

CHAPTER 16

MODELS OF CULTURE

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16.1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of culture is one of anthropology's most significant contributions to contemporary thought. What might be now called a "classical" conception of culture developed in the mid-twentieth century. It treated cultures as homogeneous and systematic entities, something shared by individuals within a given social group. Descriptions of culture were thought to be abstracted from individual actions, and appeal to culture was taken as explanatory, both of patterns of action within social groups and of differences among groups. The culture concept influenced philosophers of language who relied on the idea that linguistic communities have relatively clear boundaries. Philosophical work on language and meaning, in turn, influenced both the anthropologists who developed the classical conception and their critics. Contemporary anthropological models of culture continue to be influenced by, and have deep relevance for, philosophical understanding of language, thought, and human nature.

While the anthropological concept of culture is little more than one hundred years old, there have been many ways of conceptualizing it. In a famous survey, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn ([1952] 1963) identified 164 definitions of culture. At the risk of losing some of the texture of anthropological thought, this chapter will sort these definitions into a much smaller number of models. The earliest models treated cultures as collections of traits: a grab bag of ideas, material objects, habits, and texts. By the middle of the twentieth century, one of the dominant models came to emphasize norms, values, and beliefs as the central elements of culture, and this semiotic model is probably the notion most familiar to nonanthropologists. It emphasized the coherence of cultures, treated cultures as distinct from each other, and abstracted from the peculiarities of

individual belief and behavior. The semiotic model of culture was sharply criticized in the 1970s and 1980s. These arguments problematized the ideas that there might be a unified set of norms that define culture and that culture might be something shared by all individuals within a group. The very idea of culture became troublesome, creating something of a crisis within the discipline. Without culture, it is not clear whether cultural anthropology has an object of study. Anthropologists responded to these concerns by developing a variety of new models. We will examine three that have become popular in the last two decades: a neo-Boasian model that draws from the early twentieth-century trait model, the epidemiological model that allies anthropological theorizing with the results of cognitive psychology, and practice theory, which looks to integrated patterns of human response to account for norms and institutions.

These different models of culture, both historical and contemporary, speak to three philosophical issues. First, the classical conception of culture presupposed that cultures were bounded. While culture blending and change could not be denied, it made sense to think of a culture being circumscribable. In a prototypical example, any given trait was either typical of the culture or outside of its boundaries. This idea was an important part of the background to mid-twentieth-century philosophy of language. Philosophers like Quine, Wittgenstein, Austin, Gadamer, or Sellars felt no qualms about presupposing that there were identifiable and uniform linguistic communities. Such notions as a language game or speech community grounded accounts of rule-following, pragmatic force, and semantic content. In their empirical work, however, anthropologists have struggled with the problem of identifying cultural boundaries. While philosophers tended to treat this as a marginal, empirical problem, the history of the culture concept shows that it cuts more deeply. The idea that there are cultural boundaries makes sense only if cultures are conceived as unified and coherent. As the phenomena identified as cultural are seen as a fluctuating collection of traits, representations, or practices, it becomes impossible to identify the traits that distinguish one culture from another. This puts pressure on philosophical views that presuppose the existence of language communities wherein distinct patterns of speech and behavior can be identified. The fundamental question raised by the demise of the classical culture concept, then, is whether any of its plausible successors can do the same philosophical work.

A second issue, familiar in the philosophy of social science, is one form of the problem of methodological individualism: Is a culture a kind of entity distinct from the persons (and their properties) who inhabit it? The classical cultural concept manifested a strong anti-reductionist commitment on the part of anthropologists, and the cogency of this commitment is an important philosophical issue. The mid-century philosophical discussion of this question concerned the possibility of defining social-level concepts in terms of personal-level properties. The latter sections of this chapter will show how that discussion must change in the light of the new models of culture. None of the contemporary models of culture are committed to cultures as entities. At the same time, they cannot be described as individualistic in the traditional sense because none dissolves cultural phenomena into the beliefs, desires, or

other person-level properties. The epidemiological model looks to subpersonal, cognitive mechanisms, while practice theory seeks explanation in the properties of interpersonal interactions. There are indeed metaphysical questions here, but they are not the traditional focus of the methodological individualism debate.

Another familiar debate that must change in the light of these new models of culture is the issue about how social structures are related to agency. The question here is one of explanatory priority: Does appeal to culture explain individual behavior, or do individual choices explain cultural forms? Or is there some noncircular way of combining the two? This problem has also been discussed under the heading of methodological individualism, and is closely related to the problem discussed in the foregoing paragraph. Anthropological theories that relied on the classical conception of culture explained actions as instances of more general patterns: functions, symbolic exchanges, cultural rules, and so on. The agents were portrayed as little more than puppets or cultural dupes, moving through their lives buffeted by cultural forces. Rejecting these forms of explanation was an important factor in the critique of the classical culture concept. The alternatives that arose in anthropology and sociology, however, did not universally swing to the alternate pole by trying to explain all social phenomena in terms of individual choice. Rather, the practice theoretic models tend to place agents within a field of action where cultural norms and meanings are fair game for strategic manipulation. Matters are somewhat more complex for the epidemiological view, as we will see. The new models of culture have opened different possibilities for the explanation of action, and they present interesting challenges to our familiar ways of understanding agency.

