

# Social psychological processes as mechanisms for the explanation of cultural phenomena<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

As the two fields have developed in the American scene the sociology of culture and (sociological) social psychology have kept themselves at a rather safe-distance from one another. This is in spite of the fact that in the grand classical exemplars that we teach in the required graduate seminars—e.g. Marx on capitalism and alienation, Weber on “The Social Psychology of the World Religions”, Durkheim on religion and ritual—cultural phenomena and their generative sources and consequences at level of micro-interaction, affect and cognition are clearly not so easily separable. The main argument in what follows is that the institutional and intellectual separation between the study of cultural phenomena and the set of processes that social psychologists are usually concerned with is not healthy. I also believe that it is in fact *cultural sociology* and not social psychology that has been most hurt by this separation.

I do not come into this discussion from a “neutral” standpoint when it comes to the views on explanation. So it is time to lay (some of) my cards on the table. I subscribe to a view of explanation that is best referred to as “mechanismic” (to borrow a phrase from Mario Bunge (1997) and which attempts to disengage a concern with mechanisms from any allegiance to a *mechanistic* ontology). This simply means that a given phenomenon cannot be said to have been explained for until the relevant micro and meso processes as they are arranged in a given (sometimes bounded) context into a generative interactive system have been described and accounted for (Bechtel and Abrahamsen 2005; Machamer et al. 2000). A more concerted focus on generative mechanisms can help cultural sociologists in two tasks that are in my view crucial if we are to come up with effective explanations of cultural phenomena: *localization* and *decomposition* (Bechtel and Richardson 1993).

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First, mechanisms can help us in *localizing* cultural phenomena. This has been a perennial problem (and source of criticism) of cultural theories, which tend to refer to “culture” as if it was in Gary Alan Fine’s (1979: 733) memorable words “an amorphous, indescribable mist which swirls around society members.” Two decades later, Ann Swidler (1995) echoed the same sentiment, noting that culture continued to be treated as some sort of “mist” that envelops persons and contexts, is both everywhere and nowhere but which also somehow manages (somehow) to get inside persons and influence their behavior. Most cultural theorists understand the problems that beset this conceptualization of culture, but solutions to it have been harder to come by (Ghaziani 2009).

Second, a focus on mechanisms can help us in *decomposing* cultural phenomena. The notion (and desirability) of decomposition is a bit more controversial and harder to defend, simply because the idea of decomposition is likely to be mistaken for the notion of *reduction*. But decomposition is not reduction; in fact decomposition is fairly compatible with a view of macro-phenomena as emergent and not reducible to the operation of lower level components. Decomposition is a very well-established (and pragmatically justifiable) heuristic strategy in many scientific fields concerned with the characterization of complex, multi-level phenomena (Bechtel and Richardson 1993), including (some versions of) cultural analysis. This is important, because unwieldy, ontologically unmoored, macro-abstractions are prone to run rampant in cultural analysis (Sperber 1996). Precisely because culture tends to be usually mistaken for (or enthusiastically portrayed as) a delocalized, immaterial abstraction, I think that following the heuristic strategies of localization and decomposition with a strong focus on the effective characterization of macro-phenomena can do a lot to strengthen cultural analysis.

In short, cultural sociologists live in a world of richly characterized (macro) “phenomena” but are murky when it comes to generative processes and mechanisms. Social psychologists on the other hand, live in a realm of richly specified mechanisms and processes, but the macro-phenomena that these processes and mechanisms generate tend to be conceptualized in generic ways. An alliance between cultural sociology and social psychology along these lines thus seems natural. In what follows I specify what cultural sociology can get from this alliance. I do this by delineating a set of cultural phenomena that I think could be better handled if we paid more attention to social psychological mechanisms that generate them.

## Culture and Social Psychology

### Symbolic boundaries

Where do symbolic boundaries come from? Cultural sociologists (see (Lamont and Molnár 2002) for a review) have spent a lot of time describing the contours and consequences of the existence of cultural boundaries among persons, objects, spaces, and intellectual and cultural products. Yet, the question of how these boundaries *originate* and the issue of how they are maintained and reproduced over time has been a bit harder to answer. I submit that a set of simple mechanisms taken from *status-construction theory* (Ridgeway 2000) can be used to shed light on these issues. For the most part, cultural

sociologists are interested in those types of boundaries that carry with it some sort of hierarchical import. Status construction theory is concerned with delineating the conditions under which a certain set of *status beliefs* regarding the superiority of members of some (initially neutrally construed) category, (and correlatively, status beliefs regarding the relative *inferiority* of members of other categories) will first develop and then spread in a social system acquiring a measure of taken-for-grantedness and cultural authority (Ridgeway and Balkwell 1997; Ridgeway and Erickson 2000).

