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American culture: A sociological perspectives

Andrew Woods

Stanford University, California, United States

Abstract---The culture of the United States of America is primarily of Western origin but is influenced by a multicultural ethos that includes African, Native American, Asian, Pacific Island, and Latin American people and their cultures. American culture encompasses the customs and traditions of the United States. The United States is sometimes described as a "melting pot" in which different cultures have contributed their own distinct "flavors" to American culture. The United States of America is a North American nation that is the world's most dominant economic and military power. Likewise, its cultural imprint spans the world, led in large part by its popular culture expressed in music, movies and television. The culture of the United States of America is primarily of Western culture (European) origin and form but is influenced by a multicultural ethos that includes African, Native American, Asian, Polynesian, and Latin American people and their cultures. The American way of life or simply the American way is the unique lifestyle of the people of the United States of America. It refers to a nationalist ethos that adheres to the principle of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Keywords---American, culture, customs, multicultural, nationalist.

Introduction

Côté (1996); Cairns, S., Harmer, C., Hopkin, J., & Skippon, S. (2014) stated American cultural and social constructivist approaches to childhood studies are informed by theoretical work published in Europe and the earlier anthropological work of Opie & Opie (1969), who argued that children should be recognized separately and autonomously from adults as a community with its own stories, rules, rituals and social norms. In the 1970s, American anthropologist Bluebond-Langner (1978) interpreted dying children's worlds using their words and points of view to explain how these children comfort their parents and doctors. More recently, Clark (2003) explains how humor and play interactions initiated by chronically ill children help families cope. In Europe, Qvortrup (1994) presented childhood as a 'social phenomenon'. Likewise, other European sociologists had begun to use social interaction theory to include the daily activities and wishes of children when interpreting their lives (e.g. James and Prout, 1997 [1990]; Jenks, 2004; Maybin and Woodhead, 2003; Qvortrup, 1993; Stainton Rogers et al., 1991; Woodhead, 1999). Corsaro (1988) contributed to American theorizing by interpreting the meaning of children's lives from their social networks. Gathering data on children's everyday experiences and what these experiences mean to children is in agreement with ethnographic methods that use reflexivity and include children's voices.

DiMaggio, Nag & Blei (2013); Stone & Sharpley (2008), social constructivist research within institutional settings, such as daycare centers and schools, finds that young children add meaning to their experiences and create peer cultures. Toddler peer groups have been

Linguistics and Culture Review © 2018. **Corresponding author**: Woods, A., woods@stanford.edu Received 09 Feb 2018/ Accepted 18 April 2018 / Published 27 April 2018 noted to emerge among two-year-olds and they already show preferences for sex and race (Thompson *et al.*, 2001; van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001). Play builds upon itself and across playgroups or peer groups, even when the composition of children's groups change. The children develop shared rules and meanings that define how the play activity proceeds and who is welcome to join the play. These rules and meanings exist at the community level for the children's play so that the play or game continues even when individuals leave or join the group.

Age as social structure, whether measured as younger children vs older children, or by a generational marker of child and adult, is also used to define and understand childhood. As discussed earlier, Thorne (1987) views age and gender as structures that frame children's lives, but she also views children as social agents affecting these structures and creating their own culture within these structures. Bass (2004) similarly finds that primarily age, and then economic status and gender, together constrain opportunities open to children who work in an open-air market in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, children remain active contesters and participants of their work worlds. Passuth's (1987) research finds that age is more salient than other stratification markers, such as race, social class and gender. Passuth finds that children of five to 10 years old in a summer camp setting sort and define themselves as little and big kids. Other research (Goodwin, 1990; Scott, 2002) suggests again that age should be considered conjointly with race, gender and social class to understand how power and prestige are negotiated within children's peer cultures.

Viewing age more broadly, Foner's (1978) life course work provides valuable early insight into the age, and more specifically, generational status, as an analytic tool to understand a generation's outlook on relationships and family formation. According to Foner (1978), 'Each cohort bears the stamp of the historical context through which it flows [so that] no two cohorts age in exactly the same way.' Foner explains that those of each cohort may develop similar attitudes because they have experienced the same larger social and political milieu. More recently, age continues to be useful as a prominent marker as European and Canadian scholars find generational status to be the main factor defining children's lives (*e.g.* Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2000; Qvortrup, 2000; Walkerdine, 2004).