16.2. ORIGINS OF THE CULTURE CONCEPT

The anthropological concept of culture has a number of sources in nineteenth-century thought. The canonical definition is a quotation from Edward Bennett Tylor's 1871 *Primitive Culture*:

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1871, 1)

To understand this oft-quoted passage, it must be put into its theoretical context. Notice first that the definition is not of culture, but of "culture or civilization." In Anglophone anthropology, "culture" and "civilization" were often used interchangeably, a usage that persisted into the early twentieth century (e.g., Kroeber 1917; Sapir 1924). Tylor's project was typical of nineteenth-century anthropology. His scientific goal was to make sense of human diversity. The framework was historical and evolutionary (but not specifically Darwinian). He postulated stages through which human groups would pass. Difference among human communities was explained by the persistence of some at lower stages of culture or civilization. To compare different human groups

and identify their place in the scheme, Tylor looked to shared traits and survivals. Animism, for instance, is a trait that could be identified around the globe, and Tylor assigned it to primitive forms of religion. Groups like the Australian Aborigines were placed lower on the scale partly because their religion exhibited this trait.

In Tylor's usage, culture was different from Émile Durkheim's social facts and collective consciousness. For Tylor, culture was a collection of traits that could be compared globally and historically. Appeal to diffusion and historical stages of development explained similarities and differences in the distribution of these traits. In other words, culture was the phenomenon to be explained; it was not a theoretical posit. Durkheim, by contrast, postulated the existence of patterns of thought that were distinct from the beliefs of any individual. These social facts had explanatory force in ways that Tylor's civilization did not. Society was something that might be represented in religious ritual, and social structures could explain patterns of intentional action (like suicide rates). He explicitly argued that they had an ontological status not reducible to facts about individual agents (Durkheim [1912] 1915, [1895] 1938). Because social facts are treated as things, questions about reductionism, and the relationship between social structures and intentional actions arise for Durkheim in ways that they do not for Tylor.

Franz Boas drew on Tylor's culture concept, but his challenges to Tylor's theoretical project forced important changes in the way that Boas thought about culture. Boas rejected Tylor's idea that traits could be meaningfully compared across wide geographical areas and put into historical stages (Boas 1887, [1896] 1940), which was a central methodological presupposition of Tylor's anthropology. Boas argued that a trait (e.g., a clothing decoration, a kind of snare, or a religious belief) is significant only in the context of a whole culture. Comparisons were meaningful only when there were plausible connections, either historical or contemporary, among the cultures compared. This led Boas to begin thinking about culture as holistic. He continued to conceptualize culture as a collection of traits, but the traits were integrated, coherent, and shared by a specific group of people. Traits included both material objects and ideas. Insofar as an individual's behavior is determined by his ideas, Boas thus began to hold explicitly that culture determines behavior (Boas 1901).

With Boas's modifications of Tylor's conception, as well as his adaptation of ideas from Herder, Graebner, and Virchow, the culture concept took on some (but not all) central features of its twentieth-century form. As a result, there were tensions around Boas's concept that prefigure twentieth-century philosophical debates. Insofar as cultures were treated as local, holistic collections of traits, Boas was committed to the idea of cultural boundaries. However, because Boas and his students were interested in historical questions about diffusion of traits, they recognized that there would be variability within cultures, and that boundaries might be vague or porous. While cultural identity was not an important concern, the identity of traits was. Traits are portrayed as passing among groups, hence they must be reidentifiable across space and time. But his holism entailed that the significance of a trait depends on its place in the whole culture. So, in virtue of what can it be the same trait in different cultures?

16.3. MODELS OF CULTURE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early twentieth century, anthropologists became increasingly committed to the idea that cultures had an ontological status of their own. Boas's students, Alfred Kroeber and Robert Lowie, each defended the idea that cultural and historical phenomena could not be reduced to biology or individual psychology (Kroeber 1917; Lowie [1917] 1929). Kroeber described cultural phenomena as "superorganic," a term he borrowed from Herbert Spencer. It is telling, however, that Kroeber continued to use "culture," "civilization," and "history" interchangeably. He was concerned to argue that there was an important difference between invention and evolution, and that this difference had ontological and epistemological consequences. Culture, civilization, and history are ontologically distinct from the nonhuman realm, and hence the social sciences are distinct from the natural sciences. However, neither Kroeber nor Lowie was inclined to treat individual cultures as distinct theoretical entities.

The ontological status of cultures was viewed somewhat differently by British anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. Their functionalism was influenced by Durkheim, especially *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* ([1912] 1915). Durkheim argued that religious ideas represent the society, and that religious rituals fill "the need of upholding and reaffirming . . . the collective sentiments and collective ideas which make [the society's] unity and its personality" (Durkheim [1912] 1915, 427). While Durkheim's preferred term was "society," its explanatory role in his work was the same as the anthropologists' concept of culture. The society represented by religious experience was not some general form shared by all humans; it was the person's community. Functional explanations promulgated in anthropology shared the same explanatory form. The institutions within a culture were explained in terms of their capacity to fulfill social and individual needs. In addition, the British anthropologists attended to normative aspects of culture: the rules and laws that made categories of action and speech obligatory or prohibited. Since norms cannot be identified with regularities of behavior (at least, not without the philosophical gymnastics provided by a later generation of philosophers), it was natural to treat them as something distinct from the behavior.

