

TALK

of

LOVE

HOW CULTURE MATTERS

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REPERTOIRES

To describe how culture works, we need new metaphors. We must think of culture less as a great stream in which we are all immersed, and more as a bag of tricks or an oddly assorted tool kit (see Swidler 1986) containing implementations of varying shapes that fit the hand more or less well, are not always easy to use, and only sometimes do the job.

The difficulty with images of tool kits and magicians' tricks is that they imply conscious choice or rational manipulation. After all, people are often "used by" their culture as much as they use it.¹ Indeed, most current understandings of culture assume that it constructs the very selves who act and the terms in which action, self, and world can be understood. We do not think of people as separate enough from their culture to "use" it.² I share this view of culture's constitutive role (see Sewell 1985, 1992; Meyer and Jepperson 2000), but I would insist that cultures constitute multiple selves, worlds, and modes of action. As I shall try to show below, people do use culture as a tool kit, even when one of the cultural tools they may pick up or put down is precisely the kind of self they inhabit.

CULTURE AS REPertoire

Perhaps we do best to think of culture as a repertoire, like that of an actor, a musician, or a dancer. This image suggests that culture cultivates skills and habits in its users, so that one can be more or less good at the cultural reper-

toire one performs, and that such cultured capacities may exist both as discrete skills, habits, and orientations and, in larger assemblages, like the pieces a musician has mastered or the plays an actor has performed. It is in this sense that people have an array of cultural resources upon which they can draw. We can ask not only what pieces are in the repertoire but why some are performed at one time, some at another.

Adding a cultural style, mood, or justification of action to one's repertoire may not be easy. Indeed, one advantage of thinking of culture as repertoire is that it emphasizes the ways culture is like a set of skills, which one can learn more or less thoroughly, enact with more or less grace and conviction (Sudnow 1978). Thinking of culture as repertoire makes us aware that cultural symbols, rules, or rituals only sometimes "work" for people. Just as a musician may have easier, more assured mastery over some parts of her repertoire than others, so our mastery of culture varies. Some cultural orientations are so ingrained that they require neither effort nor self-consciousness. Others require laborious concentration. And still other parts of a repertoire are insecurely learned, so that one may act out a cultural attitude without being very good at it.

In this chapter I examine how people select among parts of a repertoire, picking up and putting aside cultural themes. Then I explore the circumstances under which people shift from one part of their repertoire to another, and what anchors or invokes the varied scripts they use.³ Particularly important here is the way different parts of people's life organization—core situations or problems—provide contexts within which particular pieces of culture make sense. People run through different parts of their cultural repertoires, selecting those parts that correspond to the situation or exemplary problem (in something like Kuhn's [1970] sense of "exemplar") that currently holds their attention.

In the examples that follow, I try to illustrate both the fluidity and the logic with which persons mobilize different parts of their cultural repertoire. While I deal first with the conscious "ideas" about love and marriage people present in discussion, the analysis applies just as forcefully to the "moods and motivations" and the ritual experiences a culture generates.

DEBATING

The easiest way to see culture as a repertoire is to examine a situation in which people mobilize several parts of their repertoires simultaneously: when they have a position to defend and they are willing to call up any argument that seems plausible. Ideals of love—deeply held, yet always precarious—often generate precisely this superfluity of reasons.

Love is a peculiar notion, both in its literary rendition and in ordinary life. One of its oddest aspects is the uncertainty about whether love does, or should, have reasons.⁴ In my interviews, for example, people had great difficulty explaining why they love the people they do. Asked why he married his wife, Donald Nelson, a Silicon Valley engineer, replied, "I wish I knew. It was funny, because I wasn't looking..." It is not that his reasons were too intensely personal to describe. In fact, he insisted on the mundane aspects of his choice: "We liked each other. We got along well." He simply could not give reasons for what now seems to him quite inevitable: "We got along. I don't know what it is. It just seemed like the one."

But love is not entirely without reasons. Indeed, despite his generally awkward style, Donald Nelson was able to offer a wealth of arguments about why one should stay married—arguments drawn from independent, and sometimes contradictory, traditions of thought.

In mainstream American culture, two contrasting vocabularies apply to the problem of love, and Americans operate in the gaps and overlaps between them (see Swidler 1980; Quinn 1996). One way to think of love is as a voluntary choice. Then the question is whom one loves and why, and what one gives and receives in a relationship. One chooses well; gets a good deal; is more or less contented, satisfied, happy, and so forth. The other way to think about love is as a commitment, a bond that is no longer purely voluntary, if it ever was. If love is a commitment then it is unique, irreplaceable, and not fully rationalizable into a set of benefits given and received. Sometimes the emotional punch of the word "love" comes from its power to signify a relationship beyond choice—one in which the normal expectation of reciprocity need not apply. At other times love signifies the ultimate choice, based on the unsurpassed virtues of the beloved.

Logically, love as choice and love as commitment may well be incompatible, since free choice implies that one could cease to prefer the person to whom one is already committed. But the quite logical engineer drew freely on both cultural images to justify enduring marriage. First, his marriage should last because it is especially "right" for him. How did he know she was the one he wanted? "Oh, I guess we wanted to see each other. There was no facade. We communicated." What is love? "I guess it's feeling right about someone." But if the idea of finding the right person implies "choosing," it becomes the wrong metaphor. Asked whether he worried when he married that there might be a more "perfect person out there somewhere," he burst out laughing: "You mean like shopping for a car or something? I don't know. I didn't even think about it." Choosing someone to love isn't like shopping, and shouldn't be.⁵

Another reason that people should stay married, however, is that they freely chose the marriage bond. "I guess it's because I believe there's no point in getting married unless you really think it should last a lifetime. If you don't want that kind of a relationship, you don't have to get married." So marriage rests on a voluntary choice, but one of a special kind—a contractual relationship to which one is bound because one agreed to it in the first place.

Enduring relationships are good, then, first because one has found the right person and second because one has freely chosen a relationship and should stick to it. But there are other reasons, which draw on other images of the nature of love. Here the imagery becomes more organic than contractual. Love "grows like a flower. If you make sure you care for it, it grows, but if you stomp on it, it certainly doesn't last."⁶ Lasting relationships are good because "You're kind of a pair. You grow with each other. It's a life you share together."

Finally, even if the general rationales that justify staying married do not work for everyone, Donald Nelson argues that a lasting relationship is good for him, given his own character: "Like I say, I'm not that type of person. I never dated much, ran around much. I am basically very quiet."

Rightness, choice, commitment, growth, personal predilection—none of the reasons Donald Nelson adduces for marrying or staying married is unusual. Indeed, he is out of the ordinary only in his somewhat awkward sincerity. While there is a dominant theme to his concerns about love and marriage (the need for mutual respect and consideration—a topic to which we shall return), he in fact draws on a hodgepodge of images to describe what love is, what keeps it alive, and why it should be preserved.

The core of his thinking seems to be his own evident satisfaction with his marriage, but around that is arrayed a variety of reasons why it is good to do what he is doing. His decision to marry he sees, at least in retrospect, as primarily a matter of rapport, communication, understanding—"feelings" that are very important but hard to articulate. Staying together requires attention and consideration, like that of a gardener nurturing a flower, but it is also a kind of obligation based on a freely chosen contract. There are also satisfactions from staying with one person and being a couple. And then if all else fails, he just finds himself to be the kind of person who prefers stable, married life.

This repertoire of reasons is not a unified argument for the virtues of lifelong marriage, nor is it inconsistent in the sense of being flawed by some logical or practical contradiction. Rather, these rationales are organized around their common conclusion: this shy engineer's evident desire to stay married. Like many of us much of the time, he has little need of a

coherent rationale for his day-to-day life, as long as his life seems to be working. Instead, he has a patchwork of cultural accounts on which he can draw, which handle most of the questions he poses to himself or which are posed for him by his environment. But for what kinds of people under what circumstances does life pose persistent questions for which they need an extensive repertoire of elaborate answers? Under what circumstances will fewer, simpler, less developed answers do?

Another suburban professional, this time a young, successful lawyer, talked about love in a very different style than did the sober engineer, but he justified lasting marriage in very similar terms. The lawyer, Ted Oster, fell madly in love with his wife—"really flipped," in his phrase. After ten years of marriage and two children, he still feels that she is "that right, special person." More articulate and more introspective than the engineer, Ted Oster nonetheless draws on very much the same repertoire of arguments about why one should stay married. First, of course, there is his satisfaction with his own marriage. "Mostly it's just you know this person is really good. It's worked so well before up until now, and it continues to do that because you expect it to, and it does by and large." For him, responsibility to a freely chosen contract is less important than responsibility to one's children ("I think it would be wrong for kids not to be able to grow up in a family"), but his desire to avoid "the sense of failure at making the relationship work" is certainly reminiscent of the engineer's view that if you choose to get married, you should stick to it. Like the engineer, he also falls back on the argument that lasting marriage is right for him because of his own character, his personal preferences: "[Having multiple relationships] is just not something that interests me. . . . I'd have to be probably a hell of a lot stronger than maybe I am now, and a lot more self-reliant, maybe falsely so, but I'd sure have to replace what I have now with something else."

The young lawyer develops a much richer version of the engineer's organic argument that it is good to be "a pair," to "grow together," and to have "a life you share together":

I have seen us get from a good relationship in terms of sharing with each other and so on to one that's much, much deeper. . . . It's one that you can't develop over a brief period of time, and also I think probably harder to develop with somebody that you meet at this stage in your life. Your having grown through your twenties with someone is good. Having first children and doing all those things, you could never do it again with anybody else. For me I would rather—I think

intellectually that life's experiences will be best shared with somebody going through all those stages together.

I get satisfaction in growth with Debby in proceeding through all these stages of life together. O.K. That's what makes it all really fun. It makes it meaningful and gives me the opportunity to share with somebody, have an anchor, if you will, and understand where I am.

Here he expands Donald Nelson's ideal of growth and sharing into a more general claim about what makes for a good, satisfying, and meaningful life. "It means much more that way, so everything that we go through now takes on more meaning than it would if I were to even experience that with somebody in a casual relationship." A shared history gives life greater meaning and also creates a richer sense of self, providing "an anchor," to "understand where I am."

Despite his greater verbal facility, Ted Oster's justifications of lasting marriage were no more unified than those of Donald Nelson, and in fact he traveled almost exactly the same ground. What is striking is that both men, despite their different styles, drew on similar repertoires when they tried to justify lasting marriage. But they also elaborated those various justifications to different degrees. For the engineer, the fact that one freely chooses marriage explained why one is obligated to try to stay married; while for the lawyer, the desire not to feel like a failure at marriage was only one reason why it would be "wrong" to get divorced, and was not elaborated into a positive rationale for staying married. The sense of sharing that occurred to the engineer only as a kind of personal benefit of marriage provided the lawyer with a very general vision of how a meaningful life is to be lived.

Thus in looking at the more-or-less reasoned arguments people make, we see them drawing from their repertoires, trying various rationales, with little concern about coherence among them. We also note that some people elaborate their reasons more than others do, and that two people who have very similar repertoires may nonetheless differ greatly in the emphasis they accord particular views.⁷ How some people enrich or elaborate parts of a standard repertoire, while letting other parts lie fallow, is central to the analysis of how culture is used. It is an issue to which we shall return in later chapters.

Even this simple example of the variety of arguments two men can develop to justify enduring marriage suggests new ways of thinking about how culture works. First, it seems evident that for these men, their cultural understandings of love are organized not around the logical coherence of

a single image, metaphor, or theory of love but around a core situation or problem. Several models of what love is like (a choice, a commitment, a growing organism) are acceptable as long as they support the marriages these men wish to sustain. Indeed, the apparent incoherence of their medley of arguments might, from another point of view, be seen as an advantage. If what one wants to do is support and justify a given way of life, having a rich variety of rationales available should strengthen one's position. If one argument fails, there are plenty of others available (see Bourdieu 1990).

Such ready tacking back and forth between one argument and another may seem to smack of cynicism, or at least of self-delusion. But this view is based on our systematic misapprehension of the way culture works. While cultural meanings may indeed give human beings some analytical distance from their experience (see V. Turner 1969) and some leverage over problems of action, for most people most of the time culture is mobilized piecemeal, to tinker at the edges or to defend their existing patterns of life. Even when people actively mobilize ideas to solve problems rather than just to confirm their current life arrangements (Quinn 1996; Strauss and Quinn 1997), they still benefit from having multiple understandings to draw on. No conscious cynicism is required; only normal commitment to the embedded features of one's own life. And in the case of love, where many aspects of daily life are imbued with multiple layers of meaning, it would be a betrayal of the "reality" of that experience to try to encompass it in a single, consistent worldview.

Second, what makes a particular image, metaphor, or argument acceptable is its fit with a given mode of life. For Donald Nelson, choosing a spouse the way one chooses a car is laughable (though not utterly beyond his cultural imagination),⁸ because it violates the spirit of his current commitment to his marriage. In this, and in other cases, we evaluate cultural images by the consequences we would draw from them in core life arenas. Thus, in some sense, cultural understandings are tied to concrete cases (R. Miller 1996). And our commitments in those concrete cases make given cultural principles more or less acceptable.

What then is the use of cultural imagery, if justifications are so fluid, incomplete, and incoherent? The question of culture's uses will, of course, occupy us throughout this book. But here I want to suggest that a cultural repertoire allows people to move among situations, finding terms in which to orient action within each situation. At the same time, cultural imagery is used somewhat the way bats use the walls of caves for echolocation. Bats know where they are by bouncing sounds off the objects around them. Similarly people orient themselves partly by bouncing their ideas off the cultural alternatives made apparent in their environments. A social or po-

litical novelty (stories of "open marriage" or the nomination of a woman for the presidency) will make us devour newspapers and solicit the opinions of our friends partly because we want to expand the repertoire of arguments and attitudes we have available for orienting ourselves to a new phenomenon. We locate our own views by their distance from as much as their agreement with opinions available in our environments. And we seek to maintain a repertoire of cultural attitudes, images, and arguments wide enough so that we can orient ourselves among them.

SHIFTING FRAMES

The image of a repertoire or tool kit makes sense when we consider how people use arguments in debate. But what about the more deeply held understandings that ground people's sense of life meaning? Even here, when people talk about their own core concerns, they continue to mobilize divergent, sometimes contradictory cultural frames. Their cultural repertoire turns out to include not simply varying images and arguments but multiple cases, stories, or examples that may each differently define the nature of a given situation. When people shift such stories midstream, we may say that they are shifting the cultural frame within which the situation is understood (Goffman 1974; Padgett and Ansell 1993).

Such shifts in cultural framing are different than the shotgun approach of a debater, throwing out arguments on the chance that one might hit the mark. Here, a person operating within one set of assumptions comes to a problem he cannot handle within his dominant scheme. Then, after floundering for a while trying to adapt his frame to unexpected difficulties, he may quite abruptly jump from one frame to another. This does not signal a loss of confidence in the first vessel, but simply a temporary abandonment of one craft while one navigates choppy waters in another.

Just such a leap—between frames, feelings, and underlying imaginative renderings—occurred during the interview with Donald Nelson, the contented, rationalist engineer. Awkward and hard to draw out on most issues concerning love and marriage, he turned out to have a well-elaborated theory of how partners in a relationship should treat each other. The basis of a good marriage, for him, is "respect." Partners should "understand" each other, each accepting and supporting the other. He portrayed each person tolerating the other person's interests; he supports his wife "in whatever she wants to do." Respect means mutual acceptance of differences—not trying, for example, to convert one's spouse to one's religious beliefs or interfere with the other person's activities. Donald indeed seemed proud of how different he and his wife are—different in

what they enjoy, different in their religious values, and separate in most of their activities. "I respect her beliefs, and she respects mine." Respect requires emotional sympathy, "understanding what each other feels," but, even more important, allowing each other freedom of action. "She does the things she wants to do." The examples are homely: she takes a needle-point class in the evenings; he is engrossed in building an elaborate home telescope; but the principle is intensely felt. The greatest virtue in marriage is giving the other person freedom to do what he or she wants, and the cardinal sin is denying that freedom. Asked what damages relationships, he said, "I guess trying to impose your will on another person, have no regard for the other's feelings. A total disregard for someone's feelings." Beyond this? "I don't know what else. I'm sure there's lots of other things, but I haven't thought too much about it."

For this serious engineer, respect is important because of what is at issue in relationships. The problem, as he sees it, is how two people can integrate autonomous lives, allowing each other room to enjoy their own passions, follow their own beliefs, and meet their own needs. As an example of respect in operation, Donald recounted a time early in his marriage when he had felt confined and bored in their small apartment, and his wife supported his buying a ham radio to amuse himself. He sees the same principle at work in his wife's willingness to tolerate his time-consuming hobbies, especially work on the telescope. When asked whether honesty is important in relationships, he saw its value for letting "the other person know that something is wrong" so that problems could be solved. The issue of honesty in relationships did not suggest problems of intimacy, trust, or self-exposure, as it does for many other interviewees; what mattered to him was mutual respect between autonomous partners.

