree to do anything that anyone asks of you when you're on the job market. But I really didn't know anything about poverty and how it might intersect with culture. Other than a vague awareness that talking about "the culture of poverty" was taboo (and, incidentally, incorrect), I had no idea what I would write about.

However, in the process of writing this paper (whose substantive focus I don't have time to discuss) I discovered something in the culture literature I'd never noticed before—a *fear* of using any explanatory categories that could be considered "normative" and the strenuous exertions people use to distance themselves from such explanations. Examples abound in the more recent literature on culture and stratification. Ann Swidler, Dave Harding, Michèle Lamont, Mario Small, Bill Wilson, and Al Young—to name only those I'm aware of—all take great pains to argue that "culture" is *not* about norms or values. Mario Small's conclusion is representative when he claims "the notion that people's actions are driven primarily by their norms and values is dated and simplistic" (2002:5-6).

Objections to the Normative

Where does this aversion come from? There are better and worse reasons to discard a theoretical approach, and some of both were involved in the rejection of the "values paradigm." Taken together,

³ To clarify: I'm not saying that sociologists don't study the normative as an *object* of cultural work or as a *resource* for drawing boundaries or solving everyday problems. The "vocabularies of motive" tradition in sociology is alive and well (Mills 1940; Swidler 1986; Lamont et al. 1996; Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). The normative I have in mind here refers to the "internally normative"; that is, the idea that we need to think of people as having tendencies to evaluate and to act that are grounded in an internalized sense of "how things are supposed to be."

however, the theoretical, methodological, and empirical case against cultural motives is remarkably thin.

One *good* reason for rejecting “values” was the objection to the method of “deductive imposition” (Spates 1983). Functionalist theory (à la Parsons and Shils [1952]) began by *assuming* the importance of values and norms and then went on to deduce them from behavior. As critics rightly pointed out, such an approach is fatally flawed because it provides no way to show that values are *not* playing a role.

Another objection is based in skepticism about the measuring subjective states reliably. Though the empirical basis for these objections was never very strong, the findings of contemporary cognitive science make any such generalized skepticism completely unwarranted. In any case, such an objection should scarcely be persuasive to most contemporary cultural sociologists, who are turning more and more to cognitive science for insights. What Harding calls “cognitive cultural concepts” (Harding 2007:361) like repertoires, frames, scripts, and narratives have been at the center of the recent surge of culturally inspired research on economic disadvantage. Thus, most cultural sociologists do not object to explanatory frameworks that involve subjective states *per se*, but rather to explanations involving *normative* or *motivational* subjective states.

Lamont and Small (2008) are thus quite optimistic about the usefulness of “cognitive” components of culture (e.g., frames or scripts) that shape “how something is perceived as real” but cast aspersions on “normative” ones (e.g., values or attitudes) that “focus on how we evaluate good and bad” (2008:80; see also Young 2004:19; Harding 2007:352-353; Wilson 2009:17).⁴ Running parallel to the cognitive-normative divide, contemporary cultural sociologists tend to conceive of such concepts as *necessary* rather than sufficient conditions. Like the paradigm case of “cultural capital,” they “enable,” “constrain,” and “make possible” various courses of action but do not possess “exogenous explanatory force” (Small 2002:5-6), like a motive would.

False Divides

In practice, however, separating the cognitive from the normative and the enabling from the motivating is impossible. Responding to similar arguments among his fellow anthropologists, Shweder (1992) argues that cultural statements are inherently evaluative and that our efforts to separate informational “content” from motivational “force” are misguided. Consider, for instance, two possible “framings” of Robin Hood: “dangerous outlaw” or “daring hero.” Though these frames make salient different *facts* about the target, they also contain evaluative and motivational components. That is, each has different

⁴ This is not to say that cultural sociologists do not make use of “evaluative” concepts. Lamont, in particular, has shown how symbolic boundaries are often used to distinguish between “worthy” and “unworthy” persons and groups (e.g., Lamont 1992; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Steensland 2006). In terms of explaining action, however, such definitions of worth are still distinguished from motives with “exogenous explanatory force”; instead, they are treated as “repertoires of justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and as “necessary, but insufficient condition[s]” for particular actions (Lamont and Small 2008:84).

implications for evaluating him as a “good guy” or “bad guy” and different implications about what makes sense to do if he shows up at your door (e.g., call the Sheriff or help him escape).

There is little justification for concluding that concepts like frames or narratives should be thought of as purely “cognitive” (i.e., informational) or that “cultural models” of this type lack the “exogenous explanatory force” to motivate those that have internalized them (see also D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; D’Andrade 1995; and Strauss and Quinn 1997 for more on the relationship between models and motives).

