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Life's Work: History, Biography, and Ideas

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Keywords

sociology of culture, Africa, institutions, sociology of religion, women's movement, autobiography

Abstract

Part personal autobiography, part intellectual history, this article offers lessons from a long career, reflections on my sociological contributions, and an account of how major social changes shaped my trajectory and made me the sociologist I am. I also offer an assessment of some of my central ideas and some new suggestions about how to understand culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing an article like this is harder than you think. Almost everything about my own life is interesting to me but probably not to others. To avoid dwelling on each precious detail of my youth, slogging through my CV, or thanking everyone who has been important in my life, I focus instead on the dramatic social changes during my lifetime, especially changes in opportunities for women in academia, how my intellectual commitments shaped my research and writing, the core questions I tackled, and my recent thinking about how to conceptualize culture. I also draw a few lessons about the choices younger scholars might encounter in their careers and speculate briefly about biographical influences on my own ideas.

A JEWISH GIRL FROM TENNESSEE

I grew up in Tennessee, shaped by a 1950s childhood. Jewish, too tall, awkward, and with awful handwriting and poor school skills,[1] I was an uncomfortable outsider. What amazes me looking back, however, is how much I, and everyone around me, took for granted the inequalities that enveloped us. My parents were "Northern" liberals—my father a Chicago-born attorney with the Tennessee Valley Authority and my mother a skilled secretary from St. Louis. They were highly critical of the South's racial order and took modest steps to oppose it—helping to build a racially mixed day camp in Knoxville, writing to the *Nashville Tennessean* in support of civil rights (receiving bomb threats in return), attending "brotherhood" events. We nonetheless lived in a racially segregated universe: I attended segregated schools, as there were no others. The only Black people I saw were gardeners and maids. While I remember arguing about race with classmates in my Nashville high school, it never dawned on me to challenge the social exclusion of Jews or the gender order, let alone the taken-for-granted forms of sexuality and gender identity.

In elementary school in Knoxville, where we lived until I was 13, of necessity I found friends among the three Jewish girls in my grade. I played with other children outdoors after school but wasn't invited into their homes. Neither of the two country clubs in Knoxville admitted Jews, and only one allowed members to bring Jewish guests. My parents wouldn't have joined a country club, but knowing that if a group of schoolmates went swimming I couldn't go was just a fact of life. This accepted social exclusion became an excruciating trial in seventh grade. Knoxville had one comprehensive junior high for all its White children. Two social clubs for girls, the Rebellettes and the QTs (I kid you not), defined the social world of girls coming from my middle-class elementary school.[2] Each girl could expect a "bid" from one of the two clubs. The QTs did not admit Jewish girls, while the Rebellettes did. My fate hung on whether in my year the "popular girls" (I was not one) would choose the Rebellettes, filling its quota of new members, leaving me the only girl from my elementary school with no club to join. I spent weeks in fearful anticipation, my mother trying helplessly to comfort me. In their collective wisdom, the popular girls that year chose the QTs, and I was spared social oblivion. During these preadolescent agonies, it never occurred to me to be angry, or to question the rules, but only to try to survive.

Those of you who know my adult self—confident, outgoing, and basically happy—may doubt this portrait of an awkward, wallflower child. The story of how and why I changed is, I think, one of the sources of my intellectual perspective. At the end of this article, I try to explain what were, at the time, nearly invisible transitions.

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[1] During college, I learned I had essential (or familial) tremor. This probably accounted for what would now be diagnosed as a learning disability.

[2] We were even more oblivious about the fact that our school was Sequoyah School, our neighborhood streets Nokomis Circle, Kennesaw Drive, and Talahi Drive, but we never thought of the Cherokee as more than a mythic presence and learned nothing of Indian displacement and slaughter.

Carried Along: Being a Woman Between 1962 and 1975

The social transformation that most shaped my life and career was the dramatic shift in expectations and opportunities for women. When I entered Radcliffe (then the women's part of Harvard) in fall 1962, I was determined to be married by the end of my junior year, so that I wouldn't, as a senior, already be an old maid. Even my more worldly New York roommate was advised by her mother, as we were moving into our dorm room, to prepare for a career just in case she were widowed. Yet by the time we graduated from Harvard in 1966, almost all of us were bent on professional careers rather than early marriage.[3]

Nonetheless, we mostly took gender inequality for granted. I worked in Yellowstone Park the summer before college, a glorious experience. The salary scale was room and board plus $90 a month for women, $120 a month for men. Much as college opened the world to me, it was clearly two worlds, one for Harvard men and the other for Radcliffe women, even though the education itself was fully coeducational. It is probably hard for those who entered college even a few years later to imagine that in my entire time at Harvard, I never had a section in any of my classes taught by a woman. Indeed, graduate student teaching assistants were officially titled Section Men. I never had a woman professor, except for one visiting lecturer who took over a class for a male faculty member on leave. There were routine inconveniences and humiliations. Girls, as we were then, could not enter Lamont Library, where undergraduate course reserve materials were kept, so Radcliffe provided some reserve materials at the Radcliffe Library, several blocks away from Harvard Yard. Radcliffe students had to wear skirts to class, even in the coldest weather, our chapped legs burning. We had to wear skirts even on the ground floor of our own dorms until the doors closed at 10 PM and no men could be present. We had to sign out every time we left the dorm (on pain of expulsion if we were caught out during a fire drill). One with the temerity to stay out overnight could expect to be called into a dean's office to give an account of herself. We met these indignities largely with sardonic humor and still managed to revel in the intense intellectual life in our dorms and our classes. Even now I remember my years at Radcliffe as thrilling. But I am astounded at what we ignored and suppressed and at how rapidly our world then changed.