In the midst of this well-worked-out picture of how two people should manage a relationship, Donald Nelson said something surprising. Asked what he would do if his wife should become ill and require constant care, he abandoned the language of autonomy and mutual respect in favor an image of absolute commitment, sacrifice, and selfless love: "If you love [someone] . . . it is just something you do for them. It's something you want to do." Even if it means giving up hobbies, interests, freedom?

Yeah. Nora is the most important thing in my life.

Q. She's important as her and not just because she gives you support for the things you like to do?

Certainly that too, but she's important because she's—I love her.

Thus in an interview where for more than an hour Donald Nelson never spontaneously used the word love, and downplayed any hint of romance (Why did he marry Nora? "It just worked out. . . . We got along." How did he know she was the one? "Oh, I guess we wanted to see each other. There was no facade. We communicated." Was the idea of love important? "Not at first. It kind of grew. . . . We liked each other. We got along well."), he suddenly expressed a vision of love radically different in tone and substance from anything that had gone before.

This sudden shift in cultural vocabulary was provoked when Donald's attention shifted to a new scene, one that called up a different part of his cultural repertoire. His declaration that "Nora is the most important thing in my life" is potent testimony to a vision of "love" as selfless commitment, which organizes one sense Donald has of his life. Yet this dramatic image is not normally uppermost in his mind, and indeed it surfaced not when he was asked about love directly but when a particular scene or situation evoked it. The frame that worked very well to describe what he values most about his marriage—the mutual respect of two autonomous individuals—broke down, or perhaps we should say it fell silent, before the problem of desperate dependence. His language of "respect," with its image of spouses supporting each other's separate endeavors, was never meant to handle a situation of decisive choice. When the vocabulary of respect failed him, an entirely different moral vision was available in reserve. In this part of Donald's cultural repertoire, relationships embody ultimate choices, ultimate commitments, and "If you love someone" you know what you have to do.

I do not know how or whether this stolid engineer's beliefs would actually lead him to sacrifice himself for an invalid wife. But he provides a particularly dramatic example of a sudden shift in cultural frame when, working through a set of problems within one frame (how people who love each other should treat each other; how spouses can get along), he comes to its limits—that is, to the limits of the problems with which it can effectively deal. It is in this sense that Donald Nelson, like the other people I interviewed, relies on a repertoire of cultural meanings from which he can draw selectively in varying contexts. Indeed, while most transitions are not so dramatic, many of the shifts I described above as opportunistic strategies of debate can be understood just as well as a slight shifting of ground when one frame for understanding experience seems to fail before problems that do not quite fit its assumptions.

Donald Nelson's sudden shift from one frame to another also reflects more general dilemmas of American culture. As we shall see in chapter 7,

Americans frequently employ a utilitarian, individualist logic in thinking about personal relationships. They talk about getting a fair exchange for what they give, communicating clearly their expectations and demands for others, and preeminently, acting so as to maximize good outcomes for themselves, expecting others to do the same. (See Bellah et al. 1985.)

For people in intimate relationships, however, such a language is seldom sufficient. Like Donald Nelson, with his well-elaborated ideal of “respect” for individual differences, most of my interviewees talk quite naturally in individualist terms, about choice, about wanting to do things for one’s partner, and about love that has to be spontaneous to be real. But in relationships they also find themselves interdependent in ways they have difficulty formulating in these terms. This tension between a dominant voluntarist vocabulary and experiences of unavoidable interdependence shows up in their frequent inarticulateness about why they “chose” to marry the people they did (since at one level “choosing” no longer has much to do with what is significant about their relationships) and their insistence that the people they married are somehow, ineffably “right” for them. It also emerges in the occasional, surprising moments when, working through a difficult problem in their usual, individualist vocabulary, they find themselves painted into a corner and then, like Donald Nelson, suddenly open a door we did not know was there. It is as if they break out of one vocabulary into other, deeper—if less thoroughly explored—passages.

SCENES

We have seen above that people switch cultural frames when they imaginatively engage new scenes or situations. But the tendency for cultural frameworks to be organized around imagined situations is more general. Indeed, a cultural repertoire remains diverse partly because it contains frameworks for making sense of many different scenes or situations of action, and each scene retains an autonomous logic, independent of other, potentially related, scenes.⁹ The ways elements of interviewees’ cultural repertoires are organized around scenes or stories becomes evident when we examine the ways they responded to a set of structured dramas of love.

In some interviews, we asked people not only about their own lives but about a set of hypothetical stories or vignettes. (See the methodological appendix for the full set of vignettes and details on how they were administered.) These were simplified problems that might arise in relationships, posing dilemmas that interviewees were asked to solve. The stories

ranged from that of a married couple in which one spouse falls in love with someone else to that of an unmarried woman (or man, since we varied the gender of each vignette’s protagonist) who cannot decide which of two people to marry.

The vignettes described dramatic situations, recognizable less from everyday life than from soap operas or the columns of “Dear Abby.” Often these stories evoked culturally stereotyped responses—no surprise if we and our interviewees were on the same wavelength. On the other hand, we tried to create real dilemmas, so that our interviewees would have to think—mobilizing the cultural resources they think with. We attempted to balance the pros and cons of each hypothetical situation, hoping that interviewees would be unable to find pat answers for the problems our stories posed.

One of the least successful vignettes from this point of view turned out to be among the most revealing. The following story (read aloud, as were all the vignettes, by the interviewer) preceded a series of questions about who is right and why:

Linda and George have a very close relationship. They have always preferred to do most things together and they have shared more of their thoughts and feelings with each other than with anyone else. Linda, however, is starting to feel that perhaps they should do more things with other people and develop some separate activities of their own. George says that this might lead them to grow apart and make their love for each other less deep. Linda says it might make their love deeper if they were more independent.

The vignette was unsuccessful because our attempts to balance two views of relationships failed. Opinions were lopsided in favor of Linda (or George when he is the one seeking autonomy). Indeed, in many cases interviewees took a vehement dislike to the more dependent partner, arguing, for example, that George was too dependent, lacked confidence in himself, was trying to live only through Linda, and so forth.

What was interesting, first, was how strongly interviewees could react to a contrived situation about which they had little information. Their ability to read much more into the vignette than we had put there was, I think, a sign that we were tapping into a culturally well-elaborated problem. Our interviewees conveyed the sense of having been through this argument, imaginatively or in person, many times before, and they recognized both the outlines of the conflict and the roles and attributes of the participants. They were angry at George for demanding such complete absorption from Linda.

A typical reaction was that of a health-care worker in her thirties, divorced for several years:

He [George] feels threatened with her wanting to be more independent. He's clinging to that—the symbiotic nature of their relationship. [Linda's view of love] is inclusive rather than exclusive. The more love that you have . . . the more [you] can share. . . . It just keeps passing. It keeps transferring. It keeps growing.

Each person ought to bring their own richness and independence to a relationship, and to be two separate parts to a whole. That's just really important. For this world to survive we need more of that. We need more people who are strong, independent, and self-sufficient emotionally, physically. To be able to take care of your own needs and not always rely on another person to do it . . .

Q. What is George's view of love?

He feels pretty dependent. He feels pretty needy. For him to say—do it all, do all those things together, our love will deepen if we do everything together, that's suffocating.

Interviewees do not simply have attitudes, or values, or norms about relationships that they then apply to the case of George and Linda. Rather they have vivid scenarios about what a dependent person is like, about how relationships can go wrong, and about what it would mean to live out particular stories. These images provide one fundamental element organizing individuals' cultural understandings.¹⁰

Response to the vignettes, or indeed to any question about social attitudes, depends heavily on how the issue is framed, on what kind of scene is imaginatively invoked by the question.¹¹ "Attitudes" are usually understood as a kind of positive or negative evaluation of some object, and "values" are usually seen as the ranking of options in a hierarchy of preferences. But in responses to these vignettes we see instead that people orient themselves by following out the implications of a particular scenario. If they focus on a different detail of the story, or in some other way reconfigure the scenario, they can switch their attitude toward it entirely.

The vignette of George and Linda tends to evoke one image, but it can be interpreted in other ways. Interviewees easily attribute to George the moral failings of the overly dependent person, but they occasionally read in a different drama, seeing Linda, for example, as someone who puts her own interests ahead of the relationship. Differing opinions about George and Linda are grounded in different constructions of their story.

One unusual interviewee—Les Newman, a well-educated young

businessman and committed Baptist, experienced in articulating how his worldview differs from that dominant in his secular environment—illustrates beautifully the crucial role that scenes or stories play in anchoring social attitudes. He took a middle position in the conflict between George and Linda, but not by finding some midpoint on a single attitudinal continuum. Instead he alternately invoked two different stories, one favoring George and the other favoring Linda, demonstrating how the formulation of a single attitude draws on a repertoire of competing cultural images.

I find myself playing the middle ground. I find her attitude very selfish [Linda is the dependent one in this version of the vignette] in the sense that—I'm assuming that we're talking about two married people, so I'll treat it that way—even though they are married they are still two different individuals and they do not exactly have the same interests. I don't think there is anything wrong with him having other activities. But at the same time, I find his attitude a little too open-ended when he says he wants to make sure it would be an independent life with independent activities. If he means to do these to the exclusion of activities with his wife, that's wrong. I don't see anything wrong with activities not done with the spouse as long as those activities don't take priority over the spouse. I think it's necessary that you do continue activities together to sort of maintain the bond, the closeness, the communication with each other to ensure that the marriage endures.

Here Les Newman defined his own position by navigating carefully between what he considered the Scylla of one dangerous way of life and the Charybdis of another. He played out each position in his imagination, fleshing out the drama that might unfold. This tendency to set up competing scenes or dramas as a way of locating his own position continued when he was asked why he considered Linda's view "selfish":

Well, what I mean is that even if two people are married they're not going to find that their interests, abilities and individual gifts they've got are going to be identical. Let's say, for example, if he could sing, and she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, for her to say, "Listen, I can't sing, so I don't want you to go anywhere and sing either." That's a very selfish attitude. But at the same time, if he says, "Look, I sing great, see you later, I'm going on the road for a year," that's carrying independent activities a bit far.

In response to one simple story, it is remarkable that this Christian businessman could quickly come up with a wide range of related stories and

images, which he somehow had “on file” as parts of his own past musings, his repertoire of knowledge and experience, or his cultural imagination. It may be, indeed, that he had on file not specific stories but a culturally structured capacity for generating appropriate stories. Note again how easily he filled in additional lines, fleshing out the parts of the actors in the George-Linda drama:

Q. What is Linda's view of love, as opposed to George's? What is his view of love?

To me it seems like her definition of love is based on activities—“The more we do together, the more we love each other.” His seems much more founded upon “We said the vows; we signed a piece of paper. It doesn't matter whether we do anything together or not. That ceremony years back has established the relationship.” She defines it as activities, and I think he just defines it as saying that it exists is enough. “We said we love each other, so therefore we love each other, and we don't need to do anything together.” I'm not sure how he thinks doing independent activities is going to strengthen their love. It's certainly maybe going to broaden his scope over the things he does and the good times he has. I think there are people who say “We're married, so we love each other,” and don't feel there's any need to contribute any more than that.

Thus this businessman had available a wide range of images—of persons, situations, and stories—with which he fleshed out the vignette he was given. And he did not have just one take on the situation. As he talks, we can hear him running through one interpretation after another, looking for plausible ways of embodying—and indeed defining—his sense of the proper balance between independence and dependence in marriage. He focuses his own thinking only by mobilizing a wide range of images and stories. In this sense, to participate in a culture is not to share in some unified worldview but to draw on a repertoire of scenes and scenarios. The point George Herbert Mead made about role-playing—that one can't adequately play a particular role, like that of “girl” or “second-baseman,” without knowing as well how the complementary roles are played—applies just as strongly to other sorts of cultural learning. One incorporates and uses a range of views to frame one's thinking about particular problems.

Les Newman seems to have drawn his interpretive repertoire from both standard cultural dramas and from his own experience, without feel-

ing a need to separate the two. Both provide possible images of what might happen in varied circumstances. Excessive independence could threaten a relationship because “I have known people that have gotten so involved in their independent, individual activities that they haven't left anything for each other.” But Linda's plan of spending all their time together might be a threat too “because I don't think two people can spend one-hundred percent of their time together without getting on each other's nerves. . . .” Rules of thumb and cautionary tales both work to the same effect, giving him a way of defining his own position by bouncing his sense of what is right off the varied scenarios he imagines could flow from either George's or Linda's “extreme” positions about togetherness in relationships.¹²

This thoughtful Christian was unusual in the elaborateness of his worldview and in his insistence on finding a balance between “extreme” positions. (Indeed, I have reported only a few of his many evocations of the problems of excessive individualism and excessive dependence in relationships.) But he nonetheless well illustrates two more general points about the way cultural repertoires operate. First, it is clear that he used a wide range of particular cases, images, and examples to think through a problem, finding out what he thought in part inductively, by figuring out which in his repertoire of dramas would have a good or bad ending in the sort of situation he was considering. His position was not so much a point on a unified continuum as a crossroads among a selection of stories. Second, even though he was perfectly able to think in terms of general rules (indeed, unusually so, as in his use of “the golden rule”), a great deal of his thinking was tied more specifically to concrete cases, images of the outcomes of typical situations, personalities, and acts. Thus he used a cultural repertoire full of stories (not information, strictly speaking, but rather projections of what persons and situations of this sort often lead to) to organize his own worldview and to respond to new situations.

Other theorists, such as the social ethicists Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin (1988; Toulmin 1981), have noted that people in fact work out their moral intuitions through analogies to concrete cases for which they already know the “right” answers. But these interviews show just how many cases with potentially competing outcomes there are and how problematic “casuistry” really is. Any given situation, personal or imagined, might be assimilated to a variety of culturally available cases.



Without yet being able to say why it is so, by now we begin to see that some conception of culture as a repertoire or tool kit is useful in understanding how culture is actually brought to bear on experience.

In the interviews we have examined so far, persons show great complexity in the ways they mobilize culture for practical use. They do not simply express perspectives or values instilled in them by their culture. Instead, they draw from a multiform repertoire of meanings to frame and reframe experience in an open-ended way. In debate, they may be unselective, taking up any arguments that seem handy. In other situations, they take up one cultural frame (usually corresponding to an imagined case or situation) until they run up against an unsolvable problem. Undaunted, they usually simply escape the conundrum by jumping outside its boundaries, invoking another situation, another metaphor, another symbolic frame. This frequent shifting among multiple cultural realities is not some anomalous sleight of hand but the normal way in which ordinary mortals (as distinguished, perhaps, from trained philosophers) operate.¹³ People know much more culture than they draw on in any one instance (DiMaggio 1997), and they slip frequently between one reality and another, switching the frames within which they understand experience. Geertz has written (1973b) of culture as the defense against meaninglessness, making potentially incoherent experiences cohere. Less attention has been paid to the capacity of culture for creating multiple possible meanings, for teaching the imaginative capacity to provide alternative, sometimes competing frames for experience (but see Victor Turner 1969 and Renato Rosaldo 1989:91–108).¹⁴

Finally, when people think through problems, they implicitly assume particular situations or cases in framing their own positions. As ethnomethodology has long pointed out, a person must supply some set of background assumptions in order to make any situation, event, or principle interpretable. To a greater extent than ethnomethodology has recognized, these frames or assumptions are matters of culture rather than personal construction. But cultures are also multiplex, offering varied ways of rendering any situation.

Such variability within cultures and the corresponding variety of the cultural repertoires available to individuals are neither unorganized nor unlimited. In the next chapter we will begin to ask how particular organizations of culture are linked to action, and whether some cultures allow more latitude than do others for movement between cultural frames.

PART II

How Culture Works: Love Stories

more culture than they actually use. Thus people possess culture of very different sorts—that which is actively part of current experience and that which is held in reserve, so to speak. In this chapter, I have suggested that people vary also in the ways they integrate culture with life experience, and that they may change over time and across life spheres in the ways they draw connections between culture and the lives they actually lead. But before we can understand how culture influences people, even in so intimate and important a sphere as that of “love,” we must examine what people use their culture for. Only when we understand culture’s uses will we be in a position to consider when and how culture actually governs experience, when it simply provides the color or tone to everyday events, and when and why in some circumstances people adopt culture that actively, directly shapes their conduct.

CHAPTER 4

CULTURED CAPACITIES AND STRATEGIES OF ACTION

Why does culture make a difference in human action? If cultures provide diverse tools or repertoires of meanings that people use in varying ways, and if people differ in how seriously they take their culture and how richly they deploy it, to understand how (and when) culture shapes action, we need to analyze how people actually make use of culture—what they use it for.

This will temporarily take us away from the analysis of love talk, since how people use culture to organize actions, emotions, and decisions concerning love depends in part on how they use cultural materials to construct a self in the first place. Thus this chapter focuses on materials that highlight self-forming, the way culture is used to construct, maintain, and refashion the “cultured capacities” that constitute actors’ basic repertoires for action. In later chapters we will see how those cultured capacities are mobilized in the realm of love.

