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Against culture versus structure

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Contemporary sociology is saddled with a culture–structure binary but the fault for its existence lies mostly with cultural sociology. This article is devoted to four related assertions: (1) There has never been any agreement on the definition of culture, making cultural sociology a field unable to define its central concept. (2) The binary ignores the fact that the proper explanation of social behaviour requires both structure and culture; culture cannot be its own cause. (3) Cultural sociology is soft and sentimental, avoiding conflict as well as politics. (4) It neglects policy and policy-relevant research even more than the rest of sociology. Structural sociology has some shortcomings as well, however, and the culture–structure binary should be abandoned.

Keywords: culture; structure; social structure; cultural sociology; cultural turn; structural sociology

Introduction

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s, sociologists shared some basic courses with the social anthropology students. Despite our many commonalities, we were divided by at least one prominent difference. The sociologists gathered under the flag of society, whereas the anthropologists did so under the banner of culture.

For anthropologists, culture was and often still is a descriptive term, enabling them to portray and differentiate the societies and other groups they study empirically. However, in the last quarter century, another conception of culture has become a keyword in many disciplines, thanks in part to an intellectual social movement called, among other things, the cultural turn. It uses culture as an explanatory concept and finds cultural causes to understand the phenomena it investigates.

In American sociology, the subject of this article, the causal notion of culture quickly became institutionalized as cultural sociology (CS hereafter). In fact, the culture section is now one of the three largest of the American Sociological Association's nearly 45 sections.[1]

CS has already added a new source of vitality to the discipline and made other contributions. By applying a variety of cognitive, emotional, practice and other concepts, it has unpacked culture and told us more about how it works. In calling attention to meaning-making and other ways with which people make

sense of their social world, CS has joined the symbolic interactionists and the practitioners of participant observation in bringing the people we study into our research.

At the same time, however, CS has some significant shortcomings, which have had some undesirable effects on American sociology. Unlike its European parent, it is also a social movement, although its crusading fervour has declined a bit over time. In what follows, I view CS as both a discipline and a movement. However, because my discussion covers a wide-ranging intellectual and social endeavour with sweeping generalizations and too few examples or references, it is best described as a polemical analysis that is therefore sometimes unfair.

Four drawbacks of CS seem to me most serious.

Defining culture

First, culture is a very broad concept and as a result it is, and has long been, hard to define even by those who use it for descriptive purposes (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Cultural sociologists have a yet harder time because their explanatory task is even more complicated.

Actually, the concept may be undefinable; it could be one of social science's major sandtrap or sinkhole concepts, which draws in all definitions that come near it. At times, it may also be used as a social science equivalent of the Einsteinian fudge factor: a residual notion brought in when no other explanations are available. Since CS treats culture as *the* explanatory concept, it must be viewed as a field that cannot define its foundational idea, thereby sometimes proceeding on a shaky intellectual basis.

Instead, and wisely so, CS has collected a list of concepts, the use of any of which is claimed to make the resulting research cultural. It includes the traditional norms-and-values duo as well as Swidler's tools and toolkits (1986), but over the years, others have added meaning-making, sense-making, frames, scripts, schemas, tropes, sentiments, practices, strategies, repertoires, narratives, performance, cultural capital as well as such literary oldies as myth and text.[2]

Taken together, these concepts are useful as surrogates for culture but too many are nearly synonymous. In one way or another, they all describe people's individual preparations for social action and interaction. However, and with some notable exceptions such as 'culture in action' (Swidler 1986) and 'cultural pragmatics' (Alexander 2006), CS is not sufficiently concerned with action or the relation of culture and action.

Thus, CS does not often seem to notice what every participant-observer learns almost at once: society and social life exist because people engage in social relationships and other actions. True, they also prepare for these, but their preparations are shaped first and foremost by what they are reacting to, other previous actions and the situations and institutions in which actions and reactions are embedded.

In the processes that constitute social actions, people must also make sense or meaning of what is going on; use frames, discourses and narratives to communicate it; and choose tools to decide what to do next. However, CS is not much interested in cultural processes – or social processes – nor does it seem to realize how much of social action and interaction consists of routines and habits that incorporate past meaning-making and other forms of culture. Consequently, people do not always need the preparations on which CS concentrates so much of its terminological energy.

Furthermore, principles or guidelines for the inclusion of terms seem to be lacking and what makes them cultural is not always clear. For example, two recent studies argue that the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor is cultural (Steenlands 2006, Guetzkow 2010). Although Guetzkow also calls this distinction a discourse, it is mainly a set of exclusionary rules and policies that have been applied for centuries by public and private overseers of the poor to withhold financial and other public supports from those unable to afford middle-class behaviour (Katz 1989, Gans 1995). Why such a dichotomy should be called a discourse and classified as cultural is therefore hard to understand. No wonder then that theorists do not agree on what is cultural and what is structural (Friedland and Mohr 2004).