By the time I entered graduate school at Berkeley in the fall of 1967, about half my entering cohort were women. Like many in my cohort of 30, I had a generous five-year Carnegie fellowship (historical timing again: the US response to Sputnik created a major push to expand PhD programs), so I never had to work as a research assistant and thus I acquired very little professionalizing experience. I don't know what we women thought we were going to do with our degrees, since there were no women faculty in the Department of Sociology at Berkeley and hardly any in the university.[4] The two women lecturers in the department, one the irrepressible feminist Pauline Bart (1930–2021), were there on short-term contracts and were thoroughly marginalized. Dramatic change was nonetheless underway. Civil rights and antiwar activism consumed my generation of students, with the campus shut down quarter after quarter during my first years of graduate school. We were marching and protesting the war in Vietnam, the bombing of Cambodia, and the university's resistance to creating ethnic studies programs. Women were joining consciousness-raising groups, and there was new pressure to hire women. The department soon hired Arlie Hochschild and Gertrude Jaeger Selznick (1915–1979) as regular faculty. Arlie, the inspired thinker who became my mentor, dissertation advisor, and lifelong friend, organized a Women's Caucus. I joined Sociologists for Women in Society and, one year, commandeered

[3] A recent book, *The Equivalents* (Doherty 2020), about the first women at the Radcliffe Institute, conveys the contradictions of the era.

[4] Gumport (2002) describes how the absence of realistic career possibilities freed many women to invent new feminist scholarship.

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the Department's mimeo machine to run off thousands of pages of early feminist sociology to distribute at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting.

By the time I finished my PhD in 1975, the women's movement and affirmative action for women had opened many possibilities that had not existed even a few years earlier. Departments were under pressure to hire women, and I received several excellent job offers, finally deciding to go to Harvard. Later, universities were pressured to abolish the nepotism rules that had prevented hiring both members of an academic couple. I was not of the generation that paid the heavy price of these struggles; I was mainly a beneficiary. There were awkward moments: being challenged by Berkeley undergraduates about whether I was really the professor; being asked to teach courses on women or gender, even though it was not my field (I won't share my jokes about the "equipment" I brought to the task); having, at a Harvard oral exam in history, stuffy, sixtyish male faculty become tangled in knots by the alarming presence of a woman examiner. But the basic story for me was doors flinging open just as I approached. I had the winds of history—the overall expansion of academia and the transformations brought by the women's movement—at my back.

The Through-Line of My Sociological Career

I loved sociology from the moment I encountered it as a sophomore at Harvard. I thought of it less as a profession than as a life's work. Without describing quite yet how I moved from studying alternative schools in Berkeley to studying responses to AIDS in Africa, I state the obvious: I have not worked consistently in one academic field. Even my status as one of the early contributors—a Grand Old Woman, I suppose—to the sociology of culture has not rooted me firmly in one subfield. I also, however, haven't been a "fox" jumping from one topic to another based on impulse or opportunity. Instead, I've pursued one central set of questions, seeking different ways of getting at the issues that preoccupy me.

A career organization like mine has costs. The discipline is in many ways siloed, with most sociologists interested mainly in their own fields. Because my best-known work is in the sociology of culture and the cultural turn has swept much of the discipline, I have not been neglected or pushed aside. I am struck, however, by how hard it is to find an audience for work in new areas and how strong the temptation is to continue plowing the same fields. I could have made a career of repeating the arguments in my 1986 "Culture in Action" article in new guises. I do not recommend my approach for most young scholars. It is harder to become known and to stay relevant to a scholarly community if one keeps switching topics and fields. There is also considerable cost in having to master new literatures. For me, however, it has been a satisfying path.

CORE QUESTIONS

Despite studying wildly different topics and taking advantage of lucky opportunities for collaboration, I was always probing a core set of interests, trying to formulate the right questions and to gain new insights, even if full answers to those questions remain out of reach.

As a way of introducing those questions, let me start closer to the present and explain how I ended up in Africa. In fall 2000, just as I had finished *Talk of Love* (Swidler 2001), the remarkable Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) invited me to a meeting of scholars studying how to improve child development and population health. They knew what policies worked, primarily reducing inequality. But they were stumped about how to get such policies adopted. CIFAR sponsored a discussion of what kinds of political institutions or societies could foster these policy goals, hoping to sponsor a group to develop a new framework for knowledge in this area. They wanted big thinkers and invited me because of *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985).[5]

[5]After several efforts, CIFAR created the Successful Societies program, in which I participated for ten stimulating years (see Hall & Lamont 2009, Hall & Lamont 2013).