Culture

The most popular explanation for Asian Americans' high educational achievement and occupational concentration in technical fields and small businesses has been cultural. Kitano (1969), for example, draws the analogy between Japanese culture and the Protestant Ethic, suggesting that similar values account for each group's success. Wong (1980) argues that Chinese American children are pushed to higher education because 'there is much respect for the scholar' in Chinese culture. Similarly, Barringer *et al.* (1993) invoke Confucianism to account for Asian Americans' educational success. While the 'segmented assimilation' theory is a broad theory of divergent assimilation paths for new immigrants depending on the macro environment they face in the US (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997), it also highlights the importance of culture. This theory suggests that cultural forces, such as an 'immigrant community's values and tight solidarity,' protect immigrant children in unfavorable social contexts from downward assimilation into the underclass (Portes & Zhou, 1993).

While important cultural differences exist between Asian societies and mainstream American society (*e.g.*, Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the cultural explanation in its plain form has limited analytical value because it is a reference to Asian Americans have done well in terms of educational attainment and scientific achievements because they value education and science. A more interesting question is why they value education and science so much. Is this purely a result of historical legacy, or in part due to interaction with American society at large (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Zhou, 1997)? We should also

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remember that the influence of Confucianism is limited to East and Southeast Asia. If Confucianism is the explanation, how do we explain the high educational and occupational achievement among Asian Indians in the US?

The structural perspective views of Asian Americans in terms of the social and economic needs of the larger US society. Historically, Asian immigrants have filled the need for low-wage labor. Before World War II, the demand for cheap labor to build the transportation, agriculture, and industrial infrastructure in the US was the driving force behind the recruitment of first Chinese, then Japanese after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and later Filipinos after Japanese became unavailable under the 1907-1908 Gentlemen's Agreement. Cheng & Bonacich (1984) give detailed accounts of such structural forces at work.

However, after World War II, the sudden demand for scientific and technical personnel, in combination with changes in immigration law, resulting in the "brain drain " of well-trained professionals from Asia (for a review, see Nee & Wong, 1985). The selective immigration of Asians with positive characteristics in recent years may well contribute to Asian American children's educational achievements (Barringer *et al.*, 1993), since, as we have learned from social stratification research (*e.g.*, Blau & Duncan, 1967), children of educated parents tend to have better education themselves. The structural explanation, however, has certain limitations. One major limitation is that it does not apply to children of Southeast Asian refugees (Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians) who came to this country after the Vietnam War with little economic or human capital. Neither can it explain why Chinese and Japanese had already closed gaps with whites in educational attainment by the 1930s, long before 'brain drain' immigrants arrival after 1965 (Hirschman & Wong, 1986).

Dowd (2004); Pratto (1999), a range of disciplines currently active in the study of childhood helps us understand children's lives and creates a meaningful discourse of the underlying methods and theories, which, in turn, create fresh approaches to the study of children. While developmental psychology laid an early foundation of interest in children, the field of childhood studies has emerged as a discourse across other disciplines, such as sociology and anthropology, which have pushed the field to include a broad range of methods and approaches. The disciplinary make-up of the Center for Children and Childhood Studies at Rutgers University provides a telling example of the breadth of research acceptable for the field: associated scholars hail from sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, library science and religious studies. It is clear that childhood scholars have a great deal to gain from continued conversation and collaboration.

British sociologist Martin Woodhead (2003) offers three models for children and childhood studies to emerge as an interdisciplinary effort. First, he offers a clearinghouse model that would include all disciplines and all studies of children as having complementary value. Second, he proposes a pick 'n' mix model, where only specific child-centered approaches would be included in the field. Therefore, if some specification is not meant, such as an acceptable method (*e.g.* the demographic approach not fulfilling the qualitative requirement put forth by European social constructivist childhood scholars, James & Prout, 1990), then those studies would allow researchers to collaborate across disciplines on child-centered research, but remain within a traditional discipline such as sociology, anthropology, or psychology. The third scenario is most common in American sociology today.

Discussion

Norgaard (2018); Zourrig, Chebat & Toffoli (2009), social dominance theory implies that dynamic ideological and political struggles occur even in fairly stable societies, and it also points out that normative institutional discrimination and cultural ideologies play as important a role in the group oppression as the force does. Social dominance theory does echo elite theories stating that, without a culturally normative and institutionalized control of power, social instability can devolve into extremely violent civil warfare, as the most recent examples of the Somalian and Yugoslavian civil wars show. However, social dominance theory also points out that stable oppression is systematically violent against subordinates. By implication, relatively nonviolent peace may also involve a struggle to balance the power. On the whole, social dominance theory argues that the least oppressive kind of peace that societies can realize would result from reducing social inequality and from recognizing the rights of all groups to be empowered to obtain what they need.