Status construction theory suggests that a simple set of *initial conditions* in which members of a group are exposed to some sort of experiential correlation between an initially neutral categorical distinction among persons and the inequitable distribution of some object or resource, can result in the emergence of a status-belief that comes to serve the role of legitimizing and normalizing that state of affairs (Mark et al. 2009). After status beliefs come to be diffused throughout the social system, they come to acquire a self-fulfilling reality of their own, as persons come to treat members of the different group categories in accordance with the initial associative link between category membership and resource distribution that generated the status-belief in the first place. Status beliefs may include presumptions about the superior *general* competence and ability of members of a given group, as they become generalized outside of the initial context in which they developed.

## **Eurocentrism**

While only applied to issues of the generation of beliefs in the superiority (or inferiority) of members of different gender, sexual or ethnic categories, it is clear that this mechanism has general applicability to a whole set of cultural phenomena. Take for instance the issues of “orientalism” in particular and “colonialism” as generalized cultural ideologies (Fanon 1983; Said 1995). While both of these issues have been subject to painstaking analysis by scholars in cultural studies, the humanities and area studies, it is easy to see that they cannot be disconnected from the singular historical event of the take-off of a particularly dynamic system of economic accumulation and expansion of markets in the West (Rosenberg and Birdzell 1986). The key point to keep in mind is that European capitalism could have been aided in its takeoff by factors completely orthogonal to the specificities of Western culture, as has been suggested in recent historical reconsiderations of the “Rise of the West” question (Pomeranz 2000)). However, once the historical correlation between wealth accumulation and Western culture become bundled in a set of consistent and recurrent experiential linkages, the stage is set for the formation and diffusion of self-validating “status-beliefs” that associate Europe and Europeans with greater generalized competence and capacities outside of the specific realm of wealth accumulation.

## **Cultural hierarchy**

In the very same way, boundaries between disciplines, occupations or other cultural domains that are not initially ranked in a hierarchical system can acquire such a cast, simply by the fortuitous association between those cultural domains and some widely recognized resource. This is of course, a commonplace observation in cultural sociology, although the generative processes that account for it have been harder to delineate. For instance,

historical research shows that the boundary between “high” and “low” culture in the West does not emerge until very late—by most accounts, not until the last two thirds of the nineteenth century—and only when the wealthy bourgeoisie comes to associate specific cultural pursuits that until that point did not have class-segregated audiences with the specific refinements and trappings of wealth (Levine 1984; DiMaggio 1991). Thus, high culture becomes hierarchically differentiated from “low” culture only after it becomes *experientially linked* to concrete markers of wealth and privilege. *Status beliefs* regarding the superior, generalized abilities of those who become experts in appropriating and monopolizing those cultural experiences then readily develop, as would be predicted by the status construction account.

## Dissolution of symbolic boundaries

Attention to social-psychological processes and mechanisms can even help us better understand processes of cultural change. For instance, while cultural studies are good at describing large-scale static patterns of hierarchical boundaries (such as Eurocentrism) they are less effective in helping us understand how and why they change. But if the status-construction account of the generation of consensual status-boundaries is correct, we should expect that these systems should weaken whenever the experiential conditions for their plausibility erode (Ridgeway and Correll 2006). Thus, one way to explain the emergence of various ideological systems that *question* the tenets of Euro-American superiority (such as the various skepticisms that go by the name of “postmodernism”) is to point to the shifting reality of status and wealth in the world-system (Bergesen 2000). As non-Western regions of Global Ecumene are able to find their own path toward developing dynamic centers of wealth-accumulation, the experiential linkage between European descent and generalized status beliefs weakens and the space for alternative (oppositional) construals of the connection between categorical identity in the world system opens up.