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At the meeting, I argued that culture could shape effective institutions and that analyzing the mutual constitution of culture and institutions should be a central focus of the program. A public health researcher pushed instead for a focus on health, playing a trump card: "Right now I am running a program giving AZT to HIV+ pregnant women in Botswana, reducing HIV transmission to their babies from 40% to 20%. Nothing could be more important than that!" I found myself responding, "But isn't the prior question why Botswana *has* a program to give AZT to pregnant women and other places don't?" My unplanned rhetorical flourish helped win the debate, and it also galvanized me. I knew nothing about Botswana and had never set foot in Africa. But I became fascinated by why countries, regions, or even areas of Africa with different historically documented forms of governance responded differently to the devastation of AIDS.[6]

Even though I was jumping not only to a new continent but to a completely new focus on a global pandemic, my interest in culture and institutions was continuous with my earlier preoccupations. In *Talk of Love* (Swidler 2001), I focused on how institutions shaped cultural resources and individuals' uses of them. My Africa research explored how cultural practices reshaped institutions. After beginning interviews in Botswana in 2003, I linked up with the demographer and sociologist Susan Watkins, who had ongoing projects in three rural districts of Malawi. She invited me to join her there in 2004. Studying global AIDS interventions in Africa, I could see how local cultural practices "colonized" global institutional forms, inverting the usual claim that global actors colonize the locals (Swidler 2009, Swidler & Watkins 2017). I also began to see how deep codes for constituting institutions both persisted and shifted. As I continued to work in Malawi, I also became fascinated by how culture sustains local institutional forms like chieftaincies and religious congregations (Swidler 2013, Burchardt & Swidler 2020), which retain a vitality that both governments and NGOs lack.

My interest in culture and institutions began long before Malawi. I had two persistent questions, which were linked, then diverged, then merged again: How does culture work? And where do institutions come from? In college, I took a course from the brilliant, if flawed, political scientist, Samuel Huntington.[7] I became convinced that effective institutions were essential for just societies. In my graduate school admission essay, I wrote about the challenge democratic political institutions face when critical social choices require scientific expertise that most citizens lack. I envisioned studying political sociology, organizations, and science and society, which I did during my first year of graduate school. But what gripped me was Max Weber's analysis of ideas. As I worked my way through Weber, I saw that his question wasn't whether ideas or material interests shaped history, but when and under what historical circumstances ideas came to matter and in what ways.[8] I wanted to study this problem not by going back to *The Protestant Ethic* (Weber 1958) but by trying to study what ideas *meant* as people actually used them. I was convinced that studying close up how people used ideas to guide their own actions and to persuade others might provide a key. In the Preface to *Organization Without Authority* (Swidler 1979, p. viii), an ethnographic study of two alternative schools, I wrote that "culture, in the sense of symbols, ideologies, and a legitimate language for discussing individual and group obligations, provides the crucial substrate on which new organizational forms can be erected. . . . Organizations, in turn, are the contexts within which cultural meanings are used, tested, and made real."

[6]I never answered the question. At that time, it was not even being asked (Boone & Batsell 2001). The best answer so far is Evan Lieberman's *Boundaries of Contagion* (2009). The role of enduring cultural legacies in shaping contemporary African governance is beginning to be addressed in political science and even economics (see Lowes et al. 2017; Wilfahrt 2018, 2021).

[7]Huntington (1927–2008) was a morally flawed figure. His work on political development and political decay nonetheless remains an invaluable resource (Huntington 1965, 1968).

[8]I read Weber partly through the lens of Bellah's (1964) brilliant "Religious Evolution."

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My book on how free school teachers and students enacted new forms of authority did not satisfactorily answer my questions,[9] so I tried to get at them from the other side, starting with individual cultural experience. I studied love (or rather, how people talk about love) to explore a living cultural tradition that matters in people's everyday lives. I was especially interested in when people rejected meanings that failed, so I interviewed married and divorced middle-class people. In *Talk of Love* (Swidler 2001), I tried to understand how my respondents drew selectively from a largely shared cultural repertoire, what use they made of the welter of love-and-marriage symbols and messages around them, and whether they jettisoned those cultural tools that did not work for them. I found that people did not have a consistent, unified world view but drew on different cultural meanings of love at different moments. People ignored most of the vast cultural storehouse of ideas about love, even when they knew them well. They sometimes defined their own ideas by contrasting them with culture they rejected ("Love isn't like in the movies"). But more surprising, they sometimes ended up embracing ideas they consciously rejected, switching between radically different understandings of love as an all-or-nothing romantic certainty versus a prosaic relationship requiring daily "work." I traced the conflicting ideas of love among these middle-class Americans to two aspects of the institution of marriage. Marriage is, institutionally, an all-or-nothing commitment to one person. Thus the romantic questions about love, "Is this relationship 'it'? Is this person 'the one'?" make sense. But marriage is also an institutionally fragile relationship that is vulnerable to breakup, requiring a prosaic, realistic approach that rejects romantic expectations. For my middle-class American interviewees, this kind of love requires hard work, accepting the limitations of oneself and one's partner, and communicating honestly about feelings. Both understandings of love derive from the institutional features of contemporary marriage—a lifelong commitment that can easily be sundered by divorce.

The demands of institutions, their basic structure, thus shape cultural meanings and help explain why people draw on different meanings at different moments. The challenges institutions create—such as deciding whether someone is (and remains) the partner to whom one can commit oneself or the very different challenge of maintaining an ongoing relationship through ordinary ups and downs—influence which images and ideas, which skills and habits of feeling, people draw from their cultural toolkits. Cultural symbols and practices also help people become the kinds of selves who can have the kinds of experiences that "love" requires.

"CULTURE IN ACTION"

For better or worse, my most influential contribution, written before *Talk of Love*, is "Culture in Action" (Swidler 1986). I am still happy to have written it. As with any widely cited paper, however, the paper is read differently by different readers (and of course many cite it without having read it). Some of its ambiguities no doubt contribute to its influence; scholars can invoke it to suit their own purposes. Without rehearsing the paper's arguments, here I explain what I was trying to accomplish.