Creating a profusion of surrogates for culture instead of an agreed-upon definition also creates empirical problems. There are simply too many for the scholarly tasks they are required to carry out.[3]

In fact, the large number of surrogate concepts for culture is often used by cultural sociologists to justify the use of cultural analysis, and CS seems unusually active in merely trying to prove the need for cultural analysis. Even so, how often must we be told that people use frames and narratives or that they make meanings. If the concepts are to prove useful, CS researchers should apply them mainly when they come up with unusual findings.

Thus, if poor people who have every right to be critical of American society should frame their descriptions of it in entirely positive ways, such frames should be investigated in detail. That people inform each other with narratives is no longer news, although the subject becomes worth studying when the narratives are fictional in origin but are nevertheless considered factual by the people who tell them or to whom they are told. If victims of corporate malfeasance view a government that seeks to help them as the enemy – the case among many Tea Party adherents – such meaning-making deserves to be analysed. But even unusual frames, narratives or meanings need to be related back to the interactions and the contexts within which they occur.

To be sure, many ordinary and extraordinary practices vary between national societies, as well as between classes, ethnic, racial, religious and other groups, but merely ascribing these variations to culture is not sufficient. Nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists, who used culture as a summary term for society, economy and polity, could do so because they were mainly studying small preliterate societies.

In addition, their studies were satisfying scholarly and popular interest in the exotic as well as the nostalgia for *Gemeinschaft*. Only a few specialists cared exactly why the kinship structure of one society differed from that of another. However, sociologists concentrate on understanding large societies and their innards. If they are using culture as a descriptive term, they cannot also use it as an explanatory one. Culture cannot be its own cause.

The sizeable number of surrogate concepts may encourage cultural sociologists to claim that nearly everything is cultural and to argue that therefore CS should rule the sociological roost. This claim also shows up in such concepts as 'culture structures'. Others complain that the contribution made by the mass of cultural concepts has not received proper credit from a structuralist-dominated discipline that keeps CS in subaltern status.[4] Such rhetoric expresses the social movement side of CS as well as the disciplinary imperialism frequently found in academic fields (Abbott 1988).

The disciplinary dichotomy

Second, in making their appeals for CS, its practitioners have revived a binary in the discipline between CS and what they call structural sociology (SS hereafter).[5] Like many other dichotomies, the culture–structure one oversimplifies empirical reality, blinding researchers to the possibility that both or neither portion of the dichotomy is relevant, and forcing them to choose sides.

However, by excluding the structural enemy from its analyses, CS decontextualizes its findings and itself. Frequently, phenomena described as values, frames, scripts and the like seem to appear out of thin air, ignoring the possibility that they might be responses to other phenomena, including even those deemed structural.

Although CS avoids the simple proposition that values cause behaviour or changes in it, the idea that recurring behaviour patterns could encourage people to adopt values that justify these patterns is not often considered enough.[6] More important, the possibility that such behaviour patterns could influence or even determine people's values, frames, scripts and so on has not generated enough CS research.[7]

While the culture–structure dichotomy can be traced back historically to earlier ones, its current sociological incarnation is in some respects similar to Marxist theorizing about superstructure and substructure. Such theorizing became familiar and widely visible in the 1960s when neo-Marxists were allowed to enter mainstream sociology, and sociology's cultural turn may at least in part be a reaction to neo-Marxist analysis.

The original Marxists described society – or the society that mattered to them – as being composed of an economic substructure and ideological superstructure. The substructure also included social and political imperatives, whereas the superstructure contained virtually all the intellectual and cultural components of society.[8]

Separated from its conceptual umbilicus and its Marxist origins, the dichotomy eventually was simplified into structure and culture. In the process, the dichotomy

also became adversarial and eventually a number of cultural sociologists suggested that analytically culture trumped structure.

Hard and soft sociologies

Third, some cultural sociologists believe that SS draws a distorted or inaccurate picture of society. It pays too much attention to economic and political phenomena or as Orlando Patterson described it, 'the relentless preference for relying on structural factors like low incomes, joblessness, poor schools and bad housing'.[9]

Patterson is not unique; those viewing culture as meaning-making or the use of frames and narratives and so on often seem to have an aversion to economic and political phenomena and concepts. Even when they deal with politics, they are more attentive to the performance of power than to its exercise and more to political symbols than to political decisions.