A close reading of exemplary works in the new cultural sociology further demonstrates the impossibility of trying to separate “cognitive” cultural models from evaluation and motivation. Young (2004:158-159), for example, considers how many marginalized black men perceive education’s role in attaining the good life. One of his informants, Peter, claims that “education is just cluttering your head with a bunch of stuff,” and he asks rhetorically, “What do I need with this stuff?” Though this is indeed a “framing” of what education *is*, and a perception of “how the world works” (Wilson 2009:17), it also has clear implications for Peter’s estimate of the value of education to him. If he regards education as useless for achieving the good life, how could this not affect his propensity to trade off schooling-related activities when competing opportunities arise? Harding (2007) interprets a teenager’s level of agreement with the prompt, “it wouldn’t be all that bad if you got [someone] pregnant at this time in your life,” as a frame, carefully distinguishing it from “attitudinal measures” even though it contains evaluative language (“bad”) and matches the social psychological definition of attitudes—“favorable or unfavorable evaluations of an object” (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004:361). Though his finding that one’s individual response is less predictive of sexual behavior as the local heterogeneity of responses increases is fascinating and important, he does not in the first place develop an account of the strong net association between the individual response and behavior in most settings. Were it not taboo, this finding could be seen as evidence that some teenagers have internalized cultural models of teenage pregnancy that are sufficient to motivate their conduct (D’Andrade 1995).

Obstacles to Synthesis

My intent is not to criticize this work, which I admire very much. Instead, I believe that concepts like evaluation and motivation are completely compatible with the findings of contemporary cultural sociology and that the main obstacle to incorporating them is a tendency to misrepresent the key claims and characteristics of the “values paradigm” or other views that take normative explanations seriously.

One primary locus of misunderstanding is around the question of within-group and between-group variation in values, attitudes, and other normative and motivational constructs. Sociologists argue against the idea that class or ethnic cultures are “monolithic entities” (Harding 2007:345) possessing values that are “shared universally” within the group (Lamont and Small 2008:81). Normative explanations are rejected simply because they do not correspond perfectly to Durkheim’s or Parsons’s ideal fantasy.

One of the more troublesome tendencies is that the standards used to cast doubt on the power of normative explanations are not equally applied to “newer” concepts. Claims about the role of “shared values,” for instance, are regarded skeptically due to the existence of within-group heterogeneity while frames—which are supposedly “*shared* definitions of how the world works”—are not held to the same high standards of sharedness (Wilson 2009:17, emphasis added; see also Young 2004). Simple claims about mean differences in values, norms, or attitudes across groups lead to concerns about essentialism or permanence while statements about how (all?) “white working class people” (always?) “code” blacks are unproblematic, presumably because they are taken—as intended—as descriptions of observed empirical tendencies at the time of data collection rather than as claims of inviolate patterns (Kefalas 2003; see Lamont and Small 2008:95). Lastly, attitude-behavior or value-behavior associations that are characterized as “weak” are rarely compared side-by-side with other associations (e.g., gender-behavior, race-behavior) which would often qualify as weaker by the same standards.

A Way Forward

I think it almost goes without saying that these reasons for rejecting normative approaches to sociological explanation are inadequate. They seem to reflect political concerns about “blaming the victim” more than scientific concerns about explanatory value as evidenced in part by the double standard of evidence that is applied to normative claims. Nor do I think that these problems are confined only to the domain of culture and stratification. The “*vocabulary of motives*” tradition that dismisses all concern for internal sources of motive is a pervasive element of sociological thinking (Campbell 1996). Our desire to exorcise the ghosts of Talcott Parsons and Oscar Lewis has come at a high cost.

Let me offer what I see as a few solutions to this problem. First, as Neil Gross (2009:373) has recently argued, culture is not just a “subfield” of sociology since “all social action involves cultural interpretation”; thus, it’s essential to get our thinking clear in this domain. The most important thing here is probably to use the master term “culture” less and to use (and measure) specific concepts (like frames, scripts, narratives, values or beliefs) more often. This will prevent us from getting bogged down in talking about “how culture matters,” as if there were a single answer to that question.

Second—and again, thinking of Neil’s paper—we need to get our model of the actor clear before we can do much convincing social explanation. Neil’s turn to the pragmatist tradition is very helpful, but not because it is “generative” or “interesting,” but because work in cognitive science on the interplay of habit and creativity suggests that it’s more or less correct. We aren’t and don’t want to be cognitive scientists, but greater attention to their work will improve ours.

Third, we need to break down the false walls separating the “is” from the “ought.” (Again, this is not because I prefer it, but because it is consistent with the evidence.) Cultural models, morals, and motives are all co-implicated. This does not mean reducing everything to an undifferentiated lump of so-called “mutual constitution,” but rather calls for doing the hard work of interpreting the interplay of beliefs

and desires, capacities and values over time. This is hard, but it's better than searching for our keys under the lamppost, so to speak.

I think we all share the same goal—we want to understand why the social world works the way it does. As Weber argued, we can't do this without taking subjective meanings—including normative ones—seriously. If we do, I think our work will be much better for it.

I'm just saying.

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