My goal was to clear away what I thought were obstacles to clear explanatory thinking about how culture influences action. If culture is not a deep structure guiding all of our actions, if it is not inherently unified, then we have to explain when, how, and under what circumstances culture becomes powerful in shaping action.[10] My challenge to the Parsonian idea of values as

[9]Gibson's (2012) analysis of how ideas were deployed in President John Kennedy's face-to-face meetings about the Cuban missile crisis perhaps comes closest to what I was hoping to do, but I had nothing like his technical or analytic skills, and I was not allowed to tape record school meetings.

[10]William Sewell (2005), Michael Schudson (1989), and Margaret Archer (1988) take related approaches.

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guiding individuals and societies was not a claim that values never matter but an attempt to open space for clearer models of the varied ways culture shapes social life. If people know much more culture than they use, then understanding when and how people draw on—and make meaning with—different elements of their cultural repertoire becomes a central question. I offered some suggestions about how culture does work. I argued that people are likely to pursue courses of action that draw on styles, skills, and habits that they already possess. I also thought then, as I do now, that people reach out to the wider culture—to cultural symbols, narratives, and rituals—to acquire and reinforce their cultured capacities. They also reach out more actively—trying to access or invent new modes of feeling and understanding—in unsettled times, when their taken-for-granted common sense fails.

I was not trying to found a new theoretical school or elaborate a full theory of culture's causes and effects. Indeed, I think repertoire theory is too loose to provide a satisfying explanation of culture's effects. People's cultural repertoires may limit the cultural meanings they can bring to bear, but if cultural repertoires are capacious, the constraints on action are modest. Two more fundamental limitations of the argument in "Culture in Action" still worry me, and I am trying to find better ways to handle them. First, by focusing on action, I made the individual actor the theoretical focus. I talked about "groups and individuals" as if the same logics should apply to both, and I lacked a way to think about culture as fundamentally collective without slipping back into the misleading image of culture as a deep, unchanging essence. Second, I was writing about "culture" as a core concept, rather than seeing it as an omnibus term that encompasses several very different phenomena.[11] Such supraindividual concepts as discourses and semiotic systems have a similar problem: Do discourses and semiotic systems constrain or explain action, or does the fact that many meanings can be conveyed through common discourses or semiotic systems mean that these are the background conditions for meaning making, but they lack specific causal effects?[12] These more collective concepts also suggest deep, unchanging patterns, even though cultures have complex histories and sometimes change radically. The trick would be to account for both cultural continuity and change (Patterson 2014).

WHAT I'M THINKING NOW[13]

Sociologists need more differentiated concepts of culture that are more precise, and more useful for explanation, than the omnibus term. In *Constructing Social Theories*, Arthur Stinchcombe (1968, p. 4) argues that a good concept should reflect current knowledge, representing phenomena that behave in the same way, with similar causes and consequences. The omnibus term "culture" is problematic because several different kinds of processes, which operate in fundamentally different ways, are lumped together. Instead we need multiple concepts, each of which is more analytically coherent than the diffuse culture concept. Here I outline several candidate concepts, which I think bring greater clarity to cultural analysis in the Stinchcombe sense, because they identify processes that work causally in distinctive ways. This is not a typology of all possible culture concepts or a comprehensive model of how the differing sorts of processes fit together. The list moves roughly from more individual-level processes to those that are more inherently collective, but to the extent that I draw causal connections, the more collective processes often govern or modulate the individual-level ones. These suggestions are preliminary and certainly incomplete, but I hope they offer a starting point for the development of better, more differentiated culture concepts.[14]

[11] Jepperson & Swidler (1994) provide an early formulation.
[12] This is the problem raised, but not solved, by Sewell (1999).
[13] This discussion draws on ideas originally developed in the Conclusion to *Talk of Love*.
[14] A very different task would be to consider the myriad phenomena, from public symbols to inner experience and from gossip to institutions, that fall under the culture rubric, among them: language, symbols, myths,

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In "Culture in Action," and *Talk of Love*, I described the **cultured capacities** of individuals, among which I emphasized styles, skills, and habits, including cultivated sensitivities to internal and interpersonal emotional cues. These capacities also include embodied habits and tastes, even if I see these as more diversified and malleable then the *habitus* Bourdieu (1977, 1984) describes. All these cultured capacities, along with the stories, beliefs, and practices that teach and reinforce them, form a repertoire upon which individuals draw in organizing action. They are learned through myriad experiences, from family and school socialization, to imitation of peers and role models, to stories, gossip, and ritual encounters. The sources of such cultured capacities are collective, but they matter for action because they influence the kinds of action individuals can more or less easily pursue and the group settings in which they can operate.

Group styles (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003, Fine 2012) are an emergent feature of face-to-face groups, making a specific subset of practices, selected a from a much larger repertoire, normative—for example, arguing freely, joking around, or greeting everyone by first name.

Some cultural processes work at a more irreducibly collective level. **Semiotic codes** (Swidler 2001, Tavory & Swidler 2009) shape behavior not by influencing the cultural understandings and practices individuals internalize, but by defining how what individuals do, think, or feel will be understood. Semiotic codes are much more specific than the broad semiotic systems that encompass a full range of meanings. Semiotic codes contrast specific symbols, identifiers, or behaviors, coding their meanings.[15] Their causal force comes not primarily from persuasion or internalization but from people's (or organizations') awareness of how they will be read by others. A particularly powerful, dynamic subset of such codes are commensuration processes, such as ranking and quantification (Espeland & Sauder 2007, 2016; Espeland & Stevens 2009), which create organized, visible semiotic fields with transformative influence on action. Such codes can sometimes be altered by wide publicity, changing almost overnight how people expect others will perceive their actions. As an example, once Malaysian dissidents adopted saffron as their color, to wear it or not signaled one's political position.