CS seems to view its opponent as producing a hard sociology, whereas its own conception of the discipline is softer and its view of society is more cheerful and consensual.[10] Their society seems to operate logically and its members seem to be culturally competent, for terms like meaninglessness or senselessness are not to be found. CS rarely sees struggle and conflict, nor are hate, anger or even relentlessness in its standard vocabulary.

This kind of sociology is soft in other ways, for its researchers are too little concerned with the making of hard choices, for example, in the allocation of scarce resources, the prevalence of hierarchical relations and the recurring struggles for control and dominance.

Sometimes, the resulting picture of society is sentimental and at times it verges on wishfulness. In a comment on my early research about the destruction of Boston's West End (Gans 1962), Borer (2006) argued that if sociologists had only studied its residents culturally and had thus made their wishes known, the city fathers would have taken these wishes into account and might have called off the urban renewal project.

True, CS does not avoid the darker side of society. For example, an increasing number of cultural sociologists are writing about poverty, although as I note further below, so far too many of their studies deal with how the poor respond to poverty.

CS's choice of studies, its negative view of SS and perhaps even its widespread appeal may be partly a reaction against the sociology of the 1960s. At the time, the neo-Marxists and others brought up a variety of controversial issues that had to be considered in the classroom and the discipline. In addition, the neo-Marxists helped to bring the long covert politicization of the discipline out into the open. Neo-Marxist analysis and its textbook offspring, conflict theorizing, have remained in the mainstream, but CS has joined them as a Thermidorian reaction that ends up being more accepting of the status quo.[11]

Research and policy

Fourth, CS has not paid much attention to policy or to the relation between research and policy, although in this respect it does not differ much from the rest

of the discipline. However, it is also burdened by a couple of conceptually based complications.

However defined, in a complex modern society, culture is often hard to change and deliberate attempts to do so have not fared well. One frequently effective policy: providing resources that increase people's economic and other kinds of security and promise a less anxiety-ridden life is too closely associated with the structural paradigm. In addition, CS has not yet developed any surrogate concepts that connect directly to policy-oriented research. Governments and other large organizations do not think about frames, and if they consider narratives and scripts, they typically do so to communicate their interests.

Nonetheless, and as already noted, a rising number of cultural sociologists have begun to do poverty research and have conducted a number of studies among the poor (e.g. Lamont and Small 2008, Small *et al*. 2010). Almost all of these studies deal with the African American poor and a number of these studies investigate a very old subject, the labour market problems of poor young Black males and how they cope with it.

Some of the researchers are African American social scientists who are looking for cultural factors to explain why teenagers and young adults engage in self-destructive and antisocial reactive behaviour when they are unable to get or hold jobs and are then demonized by Whites and middle-class Blacks.[12]

Other studies seeking to demonstrate the usefulness of cultural analysis have mainly explored the sentiments, values and frames of the victims of poverty and of racial discrimination, reflecting again the tendency of CS to give voice to ordinary people. However, the studies are neither policy-oriented nor particularly relevant to antipoverty policy. Thus, the voice of those selected for study is frequently upbeat; they have faith in American individualism, believe in the value of education and in their eligibility for good jobs, possess a strong identity geared for upward mobility and are spending social capital to pull each other up by their collective bootstraps.

Why and how CS has found so many optimistic and cheerful poor people is worth its own study, but from my perspective, focussing on how poor people think and feel is not the most important subject for policy-oriented research on poverty. Moreover, studies that give voice to the poor are unlikely to lead to policy that would help them. The poor lack political power, and the holders of economic and political power are not particularly interested in reducing or eliminating poverty (Gans 2012). Consequently, antipoverty agencies must deal with more urgent issues than worrying about how the ostensible beneficiaries and other targets of their policies feel.

Actually, if cultural sociologists would take their questions about sentiments, frames and the like into the halls of power, they could find out how those agencies and the people working in them think and feel. They could also learn whether alterations in their feelings or their frames and narratives could result in policies to help more poor people exit from poverty. They might even want to study how to empower the poor.

CS and the rest of sociology could make an even more potent contribution to antipoverty research by studying the people, agencies and institutions that help to make and keep people poor. Such studies would, however, require cultural sociologists to renounce their de facto boycott of SS and look at the macro-sociological, economic, political and other contexts in which these victimizers exist and act.

Structural sociology and its shortcomings

SS has its own conceptual faults. For one thing, it insists on the centrality of social structure in the same way as CS insists on that of culture. Similarly, SS, like CS, sometimes claims that its explanations alone are required.