By the 1920s, "culture" had become a theoretical entity, and anthropologists regarded the human world as populated by a large number of distinct cultures. Culture was no longer a phenomenon to be explained: It was a theoretical posit that explained a broad range of human phenomena. There remained throughout the first part of the century important differences between the Boasians and the functionalists. The differences were profound enough to justify a distinction between two early twentieth-century models of culture: the Boasian model and the functionalist model.

Boas's students, who dominated American anthropology for the first part of the twentieth century, continued to think of cultures as distinguishable bodies of traits. Again, their ontological commitment was to the irreducibility of historical processes, not to individual cultures as discrete entities. As a result, they could be relatively sanguine about how cultural boundaries were drawn. Moreover, American anthropologists were often interested in questions about the historical relationships among cultures (especially first nation peoples in the Americas). As a result, they expected traits such as mythic characters, decorative motifs, or technologies to both vary within cultures and move among them. Nonetheless, culture had explanatory power for the Boasians. It was an important part of the environment in which individuals grew up. Individuals formed their beliefs, values, and personality under the influence of the culture. Culture thus explained patterns of difference among groups of individuals. Among the Boasians, the precise role of individuals in the understanding of cultural phenomena was a point of debate. Paul Radin expressed this critique most sharply, arguing that while his colleagues recognized that there was variation within cultures, their ethnographic descriptions abstracted away from the variation. Individual agents were thus portrayed as passive receivers of culture, not agents within it. This made it impossible to properly understand the historical dimensions of cultural phenomena (Radin [1933] 1987).

The functionalist model of culture was primarily championed by British anthropologists. It treated a culture as having a framework of rules, laws, and institutions. Because of the stronger explanatory demands put on the concept of culture by the functionalists, they had deeper worries about cultural boundaries. When actions are explained as following rules, the cases of deviance become troublesome. In pure cultures, deviance should be relatively uncommon, and presumably a matter for concern or sanction. This means that culture change, cultural blending or overlap, and variation within cultures are difficult to explain. Ethnographic monographs tended to downplay variation, focusing on the pure culture. In a critique of Malinowski, Lowie argued that:

First and foremost, a science of Culture is not limited to the study of so many integrated wholes, the single cultures. This is doubtless important, but it constitutes neither the whole nor even the preponderant part of the ethnologist's task. A science of culture must, in principle, register every item of social tradition, correlating it significantly with any other aspect of reality, *whether that lies within the same culture or outside*. In defiance of the dogma that any one culture forms a closed system, we must insist that such a culture is invariably an artificial unit segregated for purposes of expediency. Social tradition varies demonstrably from village to village, even from family to family. (Lowie 1937, 235)

If cultural boundaries are artificial and to some extent arbitrary, then the rules and norms to which the functionalists appealed in their explanations had no basis. They were identified by abstracting the rules from patterns of behavior, but those patterns were jury-rigged by the anthropologist. The whole process appears circular.

16.4. CULTURE AND MEANING

By the time the Second World War ended, the concept of culture was widely used, both within anthropology and outside of it. One of the first philosophers to turn his attention to anthropology, David Bidney, argued at this time that conceptions of culture fell into two groups, “realistic” and “idealistic” (Bidney 1944, 1942). Realists identified culture with habits, customary behaviors, and material objects. The idealist conceptions defined culture in terms of norms, ideals, and beliefs. Bidney put Tylor and Boas into the realist category, along with Boas’s students, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. In so doing, he highlighted an aspect of trait theories of culture: they included behaviors and material objects among the traits. Of course, they also included beliefs, values, and other elements that Bidney would label as idealist. Bidney’s distinction points out an ambiguity in the early twentieth-century thinking about culture, and that ambiguity became an important bifurcation in the mid-century conceptualizations of culture.

According to Bidney, when culture is conceived in realist terms, it “is inseparable from the life of human beings in society; it is a mode of social living and has no existence independent of the actual group or groups to which it is attributed” (Bidney 1942, 449).¹ This view was perhaps best represented by theorists who continued to work in a strongly comparative and evolutionary framework, such as George Murdock (1949) and Leslie White (1949). In the fifties and sixties, this conception of culture was carried forward by those who sought the explanation of cultural phenomena in ecological or economic terms. Following Marvin Harris, this kind of work in anthropology might be called “cultural materialism” (Harris 1968). An important consequence of this approach is that it gives little or no explanatory role to culture *per se*. Like Tylor (and the materialist strands in Boas’s thought), “culture” picks out a group of phenomena to be explained.