Semiotic contexts signal which semiotic codes are relevant in a situation. Sociologists have long recognized the framing power of situations, within which specific norms, rules, and roles apply.[16] Semiotic contexts, however, can also drive the rapid development of semiotic codes, as when a polarized political meeting (or national contestation) alters the linkages among ideas and symbols, aligning them with political allegiances (Sewell 1999, p. 49; DellaPosta et al. 2015). Such semiotic contexts can also push forward the logic of ideas as proponents increasingly signal fidelity to their side's positions and test alliances by extending those logics in new, sometimes extreme, directions.

Identities are a specific kind of semiotic code that links persons (or other entities) and meanings. Identities—both the labels that individuals adopt and the categories that others impose on them[17]—matter because they answer the question, Which of all the meanings out there attach to

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narratives, rituals, practices, beliefs, ideas, ideals, values, norms, schemas, ideologies, discourses, world views, common sense, categories, rules, metrics, algorithms, tacit understandings, body hexis, habits, habitus, skills, styles, tastes, moral intuitions, and fantasy. There are also different institutional domains, such as religion, science, art and popular entertainment, where, at least in modern societies, cultural meanings and the conditions of cultural creation and reception are organized differently.

[15] One of the best discussions of semiotic codes remains Will Wright's (1975) *Sixguns and Society*, which analyzes how the semiotic oppositions between nature and society, strong and weak, and good and bad structure the plots of Western movies.

[16] The analysis of situations was at the center of Erving Goffman's (1959, 1963, 1971; systematized in *Frame Analysis*, Goffman 1974) work and plays a central role in symbolic interactionism. Bourdieu's (1992) analysis of fields is another way of talking about semiotic contexts.

[17] Much excellent work has been done on identities, challenging the notion that they inhere deep inside the person to be "discovered" (Brubaker & Cooper 2000) and recognizing how societies structure and either

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me? Identities exist in and are continually transformed by a larger field of contestation, and multiple identities can overlap, be mutually reinforcing, or compete. As Padgett & Ansell (1993) demonstrate in a classic analysis of Medici politics, actors can frame a situation to foreground specific identities and thus mobilize the alliances and resources linked to that identity. Cultural elements such as values may matter especially when they become identity markers (e.g., Smith 1998).

Institutions are a form of crystallized culture, constituted by rules and recipes (Meyer 2010, Jepperson & Meyer 2011; see also Jepperson 1991), reinforced by sanctions and rewards, and organized around purposes and meanings (Bellah et al. 1991, p. 10; Scott 2014).[18] What interests me here is how institutions both foster and elicit other less crystallized kinds of culture. Friedland & Alford (1991) argue that institutional spheres with differing logics create different meaning systems, as when family, bureaucratic employment, and the market make conflicting demands on participants. Common institutions also create and reproduce common culture. As I argued above in discussing marriage, what looks like cultural consensus (e.g., middle-class Americans' views about romantic love, the stories that move them in films, or their insistence that real love requires working on a relationship) is less a matter of being awash in a shared media stream or having imbibed a deep common culture than of being driven to the same cultural scripts because those scripts give people a way to deal with the institutional dilemmas they confront. To the extent that people confront the same institutional dilemmas, they seek out similarly-shaped cultural resources for navigating those dilemmas.

Cultural practices and meanings also shape institutions. Working in Malawi taught me how people who rely on the ties of unequal interdependence (or patron-client ties; see Chabal & Daloz 1999; Swidler & Watkins 2007, 2017; Verheijen 2013) that structure so much of African life draw on a very different set of cultured capacities than those fostered by labor markets that reward human capital. Widely available cultured capacities for building such ties of dependence also mean that Malawians often convert externally imposed institutional forms, like formal bureaucracies (Chabal & Daloz 1999) or democratically elected community driven development organizations (Casey et al. 2012), into familiar patron-client systems for which they have the requisite skills, including finely tuned assessments of reciprocal obligation (Colson 2006).

I learned these practices firsthand when Malawians whom Susan Watkins had employed—even years earlier—brought their children to greet us, offered small gifts, and sometimes insisted on working much more than we wanted or expected ("We can sleep when you leave"). At the same time, they expected us to advise them about their careers, to intercede for them at the local hospital, or to help with their children's school fees (usual obligations of senior kin). Addressed as "*gogo*" (roughly, "grandmother"), we couldn't help but become patrons. In a wonderful example described by the anthropologist Sandra Barnes (1986), when a huge unincorporated suburb of Lagos, Nigeria, sought city services, residents from heterogeneous ethnic origins formed chieftaincies, elected chiefs, invented genealogies, and built a flourishing patron-client system. The causal arrow between the cultured capacities of individuals and the institutional orders that make those capacities valuable thus runs in both directions.[19]

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highlight or suppress social categories (Lamont et al. 2014; Lieberman 2009 demonstrates the consequences of softening or sharpening category boundaries).

[18]The literature on institutions is vast, ranging from economists' shared agreements, to anthropologists' inherited structures, to sociologists' more dynamic understandings of temporary coalitions around shared rules and practices. A range of approaches is provided by Sewell (1992); Fligstein (1996); Fligstein & McAdam (2011); Hall & Taylor (1996); Jepperson (1991); DiMaggio & Powell (1991); Mohr & White (2008); and Jepperson & Meyer (2011).

[19]Three remarkable studies carefully draw the connections between culture and institutions, but each describes the important causal pathways differently (see Biernacki 1995, Collier 1997, Schalet 2011).