People use culture to learn how to be, or become, particular kinds of persons. Such self-forming (see Greenblatt [1980: 1–9] on “self-fashioning”) utilizes symbolic resources provided by the wider culture. Through experience with symbols, people learn desires, moods, habits of thought and feeling that no one person could invent on her own.¹ Symbols also provide people continuing access to their inner lives—awakening, stimulating, or heightening capacities for judgment and sensibility. Culture equips persons for action both by shaping their internal

capacities and by helping them bring those capacities to bear in particular situations.

It may seem strange that one needs culture to learn how to be a certain kind of person. But people do use culture, sometimes self-consciously, to become the persons they aspire to be.² Howard Crossland, the self-sacrificing agronomist we met in the previous chapter, describes just such a process in the development of his Christian faith. Raised in an evangelical Protestant church in a small, Midwestern farming community, he used its teachings to discipline himself. During his high school years, he accepted religious training on pragmatic grounds: "I think all of us kids went to Sunday School at least until the high school age, so I did too." He "needed the training" to control "a little more drinking than I should of" and "a little hell-raising," potentially threatening vices: "my father—usually almost exclusively restricted to the weekends—would drink heavily. . . . [T]he weekends were not the happiest part of the week for us. Some of this stuff [religious training] would build a foundation on how you would avoid some of this."

In college, however, this serious young scientist came to feel differently: "I had not been living up to my religious teachings, and certainly didn't have a one-on-one relationship with Christ. And I guess in all fairness I would say . . . I always had a little fear of death out there, and I guess I probably initially accepted Christ and the Christian faith partially out of love and partially out of fear—eternal damnation." His earlier religious training had left a gap. It "maybe left my life, shall we say, this is sort of a paradox, a little freer to do as I pleased the rest of the week. Whereas the relationship which I developed then, I could see it had to be part of every minute of each day, and I could see a greater help through prayer and through simply following the teachings of the Bible, help to make various decisions." The help he needed was moral, like the firmness not to cheat even a little on his taxes, making "the fine line a little more black and white." But he also needed help in controlling his feelings—not losing his temper or being misled by the ups and downs of human emotions: "Because I've the Bible to study, it points out it's not really relying on your emotions. There are certain facts presented and you accept the facts. Like God loves me, even if I'm having a lousy day and I don't feel like He loves me, but it says in there that He loves me, so I can accept that as a fact." Thus an aspiration for self-control—seen as the alternative to dissolute living—led this young man to seek out religious experiences that could justify, motivate, and sustain a disciplined life. Of course, his very notion of the disciplined self he could be, the possibility of having and thus desiring such a self, also depended on culture. Without his childhood religious experi-

ence and the polarity it established between moral laxity and self-restraint, he might never have sought the inner discipline his deepened relationship with Christ could offer. But when he sought to sustain and strengthen that self, he used culture to do it.

This strict Christian asserted that he could not accomplish his goals alone: Getting your "life all put together . . . is pretty close to impossible doing it on your own. . . . First of all you accept God, then he gives you help to do this—to do good to your fellow man, to refrain from immorality, to refrain from illegal things." Howard's insistence that he relies on God's help conforms to evangelical Christian doctrine, but what his religious understanding makes explicit is true of all cultural experience. Becoming a certain kind of person is learned, practiced, and sustained through culture.

CULTURED CAPACITIES

What, then, are the capacities cultures impart to their users? The first, as I have already emphasized, is the capacity to be a certain kind of self. Trained capacities to think and feel, what Geertz (1973b) has called "moods and motivations," enable one to adopt a line of conduct and carry it out. To be ~~guilt-ridden~~ about wrongdoing, passive before authority, or infuriated by insubordination may be crucial parts of a self that can carry out particular lines of action (Greenblatt 1980). More important still is the internal organization of the self (see Swanson 1971)—whether, for example, one resonates to the moods of others and can enter a trance state at ritually appropriate moments (Geertz 1973b; Swanson 1978) or resists blending the edges of the self into the psyches of others (Elias 1994; Taylor 1989: 305–90; Arditi 1998: 54–85). Such internal capacities shape the kind of life one can construct.

Second, culture helps people internalize skills, styles, and habits. These include all the things one can be "good at," from practical skills like knowing how to dress in a suit, converse with a new acquaintance, or take a standardized test; to subtler matters such as keeping a poker face when enduring social humiliation or exploding in violence when one's honor is violated.³ Indeed, such skills and habits constitute much of what we actually mean when we observe that someone differs from us culturally or when we feel culturally out of place in an unfamiliar environment. Not knowing how to bow correctly in Japan, or worse, not having any habitual sense that bowing is natural or appropriate; not thinking to discover who in a group is older or younger than oneself and to modulate one's forms of address appropriately; feeling violated when one's privacy is invaded, or rather when there is no privacy—all these are important signals that one

lacks the cultured styles, skills, and habits that fit one for a particular social world (Hamabata 1990: 1–25; Kondo 1990).⁴

Habits are hard to build and easy to take for granted. But without appropriate habits one can have great difficulty adopting a particular line of conduct. To take a regular job, for example, one must ordinarily have habits of time-consciousness. That means owning a timepiece and remembering to look at it, setting the alarm at night, getting up and dressed in the morning, having a reliable way of getting to work, and so forth. Without such routines, meeting a regular schedule can be a daunting task.

Harder to see, but just as significant, are skills for evaluating the social and material world, from the way fifteenth-century Italian merchants gauged the volume of odd-shaped containers (Baxandall 1972), to the calibration of obligation and loyalty or honor and insult,⁵ to what is so important to middle-class Americans—the assessment of individual character.

Much of our active engagement with art, literature, sports, storytelling, and gossip involves exercise of such cultural skills. When Kenneth Burke (1973) writes of “literature as equipment for living,” he does not mean that people use the plots or characters of novels as direct models of how to live. But if a homemaker who reads gothic novels is not in fact learning how to be a terrified virgin heiress, and teenaged moviegoers are not studying to be vampires and robots, at least some of their pleasure nonetheless comes from exercising cultural skills important for their ordinary life activities, particularly those of evaluating the character of individuals. From the most serious fiction to the most implausible soap opera, our dramas revolve around crises and challenges to character.⁶

We enjoy analyzing personality and interpreting motives because character matters to us. In a voluntarist, market society, we present ourselves to others as individuals with a certain kind of character that guarantees our performance, trustworthiness, or inclinations (in the same sense that knowing someone’s lineage might be thought to guarantee his conduct in a more family-based society [see Collier 1997; Derné 1995]). We also depend upon our ability to evaluate the character of others. In most fictional dramas, of course, there is ultimately an “answer”—about what kind of person someone is, how she will behave at a critical moment of decision, what will destroy or redeem her—in a way there seldom is in real life. But these urgent questions about what kind of self one has, and how to interpret other selves, are highly charged for us because so much rests on them. Cultural experience sharpens those capacities of judgment and response important to our everyday lives.

Third, as Margaret Archer (1988) among others has suggested, culture marks group membership. People use culture to delineate group

boundaries and to signal membership to other group members (DiMaggio 1987), to differentiate themselves from others (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992; Waters 1990), and to establish and maintain alliances (Barth 1969; Cohen 1974). As with the evangelical Protestants we saw in this chapter and the last, the use of culture to mark group membership can reinforce its power to shape distinctive kinds of selves.

Finally, culture offers ideas and images that constitute a view of the world. In some cases, people organize their lives according to elaborate theories of what the world is really like. But others with more interpersonally rooted lives (based, for example, on loyalty to allies or friends) may find such a larger ideology both unnecessary and uninteresting. As Geertz (1973b: 99–108) has argued, worldviews—including scientific theories, religious beliefs, and folk wisdom—give persons the continuing conviction that they know enough about how the world works to act with some confidence within it. But in stressing culture as the antidote to the chaos of meaninglessness, Geertz again overemphasizes cultural coherence. It may be much less important for people to have a coherent worldview than to have enough different beliefs to adapt to most contingencies without losing the conviction that somehow the world makes sense.

It is easiest to see how culture works where people use it most explicitly and self-consciously.⁷ Art Townsend, co-pastor of a liberal Protestant church, sees himself as “modeling” for his congregation the new ways of acting that he has discovered through Marriage Encounter and other brushes with the ethics of personal authenticity. Indeed, a full description of his worldview would recapitulate much of the self-actualization ideology of the “me decade” of the 1970s (see Tipton 1982). In this youthful minister’s description of his stance toward life, we can trace out the complex cultural retooling—a new sense of self, incorporating altered ways of feeling and judging experience; new styles, skills, and habits of action; and changed views of the nature of the world—that allowed him to enact new ways of being in the world.

Self

Art Townsend attributes his changed mode of action to a new view of himself as a minister, a “professional lover”: “the thing that is hardest for me to do is . . . to love myself, to allow myself to be lovable.” Learning to love himself then changed his attitude toward everyday problems: “It means that when I mess up I do not go through my own neurotic trip of beating myself up. I simply have at it again. I simply get up on my feet and go forward, and don’t judge myself for having made a mistake.”

Sustaining a confident self that will not be hampered by its mistakes is a matter of active cultural work—involving a new model of human nature and new rituals for untangling the knotted parts of troubled selves. Art encourages a new emotional attitude toward “problems.” For a confident self, eager to “grow,” “problems become the playground of consciousness. . . . There are some days I just feel really jazzed up and excited about problems. It’s like ‘Yum, yum, give me another problem!’” He confronts sadness, guilt, and self-blame with a belligerent cheerfulness epitomized in his advice to “lighten up” as the road to “enlightenment.” He refuses to accept congregants’ moral self-denunciations, their “cross of roses.” “If they keep crucifying themselves again and again, they are not going to find a whole lot of support. They come in with that hang-dog look and all that suffering, and I say ‘How wonderful! How great! That really is spectacular!’”

Art Townsend teaches those who organize their conduct around moral rules and guilt over transgressions to think and feel about themselves in new ways. Accepting, loving, and also laughing at oneself are the beginnings of a recycled humility, in which one is readier to admit weaknesses because they do not seem so drastic. More important, one gives up guilt and accepts “responsibility” for one’s life. “Responsibility” means thinking of the self not as “right” or “wrong” in terms of objective moral rules but as having “choices.” Speaking of his work as a marriage counselor, Art notes that many couples come to him when one spouse has already decided to leave and just wants out “without getting anything on them.” He counters by emphasizing responsibility for choices:

What we begin to explore is first all the baloney that “I did everything I could.” Because nobody has done everything they could, ever. Even when things are working, they haven’t done everything they could. So let’s get off of that and enable people to experience their own feelings and get in touch with their own desires, and decide what they want, and what they are willing to do.

The helpless self has no place in Art Townsend’s scheme; what really counts are the choices people make. Indeed, the responsible self is nearly omnipotent. “It’s up to everyone to decide their own path, you see, because you can do life in such a way as to end up getting yourself smashed, if that is your unconscious desire, and the truth is that you don’t have to do that.”

Art Townsend wants his parishioners to learn a differently organized sense of self, to “shift out of the mode which has expectations into the mode which has intentions.” He attempts to “place strategic dynamite charges around expectations—blow the expectations aspect to smithereens,” be-

cause expectations are “doomed to be disappointed,” while “an intention empowers your life.” He suggests that a coherent moral life can emerge from knowing clearly what one wants (an intention “will unfold, and you’ll have a sense of whatever is . . . appropriate for that intention”), rather than from moral rules about what one should do or be.

Styles, Skills, and Habits

The new self Art Townsend proposes is connected to new social skills and styles. Accepting oneself and nonjudgmentally loving others supports a particular style of dealing with conflict. This style depends on a changed interactional etiquette even as it redefines such elemental concepts as “thoughts” and “feelings.”

The neatest trick in the culture of authentic communication is the redefinition of “feelings.” In part a redefinition of the self’s interior, it is even more a rewriting of the rules and a reeducation in the skills and habits of interaction. A feeling “is different from a thought or a judgment. The problem is that most of the time I was using the words feel and think interchangeably.” A feeling is simply an internal state, and in that sense one person’s feeling need not threaten, frighten, or upset another. If, for example, a couple have “a commitment to explore feelings together and to experience what the feeling feels like to the other person,” then sharing a feeling—even one like revulsion or anger—can draw them together rather than drive them apart:

Tell your mate what it feels like: “Where do you feel it in your body? Does it have a temperature? Does it have a texture?” You get into a deeper level, and what happens is that feelings draw together . . . and you actually, literally feel the feeling the same way the other person feels it. And when you do there is a shift, there is a zing, and it is like the two become one.

The counterculture of the 1960s left a legacy of “psychobabble”—a language about “communication,” “sharing feelings,” and “hearing” one another (Katriel and Philipson 1981). In Art Townsend’s explication, we can see how this language supports new interactional skills, which in turn permit new ways of dealing with others (see Swidler 1979; Tipton 1982). These skills are bathed in a global style of optimism, directness, and careful attention to others, marked by such interpersonal habits as gentle smiles, extra eye contact, and welcoming nods in situations that might produce grimaces of irritation in more conventional interactors.

Worldview

The new style Art Townsend advocates is sustained by the doctrines of a large, if loose, worldview.⁸ As he tries to reeducate his parishioners (and the interviewer) in new habits of thought and feeling, he shows how a new worldview can foster the styles, skills, and habits for a changed self. In Art's vision, honestly communicating selves can ultimately reach interpsychic agreement—the “zing” in which “the two become one”—because they are in fact parts of a mystically unified cosmos. He argues, “if . . . you honestly try to connect who you are with who the other person is, you cannot lose. You see, the joke is that we are all connected anyhow on a level that we do not see. . . . When you and I have a struggle and disagreement and want to go to war, what I am doing is punching myself in the nose.”

Happily borrowing from Eastern mysticism, Christianity, and the pop culture of the 1970s, this liberal Christian believes that the world is fundamentally good. His mystical monism supports the notion that he is responsible for everything, since everything is ultimately him. But he also experiences this responsibility as a psychological truth: When he feels hurt, “It is my hurt. How is it going to be theirs? I may have helped them to precipitate behavior that I have chosen to be hurt in response to. But it is my hurt.” In what is perhaps a distant reverberation of Calvinist predetermination, he also believes that whatever happens to people is ultimately for their benefit. “If I feel hurt, there is some part of me that needed to feel that. I have experienced in my life that there is nothing that happens to me that is not for my own fulfillment—for the fulfillment . . . of my higher self.”

Art Townsend slips easily into a half-heretical Christianity, positing a benign world in which the possibility of evil has been all but eliminated. In this cheery mysticism, the full flowering of the good in every person is only a matter of time: “Somebody that says, ‘I don’t need other people yet . . . I have not an appreciation for other people,’ simply hasn’t reached the level where they have discovered that yet.” Everyone is “growing,” even those who seem not to grow fast enough to find their better selves in this life. “Sharing some of my weirdness in terms of . . . traditional Christian orthodoxy . . . if I thought God were such a being that He would waste a human soul on the basis of its mistakes, essentially in a fifty- or sixty-year period, that would be a little limiting.”

STRATEGIES OF ACTION

Someone like Art Townsend, who is in the process of trying to incorporate (and teach others) elements of a new cultural repertoire, exemplifies

important ways people use culture: to become a certain kind of self; to learn styles, skills, and habits; and to support these with a larger worldview. Now we must return to the question of how culture actually influences people, shaping their social relations and their thoughts, feelings, and action.

For Clifford Geertz (1973b, 1973d), the central aspect of a culture is its “ethos”—a mood or feeling, embodied and reinforced by symbols, made to seem reasonable by a worldview that it in turn makes plausible. The tone, mood, or feeling of a people’s life is a pervasive tint, like the filter that suffuses a film in rose tones, lights it with golden highlights, or shades it a menacing gray. But the cultural influences in the lives of the people we have examined so far do not seem to operate in this indirect, all-encompassing way. These people switch the cultural framing of a problem, often in midstream. They are passionate about some things, laid back about others. They use culture to evoke some moods and suppress others, to bring some capacities of the self to the surface while others are kept in reserve, to work at solving some life problems while leaving other issues unexamined. The implication that culture affects action largely by shaping its ethos, coloring life by diffusing outward from a few intensely shaped ritual moments, implies a culture both more unified and less complex in its operation than the culture we actually observe.

An alternative view, which traces its lineage from Max Weber’s work on the social effects of ideas, suggests that culture influences action by shaping the goals or ends people seek and the means they think will get them there. In Weber’s famous metaphor, ideas are like “switchmen.” While interests provide the motivating force or engine of action, ideas frequently determine “the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (Weber 1946a:280). In this formulation, human beings are goal-oriented actors, pursuing their interests as they understand them. But their culture shapes the ends they seek and the means that they think will attain their ends. Thus culture affects action by providing its ends and constraining its means.