A wide variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives grew in mid-century anthropology that assumed an idealistic perspective, including structural functionalism, structuralism, ethnoscience, and symbolic anthropology. These views shared the assumption that culture is something *communicated*. Culture is like a code passed from one generation to another, and the aim of ethnography was to crack the code. These anthropologists harkened back to Malinowski’s suggestion that ethnography capture “the natives’ point of view” (Malinowski 1922, 25), but they understood that point of view to be expressed in a system of symbols or meanings. As a result, this mid-century model of culture might best be called the semiotic model. In the fifties and sixties, proponents of a semiotic model of culture were divided over the issue of methodological individualism: whether the ideas that constituted culture were individual and “in the head” of individuals, or whether they were independent of individuals and shared by them. The debate had important consequences for the structure of anthropological explanations. If culture is to figure as an explanans of human behavior, it has to be treated as independent of individuals and it must be semantic. This is the sort of appeal to culture that structural functionalists or symbolic anthropologists wanted to make. Their analyses tended to

generalize strongly within a culture, treating symbolic meanings as uniform across individuals and explanatory of specific events and actions.

The individualist versions of idealism reduced culture to patterns of individual beliefs. The patterns themselves have little explanatory force, so like the materialists, individualistic versions of cultural idealism treat culture as something to be explained, as *explanandum*, not *explanans*. The ethnoscientists (an approach also known as the “new ethnography” and “componential analysis”) worked with native classification schemes. By finding minimal criteria that distinguished concepts from each other, they sought the semantic rules that underlay conceptual fields. For example, among those who share my dialect, the difference between something baked and something broiled is that the latter is cooked by heat from the top only; both are cooked by hot air alone, as opposed to methods of cooking by immersion in water or oil. Using these kinds of criteria, an ethnoscientist could outline the conceptual field of my cooking terminology. They treated these conceptual rules as represented in the minds of individuals. Strongly analogous to syntactic rules, individuals within a culture had similar representations of the rules underlying their conceptual scheme. The ethnoscientists ran into several conceptual problems that pushed them toward an individualist view. Arguments reminiscent of Quine’s (1960) showed that the analyses were underdetermined by the data (Burling 1964). Moreover, fieldwork showed that there was substantial individual variation in use. Some went so far as to embrace this variability and argue against the idea that culture was something shared (Goodenough 1965; Wallace 1961).

Clifford Geertz’s “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (1973) was an important response to the problems surrounding a semiotic conception of culture. He drew on Wittgenstein and Ryle to forge a connection between meaning and behavior. Meaning is a matter of patterns of behavior in their full context. To understand a culture, the ethnographer describes and relates these patterns. “Thick description” articulates conceptual content by relating individual events to the larger patterns of which they are a part. Individual beliefs and representations get their content from the larger patterns. The meanings that constitute a culture, then, are not a kind of entity separate from the actions of individuals; yet because of the relational and contextual character, they cannot be identified with the dispositions or beliefs of individuals either. Geertz drew the conclusion that:

Culture, this acted document, is thus public, like a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid. Though ideational, it does not exist in someone’s head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity. The interminable, because untermi- nable, debate within anthropology as to whether culture is “subjective” or “objective,” together with the mutual exchange of intellectual insults (“idealist!”— “materialist!”; “mentalist!”—“behaviorist!”; “impressionist!”—“positivist!”) which accompanies it, is wholly misconceived. Once human behavior is seen as (most of the time; there *are* true twitches) symbolic action—action which like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, signifies—the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense. (Geertz 1973, 10)

With Geertz's rhetorically elegant transcendence of tired dualisms, the semiotic concept of culture took a middle line on the issue of methodological individualism. Culture is not an abstract object of any kind. Metaphysically, it is nothing more than the interactions of individuals. At the same time, it does not reduce culture to the beliefs and attitudes of individuals. These are understood as requiring the cultural patterns for their significance. Thick descriptions thus have value for understanding particular events and actions. Appeal to culture retains its explanatory power without postulating new kinds of metaphysical entities.

16.5. STRUCTURE, AGENCY, AND EMOTION IN CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS

The semiotic conception of culture came under sustained attack in the 1980s, exemplified most dramatically by the essays in *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Its point of departure was a critique of the rhetoric of ethnographic writing, but it succeeded in raising deep issues about the culture concept. These critics pointed out that ethnography was monological—that is, it presented a single, unified narrative. This has two consequences for the semiotic conception of culture. First, ethnographic narratives speak of cultural phenomena as if there were a systematic, univocal set of norms, beliefs, and values: a single worldview. As Radin pointed out decades earlier, it must be created by ignoring variation within the community (or communities). The idea that there is something that might be *the* culture of a group is thus an ethnographic construct, not something discovered by anthropology. Second, because cultural phenomena were described as a monolithic system of rules and norms, appeals to culture treat individual action as empty rule-following. While neither issue was new, the arguments gained relevance from debates in the 1960s and 1970s about the way that anthropology had (or had not) been implicated in colonialism.