The issue nature of late-modern community

Sine & Lee (2009); Bass (2010), one obvious implication of the framework for the cultureidentity link is that social life in late-modern society is becoming increasingly problematic for the individual in terms of establishing a stable and viable identity based on commitments embedded in a community of others. Perhaps this interpretation reflects my own pessimism, but I believe it deserves careful examination. In this section, I will elaborate upon the problematic nature of present and future society, and balance it with a formulation that suggests how certain individuals seem to be coping with these deleterious social structural and cultural influences.

Pre-modern and modern institutions tend to be supportive of individual identities and intergenerational continuity, whereby new members are more-or-less willing recruits of the culture. To the extent that these institutions are failing, or have failed, it follows that both individual identity formation and cultural reproduction are in jeopardy. Moreover, to the extent that these institutions are being replaced with exploitive consumption-oriented patterns, it also follows that Western cultural development is proceeding more like a rudderless ship than as a vessel that will transport its occupants safely to their desired destinations (Giddens, 1991). Thus, while it is easy to romanticize the past in this context, there is the reason to be concerned that the young are not receiving benign guidance in their identity formation, and that there is little "foresight" in ongoing cultural change. (It is also true that some observers welcome a break in cultural continuity based on conclusions that Western culture has been patriarchal, racist, classist, etc., but such a break is tied to the increasing anomie of social structure and is not without significant casualties when it comes to matters of individual identity).

The scenario outlined above suggests two general courses individuals may take when confronted with late-modern life. One is to simply go along for the ride and drift in the currents and eddies of changes orchestrated by the captains of the consumer industries who profit from manipulating identities, especially among the young (Co⁻te⁻ & Allahar, 1994). The above discussion of the culture-identity link constitutes a descriptive account of this. In a more prescriptive vein, we can discuss another course; namely, for individuals to take an active role in their own development by becoming pilots of their own destinies, to the extent that this is realistically possible. (Some sociologists refer to this as being an architect of one's biography; *e.g.* Giddens, 1991). In other words, without institutional support and guidance in making developmental transitions, individuals are left largely to their own internal resources more so than in the past. The passive response to this is to drift from image to image, as discussed above, rather than to undertake more difficult developmental tasks, like actively exploring, challenging, and developing one's beliefs and potentials. In contrast, the active, agentic response is to develop strategies for dealing with

these influences in terms of sustaining some sense of direction and meaning and taking initiative in one's own personal development.

Negative emotions across cultures

The process that follows blame and precedes revenge behavior is of an emotional nature (Shteynberg, 2005). Negative emotions such as anger, shame, and outrage, are the major emotions that promote revenge behavior (*e.g.*, Bougie *et al.*, 2003; Folkes, 1984; Xia *et al.*, 2004, etc.). However, experienced and expressed emotions may vary across cultures in terms of intensity and situation in which they occur (Stephan *et al.*, 1996).

Regarding experienced emotions, Shteynberg (2005) found that anger triggers the revenge of individuals with interdependent self-construal as well as those with independent construal of self. However, when he controlled the anger level, the revenge intentions of the former became a function of their shame emotion to a greater extent than for the latter. Thus, shame is more predictive of revenge intentions for interdependent self-construal samples.

When faced with a dangerous encounter, idiocentric (allocentric) consumers experience more (less) anger than shame. Furthermore, Roseman *et al.* (1995) found that Indians reported lower sadness, fear, and anger than Americans. Since Indians perceive negative outcomes as less modifiable than Americans do, they resign themselves more readily to what happened and thus perceive less discrepancy from what is desired and feel less negative emotion. Overall we posit:

The more consumers cling to idiocentrism (allocentrism) values, the greater (less) negative emotions (*e.g.*, shame, anger) they will direct at the transgressing firm. With respect to expressed emotions, Stephan *et al.* (1996) reported that in cultures such as Tahiti, China, and Japan, people perceive expressions of anger as inappropriate and rarely occur, whereas in other cultures, such as the United States, individuals consider expressions of anger as acceptable and actively encourage self-expression. Moreover, the authors found that in contrast with individualists (Americans), collectivists (Costa Ricans) are more reluctant to express negative emotions (eg annoyance, distrust, disapproval), given that in collectivistic cultures people are likely to experience strong normative pressures to express emotions that facilitate interpersonal relations even if they are not feeling these emotions.

Likewise, Liu & McClure (2001) argued that unlike individualists' consumers, collectivists tend to not express their emotions outwardly, especially negative emotions that they often hide in public settings, to avoid losing face. If they display their negative emotions, they will be more likely to discuss issues in intimate social settings. In this vein, Schutte & Ciarlante (1998) refer to the value placed to maintain smooth and harmonious interpersonal relationships that discourage negative emotions' demonstration of people with interdependent self-construal.