The Weberian view of culture’s influence became dominant in American sociology through the work of Talcott Parsons, who adopted Weber’s basic analysis of how culture shapes individual action. For the “ideas” that concerned Weber (complex historical entities like Protestant doctrine or the Confucian worldview), however, Parsons (1951, 1961) substituted “values,” ultimate ends of action that provide the ever-unreachable ideals that define particular societies. Sociology made an essential contribution to the analysis of action, in Parsons’s view, because the economic image of a rational actor was incomplete without a sociological account of where

actors derive their ultimate ends and their beliefs about which means are legitimate.

The Parsonian view of how culture influences action is enormously appealing intuitively because we often think of ourselves as goal-oriented actors and, especially in America, we are likely to give an account of why we act the way we do by speaking of our "values." But as sociological explanation, such a view is theoretically implausible and empirically inadequate (see also Joas 1996: 148–51). First, the assumption that culture shapes people by shaping their values is not supported by evidence. If deep, enduring values were dominant factors in individual behavior, we should expect people in changed circumstances to continue to pursue traditional values, perhaps using new methods to achieve their goals. In fact, we observe precisely the opposite. People change their ends relatively easily in new circumstances—for example, immigrants seeking individual wealth and prestige in market societies, while they may have sought family continuity and family honor in their homelands. What tends to have more continuity is the style or the set of skills and capacities with which people seek whatever objectives they choose (see Swidler 1986).

Values-based explanations of how societies differ face similar empirical difficulties. Western scholars used to take satisfaction in explaining Western economic development by contrasting Western values—achievement orientation, egalitarianism, universalism—with the more otherworldly, particularist, ascriptive values of non-Western or "traditional" societies. Weber argued that Protestantism, especially its Calvinist variants, channeled the desire for salvation into a distinctive set of motives that encouraged rational, methodical action to master the world. Protestantism contributed to the development of rational capitalism by encouraging accumulation of wealth as a sign of salvation while restraining the enjoyment of that wealth, by fostering methodical economic calculations of profit and loss, by promoting honesty and predictability in business practices, and by encouraging hard, disciplined work. In contrast the otherworldly, mystical Eastern religions led away from rational economic action by focusing human motives on mystical escape from the world and devaluing methodical action in the world (Weber 1958a, 1968; Marshall 1982; Schluchter 1981).

But it is precisely here, in the comparative analysis of economic development, that cultural explanation focused around ends or ultimate values has failed most dramatically. Researchers in the Weberian tradition have been embarrassed by their success in finding functional equivalents to the Protestant ethic in non-Western societies that Weber would have considered otherworldly, mystical, or otherwise averse to rational economic

activity. If there was an initial triumph in discovering independent religious sources of a transcendental, ascetic, and potentially rationalizing ethic in one remarkable non-Western modernizer, Japan (Bellah 1957; Ikegami 1995), the replication of such parallels has undermined the very argument for the unique causal influence of Protestantism (see Eisenstadt 1970a).

Is culture then unimportant? Far from it. Non-Western societies' encounters with the West have everywhere produced a surge of cultural activity (see Wuthnow 1987: 221–47)—from the cargo cults of Melanesia (Worsley 1957), revitalization movements among Native Americans (Wallace 1956), and revivals of religious traditionalism in new nations (Geertz 1973), to the Marxist ideologies of China, the Soviet Union, and much of the Third World. Faced with the challenge of the modern West, late-developing nations have constructed ascetic, this-worldly, modernizing ideologies, fusing borrowed elements with cultural resources their own traditions made available (Gerschenkron 1966; Wuthnow 1980). Chinese Communism (Schurmann 1970; Madsen 1984; Walder 1986), Islamic scripturalism (Geertz 1968), and other nationalist ideologies (Gourevitch 1979; Hannan 1979) have developed as indigenous movements for ascetic rationalization.⁹ Cultural fervor—ideological and religious—has everywhere propelled the transformations modernizing societies seek.

Culture, in fact, drives contemporary social change, but not in the way conventional sociological models suggest. Rather than pursuing enduring traditional values, many contemporary Third World nations have generated powerful, transformative ideologies. Culture shapes these societies not through values but by furnishing a repertoire of capacities for action that can be mobilized to achieve new objectives.¹⁰

The argument that culture influences action by supplying its ultimate ends or values is also problematic on theoretical grounds. To claim that people act so as to maximize culturally determined values is misleading in somewhat the same way as the claim that they maximize "interests." Both views see human beings as choosing their actions one at a time, in light of their interests or values. Both views also assume that having the skills or capacities to act in a certain way is unproblematic, so that all persons need ask themselves is, "What do I really want?"

Hans Joas (1996) has formulated an alternative to the model of action as goal oriented. Drawing on the work of John Dewey and the American pragmatist tradition, he argues that goals and means are in fact chosen reciprocally. "Only when we recognize that certain means are available to us do we discover goals which had not occurred to us before" (p. 154).

Joas conceives "perception and cognition not as preceding action but rather as a phase of action by which action is directed and redirected in its situational contexts" (p. 158). The implication of this view is that "our perception of the world appears to be structured by our capacities for, and experiences of, action" (p. 158). For Joas, the human body is the basis of "pre-reflexive aspirations and tendencies" which orient people to situations. "It is the body's capabilities, habits and ways of relating to the environment which form the background to all conscious goal-setting, in other words, to our intentionality" (p. 158). Action, in this understanding, is inherently situational. "Every habit of action and every rule of action contains assumptions about the type of situations in which it is appropriate to proceed according to the particular habit or rule. . . . [S]ituations are not merely a neutral field of activity for intentions which were conceived outside of that situation, but appear to call forth, to provoke certain actions" (p. 160).

People do not, indeed cannot, build up a sequence of actions piece by piece, striving with each act to maximize a given outcome. First, people would be crippled if they had to think about each action they performed. Like dancing, but much more complex, orchestrating one's day-to-day life must be learned so that it "comes naturally." People develop habitual ways of acting, so they do not trip over their feet while deciding what steps to take (Camic 1986; Joas 1996). Culture provides the capacities that make such complex orchestration possible. Second, people organize action over time. Individual actions do not make sense by themselves, but only as parts of larger patterns. And culture has its effects not by providing the ends actors pursue but by shaping the patterns into which action is routinely organized.

I call these larger patterns "strategies of action." These I define as ways actors routinely go about attaining their goals. Thus my focus is on "means" rather than ends. I argue that the skills and capacities necessary to pursue a line of action have greater influence than their objectives in determining how people will actually act in new situations. (In stable situations, strategies and ends of action may appear so fused that one cannot disentangle them.) And, finally, I emphasize the flow of action over time. Culture affects action by shaping that repertoire of routine, natural styles, skills, and habits that together organize and sustain a strategy of action.

Strategies of action are general solutions to the problem of how to organize action over time, rather than specific ways of attaining particular ends. Relying on alliances with family, developing one's individual capabilities so as to do well on the job market, joining a gang and protecting its turf, developing a wide network of casual acquaintances, building a group

of fictive kin with enduring mutual loyalties—all these are characteristic strategies of action of some groups or individuals in our society. But few people rely exclusively on one such strategy. A person may, for example, cultivate capacities that make her good at her work, but at the same time develop informal relations of mutual help and support that are likely to make any given job more secure. In the American middle class, people prepare themselves to earn a living, maximizing their individual marketability, while also maintaining kin and community ties that provide the solace and security that markets do not (Hewitt 1989). Often the demands of varying strategies of action conflict (as investments in marriage versus career often do for women [Gerson 1985] or heading for college versus maintaining street-corner attachments did for Italian slum youth [Whyte 1943]). Nonetheless, both individuals and groups attempt to maintain diverse repertoires of strategies of action, within the constraints set by the investments and commitments each of these strategies demand.

A strategy of action provides one or more general ways of solving life's difficulties—solutions that may be applied to a variety of problems. I argue that a person's available strategies of action shape the kinds of goals he or she pursues, instead of the other way around.

The phrase "strategy of action" may seem to imply rational calculation, or a utilitarian model of action in which actors are motivated by the pursuit of interest. But I mean the phrase in just the opposite sense. What people want is a product of the cultural shaping of their capacities for action. And those capacities for action are organized into generalized strategies of action.

Strategies of action necessarily depend on culture. Cultural experience shapes the sense of self, the styles and habits of acting, and the larger beliefs about the world that allow individuals and groups to construct and enact particular life strategies. Culture then influences social action because it supports or limits the strategies of action people can pursue.

Strategies of action are also inherently social. Not only do people depend on the wider society for cultural resources that shape their capacities for action; strategies of action make sense only within a social world. A strategy of relying on kin may depend upon distinctive cultural capacities—the ability to feel guilt and induce it in others, skill in mobilizing family rituals that reinforce bonds of loyalty and obligation, a sensitivity to others' hurt feelings. But such a strategy makes no sense except where others share similar expectations and where the aspirations and obligations one feels can be reciprocated. Similarly, the skills and capacities of a market actor make little sense without a market. But the strategies-of-action perspective differs from more usual anthropological interpretations of the

“fit” between culture and social organization. It stresses that individuals maintain cultural capacities for varied strategies of action which they mobilize differently in different situations; and it suggests that the cultural influences individuals and groups carry into new situations are those that form their capacities for action—not their ends or goals.

ACTION

To see how a set of cultured capacities can be mobilized to support a new strategy of action, we may return to the articulate, self-actualized pastor, Art Townsend. The new cultural capacities Art has learned make possible changed patterns of action. As he describes it, “integrity and responsibility” mean not evading problems but dealing with them as they arise. Sharing feelings, converting expectations to intentions, and practicing integrity and responsibility support new strategies for dealing with the social world.

The most concrete manifestation of these new strategies is Art Townsend’s changed relationship to his church. “The shift is that I no longer treat the church as an employer. . . . An employee does not keep telling the boss about his inadequacies . . . but the church is really a part of me and I am part of the church, and my shift professionally has gone from how can I please them and make them like me so that I can keep my job and get a promotion, to how can I love them. . . . How can I help these beautiful special people to experience how absolutely wonderful they are.” A new formula is then at work: having learned to love himself, Art no longer hides his fears and failings, but joyously shares them as a source of “enlightenment” for his congregation. “I tell them on Sunday morning what is going on. It fills the church with this wonderful energy . . . and everybody is laughing. I mean they laugh out loud. Lightening up is one of the steps to enlightenment.” This youthful pastor’s willingness to express vulnerability makes him a confident teacher, rather than an anxious employee of his congregation. In the ultimate service profession, Art Townsend has developed a new basis of pastoral authority over his flock.

Art Townsend also uses his new style to resolve difficulties more general than those of marriage or ministry. To see the ethic of “integrity and responsibility” in use, it is instructive to examine this pastor’s account of an incident in which he “acted without integrity”: His church had agreed to host one of a series of interdenominational retreats in collaboration with other churches in the area, having repeatedly made clear to the church hierarchy that, since their facilities were small, they could invite only another small church. After weeks of negotiation, despite “a very,

very clear, polite no, explaining the reasons why,” the hierarchy simply informed them that the retreat was set with a much larger church. Art reported:

So I came in this morning, and rather than dealing with the issue and sorting it out, what I did was to stomp around for a while saying “they can’t do . . .” See already my shift, “they can’t do this to us.” See already the thing starting to crumble, and wasted about twenty minutes of energy stomping around, calling people on the phone, and kicking asses, making them wrong. What I experience now is that wasn’t necessary. It didn’t move toward a resolution of the dilemma. And some part of me even knew at the time that what I was doing was not contributing to a solution, but contributing to the development of the problem.

The alternative approach Art favors involves a willingness to pick up where one is and move on, not trying to affix blame but looking for ways to solve the problem. Perhaps people could eat out in the church courtyard, or they could borrow the facilities of a larger church up the street. But the possible solutions are less important than his view that his righteous anger “was wasted energy. It was wasted energy.”

This fluid strategy substitutes empathetic communication of needs for fixed expectations and obligations. It thus presumes an essentially benign context of similar, sympathetic others, with whom it is possible to reach mutually satisfactory understanding. Indeed, this strategy of action is an ideal addition to the repertoire of a middle-class service professional like Art Townsend, who deals almost exclusively with others like himself (see Tipton 1982). This style may also appeal to his Silicon Valley parishioners, who must manage complex social relationships in a fluid social world, with variable, hard-to-define standards of conduct. They may particularly appreciate devices for psychic self-restoration in a world where anxiety over possible failures or regret for past mistakes can be a debilitating drain on one’s energies.

Art Townsend, who makes his living by talking about how to act, articulates with unusual clarity the cultural supports for a strategy of action. He describes learning to see himself in a new way, defining new feelings and experiencing new moods and motivations. He also expresses a new style of interaction, framed in language borrowed from the human potential movement. He has learned skills and habits that allow him to reorganize his own conduct (through forming “intentions” while refusing to become bogged down by “problems”) and to negotiate relations with others (by sharing feelings without judging; by searching flexibly for solutions rather

than “making them wrong”). And finally he has developed a new worldview, in which the underlying harmony of a unified cosmos guarantees the eventual fulfillment of human possibility.

The new culture Art Townsend has learned has reshaped his action not by providing new values or goals but by giving him new capacities to act. (And, indeed, as the examples above show, his new strategy of action is an addition to his existing repertoire; he can still “kick ass” as well.) A strategy of action involves a characteristic way of solving problems and characteristic sets of problems to be solved. Such strategies depend on skills, styles, habits, and capacities for organizing self and action that are learned through culture. Such skills, I have argued, are essential for pursuing a line of conduct and for adopting the interests or values that one could maximize in that line of conduct. Culture constrains action because people can most easily construct strategies of action for which they already have the cultural equipment. When people develop lines-of-action, they start with the repertoire of things they already know. Implicitly they ask, “Who am I? What am I good at? What do I know how to do?”¹²

Despite its rational sound, a strategy of action does not imply rational calculation. Once a person has integrated the elements of a strategy of action into his or her behavior, they become ways of orienting oneself to or evaluating situations. A strategy of action may lead one on occasion to make elaborate calculations—“Should I invite my cousin’s boyfriend, and risk my friends feeling offended that their boyfriends were not invited as well? Or should I invite my cousin without her boyfriend, knowing that she will be hurt, even though she would never say anything?” But it is organizing one’s life in one way versus another—through a network of reciprocal obligations to kin and friends, or through an individualized career—that constitutes the strategy of action. Outside the context of such a generalized life strategy, particular calculations based on either “interests” or “values” make little sense.

Within an established strategy of action, however, “values” do come into play as important guides to action. Indeed, one of the cultural resources that help people to enact a strategy of action is a set of “values” that orient important choices within that strategy. If a person’s strategy of action is to develop professional competence in a world based largely on back-scratching and mutual favors, he may frequently consult his “values” to remind himself that the pursuit of professional competence comes first. Values are important. But values are not the reason why a person develops one strategy of action rather than another. They are not, so to speak, the originator of the chain of “reasons” why someone acts as she does. In-

stead, values are one of the many cultural resources, like other skills and habits, that allow persons to enact strategies of action. Commitment to particular values, including the ability to consult them and to apply them to specific choices, is one of the cultured capacities that make a strategy of action possible, rather than the cause of the adoption of that strategy.

The model I propose might also be called an “identity” model of how culture works. The fundamental notion is that people develop lines of action based on who they already think they are. This is true in two senses. First, as I have been saying, actors’ capacities shape the lines of action that they find possible and promising. The second sense in which mine is an identity-based model is that a great deal of culture operates by attaching meanings to the self. The term “identity” usually implies a more unified self and a more inward-looking psyche than I wish to evoke. Precisely the point of an adequate identity model would be to point out that what is experienced as the “self” and its cultural resources or capacities is constructed very differently in one historical period or social situation versus another. Natalie Davis describes, for example, the “autobiographies” of sixteenth-century French women who wrote about themselves (in the third person) within histories of their families (actually their husbands’ lineages) (Davis 1986). But even in a world in which (exaggerating a bit here) lineages are real and individuals aren’t (see Meyer and Jepperson 2000), the acting, experiencing person will be engaged by matters that affect the group with which she or he is identified (see Honess and Yardley 1987; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Abrams and Hogg 1990, 1999).

Identity in contemporary popular understanding refers to some essence located deep within the person. But of course most identities are much more institutional and collective than that—one’s identity is one’s totem, tribe, lineage, nation, or village. As will become clearer in chapter 8, the focus on a personal identity that contemporary Americans take for granted results from social codes and practices that define us to ourselves and others, not from anything inherent in individual personhood. Nonetheless, a great deal of culture is organized by and about identities, both individual and collective. The self’s capacities for action and the capacities for action of collectivities shape potential strategies of action and thus in turn influence the ends they are likely to pursue.

Strategies of action are the major links between culture and social structure. Culture powerfully influences action by shaping the selves, skills, and worldviews out of which people can build life strategies—strategies made possible in turn by culture. But in periods of social change, when new cultural understandings and new strategies are being tried out

simultaneously, culture persists when the strategies it helps to sustain can flourish within extant social-structural constraints. It is in this sense that culture and social structure exist in complex, but not impenetrable, interdependence. In the next chapter we will investigate the different ways culture is binding (and thus independently influences action) in stable versus less stable periods.