## Attachment to nested groups

The behavioral and social consequences of personal attachment to large-scale collectivities has been an enduring interest of cultural sociologists. From the origins and consequences of “nationalism” (Anderson 1991) (and the more recent topical interest in in “religious nationalism” (Friedland 2002)) to the recent spread of cosmopolitanism as belief system and ideology (Beck and Sznaider 2006). Like many other topics of interest in cultural sociology, the characterization of these phenomena suffer from problems of localization and decomposition (more specifically, lack thereof). In many applications, appeal to their existence once again comes close to the postulation of culture as an ever-present “mist” that suffuses certain social contexts and spreads across the global system but which cannot readily be pinned down.

I suggest that *nested group attachment* theory (Lawler 1992) can help in the explanation and characterization of these phenomena. According to nested group attachment theory, persons are more likely to develop strong affective attachment to wide-ranging, superordinate groups or identities (e.g. the nation, the world) *only* when they have the simultaneous opportunity to develop attachments to smaller micro-collectivities

that are embedded (or “nested”) in these larger groups. Thus, attachment to large-scale identities requires the support of attachment to more concrete micro-collectivities operative at the level of face-to-face interaction. This elementary social-psychological mechanism illuminates how such “misty” cultural forces as “nationalism” or world-cultural “cosmopolitanism” operate in concrete social settings. Nested group attachment theory also suggests a clear rule of thumb for the cultural sociologist interested in these types of phenomena: *no postulation of “direct” individual attachment to broad identities without intermediary attachments to smaller groups or organizations “nested” within them.*

## Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

Nationalism is unlikely to become a potent social force simply by virtue of individuals “imaginatively” linking to broad communities that transcend face-to-face interaction (even in the presence of print or electronic media that facilitate the “imagined-community” (Anderson 1991) formation process) or simply due to the top-down efforts of centralized elites to create nationalist cultural mythologies. Instead, nationalism—whether “religious”, or authoritarian—is more likely to grab a hold of a given population when it can “piggy-back” on already operative affective attachments to an existing network of small groups, such as voluntary associations (Riley 2005). “Religious nationalism” operates in a similar way: by making use of already existing networks of religious organizations that already generate group attachment at the micro-level, in order to produce more abstract patterns of attachment to national and transnational imagined communities of faith (Riesebrodt and Reneau 1998). Attention to an elementary social-psychological process thus sheds light on the cultural “dark side” of the traditional Tocquevillian concern with associational and civic life.

In the very same way, cosmopolitan “world culture” is not just an ideological mist slowly spreading itself throughout global society (Meyer et al. 1997; Lechner and Boli 2005) leaving “cosmopolitanism” in its wake. Instead, attachment to “humanity” and the “world” on the part of individuals only becomes behaviorally consequential when it supports itself on existing attachments to networks of international non-governmental organizations (Boli and Thomas 1997). Nested-group attachment theory suggests that INGOs, are not only the *cognitive* carriers of world cultural models, but also the *affective* support of newly emerging sensibilities and patterns of identification with transnational communities and forms of identity.

## Concluding remarks

In very real respect, the strategies of localization and decomposition that I have outlined here are certainly not new. It was the deployment of these heuristics that allowed such pioneers in the study of small group dynamics as Bales, Slater and Zelditch, to concretize and better characterize the ponderous functionalist abstractions regarding “goal attainment,” “integration,” “power and prestige” into a set of generative processes that were conceived as *yielding* these macro-phenomena from concrete interaction processes in small groups. In the study of culture consumption localization and decomposition is the strategy that Fine (1977) recommended to better get a grasp of the “behavioral implications” of the

reception of the commercial arts in local contexts. As also noted by DiMaggio (1987) the big, ponderous abstractions of “mass culture theory” can be more profitably re-characterized by paying attention to how culture is used in interaction and conversation face-to-face settings.

Where I believe that the current generation of cultural sociologists can do better is in moving to integrate cultural theory with the *specific* processes and mechanisms that are constantly being proposed, refined and updated in social-psychological research. I outlined how two of these research programs, status-construction theory and nested-group attachment theory fit naturally in helping illuminate the conditions in which large-scale cultural abstractions—large scale systems of symbolic boundaries, cosmopolitanism, nationalism—are best seen as operating and being effective. I could have given many other examples. Cultural analyses of money and the economy for instance, can benefit from mining the vibrant literature on affective consequences of exchange (Lawler 2001), cultural analyses of gender and ethnicity can profit from considering the micro-processes that produce categorical distinctions among persons as interactive and affective realities (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). The moral is the same: cultural theory becomes better *explanatory* theory when cultural phenomena are localized and decomposed into the likely social-psychological processes that generate them.

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