Geertz's assimilation of a Wittgensteinian analysis of rules with the anthropological concern for symbolic meaning left the semiotic conception with a rather pointed problem about cultural boundaries. For Geertz, the thick description synthesized a broad pattern of speech and behavior. The content of the thickly described concept thus depends on how the boundaries of the pattern are set—much in the same way as Wittgenstein's analysis of rules depends on what instances are taken to be within the proper bounds of correct or incorrect application. The semiotic conception of culture thus depends on the presupposition that there are relatively clear boundaries to the culture. The boundaries of culture presupposed by the semiotic conception of culture were problematic in many of the same ways that they were for the functionalists. As we saw above, anthropologists like Lowie already recognized that boundaries set by ethnographers were permeable and relatively arbitrary. In the 1980s, however,

this critique was deepened by political concerns about anthropology's relationship to colonialism. Twentieth-century ethnographic fieldwork often followed in the wake of colonial expansion. Access to remote areas and peoples was facilitated by colonial administrations. These relationships raised the suspicion that anthropology had helped support colonial domination of indigenous peoples (Asad 1973; Hymes 1969). By presenting a single and unified view of the culture, monological ethnographies had to suppress contrarian, marginalized, or peripheral voices in favor of those who are dominant. They also obscured ways in which ideas and people from historically different communities interpenetrate, mix, and change. This means that the ethnographic representation is a *misrepresentation*. Within a community, there may be alternative norms, rules, and values that conflict with the dominant ones, and the interpretation of past practice may be locally disputed. Such misrepresentations are not politically neutral. The elevation of some perspectives as *the* culture and the presentation of the group as homogeneous arguably makes them better subjects of indirect rule.

The second line of critique of the semiotic conception of culture revolved around the structure-and-agency problem. We have every reason to suppose that there is wide individual variation in action, in subjective experience, in social position, and so on. Monological ethnographies papered over these differences by trying to describe general patterns that would apply to the whole group. This made it difficult to represent the relationship between the individual and the larger group. Emphasis on the normative dimensions of culture compounded the difficulty. As Renato Rosaldo argued in *Culture and Truth* (Rosaldo 1989), classical ethnographic analysis identified patterns and treated them as obligatory. As an example, Rosaldo quotes Radcliffe-Brown's ethnography of the Andaman Islanders:

When two friends or relatives meet after having been separated, the social relation between them that has been interrupted is about to be renewed. This social relation implies or depends upon the existence of a specific bond of solidarity between them. The weeping rite (together with the subsequent exchange of presents) is the affirmation of this bond. The rite, which, it must be remembered, is obligatory, compels the two participants to act as though they felt certain emotions, and thereby does, to some extent, produce these emotions in them. (Radcliffe-Brown [1922] 1933, quoted in Rosaldo 1989, 52)

Rosaldo argued that treating such interactions as obligatory distorts social experiences and misrepresents social reality. The joy and relief of seeing one's child return from a dangerous journey is reduced to the by-product of the obligatory action of weeping. Insofar as ethnography was to capture the native's point of view, treating that experience as a kind of hollow playacting signals a failure of the project.

Not only is social experience misrepresented, treating culture as a set of shared ideas, obligatory norms, or customary behaviors prevents the ethnographer from raising questions about how individuals resist, exploit, adapt to, or reproduce the norms and practices. Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of how Kabyle men and women differently represent kin relationships provides an excellent example. According to standard ethnographic descriptions, the Kabyle practiced parallel cousin marriage, and the relationship was reckoned through the male line. This means that the preferred husband for a

woman is her father's brother's son; or if the relation needed to be extended, grandsons of the woman's paternal grandfather. Bourdieu argued that in many actual cases, kin relations are also reckoned through the mother's side. Counting relationships through the male line was the official strategy, and the one used where the honor and property of the family needed to be protected or advanced. Relationships counted through the female line, while less prestigious, were used to establish appropriate family relationships in the arrangement of marriages and maintenance of practical relationships (Bourdieu 1977, 53). Given these two systems of reckoning genealogical relationships, the practice of parallel cousin marriage can bring about ambiguities. Bourdieu gives the example of a woman whose husband was both her mother's brother's son (maternal first cousin) *and* related through her paternal great-grandfather (paternal second cousin, grandson of her grandfather's brother), because of a parallel cousin marriage in the previous generation (Bourdieu 1977, 42). Bourdieu argues that both the ethnographers and their (male) informants insist on privileging the official strategy. But doing so hides the way in which individuals can strategically use such relationships. After all, the maternal first cousin relationship is much closer than the paternal second cousin relationship, and this fact may be to someone's advantage.

By endorsing the official rules or norms, ethnographers not only misrepresent the actual patterns and (perhaps unintentionally) reinforce the existing power relationships within the group. They make it impossible to see how individuals act within social structures, and how individuals instrumentally and strategically use the official rules. Rather than being programmed by culture to follow certain routines, people treat elements of their culture—explicit rules, implicit norms, all kinds of symbols and meanings—as elements of their environment. Rules and symbols are manipulated in much the same way as hammers and swords. Rules are resisted, undermined, or contravened as often as they are followed, and when they are followed, it is because doing so presents the greatest advantage in the immediate or strategic context. By emphasizing the way in which actors work within structure to achieve ends that are not socially determined, theorists like Rosaldo and Bourdieu were not falling back into a form of methodological individualism. They held that the social structures were maintained by practices that were not reproduced only by individual choice, and that the cultures informed agent's beliefs and attitudes in deep and important ways. They were arguing for a dynamic, nonreductive relationship between structure and agency, and in so doing, they moved well beyond the semiotic concept of culture that dominated mid-century anthropology.