CHAPTER 5

SETTLED AND

UNSETTLED LIVES

Culture shapes the diverse capacities out of which people build strategies of action. But the way culture influences action—and the way people use culture—differs in two kinds of situations, which I call “settled” and “unsettled.” In describing individuals, we may think of settled and unsettled lives; in describing societies, of settled and unsettled periods. The contrast is intended to differentiate situations in which new strategies of action are being developed and tried out (unsettled) from situations in which people are operating within established strategies of action (settled).

Culture influences action in both settled and unsettled situations, but its influence is of a very different sort. When people operate within well-established strategies of action, they can live with a loose fit between culture and experience. In unsettled lives, however, culture is more visible—indeed, there appears to be “more” culture—because people actively use culture to learn new ways of being.

American teenagers, for example, often live, rather than simply listen to, their music (Frith 1981; Gaines 1991), while many adults retain the musical tastes established when they were young. After young adulthood, music, like existential questions about the meaning of life, becomes more a pastime and less a passion. Being swept away by cultural experiences, from religious conversion to rock concerts, seems mainly an activity of the young.

interview. Anthropologists have extensive experience investigating ritual practices, symbol systems, and the larger semiotic codes that structure a group's collective products—their myths, tales, folklore, and so forth. But neither approach really gets at the place where semiotic code, cultural context, and institutions meet.

Individuals in interviews often seem to know very well what they think, even when what they think seems quite inconsistent. One reason is that they are often responding not to an abstract question about some general set of principles or beliefs (or even some fund of common sense or popular wisdom) but to their sense of what answer would make sense in the particular situation the interviewer's question suggests. Thus the vignettes I used often generated strong responses as interviewees imagined particular situations. They attributed various meanings to the actions described in the vignettes, seeing particular behaviors as indicators of larger complexes, such as psychological dependency or being "a person who could do that" (leave a sick spouse, for example). These interview responses seem incomplete or incoherent only because we are still too wedded to the view that what we are seeing when we observe culture is an internalized complex of meanings and practices, rather than people's knowledge of how a set of publicly available codes and situations operate.

It is this publicly available (indeed sometimes unavoidable) configuration of codes, contexts, and institutions that actually structures our cultural usage. Exploration of this complex set of interactions can allow some of the sophisticated new ways we have of thinking about culture to be incorporated into more powerful theories linking culture and action.

CONCLUSION

HOW CULTURE MATTERS

Over the past two decades sociologists have developed increasingly complex, theoretically sophisticated conceptions of culture. Despite these advances, however, we still rely on remarkably one-dimensional images of how culture works, how it affects experience and action. One purpose of this book has been to develop conceptions of culture's effects that match the sophistication of our analyses of culture itself.

Simply posing more pointed questions, which might form the basis for future research and theorizing, constitutes progress in a field as inchoate as the study of culture. Therefore I want to return to some central themes of this book to see what questions remain unanswered. I hope in this way to take stock of where we are, to focus future theoretical debate on questions that can be explored empirically, and thus to encourage cumulative development in the sociology of culture.

IS CULTURE COHERENT OR INCOHERENT?

When we talk with ordinary people, even (or especially) about so fundamental a matter as love, their responses are often disjointed, self-contradictory, or fragmentary. But how does this square with the image of culture as a "system"? Robert LeVine (1984:72) has noted that "[n]othing is more characteristic of contemporary anthropologists than the conviction that the customs they study are connected and comprehensible only as parts of a larger organization—of beliefs, norms, values, or social

action.” This view is shared by sociologists as well. Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander and Smith 1993) has argued for the continuity and coherence of American culture, while Richard Biernacki (1995:12–13) sees coherence as the very criterion of distinctively cultural explanation: the “line of reasoning specific to cultural analysis” is that practices form “a meaningful constellation” such that a distinctly cultural argument is “configurational, attached to an overarching pattern of techniques rather than to a simple outcome.”

Yet anthropologists and sociologists also repeatedly report incoherence along two dimensions—whether cultural meanings are internally consistent and whether they are shared. Roy D’Andrade (1984:90), the anthropologist, notes that “[a]lthough the conception of culture as consisting of the shared knowledge of individual minds marked a clear advance over earlier theories of culture . . . many things one would want to call cultural are not completely or even generally shared.” Those who attend to how ordinary people talk and think note, as Michael Billig (1987) does, that commonsense understandings develop in a continual process of argument that constantly doubles back on itself, crossing and recrossing its own tracks. People generalize from a few cases, formulate something like an all-purpose rule, attend to exceptions to the rule, and then form new generalizations, in a process that never reaches closure. In *Talking of the Royal Family* (1992), Billig notes that people routinely take both sides of the arguments they have with themselves and others, insisting, for example, that “the Royals” are no better than anyone else, while repeatedly presuming that it is precisely because the Royals are so superior that to be just like them is to be superior oneself. Like my interviewees when they discuss their marriages, British commoners offer not an axiomatic system of first principles and logical consequences, but a “kaleidoscope of common sense” (p. 48)—a swirling pattern of shifting justifications.

If we no longer build into our assumptions and our methods the notion that culture is by definition a “system,” then we can focus on the unanswered questions that evidence of both cultural coherence and incoherence raises. The issue is not whether the glass is half-empty or half-full, but what creates cultural coherence and in what places, and what accounts for the extent and shape of cultural incoherence.

Keeping One’s Options Open

I want to begin with the sources of cultural incoherence. It is important to note that while cultural contradictions, confusions, and inconsistencies may worry researchers, they do not seem to bother ordinary people in the

course of their everyday lives. Indeed, as I have argued, people are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action.

The anthropologist Lawrence Rosen (1984), in a classic study of Moroccan kinship, points out that for Moroccans, statements about the world—in particular claims of kin relationship—are not statements about a fixed, external reality so much as positions to be negotiated. Since kinship groups are themselves flexible, indeterminately bounded “personally-centered action groups” (p. 163), a kinship claim is neither true nor false until it is realized. In negotiations over correct terminology, the “practical question is how to convert mere utterances into truth-bearing propositions and how to do this most advantageously” (p. 122). Rosen points out that since life is uncertain, Moroccans employ strategies of network diversification, seeking not to keep all their eggs in one basket, but hoping to have an alternative if their preferred strategy fails. But this uncertainty is not a feature only of life in Morocco. It might be said of middle-class suburbanites’ understandings of love, as much as of Moroccans’ kin terminology, that “[at] their very heart the terms that imply some form of obligation or reciprocity . . . remain incompletely defined, open textured, until, by a process of mutual negotiation, an actual relationship comes to be conceptualized under them” (p. 118).

Cultural meanings, then, often remain fluid, waiting to be filled and made real by the relationships they help to create.¹ And because life is uncertain, people keep multiple cultural meanings on tap. In this sense, what appears as cultural incoherence is also adaptability, flexibility, keeping options open. And this is as much a cognitive as a relational reality. A worldview that could be shattered by a single setback or contradiction would be a very fragile one (see Padgett and Ansell 1993; Leifer 1991).²

How Meanings Mean

Many researchers assume that cultures must be coherent because coherence is an essential property of the semiotic systems through which meanings can be conveyed. William Sewell Jr. (1999:39–40) explicitly argues that while individual cultures may be incoherent and disorderly, “culture” as an analytic aspect of human societies is necessarily coherent because it is only through structures of relationally defined meanings that meaning can be communicated. But this picture of how meanings work is misleading.

If culture is a communicative system, its meanings are neither fixed

as the structuralist image of a semiotic code might suggest, nor loosely related like the set of overlapping associations that Wittgenstein described. Rather, culture conveys meanings through adherence to and deviations from locally established expectations or conventions. There are three aspects to this incoherent coherence: First, cultures communicate by ringing (usually small) changes on established expectations, so meaning systems are necessarily more innovative and unstable than we usually imagine. Second, partly because of this innovativeness, semiotic systems often have intense local variations, so that a small subculture, or even a subgroup within a subculture, may experiment with new variations on established meaning systems. Third, this local variation means that while particular semiotic codes have systemic qualities, people necessarily keep multiple ones on tap. Thus the problem of meaning and of cultural coherence cannot be solved without some way of understanding how people switch from one code to another, what contextual cues signal which code is in effect, and how people keep multiple interpretations of action available simultaneously, crystallizing situations and meanings only occasionally.

To take the first point, cultures communicate as much by violating as by adhering to established meanings and expectations.³ The rebellious British punks Dick Hebdige (1979) describes created a powerful subculture that systematically violated conventions of middle-class respectability to convey contempt for bourgeois taste and values. Through exaggerated stylization punk youth communicated that they defied convention intentionally, that it was members of the conventional middle class who did not really understand what was going on. (Middle-class observers presumably felt befuddled, perhaps a more common experience than theories of meaning usually allow [see Rosaldo 1989:91–126].)

If codes “communicate” when people violate expectations, cumulative violations make the codes themselves dynamic. Of course, expectations must exist in order for violations to be experienced as meaningful (L. Meyer 1956; Alter 1981). And meaning systems can be stripped of their expressiveness by overuse. It is hard to write a stellar recommendation when everyone uses superlatives; intentionally torn or “ugly” clothing conveys contempt for the status order only until it becomes a fashion statement. As violations accumulate (as did the use of “vibrato” to emphasize important musical passages), what is conventional is itself changed (vibrato became standard, so that passages are highlighted now when played without vibrato [L. Meyer 1956]). Many social processes appear to work this way, from the status distinctions established by having a certain kind of taste or lifestyle (Weber 1968:926–40; Fallers 1966; Bonfenbren-

ner 1966; Bourdieu 1984) to the codes that define in-group and out-group membership (Frith 1981; DiMaggio 1982; Lamont and Fournier 1992).

This dynamism of meaning systems then leads to the second point—that codes often are local, both in the sense that they may be shared by a local subgroup (and indeed, the more intensively organized the subgroup, the more dynamic its transformations of the meanings of a semiotic code may be—as any student of the meanings conveyed by teen subculture dress-styles, for example, can attest),⁴ and in the sense that a semiotic code may organize a single domain of action—gang turf claims or faculty teas—and be largely unknown or incomprehensible outside that domain.

If cultures are made up of many semiotic codes and these vary locally, then—and this is my third point—any given individual can read or communicate in several different codes. People participate in multiple spheres of action and interact with different social groups, and thus they usually communicate in and move among many different semiotic codes.⁵

Each of these semiotic codes may be orderly and rule-like in its own terms (even if, as Bourdieu [1977] emphasizes, the “rules” exist because there is the possibility of breaking them); but because the “rules” are a moving frontier, and because people vary in terms of where they are in relation to multiple frontiers, it is highly unlikely that their knowledge of or participation in a variety of semiotic systems will amount to a coherent culture. At any given time particular people may be able to maneuver quite well in relation to the codes that currently apply to them or that they can “read” in the behavior of those to whom they are oriented socially, but this capacity to construct, renovate, and navigate within semiotic systems would be unlikely to produce coherence. Indeed, what something “meant” would depend very much on the context in which it was offered and understood. This is not just a matter of confounding the problem of the coherence of concrete “cultures” with the coherence of “culture” as an analytic aspect of human experience, as Sewell (1999) suggests. The nature of semiotic systems themselves, precisely as communicative systems, necessarily generates multiple, overlapping, if locally systematic, meanings.

Unanswered Questions about Coherence

This way of thinking about the numerous and perhaps shifting codes that constitute any meaning system raises a number of difficult questions. First, if the meaning of a particular action, or the overall scheme of interpretation that is to govern a particular encounter, depends on the context, how do people establish or negotiate the context that is operative in a situation?

Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:94–115) writes about “fields” as arenas in which particular criteria of valuation become established (see also Boltanski and Thévenot 1991); and Goffman (1974) analyzes the “frames” that govern particular interactions. Sewell (1999:56–57) suggests that the state may play a central role in organizing and making coherent what could otherwise be disconnected arenas of discourse. But we still understand far too little about how people know what situation they are in and what codes apply.

Of course, “mistakes” may occur—from the police officer stumbling upon a movie filming of a robbery to a misunderstanding about when a business lunch has become a date. But what is more remarkable are the relatively smooth ways people navigate transitions from one situation to another and from one semiotic code to another. Even when multiple potential framings are available simultaneously—as they are when people talk about “love”—people easily assume one frame and operate within it and then switch frames when the implicit situation seems to shift. Remember, for example, that how interviewees reacted to a vignette depended on how they framed it, and often they could offer multiple readings as they thought through one framing after another. When discussing their own life experiences, people first anchored themselves in a context—a real or imagined situation—and then derived beliefs or arguments from that situation. Imagining a lasting marriage, for example, they were able to adduce a range of sometimes contradictory arguments about why one would want to stay married. But when some question provoked a shift in the imagined context that anchored their thinking, their entire orientation could shift.

Just what structures such framing processes, and how people keep multiple potential frames on hold, seem central questions for cultural analysis.⁶ By assuming that symbolic activities have a single meaning, we compromise our ability to understand what skilled interactors do. The challenge is to accept that cultures are multiplex, fluid, and contradictory, and then to rethink models of when and how culture constrains action and experience.

Given the importance of contexts, we have few clues about what are the defining features of social contexts or situations, or about how people “read” the crucial features of situations and how they invoke one situation and its codes versus another. Despite the enormous attention cognitive psychologists have given to scripts and schemas, which define situations, they have focused on their cognitive-processing aspects without trying to understand the basic structure of the situations those scripts and schemas describe.

Sociologists who want to understand what mediates between cultural meanings and action, or, indeed, what variations in cultural meanings signify, will need a richer, more systematic way to analyze contexts. Whether there is some fundamental set of situations out of which particular situations get constructed as social psychologists tend to imply, or whether situations are culturally constructed in the same fluid and sometimes contradictory ways as other cultural elements, sociologists of culture would benefit enormously from a more systematic analysis of contexts as they structure meaning and action.

WHAT IS A CULTURAL “LOGIC”?

Almost all of those who work on culture assume that cultures have “logics.” Even if we do not subscribe to the notion that each culture is a unified whole with a single overarching logic, we assume that each subpart of the culture, each semiotic code or institutional arena, has its own logic. Indeed, here even (or especially) the very cultural-studies analysts who promote the notion that cultures are fragmented and fluid specialize in finding the deep logics that link up consumption and capital, gender and patriarchy, love and individualism (see, e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Haraway 1983, 1991; Baudrillard 1975, 1983; Illouz 1997). But the key unanswered question is what a cultural “logic” is—or rather, by what kinds of logics different kinds of cultural elements are integrated.

To think about this question, we need to consider what people do with culture, what different kinds of culture are “used for.” In chapter 4 and subsequent chapters, I argue that cultural meanings operate less as logical structures that integrate ends and means, and more as tools or resources that cultivate skills and capacities that people integrate into larger, more stable “strategies of action.” But that kind of integration is different from the logic that sociologists and anthropologists have traditionally assumed.

The Logic of Deductive Inference

For Max Weber, interpretive analysis (*verstehen*) linked ideas and action through deductive logic. The analyst entered imaginatively into the ideas and motives of those whose action he or she was trying to understand. Beginning with the logical and psychological premises of action, the analyst could arrive at an understanding of how those starting presuppositions led to particular kinds of action in the world. While such cultural logics might rest on irrational premises, and while many factors besides a cultural logic

could influence concrete historical outcomes, the power of sociological analysis was its ability to tease out the logic of the ideas and presuppositions fundamental to a cultural system.

In analyzing the basic forms of social action, Weber (1968:5–6) argued that “rational action” was the baseline for cultural analysis.⁷ Given a set of ends and the facts about the world as understood by the actor, the analyst could understand the action that would flow from those premises.

What, then, was the “logic” of Weber’s logic? At bottom, it was straightforward deductive logic (see Weber 1968:6). If one believes in an all-powerful creator and judge who will send one to heaven or hell, then one will try to earn salvation by living up to that God’s commandments; if one believes that human suffering is caused by alienation from the divine, then one will seek to unite the self with the divine through mystical contemplation. Even Weber’s recognition of the power of nonrational motives testified to the power of the logic of ideas. In a famous footnote to *The Protestant Ethic* (1958a [1904–5]: 232), Weber notes that:

The Calvinistic faith is one of the many examples in the history of religions of the relation between the logical and the psychological consequences for the practical religious attitude to be derived from certain religious ideas. Fatalism is, of course, the only logical consequence of predestination. But on account of the idea of proof the psychological result was precisely the opposite. . . . The *electi* are, on account of their election, proof against fatalism because in their rejection of it they prove themselves. . . . The practical interests cut off the fatalistic consequences of logic (which, however, in spite of everything occasionally did break through).