Xie & Goyette (2003); Jacobs & Spillman (2005), overall the literature suggests that collectivistic cultures may discourage the expression of negative emotions due to the disruption of interpersonal relations; whereas individualistic cultures may encourage the expression of negative emotions that enhance in some way the individual's sense of distinctiveness and independence. Consequently, when faced with a dangerous encounter, idiocentric consumers are more likely to express their negative emotions outwardly than do allocate ones. Notwithstanding cultural differences in experiencing and expressing negative emotions, the emotion antecedent appraisal processes have not been deeply studied across

cultures (Graham, 1991). Given that the literature on psychology shows that particular attribution dimensions give rise to specific sets of emotions and as the perceived weight of causal dimensions as well as emotional reactions may depend on cultural values' orientations, we can expect that allocentrism/idiocentrism tendency may alter the impact of secondary appraisal on emotions.

The life-chances of individuals are often shaped by the organizations and industries in which they work (*e.g.*, Haveman & Cohen, 1994). Not surprisingly, music sociologists examine how musicians negotiate opportunities found in various settings, including those of patronage (Abbott & Hrycak, 1990), string quartets (Murningham & Conlon, 1991), movie studios (Faulkner, 1983), publishing (Ryan & Peterson, 1982), and recording (Dowd & Blyler, 2002). They find, among other things, that most opportunities accrue to a few. A small percentage of musicians enjoy stable "occupational careers," whereby they move from one position to another. While music sociologists offer multiple explanations for this pattern, I highlight two who theorize about how notions of gender limit opportunities for female musicians and how such limits may change.

DeNora (2002) tackles conventional wisdom which suggests that certain instruments and genres correspond to the "feminine" and others to the "masculine." Drawing on the work of Antoine Hennion, DeNora argues that music is a bodied activity that "affords" a variety of conceptualizations - whereby the musical and non-musical become intertwined. However, this intertwining is not obvious a priori but instead, it requires a historical perspective.

DeNora illustrates her argument via the "gendering" of the piano that occurred in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century. Prior to the late 1790s, women did not play instruments that violated the decorum of the day (e.g., cello); they did, however, play the piano. Given that playing the piano was a genteel activity, women performed in public as often as men and typically performed comparable works. This would change with the arrival of Beethoven. His individual performance marked a dramatic move towards the athletic. Furthermore, his compositions required aggressive play rather than refined repose. In the wake of Beethoven's arrival, gender segregation began with regards to public performances on the piano. When this segregation was combined with emergent notions regarding the "masculinity" of both Beethoven's music and genius, women no longer enjoyed the same relationship with the piano that they did before the late 1790s (e.g., works performed in public).

Clawson's (1999) DeNora's work complements, as she examines the emerging trend of female bass players in rock bands. Just as Beethoven was cast as masculine, so too were rock bands. The number of women in rock bands has been historically low, and the number of female instrumentalists is lower still. Clawson points to watershed moments when a slight but notable shift occurs. The rise of punk in the U.K. during the 1970s provided women with opportunities; female vocalists and bands that flouted gender roles and embraced musical simplicity burst on the scene. The subsequent emergence of punk, new wave, and "alternative" music in the U.S. likewise opened the door for women. Perhaps most notable were women bassists in a number of bands.

What does this boundary-crossing mean then for cultural sociology itself? We suggest four emerging themes in these articles which might deserve more widespread attention from cultural sociologists. Two are matters of empirical application, and two are matters of theoretical clarification.

First, Levitt issues a challenge that forces cultural sociologists to stretch their capacities: how, when groups work and expand culture to ensure their survival across space, (do) they set the stage for the emergence of new types of norms and institutions which, in turn, feedback upon ongoing cultural settlements?" Conversely, Derne might ask cultural sociologists to pay more attention to issues generated by the increasingly global circulation of cultural products. Unlike cultural analysts in anthropology, political science, sub-altern studies, and cultural studies, cultural sociologists, especially in the United States, have conventionally defined their research problems within the confines of nation-states — a convention which operates, of course, as much in cross-national comparison as in single studies. While some sociologists of social movements are examining culture in transnational social fields, cultural sociologists have, in general, been slow to reflect on what difference it might make to our research to define our research problems in terms of transnational social fields, and what is important arenas of inquiry we are missing in not doing so.