16.6. CONTEMPORARY MODELS OF CULTURE

While the criticisms of the classical culture concept were deep and telling, anthropologists could not entirely turn away from the idea. In an often-quoted remark, James Clifford captured the discomfort of the eighties, saying that culture “is a deeply

compromised idea that I cannot yet do without” (Clifford 1988, 10). After all, the difference among peoples expressed by the theoretical notion of culture was, in an important sense, a part of the phenomena ethnographers encountered. Humans recognize and name group-level differences, and such differences can be very important aspects of the way people interact. Understanding human behavior thus requires something like the culture concept. In response, many anthropologists set about retheorizing culture, and since the 1980s, a variety of suggestions have been put forward. While no single conception has come to dominate the field, there are a number of common themes. We can map the contemporary literature with three models of culture: the neo-Boasian model, the epidemiological model, and practice theory.²

16.6.1. The Neo-Boasian Model

The foregoing sections have shown how the problematic features of the culture concept are associated with the semiotic (Bidney’s idealist) model of culture which arose mid-century. Proponents of this model tended to treat culture as strongly holistic, ontologically independent of individuals, and determinative of their behavior. A natural response to the criticism, then, would be to return to a conception of culture that predates the semiotic model. Such was the strategy of five anthropologists who published a collection of essays in a 2004 issue of *American Anthropologist*. Calling the project neo-Boasian, they sought to draw out ideas that would help cultural anthropology move beyond the critique.

Boas’s conception of culture was different from the later semiotic model insofar as he did not treat cultures as theoretical posits. Because cultures were groups of traits, the issue of cultural boundaries does not arise in the way that it does for the semiotic model of culture. As we have seen, for Boas and his students, cultural boundaries were regarded as permeable and constructed by one group or another for their own purposes. Rethinking the Boasian culture concept in contemporary terms, Ira Bashkow argued that we should conceive of cultural boundaries as created to highlight differences and contrasts among groups of people (Bashkow 2004). People categorize themselves on the basis of a wide variety of criteria. While ethnographic description should recognize local distinctions, they are not bound to such categories: “The old Boasian triad of race, language, and culture ramifies today into a larger set of demarcational viewpoints that include varied constructions of society, polity, economy, geography, interactional fields, collective identities, ethnicity, cultural practice, linguistic codes, communicability and comprehension, and regional networks” (Bashkow 2004, 451). Cultural boundaries are thus interest (or observer) relative. Individuals draw on available traits to identify with, or separate from, each other. Such boundaries may be policed or enforced, but in some contexts individuals may move freely across boundaries and inhabit multiple cultures. The ethnographer should recognize local identities and understand ways that they are maintained, but ethnographic analysis is not bound to find that one demarcational viewpoint is “the” culture. The ethnographer is no more tied to any boundary than the participants;

there may be analytically useful ways of drawing boundaries that are not recognized by the subjects themselves.

The neo-Boasian view inherits a tension from its intellectual forbearers. The Boasians held that traits are both independent of particular cultural collections (hence can be reidentified across time and space) *and* depend on cultural context for their meaning. Responding to the argument that ethnographers had artificially made their subjects consistent and integrated, Bashkow (2004) and Daniel Rosenblatt (2004) argue that Ruth Benedict (one of Boas's leading students) regarded cultural integration as a historically contingent phenomenon. Under the right circumstances, cultures could become coherent and tightly integrated. Integration was not necessary, and when it did happen it was often fragile and unstable. This deflation of "integration" into a fact about some cultures at some times meets the criticism made of the semiotic model of culture, but it also weakens the neo-Boasian's position. "Culture" seems to reduce to "identity." Bashkow recognized this objection and argued against such a reduction. While a group may draw a cultural boundary around itself on the basis of some similarity, culture is more than such identities. Not only do individuals within the community differ, culture forms the background against which difference is meaningful. Bashkow goes so far as to say that "culture is not only the product of but also the precondition for meaningful action, thought, and expression" (Bashkow 2004, 452). This claim appears to conflict with the observer-relativity of cultural boundaries and the contingency of cultural integration. If culture is the precondition of meaningful thought and expression, then it does not seem like the sort of thing that individuals can adopt, shed, or strategically engage.

A second issue, concerning agency, arises for the neo-Boasians in ways that also echo earlier tensions in Boas's thought. True to the earlier Boasian position, the neo-Boasians are pluralistic about the elements that make up a culture. As Bashkow's list of "demarcational viewpoints" indicates, cultures can be identified by a wide range of objects, ideas, values, beliefs, or practices. The question is: What is the relationship between the agents who draw the cultural boundaries and the cultural forms with which they interact? By emphasizing that the agents need not recognize the cultural boundaries drawn by the theorist, the neo-Boasians risk treating the agents as relatively passive. Rosenblatt takes a different path, aligning the neo-Boasian approach with the "practice theory" of Sherry Ortner and Pierre Bourdieu (to be discussed below). The goal is to portray "cultural wholes from the point of view of the dilemmas and possibilities they presented to individual actors" (Rosenblatt 2004, 461). The actors are seen as actively shaping the culture through their action, and in turn, being shaped by it. While these remarks are more satisfactory from the point of view of the structure and agency problem, they highlight the question of cultural integration all over again. Indeed, they vividly raise the question of what such "cultural wholes" are supposed to *be*. As a version of a trait theory, the cultural wholes should be no more than a collection of traits. But what makes something a trait, an element of the culture? Once again, the neo-Boasians seem caught between the recognition of the contingency of cultural boundaries and the importance of an integrated cultural whole.