One candidate for cultural logic, then, is deductive logic; and implicitly or explicitly, many cultural analysts see the way a culture “hangs together” in such terms. But there is ambiguity about where such logics are located. Weber clearly saw logic—even when its presuppositions were irrational and its implications thwarted by practical constraints—as residing in individual thought. Weber recognized, of course, that socially influential ideas were the product of the collective life experiences of earlier groups. Nonetheless, Weber thought about the logic even of large social formations such as authority systems as if they were exchanges between parties to a debate, and he analyzed such phenomena as the relationship between class and status claims by exploring the deductions individual or collective actors would draw from their ideas.

I have argued that such constraint by logical deduction rarely influences social action directly. While people vary in how thoroughly they

articulate their understandings of their experience and how coherently they present these understandings, throughout this book I have shown that people are little constrained by logic. Other researchers, studying a variety of problems, report very similar results (see DiMaggio 1997). Especially in settled situations and in the realm of common sense, logical consistency is a scarce commodity. Indeed, deductive logic is not the place to look for the most important links between culture and action.

Looser Logics

Even if full-blown deductive logic is not central to the organization of cultural systems, nor a primary link between culture and action for individuals, in recent social theory other more limited logics have been seen as central to the way cultural systems are organized. The issue of the kind of logic is often confounded with the question of where the logic is located socially (in the consciousness of individuals, in collective discourses, in embedded social practices, or in institutions) and with the question of what substantively the logic organizes (discourse, semiotic codes, practices, interests, lines of action, institutions, etc.). But here I want to look at alternative candidates for cultural logics themselves—logics that may be less determinate in their constraint over outcomes than rational-deductive logic, but that may offer better models of how cultural elements are actually organized.

Binary Oppositions

Since Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson (and indeed since Durkheim) analysts have seen cultural logics as organized around binary oppositions. In part, as Kenneth Burke (1970) emphasized, symbols themselves create the possibility of imagining (or articulating) oppositions. Lévi-Strauss (1963) located the role of binary oppositions in organizing symbolic systems (totemic organization, kinship, and myth, for example) in fundamental properties of the human mind, but others have seen such oppositions as fundamental to the nature of symbol systems and to the capacity of symbols or discourses to convey meanings (see Leach 1976). If semiotic systems define meanings relationally, then opposition is at least the elementary operation by which meaning can be defined.

Narratives

Another logic that appears to organize many social processes is narrative. While the temporal form of narrative may sometimes trace causal connections that could be described under formal logics, narrative is less

rigidly structured. Nevertheless, narrative forms are fundamental devices for ordering understandings of the social and natural worlds.

There is an enormously rich literature on narrative and narrative forms (Propp 1968; White 1973; Chatman 1978; Todorov 1969, 1977). Anthropologists and sociologists have noted that a culture's logic can be carried by its dominant narratives, either recounted or enacted. Victor Turner (1974), for example, describes how societies continually reenact certain dramatic narratives, whether in the form of repeated ritual enactments like pilgrimages or processions, or that of typical social dramas.

Sherry Ortner (1989), analyzing the founding of the first celibate Buddhist monasteries among the Sherpas of Nepal, offers an example of the way narratives (what she calls "schemas" or "scenarios") order social transformations. Drawing on Sahlin's (1981) and Geertz (1980), she describes "cultural dramas or scenarios, that reappear over time and that seem to order the ways in which people play out both conventional and historically novel social encounters" (Ortner 1989:60). The monasteries' founders, she argues, reenacted traditional Sherpa narratives in which a hero fights for supremacy, is driven into exile, acquires powerful divine and/or human protectors, and then returns to triumph over his rivals and establish a new order.

Homologies, Resemblances, Resonances

If "cultural logic" ultimately means cultural ordering, then there are other forms that cultural logics might take. One of the simplest is associating like with like, generalizing a pattern of resemblances. Of course, these resemblances may be organized in a wide variety of ways. Huizinga (1954) pointed out long ago that medieval European culture saw "sympathies" or what we would call analogies operating everywhere. Plants could be linked with diseases because of some physical resemblance between the plant's flower and the organ it was thought to cure; the twelve apostles were connected to the twelve months by their number; and the four-petaled dogwood blossom represented the cross.

While such resemblances seem too fuzzy to constitute a "logic," many claims of cultural ordering depend upon precisely such metaphoric linkages. Even Geertz's (1973b) attempt to identify "ethos" (typical "moods and motivations") as central to cultural "systems" suggests that resemblance in emotional tone or mood is basic to cultural logics. The difficulty of course is that if cultural logics can move along such varied paths, with such diverse outcomes, it is hard to know when a cultural logic is at work.

The Logic of Practice

The term "practice" in contemporary cultural sociology has acquired a range of meanings. Ortner (1984) emphasizes practice theorists' focus on agency (itself a highly fraught term)—on the ways active, strategic agents reproduce, resist, or change social structures and rules. This focus on agency, reproduction, and power is confounded with another set of issues—"practice" as unconscious, embodied, or habitual action, contrasted with articulated, conscious ideas (S. Turner 1994; Biermacki 1999: 75–78). This meaning of practice at least overlaps with the notion that cultural organization is located less in conscious ideas or shared cultural symbols than in the routines of institutions and actors, routines that, to return to our theme, have a logic of their own.

Michel Foucault (1978, 1983) has attempted to uncover the logic of practices that define categories of human beings, or that redefine human properties, pathologies, or potentials. He usually (at least in his more "structuralist" phase [see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983]) has identified a Lévi-Straussian binary logic as the core feature of practices that "divide," "confine," or categorize human beings. But the source of these logics is not some universal feature of minds, or even of symbol systems. The division of human beings into different "kinds" of persons—separating the normal from the pathological, or the criminal from the mad, for example—depends not on universal human mental organization but on the organization of institutional practices themselves. Thus, in *Madness and Civilization* (1965), it is the existence of practices of exclusion—setting apart a group to be isolated in a distinctive physical space—that creates the framework for such categorization. Foucault writes hauntingly of the leper houses, which set the pattern of confinement that would, centuries later, undergird the categories of the mad and the sane:

Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often, in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and "deranged minds" would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well. With an altogether new meaning and in a very different culture, the forms would remain—essentially that major form of a rigorous division which is social exclusion but spiritual reintegration. (p. 18)

Other sorts of practices—the pastoral practice of the modern welfare state or the probing practice of the confessional, re-created in psychoanalysis and therapeutic self-scrutiny—have very different structures and thus generate logics with very different ordering principles (Foucault 1978). These forms can be generalized or transposed to new arenas, but the shape of each logic cannot be deduced from any universal mental structure.

Institutional practices may anchor a semiotic system, given plausibility by that set of practices. But the “logic” derives from the practices themselves. So, for example, in a system that differentiates the deserving from the undeserving poor, a line is drawn between those who can work and those who cannot—with women, children, and the insane categorized together and separated from the criminal and the vagrant. But it is the existence of confinement—the workhouse, and later the prison and the asylum—that gives the categorization of the poor versus the criminal versus the mad its plausibility. The pathbreaking work of Mohr and Duquenne (1997) demonstrates how a system of categories and a set of practices can mutually constitute one another. Welfare clients form categories based on kinds of services they receive (ranging from the monetary to the minatory), while welfare services are categorized by the kinds of clients to whom the services are available. Thus a set of practices and a system of categories mutually constitute one another.

Despite the apparent logic in the linkage of practices and categories in Foucault's work, it is not clear what kind of logic this is. The image of power as a kind of self-multiplying practice, probing and penetrating wherever it finds an opening, continually constituting new realities, does not suggest logic in the usual sense. While some practices of power may penetrate further when they are more systematic (like the Enlightenment legal regulations that made punishment proportional to the severity of crimes [Foucault 1977]), other practices may resist systematization. The perpetual proliferation of new practices of power and resistance is not really compatible with the notion of an overarching logic.

In *The Logic of Practice* (1990:86), Pierre Bourdieu adduces an array of reasons why “practice has a logic which is not that of the logician.” For Bourdieu, “practice” refers to action that is oriented to practical outcomes, is strategic, and is largely organized by unconscious schemas, so that it operates as an intuitive skill or tact. Practice cannot follow “logical logic” first because of its relation to time. In arguments familiar from *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu stresses that for practice, unlike logic, “[i]ts temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning” (p. 81). Practice

requires instantaneous judgments anticipating future actions, as when “a player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees but to what he fore-sees . . . in response to an overall, instantaneous assessment of the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions.” He does so under conditions of “urgency” that “exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflection” (pp. 81–82).

Practice, Bourdieu (1990) insists, has a “practical logic”: it “is able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole.” But it can achieve coherence precisely because it ignores the niceties of formal logic. It sacrifices “rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality.” To fulfill its “practical functions” the logic of everyday life requires “unity and regularities” and also “fuzziness” and . . . irregularities and even incoherences” (p. 86). This is an “economical logic” in which “no more logic is mobilized than is required by the needs of practice.” The same term may be used in contradictory ways in different situations because “it is very unlikely that two contradictory applications of the same schemes will be brought face to face” (p. 87). Its schemes are simple and since they operate “without conscious reflection or conscious control . . . [t]he most characteristic operations of its ‘logic’—inverting, transferring, uniting, separating, etc.—take the form of bodily movements, turning to the right or left, putting upside down, going in or coming out, tying or cutting, etc.” (p. 92).

Finally, and most crucially for Bourdieu, practical action is driven by urgent necessities. Cultural analysts may divide the world into sets of positions, but the most important life activities—for the Algerian Kabyle, “marriage, ploughing or harvesting”—require rituals “to overcome in practice the specifically ritual contradiction which the ritual taxonomy sets up by dividing the world into contrary principles and by causing the acts most indispensable to the survival of the group to appear as acts of sacrilegious violence” (p. 97 and pp. 210–70 ff.). Examining the contradictory interpretations that have been offered of Kabyle rain-making rites, in which key ritual objects can be seen as sometimes male and sometimes female, sometimes the source of rain, sometimes in need of rain, Bourdieu notes that “this distinction, which has worried the best of interpreters, is of no importance . . . the two perspectives being equally valid by definition when it is a matter of reuniting contraries” (p. 264). This is not a matter of an elegant ritual logic that creates and then resolves contradictions. Rather “practical logic,” driven by urgency, “never ceases to sacrifice the concern for coherence to the pursuit of efficiency, making

maximum possible use of the *double entendres* and dual purposes that the indeterminacy of practices and symbols allows" (p. 262). Especially in desperate "situations like drought . . . the threshold of logical requirements [is] lowered even further so as to exploit all the available resources" (p. 264).

Bourdieu's Kabyle are in this respect not very different from the middle-class suburbanites I interviewed who used all the sometimes mutually contradictory arguments and understandings at their disposal when they shored up the hope that their marriages would last or explained having married the "right" person for them. But understanding the partial, overlapping, indeterminate logics of practical action still leaves unclear what organizes the practical agendas around which practical logics swarm.

The Logic of Existential "Fit"

What makes accounts of cultural logics persuasive is the apparent "fit" among different aspects of a culture. To see how an account of such a cultural "fit" is constructed, let us consider the problem, which Geertz among others has repeatedly dealt with, of what kinds of selves are constituted in different social worlds. In an early essay, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali" (1973h), Geertz links Balinese naming practices, the Balinese sense of time, and Balinese rules about conduct. To oversimplify, the dominant naming practices are relational, so that a given person's name changes over the lifecycle (as our terms "Mom," "Grandma," and so on do), and cyclical, so that the same generationally specific names recur (as if the term for "Grandma" and "great-granddaughter" were the same). Geertz argues that these practices tend to deny historical change, so that change becomes simply the recurrence of things that have already been. It is not persons' uniqueness, their "special, never-to-be-repeated, impact upon the stream of historical events—which are culturally played up, symbolically emphasized: it is their social placement, their particular location within a persisting, indeed an eternal metaphysical order. The illuminating paradox of Balinese formulations of personhood is that they are—in our terms anyway—depersonalizing" (p. 390).

The "depersonalizing" Balinese "conception of personhood" is in turn "linked" to a "detemporalizing (again from our point of view) conception of time" (p. 391). The Balinese calendar defines the ritual significance of each day (determined by the ways multiple day-naming cycles overlap), categorizing time rather than measuring its passage. The calendrical "cycles and supercycles . . . don't tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is" (p. 393).

Balinese time and personhood join with a third factor, "the ceremonialization of social intercourse," to form "a triangle of mutually reinforcing cultural forces" that eliminate, so far as possible, the "consequential" relations among human beings (Geertz 1973h:399): "To maintain the (relative) anonymization of individuals with whom one is in daily contact, to dampen the intimacy implicit in face-to-face relationships . . . it is necessary to formalize relations with them to a fairly high degree. . . ." Balinese "ceremoniousness" is "a *logical correlate* of a thoroughgoing attempt to block the more creaturely aspects of the human condition—in-dividuality, spontaneity, perishability, emotionality, vulnerability—from sight" (p. 399, emphasis added).

Geertz (1973h) sees these Balinese cultural practices as linked by a distinctive kind of "logic" that I term "existential." He begins: "logic' is a treacherous word; and nowhere more so than in the analysis of culture. When one deals with meaningful forms, the temptation to see the relationship among them as immanent, as consisting of some sort of intrinsic affinity (or disaffinity) they bear for one another, is virtually overwhelming" (1973h:404). But "meaning is not intrinsic in the objects, acts, processes, and so on which bear it." Rather the nature of "cultural integration"—what makes cultural patterns fit together, or come into conflict, or change—must be sought in "the experiences of individuals and groups of individuals as, under the guidance of symbols, they perceive, feel, reason, judge, and act" (p. 405).

Cultural logic, for Geertz, turns out to be an existential matter of how "experiential impacts play into and reinforce one another."

A penchant for "contemporizing" fellowmen blunts the sense of biological aging; a blunted sense of biological aging removes one of the main sources of a sense of temporal flow; a reduced sense of temporal flow gives to interpersonal events an episodic quality. Ceremonialized interaction supports standardized perceptions of others; standardized perceptions of others support a "steady-state" conception of society; a steady-state conception of society supports a taxonomic perception of time. And so on. . . . (1973h:406)

In the end Geertz comes back, as he often did in the essays of this period, to universal features of the existential human situation:

The close and immediate interdependency between conceptions of person, time and conduct which has been proposed in this essay is, so I would argue, a general phenomenon . . . because such an interdependency is inherent in the way in which human experience is

organized, a necessary effect of the conditions under which human life is led. But it is only one of a vast and unknown number of such general interdependencies. . . . (p. 408)

The universal "conditions under which human life is led" to which Geertz refers here are presumably those of the succession of generations, the balance between individual personhood and social interdependence, and, as we shall see below, human similarity and difference, among others. This existential argument makes cultural logic a matter of the basic psychological way human beings solve universal problems of human experience across different domains of social life.

The existential logic Geertz articulates operates at an abstract, psychologized, almost aesthetic level quite apart from the practical problems people normally use their cultural resources to solve.⁸ How people find allies, arrange marriages, inherit land, or feed their families is never visible. The logic Geertz finds is real, but the source of its coherence is misspecified by ignoring the role of institutions.

Institutional Logic

To see how a more institutionally grounded analysis might push the same questions further, let us turn briefly to Geertz's later treatment (in "From the Native's Point of View" 1983b) of conceptions of personhood in Morocco, Bali, and Java—this time comparing his analysis of Moroccan personhood to Lawrence Rosen's description of the same Moroccan city Geertz studied, Sefrou. Geertz observes of the Moroccan use of the *nisba*, a kind of additional surname or tag that locates a person in some geographic or group identity that differentiates him in his immediate local context, that

the *nisba* way of looking at persons—as though they were outlines waiting to be filled in—is not an isolated custom but part of a total pattern of social life. This pattern is, like the others, difficult to characterize succinctly, but surely one of its outstanding features is a promiscuous tumbling in public settings of varieties of men kept carefully segregated in private ones—all out cosmopolitanism in the streets, strict communalism (of which the famous secluded woman is only the most striking index) in the home. (pp. 132–33)

The logic here is manifestly functional, in the experiential sense:

Moroccan society does not cope with its diversity by sealing it into castes, isolating it into tribes, dividing it into ethnic groups, or cover-

ing it over with some common-denominator concept of nationality, though, fitfully, all have now and then been tried. It copes with it by distinguishing, with elaborate precision, the contexts—marriage, worship, and to an extent diet, law, and education—within which men are separated by their dissimilarities, and those—work, friendship, politics, trade—where, however warily and however conditionally, they are connected by them.

To such a social pattern, a concept of selfhood which marks public identity contextually and relativistically . . . would seem particularly appropriate. Indeed, the social pattern would seem virtually to create this concept of selfhood, for it produces a situation where people interact with one another in terms of categories whose meaning is almost purely positional, location in the general mosaic, leaving the substantive content of the categories, what they mean subjectively as experienced forms of life, aside as something properly concealed in apartments, temples, and tents. (p. 133)

In contrast to Geertz's existential account, one can begin to see how the practices of naming and identity, and ways of defining contexts as public or private, might "go together" in Morocco if one adds to the analysis institutions and their effects on practical action (which Geertz seems almost calculatedly to ignore). Lawrence Rosen (1984), Geertz's sometime coauthor (Geertz, Geertz, and Rosen 1979), also describes the Moroccan use of the *nisba* to highlight context-based social identities. But he adds the additional pragmatic element that makes the culture's patternedness make sense.