Reflection upon these studies also suggests rethinking the assumption that cultural sociology is not limited to the study of specialized cultural systems such as art, media, or science but rather that it is an analytic perspective on any social arena. This understanding contrasts with earlier, more marginalized, and more delimited programs in the sociology of culture, and, for some time, enabling the luxuriant growth in the subfield. The papers here certainly do not suggest that cultural sociologists should once again restrict their focus to specialized and differentiated cultural systems: however, they do suggest that the tolerant partnership of institutional convenience between, for example, sociologists of art or literature and students of political culture or symbolic boundaries might be placed on a firmer theoretical footing — or, at least, that the relationship might be reconsidered.

All these articles involve claims about the implications of specialized arenas of cultural production for " culture " understood more broadly - early modern Japanese aesthetic practices become a condition of political modernization, the influence of Western film and cable TV is (originally) blocked by norms more embedded in family and economic structures, religious doctrines and practices both sustain transnational migrant identities and are themselves altered by migration, and histories are produced which articulate contemporary concerns (just as earlier sociologists of knowledge would have it). Bourdieu, of course, theorized an important link between specialized cultural products and broader social processes in Distinction (1984) -a link which partially accounts for his enormous influence. But apart from the line of inquiry generated by his work, and Griswold's (2004) transfer of analytic perspectives developed from her work in the sociology of literature to other, less specialized cultural products, there is relatively little regular exchange between sociologists who study art, literature, science, and so on and sociologists interested in less institutionally differentiated culture. However, what these papers suggest is that perhaps we could return to some older questions - Does art change society? When does it do so? When and how does science influence social change (e.g. Goldstone, 2002)? - armed with new analytic insights.

A call for sociologists

Just as the interdisciplinary social science conversation has been slow to engage sociological approaches to climate inaction, the discipline of sociology has unfortunately been surprisingly silent on the implications of climate change for sociological theory and practice. As of this writing in 2017, climate change has only once been the subject of a plenary session at the American Sociological Association meetings (in 2014), was not mentioned in a Presidential address until 2016, and only a few sociologists outside of the subfield of environmental sociology have applied their expertise to the issue. We sit on the brink of the most profound social dislocation since the founding of our discipline, yet all but a few are doing "sociology as usual." There is work to be done here as well.

There are historical reasons for sociology's short-sightedness. The discipline emerged at the height of the modernist myth that humans had overcome natural "limits." It was presumed that the natural world was no longer a relevant influence on social outcomes (Brulle, 2015). The central concern of this new discipline was to understand the novel forms of social order that were emerging with modern capitalism - especially those in the rapidly growing urban areas. Founding father Emile Durkheim specifically called for a focus on "social facts." But as the social dimensions of climate change become evident - thanks in large part to the modest number of environmental sociologists - the lack of attention paid to this urgent situation by the mainstream sociologists is appalling. Just as those in the scientific community struggle to see social structure, it is time now for sociologists to develop an ecological imagination. Things have recently begun to change. The American Sociological Association's Task Force on Climate Change released its important report Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives (Dunlap & Brulle, 2015) at the 2015 annual meeting and a solid collection of sociological work on climate change is emerging.

Given these factors - and assuming academic discourse can indeed influence public understanding or social policy - it would seem that our collective interdisciplinary task is twofold. First, the natural scientific community needs to move beyond scientific imperialism and truly engage sociologists and other scholars in the social sciences outside economics - in short, to develop a sociological imagination. Our paradigms and methodologies are different, but they are urgently needed. Now is the time for natural scientists to read our task force report, consult with sociologists on policy directives and involve more sociologists and other social scientists on the IPCC, journal editorial boards and interdisciplinary academic institutes. Sociologists in turn, need to broadly engage the material and symbolic importance of environmental problems, climate change and the Anthropocene in our research agenda, learn more about the natural science dimensions of what we are up against, be more vocal in getting our research findings to the media and even perhaps invite a few more natural scientists to our meetings.

Conclusion

All provocative and important arguments in their own right, the articles here also help promote reflection on cultural sociology as an intellectual field and the institutional boundaries which shape its diffusion. They show that cultural sociology offers an array of conventions and analytic tools that can be adapted to further the examination of research problems initially formulated in other terms. Variously mobilized, these conventions and analytic tools are used here to develop arguments that suggest limits and qualifications to otherwise persuasive overgeneralizations about social change, arguments that are grounded in the concrete empirical examination of meso-level links between individual subjectivity and macro-level structures. In turn, the application of cultural sociology's conventions and analytic tools across sub-disciplinary boundaries raises or re-emphasizes for cultural sociologists some important empirical and theoretical issues in our understanding of the culture which have been recently receded.

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