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"**Collective action schema**" is a less-than-ideal term for an important concept. This is what we refer to when we note the individualism of American culture, recurrent authoritarianism in Russia, or French versus American versus British or German approaches to policy and governance (Dobbin 1994, Fourcade 2010). Collective action schemas resemble the traditional view of culture as enduring, deeply rooted collective values. They are nonetheless narrower and more specific in their mode of operation than that image would suggest. They need not be deeply internalized, and they usually do not characterize all, or most, interactions in a society or group. Nonetheless, they are shared and enduring in a way most culture is not.

Collective action schemas, as I conceive them, are something like the background recipe for how a group is constituted and, thus, how it would coordinate joint action if no other organizational solution were operative. But ordinarily, other organizational solutions are present. Like voluntarist individualism in America (Fischer 2010), the code need not be dominant in most of social life. In America, family, market relationships, and citizenship impose obligations and forms of authority that are not freely chosen, even if such voluntarist codes are instantiated in how Americans form religious congregations (Chen 2008) and friendship groups (Varenne 1977), celebrated in political rhetoric, and imagined as the way Americans formed their nation (Bellah et al. 1985). Such codes are like a default option for social action. Collective action schemas are hard to change until everyone can expect that everyone else knows the new code and is ready to make the switch.[20] Individual skepticism or dissent cannot change such schemas until, sometimes suddenly, at a key ritual moment or a moment of public crisis, everyone sees that everyone else has seen that the system has changed (Chwe 2003). Such robust cultural schemas, which seem immune to contrary experience, are lasting not because they are deeply internalized or widely believed—though they may be—but because they comprise widely shared knowledge, taught in children's stories and in myths of collective triumph or nation formation. Sewell (1996) describes such codes in analyzing the transformation of schemas for defining what constituted the French nation during the French Revolution. Armstrong (2002) analyzes a similar transformation of the code defining San Francisco's gay community: from an interest group built around a shared agenda to a community constituted by its diverse identities.

Constitutive rules are the most irreducibly collective aspect of culture but the hardest to characterize. Sociologists point to their existence by noticing the socially constructed character of things others take for granted, from the person, to time, to the state (Berger & Luckmann 1967; Meyer 1999, 2010; Meyer & Bromley 2013, Zerubavel 2018). I do not think we understand, however, what creates, maintains, or sometimes alters such constitutive rules. These processes involve language (Searle 1995), in the sense that to name something helps make it real, and they also usually involve a system of entailments (D'Andrade 1995), so that, for example, the game of chess is chess partly because the entities constituted as knights, pawns, bishops, king, and queen can make certain moves and not others and because a certain move constitutes winning. There are rules that make things what they are. But why some socially constituted things become indisputably real, and others, like love, can be named but remain permanently contested, I do not know. In an era when basic categories like gender are rapidly shifting, and processes like financialization are constituting new realities, constitutive rules have become more visible, but more work will be required to really understand them.

[20] Sewell (1994, 1996) describes how, leading up to the French Revolution, ideological contestation pitted ideas of individual natural rights against defenses of privileges anchored in royal authority. The transformation of collective action schemas during the revolution was thus preceded by a period in which people debated the new ideals and came to imagine them as the basis for a new social ordering.

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YOU MAKE LOTS OF CHOICES. . . BUT YOU HAVE LITTLE CONTROL

Almost inevitably we are understood differently than we intend. My colleagues and I learned this when we wrote *Habits of the Heart*. (Before *Habits* and "Culture in Action," so few people read what I wrote that I did not have a chance to feel misunderstood.) *Habits* was received more positively than we had dared hope. But many read it as a lament for community in American life, for the kind of community Americans experience with their neighbors, at church, in scout troops, or in the local softball league. Our argument, however, was nearly the opposite. Americans, in comparative terms, have lots of community; they are typically patriotic, religious, and eager to volunteer. Their individualism is voluntarism, the assumption that the only legitimate social ties are those that individuals freely choose (Varenne 1977, Fischer 2010). We argued that this makes them hostile to institutions, especially to political institutions that make them responsible for those who are unlike themselves, who do not live in their neighborhoods, attend their religious congregations, or share their lifestyles. If individualism has nearly eclipsed the Biblical and Republican traditions, it is as much the individualism of idealized neighborhoods, small towns, and freely chosen communities of others like ourselves as it is the individualism of rampant capitalist greed. We wrote a second book, *The Good Society* (Bellah et al. 1991), to make this argument, with new interviews and what we thought was a rich new argument. However, this second book landed with a thud. Readers loved reading about how much they needed community, but they were not much interested in how much they needed better institutions.

My experience with "Culture in Action" was also nothing I could have anticipated. I described earlier how the paper was understood, or misunderstood, in very different ways than I imagined. I also had no idea that the paper would become a "classic," or that the sociology of culture, at that time a marginal subfield, would sweep the social sciences, carrying me along. Indeed, I was fortunate that the paper was published at all. The generous Sheldon Stryker (1924–2016), then editor of the *American Sociological Review*, accepted the paper without requiring revisions, overriding the reservations of some reviewers who noted that the theoretical argument needed an empirical test to be fully convincing. Stryker judged that that would be asking for a different paper and elected to publish the paper as it stood (although I did revise it substantially after it was accepted). That was a different era: A single editor, not a team, felt authorized to make important judgment calls without multiple rounds of reviews. If today's editing practices had been in effect then, "Culture in Action" would likely have never been published.