Because Moroccans are continually trying to establish relationships for trade, exchange, and marriage alliances, information that locates others socially is acutely important:

For to know another's origins, in this broadly geo-social sense, is to know what kinds of personal characteristics a person does or is most likely to display or acquire, what kinds of ties he or she may already possess, according to what customs one is most used to forming relationships with others, and—perhaps most importantly—what bases exist for the establishment of a personal bond between another and oneself. (Rosen 1984:24)

Thus Rosen also identifies a fit between social practices and cultural understandings. But it is not "fit" in the sense of experientially compatible solutions to universal dilemmas. Rather, specific institutional features of Moroccan society—the importance of alliance and exchange networks;

the use of social identities to establish ties of mutual obligation—provide the pragmatic basis for cultural practices such as the *nisba*. When one Moroccan hears another identified by a *nisba*, “that information itself begins to clarify some of the contexts through which the other, and potentially oneself, can be conjoined and known” (p. 24). This complex of belief, behavior, and symbolic action fits together because it is oriented to the same institutional order—one in which allies are a key social resource. In such an order, it makes sense to think of the self as having identities that create similarities with and differences from others, to “bargain” for social ties, and to name oneself and others in a way that highlights bases for making claims and forming alliances while leaving open precisely what kind of relationship will be established.

This kind of logic is not deductive nor is it in any strict sense “semiotic.”⁹ The fit among cultural practices is due to their common link to practical problems generated within an institutional order. The institutional order is itself, of course, culturally constructed (Scott 1994; J. Meyer et al. 1997). And the existing repertoire of cultured capacities (Moroccans’ verbal facility [Geertz 1976], their flexible opportunism, and what Rosen [1984:28] describes as the extraordinary ability to absorb information about diverse social groups, customs, and particular others that might someday be useful in “forming networks and assessing others”) constrains the kind of institutional order that is possible. But the continuing plausibility or reality of the meanings an institutional order generates, the eagerness people have to master the skills it requires, and the strategies individuals form in relation to its possibilities are linked by the institutional pattern itself.

Such a pragmatic logic may be conveyed through cultural symbols and stories; it is reproduced through unanalyzed social practices (like naming people with a *nisba*); but it is taught and enforced through the pragmatic structure of life-problems.

An important recent study (Collier 1997) traces a dramatic transformation in such institutionally grounded cultural logics. By following the impact of market logic as it shifts the ground of cultural meaning, Collier demonstrates that such logics are not anchored in some self-reinforcing circle of experience but in institutional orders that, when they change, rapidly alter understandings of personhood, time, and conduct as well.

In the rural Spanish village of Los Olivos in the 1960s, a family’s wealth and social standing depended on the land or other property it owned. In such a world, families thought of their “honor” (the purity of their women and thus the integrity of their claims to inheritance) as the key to their family’s well-being (Collier 1997). The practical “logic” of

such a system was reproduced because a family’s honor affected its children’s marriage chances; and an advantageous marriage (and the habits of thrift and diligence that preserved the family estate) was the way families acquired or retained property. With the collapse of the agrarian economy in the post-Franco era, land became essentially worthless. In less than a generation, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the logic of market work supplanted that of agrarian inheritance.

In the earlier period women spent their adult lives promoting their family’s honor by suppressing any sign of their own sexuality, advertising their “obligations” to others, and working to build up the stock of home furnishings that would make their children good marriage prospects (Collier 1997). In the market world, however, such “self-sacrifice” no longer made sense. Each person now had (market) value based on her talents and abilities. Rather than dressing in black and becoming matronly upon marriage, women dieted, wore makeup, and dyed their hair. Rather than valuing sacrifice for others, people sought to increase their own value by improving themselves. Sacrifice on behalf of others came to be seen as hypocrisy, a failure to act on one’s true feelings. In short, the logic of family honor was replaced by the logic of market individualism.

This shift in pragmatic logic altered what Geertz would think of as understandings of the self, along with the public vocabularies in which people justified their behavior to themselves and to others. Collier (1997: 183–87) describes, for example, the heavy black mourning clothes worn by the women of Los Olivos (woolen stockings and layers of heavy wool clothing even in summer) to show “respect for the dead.” Younger women rejected mourning dress as a “stupid custom” because what one wore could not express one’s true feelings. It was not simply that older and younger women disagreed about mourning customs. It was that they no longer communicated in the same cultural language: for the younger women, what behavior meant had to do with one’s motives and wishes; for the older women, behavior signaled willingness to perform social obligations and to maintain family honor. Even when younger women wore black dresses (usually stylish ones) to please their mothers, they explained that what really mattered was what you felt. In their mothers’ world, however, following one’s own feelings or wishes was a sign of self-indulgence, putting distractions ahead of obligations. Social signals that the daughters saw as guarantees of good conduct—sincere feelings, loving one’s family, wanting to make them happy—only distressed the mothers who longed to hear that their daughters would sacrifice their own wishes to meet their obligations to others (Collier 1997: 192–94).

In Los Olivos, mourning dress did operate as a semiotic code. The

language of “showing respect” for the dead made sense, and wearing heavy black mourning for years asserted status, when one’s prospects in life were determined by inherited property. Collier notes that “[i]n the early 1960s, villagers argued endlessly over exactly which items of mourning dress a woman who was ‘touched’ [by a death] had to wear, and for how long. But they all agreed on the basic principle that a woman’s mourning dress should reflect her genealogical relationship to the person who died” (p. 188). The extent of mourning also conveyed information about inheritance: “[b]y observing which women put on which items of clothing in the days following a death, villagers could assess, with fair accuracy, not only the genealogical relationships through which inheritances were supposed to pass, but also the quality of relationships among living family members . . . [as well as] a woman’s possibilities for inheriting from distant kin” (pp. 190–91). Furthermore, being known as a person who maintained appropriate mourning customs, despite discomfort and inconvenience, may have “attracted inheritances” (p. 191). A woman who demonstrated willingness to sacrifice for her obligations signaled childless elders that she might make a good caretaker and heir.

Younger women, oriented to market and marriage, demonstrated their ability, sincerity, talent, and drive by their appearance and attitude and by the testimonies they offered to the sincerity and depth of their feelings.¹⁰ They sought to demonstrate that they did things not because they were obligated to, but because they wanted to. Love became the best predictor of whether a couple would marry, rather than “the properties and reputations of their respective families and . . . the couple’s respect for social conventions” (p. 103). Women sometimes succumbed to passion, in part because withholding sex until marriage came to seem calculating in a world that valued sincere feeling and rejected conformity to social conventions. Younger women no longer sought to “subjugate” their children (as their parents had to keep them from risking family honor and the chance of an advantageous marriage). Rather they sought to foster their children’s talents and to teach them independence.

In the contrast of these two cultural patterns, we can identify a kind of cultural logic. But in what does this logic consist? It is not the resonance of a unified ethos across various spheres of life (in fact, as Collier notes, in modern Spain calculation in the market sphere has been accompanied by the expectation that family life will be emotional, intimate, and free of mercenary motives [see pp. 108–10; 132–35]). Nor does a cultural logic link one sphere to the next through the experiential interdependencies Geertz would see among solutions to existential human dilemmas. And these cultural logics are not abstract deductive systems. The logic, including the

logic of the associated semiotic code, hangs together to the degree that its various elements derive from (and help constitute) the same institutional order. When dominant institutions create similar dilemmas of action, there will be what looks like a unified cultural logic. To the extent that institutions develop divergent patterns (as, I have argued, the state, the family, and the market do in contemporary societies), there will be multiple, sometimes non-overlapping cultural patterns (see Friedland and Alford 1991; Friedland and Hecht 1996). And even a single institution creates dilemmas and uncertainties that elicit multiple, sometimes contradictory strategies of action.

In contemporary America, I have argued, two different ways of understanding love are rooted in different aspects of the institution of marriage. The contemporary structure of marriage as an institution—exclusive, voluntary, life-transforming, and enduring—generates no single logic. Rather, it poses tasks or practical difficulties of action, to which the wider culture generates many different, sometimes competing, and always only partially satisfactory solutions.¹¹ The culture of “prosaic-realistic love” addresses the problem of how to make a relationship last. “Mythic” or “romantic” love focuses on the problem of deciding: whether to commit oneself to a relationship and how to choose whether or not to stay in a relationship. The culture of romantic love reproduces the institutional features of marriage as psychological states, honing the capacity to identify one other person as *the* person whom one loves and to know that this relationship is “it.”

While basic institutional contradictions—in this case the contradiction between the voluntariness and the permanence of marriage—generate dilemmas for actors, the cultural solutions to those dilemmas are not simple reflexes of the institutional order itself. The solutions share a logic, not in the sense that they share similar ideas but because they provide alternative routes to the same destination. There are wide variations and sometimes dramatic shifts in theories and techniques for solving these dilemmas, even while those varied solutions share a common orientation to the institution itself. The prosaic-realistic love culture, for example, may teach patience, the value of affection over infatuation, and how to discount strong emotions in favor of more constant thoughts and feelings, as well as such skills as “communication,” “sharing,” sexual intimacy, and managing conflict. These are skills that many contemporary Americans believe make the difference between relationships that last and those that fail. But shared religious commitment and the quest for personal fulfillment may also at one time or another, for one group or another, be envisioned as ways of making relationships last.

Alternative strategies of action not structured by the model of lasting marriage are also possible, although I found only scattered hints of this among the middle-class married and/or divorced suburbanites I interviewed. As I mention in chapter 6, older, divorced women who had largely given up on marriage occasionally used a different logic in talking about love, one in which friendship, mutual support, and fair exchange were the criteria of a good relationship, and the word "love" no longer made sense. Some research on gay relationships suggests alternative strategies of action in which life is organized not around finding a single, lasting relationship but around friendships in which love and sex mingle, without "love" implying a lasting, exclusive relationship (see Popovitch 1989; Nardi 1999:74–101).

The culture of romantic love has a stricter logic, presumably because it is more tightly bound to the key institutional features of marriage. Nonetheless, romantic love may enshrine sudden passion, a gradually growing inner certainty, or careful weighing of pros and cons as ways to know whether a relationship is worthy of commitment. These cultural solutions are not united by their inner logic, nor by pervasive schemas that are transposed from one arena to another. Rather, however internally diverse, fluid, or incoherent they are, these cultural patterns are given unity by the institutional dilemmas to which they are addressed.

Institutions

The concept of an institution plays a large role in this book, yet I have not explored it directly. The best definition of an institution is probably that of Ronald Jepperson (1991:145), who treats institutionalization as a matter of the degree to which a practice or structure is stable and self-reproducing:

An institution is then a social pattern that reveals a particular reproduction process. When departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated, socially constructed, controls—that is by some set of rewards and sanctions—we refer to a pattern as institutionalized.

Others (Bellah et al. 1991:10–12, 39–41; Scott 1994; Selznick 1957, 1992; Friedland and Alford 1991) have emphasized that institutions are stable, patterned systems based around culturally defined purposes.¹² In this view, some stable social practices (what aisle holds fresh produce versus meats at the supermarket) may still not be "institutions." And similarly the university, or baseball, is an institution because it has a set of core

meanings that define its purposes—even when particular universities or baseball teams, or perhaps even the whole academy or all of American baseball, fail to live up to those ideals. That is, the "institution" is defined by the existence of a set of rules or purposes that transcend any particular organizational or social embodiment.

The "new institutionalism" of John Meyer and others (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Fligstein 1990) emphasizes how institutions import fundamental elements of their purposes and structures from outside themselves. John Meyer (1983, 1987; J. Meyer et al. 1997) has postulated a kind of floating environment of institutionalized rules about what features and associated purposes constitute a nation-state, a corporation, a school, or a marriage, and he sees the instantiation of a relatively stable set of externally available rules as the defining feature of institutions. For Meyer, environments become more "institutionalized" as the comprehensiveness and elaboration of the rules that define entities and the kinds of entities that can exist expand. But this alerts us to a central feature of institutions—that they are patterns of "constitutive rules."

One of the most helpful discussions of the nature of institutions as culturally constituted entities comes from the cognitive anthropologist Roy D'Andrade (1984). D'Andrade (1984:90), paraphrasing Geertz (1973c:11–12), notes that "[m]arriage is part of American culture, but marriage is not the same thing as knowing how to marry people or knowing how to get married or understanding what it is to be married. Most Americans have an understanding of what banishment is and how to banish someone (were they Richard II), yet these understandings do not make banishment a possibility in American culture." He quotes John Searle, the philosopher, on the special quality of certain statements (such as saying "I do" in a legal marriage ceremony) that, within the constitutive rules of an institution, create a certain state of affairs:

It is only given the institution of marriage that certain forms of behavior constitute Mr. Smith marrying Miss Jones. Similarly, it is only given the institution of baseball that certain movements by certain men constitute the Dodgers beating the Cubs 3 to 2 in eleven innings.

These "institutions" are systems of constitutive rules. Every institutional fact is underlain by a (system of) rule(s) of the form "X counts as Y in context C." (Searle 1969:52, quoted in D'Andrade 1984:91)

An institution, as D'Andrade (1984:94) points out, depends on "social agreement that something counts as" something, and on adherence to (or enforcement of) that rule and the "entailments incurred by application

of the rule." As D'Andrade conceives them, these "entailments" are linkages between the rules that constitute an institution and norms (regulations of action) that flow directly from the constitutive rules. As he emphasizes, these norms "are not a matter of logic, but rather consist of the assumption that such linkages exist." Thus, he argues, "wearing a tie" is "linked to constitutive rules by which formality is defined and created," just as, we might note, wearing heavy mourning was linked to the rules that constituted kinship and inheritance in Los Olivos in the 1960s.

Thinking of such behavioral entailments as "norms" is probably not as useful as thinking of them as semiotic codes: a tie signals the formality of an occasion while mourning dress signals (and enacts) the closeness of a kin relationship. All institutions have signaling systems that permit monitoring and enforcement of the basic structures of the institution. The institution of family inheritance in Los Olivos entailed an elaborate system of codes by which people demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice for their family obligations, including the mourning dress that showed "respect for" the dead. Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) rejects the idea of normative rules for behavior precisely because he recognizes that any institutional order creates corresponding "games" through which individuals manipulate what the codes that define institutional positions allow them to "say" (see also Crozier and Friedberg 1980).

Unanswered Questions

Wide variation in kinds of cultural "logics" suggests that social analysts need to consider carefully what kind of account they are offering when they claim to have uncovered a cultural logic or to have observed a logic being played out. Part of what we mean by cultural explanation is that some logic internal to culture itself drives social processes. Yet we understand all too little what we mean by various claims that particular cultural processes have a logic, and we know less about how much those logics are constraining.

I have suggested that the notion of a "logic" as some form of rational, deductive logic (albeit with "nonrational" premises) does not really capture what analysts in concrete cases understand as "logical" about the cultural logics they analyze. But it is still an open question how far deductive logics (or other kinds of formal logics, like the binary logic of Lévi-Straussian structuralism) play an independent role in structuring cultural processes. There are, for example, hints in some cultural analyses that cultural oppositions are linked, so that a change in one impels change in others (for example, Wright's [1975] study of the changing plot struc-

tures of cowboy movies), but we have little notion of how general such processes might be.

Second, while I have argued that cultural logics are anchored in institutions, we do not really know to what degree similar ways of solving problems transfer from one institutional sphere to another—or to what degree there is strain toward consistency across institutional arenas. This might be understood as a question about the limits to human beings' cognitive and social capacities, although DiMaggio's (1997) recent review of cognitive psychology suggests that human beings keep multiple scripts and schemas on tap simultaneously. On the other hand, researchers like Dobbin (1994) argue that at the societal level, "solutions" to at least some problems of social organization tend to be stable over time and consistent across different domains of social activity (though Ziegler [1997] finds domain-specific solutions to similar problems).

We need more explicit attention to the question of how different logics interconnect (and disconnect) and why. If human beings can function in multiple modalities—impersonality at work, intimacy at home, and hedonism away from home, for example—then questions about whether or not there are necessary linkages among spheres may require analysis at another level. John Meyer's work might suggest consistency in cultural logics across spheres, not because there is some functional need for coordination but because institutions draw on a common world-level reservoir of institutionalized rules to establish nation-states, school systems, corporations, and even selves (Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli 1987; J. Meyer et al. 1997). But the reservoir of constitutive rules may not be consistent across institutions or cases. And as in other cultural arenas, pressures for innovativeness and organizational distinction may lead to the transformation of constitutive rules themselves. If chiefdoms, territories, tribes, and empires have all given way to the institutional form of the nation-state, are not the number of things that can be squeezed under the nation-state umbrella constantly expanding, even as the notion of the nation-state as the highest organizational unit in the world polity is itself under challenge (Soysal 1994, 1997)?