While the neo-Boasian essays of 2004 were not historically the first responses to the eighties critique of the culture concept, they do, I suggest, have a kind of logical priority. If we are to respond adequately to the critique of the eighties, then we must not think of cultures as theoretical posits with their own explanatory force. Cultural difference must be constituted by something else, and conceiving of culture as an assemblage is the natural alternative. The question is: assemblage of what? This is where the neo-Boasian view is not sufficiently articulated, and it is beholden to unresolved tensions in Boas's own thought. The two other models of culture to be discussed here, the epidemiological model and practice theory, can be viewed as attempts to further specify the traits that compose culture.

16.6.2. The Epidemiological Model

The epidemiological model of culture was proposed by Dan Sperber in his Malinowski Lecture (1985), and developed in *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (1996). Arguing against those who would reify culture, Sperber proposed that the field for anthropological theorizing should be conceptualized as a distribution of representations:

Just as one can say that a human population is inhabited by a much larger population of viruses, so one can say that it is inhabited by a much larger population of mental representations. Most of these representations are found in only one individual. Some, however, get communicated: that is, first transformed by the communicator into public representations, and then re-transformed by the audience into mental representations. A very small proportion of these communicated representations get communicated repeatedly. Through communication (or, in other cases, through imitations), some representations spread out in a human population, and may end up being instantiated in every member of the population for several generations. Such widespread and enduring representations are paradigmatic cases of cultural representation. (Sperber 1996, 25)

Like the neo-Boasians, Sperber was proposing that we return to a conception of culture that treated cultures as distributions of traits. Sperber makes two apparent advances on the trait theories of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, he replaces the notion of a "trait" with the notion of a "representation." Sperber is staunchly materialist about representations. As the quotation above suggests, these may be either the mental representations of an individual, or they may be public representations. Mental representations are features of our brains that play a role in our information-processing systems (Sperber 1996, 61). Public representations are also spatio-temporal objects, such as texts, feathered sticks, or patterns of sound waves. While public in the sense of being available to many interpreters, they get their content from the individual mental representations formed from them. The second advance is made possible by the first: By conceptualizing cultural difference as patterns of distribution of representations, he can engage the resources of psychology to explain why some representations are distributed widely and endure (and hence are cultural), while others are individual or fleeting.

The choice of the word *epidemiology* to capture this new attitude toward cultural phenomena reflects both advances over older trait theories. Where the discipline of epidemiology is concerned with the conditions that explain the distribution and propagation of disease, anthropology needs to be concerned with issues of distribution and propagation of representations. And both approach their problems with an eclectic collection of middle-range theories, not by creating grand, unifying theories. Finally, an epidemiological approach is materialist in the sense that “everything that has causal powers owes these powers exclusively to its physical properties” (Sperber 1996, 10). There is no ontological commitment to cultures, norms, rules, values, beliefs, or other nonmaterial entities.

The important upshot of Sperber’s epidemiology is that it changes the questions of anthropological theorizing. Anthropological work influenced by the semiotic conception of culture focused on supra-individual entities: systems of belief, social structures, power relations, or patterns of social interaction. An epidemiological approach treats all cultural phenomena as the product of individual representations. The new challenge, then, is to understand why some representations are persistent and widely distributed, for example, why a belief in supernatural beings is so common among human groups. These questions have a natural relationship to research in cognitive psychology, and the epidemiological approach has been adopted by those who seek to use the resources of psychology to explain social phenomena. This kind of work has been quite fruitful in the last two decades. Scott Atran (2002), Pascal Boyer (1994, 2001), Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd (2005), Robert McCauley and Thomas Lawson (2002), Harvey Whitehouse (1995), and others have taken up this challenge and produced very interesting and important research. For example, McCauley and Lawson and Whitehouse have used recent work on memory to explain certain features of ritual performance. Boyer and Atran appeal to cognitive dispositions to represent agency to account for the near-universal belief in supernatural beings. The empirical fecundity of the alliance between cognitive science and anthropology encouraged by an epidemiological model of culture is one of the strongest arguments in its favor.

Perhaps the most important challenge for an epidemiological approach is to account for institutions, implicit norms, and other aspects of culture or society that might be misrepresented or only partially understood by the participants. Julia Tannev points out that there is an ironic similarity between Sperber’s materialism and what Bidney called idealism: culture, in Sperber’s view, is nothing more than a set of ideas. In his argument for materialism, Sperber complained that marriages are not the kind of thing one can look at (Sperber 1996, 20). Tannev responds:

But *of course* we can look at marriages: how else would we be able to gossip about them? When I remark on the fact that my friend’s marriage seems to be falling apart, I am talking about her relationship, not an idea in her mind. (It is true that her belief in the sanctity of marriage might collapse too but this is logically independent of her collapsing marriage; in fact, it is obvious that my friend’s marriage might be falling apart even if she—and others—believes it is sound.) If this kind of observation can be made at home there is no reason why it cannot be made during fieldwork. (Tannev 1998, 673)

Social roles and relationships can have practical consequences that are poorly understood (if understood at all) by those who occupy them. Tanney goes on to say that this is why participant observation is a useful method. By interacting in a practical way, the ethnographer puts herself in a position to make mistakes and disrupt the flow, thereby exposing patterns and implicit norms. Indeed, as Bourdieu argued, asking about beliefs will only garner the official story or dominant point of view. It is difficult, therefore, for an epidemiological model to represent the way in which agents resist, undermine, or exploit features of their social environment, and there seems to be no place for the analysis of institutions, structural constraints on action, or relationships of power and domination.