Other Lessons

I am by inclination and training a work-alone scholar. So how did I become involved in so many collaborations, and what have been the trade-offs? There is certainly a trade-off between the credit one gets for sole-authored work and the stimulation that collaboration can produce. When I was still untenured, I got little credit for *Habits of the Heart* because no one knew how to divide credit among five authors. But as *Habits* became widely influential, I think all five coauthors—Bob Bellah, Dick Madsen, Bill Sullivan, Steve Tipton, and I—got nearly full credit, as the glamour of being associated with a widely hailed book rubbed off on us. More important was the way working together led us to think more deeply than any of us could have done on our own. We usually met for three or four days, working perhaps four or five hours each day, coming away exhausted but exhilarated. The shared process through which we wrote *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society* is hard to reconstruct. Occasionally we literally wrote together, but more often we would have intense discussions, new ideas would pour forth, and then one or another of us would undertake to write them up. Sometimes one of us thought of a new formulation or developed new terminology between meetings, but even those ideas often drew on the work of others in the group.

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Without Bob Bellah's ideas, his inspiring, often indirect guidance, and his fluent smoothing of the text, of course, there would have been no *Habits*. But the greatest effect of our collaboration, and Bellah's gift, was to give us all permission to address what we saw as the most important questions of our historical era, a daunting task at which we would inevitably fall short. We also became close friends, so that affection and humor allowed us to disagree vociferously (I remember Bob saying, "Now, now, boys and girls") in a way that was intense but playful rather than angry. Other collaborations have been less intense but also very satisfying. They fit more the model of a division of labor, rather than the sort of powerful mind stretching *Habits* sometimes required. With Susan Watkins, however, our joint pleasure in writing and our complementary skills made collaborating both easy and fruitful. In Berkeley, New York, and Los Angeles, and under an outdoor shelter in Malawi, computers powered from a single outlet by a tangle of extension cords, we traded ideas; pored over field notes; dictated text to each other; sent paragraphs, drafts, and data back and forth; and deepened our friendship as we deepened our understanding of Malawi. I have found that I love brainstorming with other people. I sometimes get bursts of creativity when I am responding to others' ideas and I experience a kind of intoxication in collaborative interaction when I am transported by a rush of ideas. So even if sometimes one gets less credit, collaboration has been more than worth it.

The issue of collaboration is related to another central truth of academic life that is not often acknowledged. The bonds that connect scholars intellectually often are, or become, deeply personal. I am extremely fond of many of my students and collaborators, even love them. It is one of the enormous gratifications of working with graduate students. I remain genuinely puzzled, however, about why strong intellectual connection seems so often to bring about strong emotional connection.

I Learned Something Each Place I Went

One of the important but less-remarked-on features of our first, second, etc., jobs is how they continue our education as sociologists. Having been trained in Berkeley's wide-open, ecumenical intellectual environment, I found Harvard bracing. I had known the old Department of Social Relations, with Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) at its center, but the Department of Sociology where I became an assistant professor was a very different place. There was more explicit attention to causal explanation than I was used to, for one. Harrison White, then at an incandescent peak of creativity, was developing network modeling while continuing his interest in art and institutions (White & White 1965, White et al. 1976). What most shaped my thinking, however, were my junior colleagues at Harvard, among them Ron Breiger, Theda Skocpol, John Padgett, Gøsta Esping-Andersen, Rosemary Taylor, and Mark Granovetter, and an equally remarkable group of graduate students, including Wendy Griswold, Paul DiMaggio, Steve Brint, and many others. I taught a graduate seminar on the sociology of culture, and this group of superb students fundamentally shaped my thinking. Suddenly there was a field, with a literature, central questions, and the possibility of asking those questions systematically.

I was at Harvard only four years, and only three of those in residence. I spent my third year on leave in Berkeley with Claude Fischer, whom I had married in January 1977, when we were still living a continent apart. Claude then joined me in Cambridge for my fourth and last year. At Harvard the somewhat inchoate interests I had developed at Berkeley—in ideas, which I took from Weber, and the importance of meanings, which I took from Hochschild, Bellah, Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993), and Reinhard Bendix (1916–1991), plus reading Geertz—blossomed into a preoccupation with the role of meanings in shaping human possibility.

Stanford was a shock. I was told at first that I could not offer qualifying exams in the sociology of culture because there was no such field; and John Meyer, of whom I eventually became very

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fond, once said in his oracular style, "culture is what loses" (translation: culture that wins becomes institutionalized and we no longer see it as culture). But I learned a tremendous amount, even from ideas I resisted or rejected. Stanford's department was more-or-less divided into "shops,"[21] groups of graduate students working with one or two core faculty members who shared a research program. Required graduate courses, which seeped into my awareness largely via the students, embodied a strong logical-deductive model of theory construction and the ideal of a "theoretical research program." Although I rejected this rigid model, confronting it sharpened my thinking. I was very fortunate to be at Stanford when John Meyer was developing his powerful alternative to the usual explanatory models in sociology. Rather than tracing concrete causal processes (dismissively referred to as "realist"), Meyer postulated institutional processes (constitutive rules and recipes) that generated logics (or accounts), which in turn shaped concrete organizations and actors. Perhaps like all ideas we ferociously resist, Meyer's thinking had a big influence on me, especially through my friendship with several of his brilliant students, even as I continued to work toward more concrete, realist causal models.