If culture is a term looking for a definition, structure is only a metaphor and calling a set of interconnected, recurring and patterned relationships or interactions a structure contributes little. Calling that set a structure can also exaggerate the integration or cohesion of its interconnected relationships – although terms like society, social system and network are equally guilty in this respect. Also, SS sometimes omits the human element from such relationships, partly justifying the criticism of CS that SS sometimes turns the participants in these relationships into Pavlovian responders to overpowering social stimuli.

Thus, structural sociologists must understand that social relationships, whether in families or in giant corporations, always involve values, tools, meaning-making and other surrogates of culture. Occasionally, culture may dominate; true believers try to practise their values when they are situationally inappropriate and cannot be implemented. Still, even the most intensely held values have structural causes.

Some forms of SS can also be accused of an overly narrow view of the relationships themselves so that, for example, network depictions sometimes resemble electric circuits. Such views forget that these relationships are held together by a variety of reciprocal and other obligations, as well as procedures, rules, opportunity structures and responsibilities.

However, when the relationships are hierarchical, as most are to some extent, such components as power relations and struggles over resources, position and status are at least as important. Moreover, if and when the leaders and other decision-makers have control and their hierarchies some degree of permanence, they deserve to be called social structures.

Last but not least, social structures are interconnected, again often hierarchically – as academics who work within them should know. When the decisions made within such structures are set in bureaucratic or political cement, they may actually feel like structures, as anyone trying to negotiate or renegotiate departmental budgets must know.[13]

Conclusions

The critical question that unites CS and SS – even when they are often in conflict – is whether and when culture and social structure possess causal power to explain

social life. For me the answer seems clear, for as long as social life is made up of sets of social relationships that are embedded in yet others which can exercise some form of control or power over them, social structure trumps culture. It does not exclude culture, but what people *do* with, for and to each other in their relationships generally shapes social life more than what they perceive, think, frame and feel about these doings.

Values, tools and the other surrogates for culture are ever present, but they do not arise in a vacuum. The particular cultural surrogates that are chosen or imposed depend on the situational, relational and structural contexts within which they occur. Putting it more simply, culture is a necessary explanation but structure is almost always the sufficient one (Lamont and Small 2008, Wilson 2009, 2010).

Still, is there any good reason to distinguish what we call cultural and structural and to turn them into permanent conceptual adversaries? As suggested above, the two terms hark back to past philosophical and political struggles but the struggles still exist and need to be brought out into the open and better understood.

Perhaps the struggles could someday even be ended. In that case, researchers might be able to realize that one sociology will suffice and then get to work to make it happen.

Notes

1. No one knows quite why it is the largest, but only some of its members are cultural sociologists proper or devotees of the cultural turn.
2. Sometimes, Swidler's trio of habits, skills and styles is added (Swidler 1986). Yet, others add more macro-sociological terms such as boundaries, ideology and identity (Friedland and Mohr 2004) and also Zeitgeist, world view, collective memory and even institutions. For a comprehensive discussion of the several definitions of culture and of its surrogate terms, see Sewell (1999), Lamont and Small (2008) and Small *et al.* (2010).
3. The analytic difficulties are increased by the jargon-ridden and opaque language often used in these discussions.
4. The claims and complaints have appeared frequently over the years in the American Sociological Association's Culture section newsletter. Newsletters are a good source for discovering what disciplinary leaders say backstage to their members but omit from their more public performances.
5. For too many cultural and structural sociologists, it is also a moral, even Manichaean dichotomy.
6. Unfortunately, sociologists too rarely study whether, when how what people practise accords with what they preach, and which adapts to which when people feel they need to be consistent.
7. But see Friedland and Mohr (2004) on pursuing goals and on complications in separating means from ends.

8. Sometimes, Marxists used superstructure as a synonym for culture.
9. Patterson was criticizing what he viewed as the standard analysis of the labour market failures and deviant behaviour patterns of poor Black males, although other parts of his analyses acknowledged these structural factors alongside 'cultural attributes . . . distinctive attitudes, values and predispositions' (Patterson 2006).
10. I borrow this notion from William H. Sewell, Jr.'s account of his discovery long ago of cultural analysis as 'a turn from a hard-headed, utilitarian and empiricist materialism' and what he saw as its 'relentless pursuit of wealth, status and power' (Sewell 1999, pp. 35–36).
11. Such a discipline could easily be caricatured as expressing the world view and frames of comfortably tenured professors at affluent research universities.
12. For a spirited recent debate about this topic that emphasizes culture versus structure issues, see Darity *et al*. (2011).
13. Cultural sociologists interested in the culture of the academy ought to study the conspiratorial framing and paranoid meaning-making that academics and other workers in bureaucratized organizations often indulge in – and justifiably so – after banging their heads against unyielding structures.

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