A third unanswered question about cultural logics concerns the relationship between institutional orders and the semiotic codes through which they are enacted. To go back to Collier's (1997) case of Los Olivos, if showing that one would make sacrifices for family honor was important for marriage alliances and "attracting inheritances," then wearing cumbersome mourning dress, while not directly preserving property, may have seemed a logical correlate of being a successful or high status family. Such claims themselves are of course socially constructed rather than purely

"logical"—in one place self-sacrificingness might be signaled by intensity and duration of mourning, while in another by the burdensomeness and expense of funerary rituals or by willingness to go hungry to feed one's children. As I suggested in chapter 8, there can be social debates about the codes that signal various traits or properties (such as current debates over what traits are masculine or feminine) so that the content of a semiotic system can shift, while its underlying "point"—what it seeks to convey—remains pretty much constant. But we know relatively little about how tightly linked semiotic codes and institutional orders are. In some cases institutional orders may remain stable while the semiotic codes in terms of which they operate shift.¹³ In other cases, a semiotic code may be adapted to convey new meanings, linking it to a different institutional order than the one in which it originally made sense.

Finally, we need to understand the contexts in which "logical logic" does make a difference in social life. To the extent that individuals use cultural resources not only to organize strategies of action but also to justify their actions to themselves and others, those accounts may have logical entailments. This is certainly the burden of Weber's (1968) analyses of legitimations of authority, of the symbolic content of status claims, and of the independent effects of religious worldviews. Without trying to revisit Weber's arguments about rationality and rationalization (see Swidler 1973), or to judge how far some inherent propensity toward logical consistency plays a role in social life, I want to suggest that once we stop assuming that "cultural logics" are transparent and that how the logic generates implications is obvious, we may develop more powerful ways of analyzing cultural logics—even if those logics turn out to be multiple, overlapping, and varied in their structure.

DO SOME CULTURAL ELEMENTS CONTROL OTHERS?

The biggest unanswered question in the sociology of culture is whether and how some cultural elements control, anchor, or organize others. Indeed, this partially subsumes other questions of cultural integration or cultural logic.

If we have finally won the Weberian battle to demonstrate that cultural factors influence human action, we are nonetheless in great danger of losing the war. For if everything is culture—from the structure of organizations, actors, and nation-states (Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli 1987), to the fundamental constituents of economic life such as markets (Reddy 1984) and labor (Biernacki 1995), to the dynamics of revolutions and social movements (Sewell 1980, 1985; Tarrow 1998; Johnston and

Klandermans 1995)—we need to differentiate the culture concept to explore which kinds of cultural elements organize others, and which control particular kinds of social processes (see Jepperson and Swidler 1994).

We can see the difficulty by turning to William Sewell Jr.'s important essay, "A Theory of Structure" (1992). Sewell recasts the perennial problem of the relationship of culture and social structure by redefining structure itself, as "composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual" (p. 13). In a brilliant inversion of the older view of culture as the unexplained residuum left over when material factors have had their causal impact, Sewell argues that structures themselves can be "read" for the schemas they contain, and that reproduction of a structure is the reenactment of a schema using human and material resources. Because of the "multiplicity of structures" and the "polysemy of resources," structures can be reinterpreted to generate schemas different from those that originally produced them. Thus human agency is possible (indeed ubiquitous) in "the capacity to reinterpret or mobilize an array of resources in terms of schemas other than those that constituted the array" (p. 20).

Sewell (1992:22) directly confronts the major difficulty this new conceptualization raises. If everything from "structures that shape and constrain the development of world military power to those that shape and constrain the joking practices of a group of Sunday fishing buddies or the erotic practices of a single couple" is a structure organized by schemas, then it is essential to differentiate among kinds of structures—to analyze, in my terms, whether and how some structures organize or constrain others.

Sewell (1992:22) suggests a categorization of structures by "depth, which refers to the schema dimension of structure, and power, which refers to the resource dimension." These dimensions provide a way of analyzing which structures organize and control others: "deep structures are those schemas that can be shown to underlie ordinary or 'surface' structures, in the sense that the surface structures are a set of transformations of the deep structures." Deep structures are also "pervasive" and "relatively unconscious." A structure's power, on the other hand, is its ability to mobilize resources. So language is a structure that is deep but not powerful, while nation-states are powerful but not deep. "[R]elatively near the surface of social life . . . [s]tate and political structures are consciously established, maintained, fought over, and argued about rather than taken for granted as if they were unchangeable features of the social world" (p. 24).

Sewell's formulation is a great advance in rethinking the distinction between culture and social structure. But the attempt to specify why some

length of the finished product. The British pattern compared the picks [weft threads] in different kinds of finished products rather than in motions" (p. 50). When the ways laborers and owners negotiated wage rates changed, German-British differences in the constitution of labor as a commodity vanished—essentially overnight (Birnacki 1995:495–97). During World War I, governments in both countries began setting wage rates directly. This interruption in the practices of negotiating piece rates eliminated the British-German difference in how labor was constituted as a commodity.

Thus what look like relatively unimportant surface practices—such as how wages are negotiated—can organize (indeed define) important characteristics of the physical and conceptual universe. But it is not clear that "depth" is what gives these practices their pervasive influence. The intellectual challenge for students of culture is to think more broadly about why some cultural schemas dominate or organize wide areas of social life. It is an open question, I think, whether such pervasively influential schemas are also the most enduring—although logically it might seem the two should go together.¹⁴

Sewell argues that "deep" structures affect broad domains of life because their basic schemas underlie many "surface" structures that are transpositions of them. But very influential structures do not necessarily work by generating homologous versions of themselves. I have argued instead that social institutions shape action because they define problems actors must solve. The various solutions then share common schemas (or common cultural logics) because they are solutions to the same institutionally structured problem. Thus the mechanism Sewell proposes to explain why some structures are broadly influential (and why some schemas are widely reproduced) may be wrong. It is not self-propagation of schemas through homologous transposition that is at work, but active agents constrained by the same institutional logic who seek out cultural resources to solve similarly shaped problems.

Cultural styles, skills, and habits of the sort I discuss in chapter 4 (and certainly the *habitus* as Bourdieu describes it) may indeed be propagated by the replication of analogous schemas in the way Sewell describes for "deep" structures. I have argued that culture in the sense of "cultured capacities" for action, feeling, and perception influences action because it is easier for people to use skills they already have and to apply them to new situations than to develop new ones. (People may also develop new cultural capacities by modifying ones they already possess, or by prolonged contact with models whose styles and habits they can imitate.) Homology rather than complementarity is the rule here. But while such cultural

schemas are more influential than others is less satisfactory. As I argue in chapter 8, "deeper" cultural meanings do not always have greater capacities to organize other social patterns. The uncontested, taken-for-granted meanings that pervade much of ordinary social life may be so loosely organized and so internally contradictory that they have little influence on social action (see Swidler 1986; also Billig 1987, 1992). At the same time, sometimes apparently superficial cultural practices, like gift-giving on Mother's Day, can constrain action by defining the meaning of social gestures, while being neither deep nor powerful.

There is a question as to whether "depth" and "power" are the right conceptual tools at all. Labeling a structure "deep" (having the broad capacity to organize other domains of social life) or "powerful" (able to mobilize extensive human action) simply describes the outcome we are interested in, without really accounting for it. Indeed, these metaphors may mislead us about what kinds of cultural schemas (or structures in Sewell's terms) have these effects.

Richard Birnacki's *Fabrication of Labor* (1995) suggests why depth and power may be the wrong metaphors for thinking about what makes culture influential. Birnacki traces the effects of the different schemas that constituted labor as a commodity in England versus Germany. These schemas were certainly deep in the sense that they were unconscious and taken for granted. British owners and textile workers "defined the factory employment relation as the appropriation of workers' labor concretized in products" (that is, cloth), while "German employers and workers . . . acted as if the employment relation comprised the purchase of labor effort and of the disposition over workers' labor activity" (p. 43). These differing schemas had widely pervasive effects, according to Birnacki, structuring everything from mill architecture, to the timing and shape of strikes, to the fundamental intellectual differences between British political economy and Marxian analyses of "labor power."

Despite being unconscious and taken for granted, however, the core schemas, what Birnacki calls "silent practices" for negotiating labor arrangements, were not "deep" in the sense of lying "underneath" everything else. They were anchored in and reproduced by specific, everyday practices, not deep conceptual assumptions, and when these practices were changed, the different understandings of labor disappeared with them. It was the negotiation of piece-rate wage scales—reproducing shared assumptions about what there was to negotiate over—that kept the contrasting British and German patterns intact. "The German piece-rate system centered its comparisons of different ways of weaving on the motion of inserting a pick [weft thread], without respect to the visible

styles have some of the attributes Sewell would identify with “depth”—they may be unconscious and ingrained and, as I have argued, they may be difficult to learn or unlearn—there are usually many such skills and habits, and they may be brought together in diverse arrays rather than by some unifying structural logic.

Of course features of institutions themselves may be generated by cultural schemas transposed from one arena to another—as, perhaps, the logic of free choice and contract structures Americans’ thinking about government and marriage, as well as about market transactions. But as both government and marriage illustrate, actual institutional structures do not necessarily approximate the schemas people attach to them. Thus Americans cannot decline the contract government offers, while marriage involves vows that people are not required to honor.

John Meyer and his collaborators might adduce the “rules” that define institutions as examples of “deep” structures. And indeed the cognitive frames—in D’Andradé’s terms the “constitutive rules”—that make some structures universities and others nation-states might be candidates for such deep structuring principles. But as the Meyer group has demonstrated in their empirical work, such structures are themselves in a process of constant evolution—sometimes according to quite superficial, faddish principles—so that the “recipe” for making a nation-state, for example, increasingly requires more form (an elaborated constitution, a large number of cabinet departments, and data-gathering capacities, all validated by recognition by the United Nations [Boli-Bennett 1979; McNeely 1995]) and less by way of effective content (a military able to assert sovereignty, effective rule over territory, long continuity of rule).

If “depth” is not the right metaphor for suggesting which structures or schemas will be widely influential, “power” does not solve the problem either. Of course in an obvious way powerful social structures that mobilize vast resources will be widely influential. But thinking about their direct “power,” their capacity to mobilize things or people, does not answer the question of whether the patterns they create are central in anchoring or shaping other structures and schemas. Sewell seems to be thinking primarily of the state as the paradigmatic example of a structure that is “powerful” but not “deep.” But it is not clear that the state’s influence comes directly from its power over resources, so much as from its ability to set the limits or constraints within which other institutions operate. Theorists such as Fligstein (1990, 1996) have increasingly pointed to the state’s crucial role in setting constraints that define the limits of rational action for other actors. Thus Fligstein (1990) shows that the American state’s legal and regulatory environment—laws against cartels, trusts, and restraints

of trade—directly affected the form corporations adopted and the “conceptions of control” their managers embraced. In a similar way, the legal order created by the state anchors the institution of marriage and ultimately affects the way that institution itself is defined. But this role of state action does not quite fit Sewell’s notion of “power” as the capacity to mobilize resources. The activities that embody state “power”—say, drafting a large army, collecting taxes, and imposing criminal sanctions—may not shape other structures and schemas in a way at all proportional to the “power” these activities involve. At the least, more analysis is necessary to determine what elements of a state’s effects on society are widely influential in structuring other patterns and which have less influence on the shape of other structures and schemas.

If depth and power are not what make some cultural patterns especially influential, recent research offers other suggestions. Biernacki’s (1995) analysis of how labor was constituted in England versus Germany suggests that social formulas that mediate ongoing negotiations of antagonistic interests may be particularly enduring. Each side in a dispute, in formulating and pursuing its interests, continually reproduces the schema in whose terms it seeks advantage. Such structured antagonisms may also account for why German versus British schemas for constituting labor had such wide influence. Biernacki emphasizes that these were “silent practices” rather than consciously articulated ideas. The ways people actually defined what they were doing while they worked (producing a length of cloth of a certain value, or sending the shuttle across a certain number of times) and how much they deserved to be remunerated were influential because they were “unobtrusive.” But we could make the same point slightly differently by saying that these unobtrusive practices operated as “constitutive rules,” defining what it was that employers purchased from workers, and that the other arenas in which this schema was also influential—structuring the ways labor was withheld during strikes, or what factory architecture attempted to regulate, or how employers fined or penalized tardy or absent workers—were all sites where conflicts between workers and employers played out. So rules that constitute something that becomes the ground for repeated conflict may have particularly wide and lasting influence.

Constitutive rules may also be anchored by public practices. Elizabeth Armstrong (forthcoming) has traced the crystallization of a “gay and lesbian community” in San Francisco in the early 1970s. This community was defined by the diverse groups that it comprised—and its constitutive rule was embodied (and annually enacted) in the Lesbian-Gay Freedom Day Parade, which displayed those diverse identities. This new

rule—congealed in a relatively short period of time but almost immediately widely influential—spawned the rapid formation of hundreds of identity-expressive organizations in a population that earlier had supported only a small number of political groups, each of which had tried to represent gay or lesbian interests in general. This example suggests how a key symbolic or ritual practice may instantiate the constitutive rule that defines a social entity, making real, for example, what “membership” in the “community” consists in.

Sewell (1996; see also 1990) has brilliantly analyzed how emblematic public action—such as ritual displays during a revolution—can encode new constitutive rules (that “the nation” now equals “the people”), model new forms of collective action, and enact new understandings of public order and social progress. In the key case he analyzes, that of the fall of the Bastille in the summer of 1789, a new constitutive rule crystallized very quickly and came to organize broad domains of public action. Of course, not every new form of collective action is “successful.” The question of why new constitutive rules sometimes take root is precisely what further research along the lines Sewell has laid out would explore.

What is fascinating about the kinds of constitutive rules Armstrong and Sewell analyze is how quickly they can establish themselves, becoming the accepted reality not through long usage but through their capacity to establish a public model of collective life. But even when a schema is neither taken for granted nor unconscious, it may be enduring and pervasive, I have argued, if it is the shared “default option” for collective action in periods of uncertainty. Thus Americans, while they can constitute and navigate formal organizations, contractual exchanges, and governments that require obedience, nonetheless tend to fall back on the notion that action is coordinated by the voluntary choices of individuals (Swidler 1992). It is true that sectors of American social life are organized this way—from Bible study groups, to churches, to fraternal organizations. But the schema is not “transposed” everywhere. Rather, it is the fallback position—that form of coordination people assume that others will turn to when the bureaucratic, corporate, familial, or state system isn’t there. There is a great deal of conscious cultural elaboration of such a schema, perhaps precisely because it is less institutionalized. Voluntary social action survives in the cultural repertoire as a focus of story and myth as well as occasional enactment. People want to know “how to” do it, and they want to see examples of how such action is performed successfully. In other cultures, family loyalty, or sacrifice for the group, or revolutionary exaltation is the “default option” that people assume will solve collective problems.

The difficulty in developing cumulative theory and research about

which cultural practices anchor or organize others is exacerbated by confusion about levels of analysis in social theorizing. In contemporary theorizing about culture there is a kind of unspoken assumption that social-level cultural factors—“discourses”—are impersonal, pervasive, and enduring, while individual-level beliefs and attitudes are particular, concrete, and variable. But it may be instead that there really are public cultures—not simply generalized discourses or semiotic codes (in whose terms many things can be said, but which don’t directly say something in particular) but quite particular beliefs—that are, so to speak, the authorized beliefs of a society about itself (see Jepperson 1992; also Nicolopoulou and Weintraub forthcoming). These might be quite long lasting but nonetheless subject to change in the light of publicly authorized or validated historical experience. In *Forging Industrial Policy* (1994), for example, Frank Dobbin analyzes continuities in French, British, and American patterns of economic regulation. Dobbin argues that each nation has pervasive schemas that are publicly defined as answering the collective question of how it can maintain social order and produce progress. Those implicit theories, he argues, are established by authoritative interpretations of early successes, particularly in establishing political order. Such modes of problem solving persist until there is publicly defined catastrophic failure and repudiation of specific elements of the available theory of public coordination (as there was in the United States after political corruption seemed to damn the capacity of local government to assure economic progress). Such a perspective would hark back to Bendix’s analysis in *Work and Authority in Industry* (1974) of how dominant ideologies are constructed. But it would not assume that powerful ideologies operate as deep, largely hidden structures of discourse. Rather it would accept that there are public ideologies that are not reducible to shared private opinions but are instead public realities that directly confront (and sometimes conflict with) individual views.

These are only tentative suggestions about where we might look for distinctions among types of culture that would let us answer the question of what makes some cultural elements able to organize others. At this point, we should take persuasive empirical studies of how culture operates and think inductively about what aspects of a particular cultural schema make it dominating, pervasive, or enduring (or weak, narrow in application, or fleeting). Our empirical studies will make much more substantial contributions if we can begin, however uncertainly, to formulate general theoretical questions about culture that can guide research into the roles that it plays. This book is intended as a contribution to that endeavor.