Encountering departments with different institutional traditions also taught me something about the relation between practices, organizational structure, and meanings. At Stanford, theoretical schools defined both student training and faculty research programs. Students typically worked with one advisor, and they did research using that faculty member's approach. So sociological knowledge appeared to emerge cumulatively out of these theoretical research programs, partly because both students and faculty cited and read mainly work from their own school. This was in sharp contrast to Berkeley's devotion to classical theory and to eclecticism in theory and method. Students normally work with several faculty members, so they often come up with highly original but idiosyncratic projects and then figure out later what theory is relevant. This can lead to rich, innovative work, but it militates against the notion of a cumulative social science. At Berkeley, we could not imagine ranking our students, as, for example, economists do (Fourcade et al. 2015, p. 97). To rank students would be to enact the—to us—ludicrous premise that sociology is a unified discipline with a single standard of valuation. Differing departments' practices thus instantiate schemas and make alternative schemas almost incomprehensible.

Another lesson from my early faculty years was that the size and congeniality of one's junior cohort is probably the best predictor of everyday happiness in a first job (for those fortunate enough to have a tenure-track position). I was very happy at Harvard even though untenured faculty were treated badly. I was less happy at Stanford despite its more democratic, egalitarian norms, in part because no assistant professors were hired in the years right before and after me. There was no one to commiserate with. This also reflects the institutional structure of academic life, in which even the most democratic, welcoming department nonetheless hides a dark reality: Your senior colleagues and other higher-ups in the university will decide whether you receive tenure. No amount of friendliness can obscure this fact.

One more lesson comes from being part of a two-career couple. The hardest part, of course, is solving the "two-body" problem. Colleges and universities have made more accommodations for two-career couples than in the past, but it is still terribly difficult. Claude and I were very lucky eventually to land two jobs in the same excellent department. Working in the same department nonetheless required decisions about how to manage our roles. Someone in a similar situation

[21] Expectation states small group research centered around Joseph Berger, Morris ("Buzz") Zelditch Jr. (1928–2017), and Bernard Cohen (1930–2011). Mike Hannan's group worked on population ecology of organizations, and John Meyer was developing the new institutionalism. W.R. (Dick) Scott's group focused on the sociology of organizations.

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once told me that the couple worked as a unit. Usually, only one attended any meeting and they voted in sync, relying on each other's recommendations. We took the opposite tack. We have separate professional and departmental identities and do not typically coordinate. This sometimes requires special effort. For example, when I taught the required first-year graduate theory course the same semester that Claude taught the required first-year methods course, we never discussed the students. I announced our pact the first week, joking, "You can go ahead and make Claude's life miserable and I won't even know." We occasionally advocated different departmental positions, our votes cancelling each other's. Our relative independence also has come from the different fields and styles in which we work. Some academic couples navigate being a political or intellectual block very well, but it can also be a potential danger.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES OF INTELLECTUAL INSIGHTS

Our ideas are always at least in part shaped by our biographies, either directly or in what we rebel against. I am sure my engagement with institutions is related to my father's career in government service and both my parents' devotion to the New Deal. Especially in a theoretical essay like "Culture in Action," my own experiences, alongside immersion in sociological debates, inevitably contributed to the intuitions that grounded my arguments.

I knew from my own experience that I had been exposed to a lot of culture—suburban, Protestant, Southern—that never "took." I recognized that each time my family moved, I left behind a persona that no longer fit and, drawing on some attributes I already had and developing some new capacities, became a new person. Awkward, plump, and out of place in Knoxville, in Nashville, at an excellent high school, I became an excellent student. Taller and thinner, I even looked better. I made a wonderful friend whose animated personality rubbed off on me. At Harvard, even what might have been liabilities—having a Southern accent, being tall, being ignorant of much that my more sophisticated classmates knew—became assets. I relied on a lively, if naïve, curiosity, and I developed a gift (some might call it a curse) for conversation. These compensated to some degree for my still very uneven academic skills. Aspects of my father's decisive style helped me appear confident even when I was not, and I had an enthusiasm for ideas that is still with me.

My childhood also taught me about identity and about the difference between personal and public culture. Because in the small Southern world I lived in as a child, being Jewish was such a central issue, I felt very Jewish. But my family's minimalist Reform Judaism left me with almost no content for that identity. Initially unconsciously, I worked to absorb Jewishness from other sources, less Judaism than "Yiddishkeit," a matter of style and cultural familiarity. In Nashville I joined my best friend's family for Jewish holidays, at Harvard visited my Jewish roommate's family in Manhattan, took courses in Jewish history and literature, and even enrolled briefly in a Yiddish class. Another experience taught me about the importance of public culture. When I was 11, my parents sent me from Knoxville to visit my aunts and cousins in Chicago. I felt like the country bumpkin I was. Who knew a restaurant could serve raspberries in the middle of winter? Or how to eat a shrimp cocktail? The big shock, however, was that the soda fountain on the first floor of my aunt's building served toasted bagels! A public eating place, a regular soda fountain, could serve Jewish food? That was a revelation. So I understood, even inchoately, that having something affirmed as part of public culture was utterly different from experiencing it as a personal reality.

I also understood intuitively how the cultural skills and habits with which people pursue goals shape the ends they can pursue. To do sociology, I often used the skills that served me well in other areas of my life, learning about new research by talking with colleagues rather than systematically perusing the journals, doing interviewing in part because I like talking to people, generating ideas rather than systematically testing arguments. I also understand how much I have been shaped by institutional commitments: my belief in sociology and in the larger enterprise of generating

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knowledge about society, my role as a teacher, my love of my family. I consider myself a moral person, a person with integrity, with values. But that integrity is not an individual matter; I did not build it myself. It is inseparable from the institutional arenas that give moral choices content and meaning. I am a social being even more than a sociologist.

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