16.6.3. Practice Theory

An epidemiological model of culture refines the Boasian notion of a trait and supports it with a more robust psychology. It thereby addresses one of the tensions in a Boasian trait theory by discounting the holism and providing a clearer account of trait identity. Practice theory, on the other hand, can be seen as resolving the tension by providing an account of cultural integration that does not reify cultures and provides a more satisfactory account of agency within social structures. The neo-Boasians themselves saw their work aligned with practice theory. Writing about Benedict, Rosenblatt argued that

her ideas have much in common with the ideas and approaches Sherry Ortner has gathered together under the rubric “practice theory” (1984, 1996). Like Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Benedict described cultural wholes from the point of view of the dilemmas and possibilities they presented to individual actors, and, like him, she saw those wholes as shaping the actors—indeed, for her, to some extent, cultural wholes exist through the ways they are sedimented in actors. While it is less obvious, Benedict also shares with “practice theorists” like Bourdieu, Sahlin (1985), Giddens (1979), and Ortner herself a sense that this shaping is mutual: Just as the culture shapes individuals, individuals can sometimes shape (and reshape) the culture. (Rosenblatt 2004, 461)

The essay by Ortner to which Rosenblatt refers is “Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties” (Ortner 1984), and it is often taken to be the beginning of practice theory. Ortner synthesized several strands of thought, and argued that a turn to practice was emblematic of anthropological theory in the 1980s.

Practice theory tries to split the difference between theories that treat social structures as the primary determinant of action and those that prioritize individual choices. Against the picture of action as rule-following, practice theorists viewed agents as using social norms strategically, conforming when expedient and resisting when necessary. Earlier versions of this approach tended to treat agents individualistically by analyzing motivation in terms of material and political ends. In the 1980s, practice theorists wanted to acknowledge that motivation was deeply informed by the system of norms, expectations, and institutions that make up the culture: “Action is constrained most deeply and systematically by the ways in which

culture controls the definitions of the world for actors, limits their conceptual tools, and restricts their emotional repertoires. Culture becomes part of the self” (Ortner 1984, 153). Practice theory thus presented a dynamic answer to the structure and agency dilemma. Social structures and agents are mutually constituted. This perspective opens a new set of questions: “What a practice theory seeks to explain, then, is the genesis, reproduction, and change of form and meaning of a given social/cultural whole” (Ortner 1984, 149).

Ortner’s essay appeared before *Writing Culture* was published, just as the concept of culture was beginning to get the scrutiny discussed in section 16.5, above. Ortner’s presentation had a strong tendency to reify culture in ways that would soon make anthropologists uncomfortable: The quotations in the foregoing paragraph seem to attribute causal powers to social/cultural wholes. However, practice theory need not be beholden to such an ontology. Contemporary practice theorists have tried to split the difference on the methodological individualism issue, just as they did on the structure-and-agency issue (Schatzki 2001, 5; Rouse 2007, 645). They do so by dissolving the social/cultural whole into a set of ongoing practices, where a practice is understood as a shared set of embodied habits, cognitive capacities, abilities, and implicit (or tacit) understandings. Practices are thus embodied in individual agents and constituted by their actions, especially those patterns of behavior that are routinized or patterned. The set of practices that are found in a community will be interrelated, but they need not be coherent, or even consistent. The object of a practice theoretic analysis is to show how relationships of domination and subordination among the practices exhibited by the agents are reproduced, challenged, or changed, and contradictions in the system often play an important role in the analysis.

One way to understand a practice theoretic model of culture is as replacing the Boasian traits with patterns of behavior. This provides a way to understand the integration of traits. Since practices are embodied in the behavior of agents, the patterns of action will have to be integrated. The character of the interaction among practices, and the extent to which there are conflicts and contradictions embedded in the system, is a question for empirical study. Understanding practices as patterns of behavior, however, opens practice theory to a pair of further difficulties. In *The Social Theory of Practices* (1994), Stephen Turner pointed out that a pattern of practices requires different performances to be identified as part of the same pattern. It is not sufficient, for the purposes of a practice theoretical analysis, that the individual performances are similar in observably salient ways. Practices manifest something deeper: a norm, implicit presupposition, or tacit understanding. This must be transmitted from one individual to another if the practice is to be learned. While accounts of practice conceptualize transmission in a variety of ways, Turner argues that none of them can provide an account of transmission that will support the weight of their theories.

The second sort of problem also concerns the identity of practices. Practices are normative in the sense that individual performances may be correct or incorrect. Their normativity makes practices an attractive replacement for the norms and

values that were embedded in the semiotic conception of culture. However, the normativity also creates a logical gap between the norm and any actual set of performances. Given a single set of performances, there is more than one way of expressing *the* practice they exemplify. Performances therefore underdetermine practices (Kripke 1982, Brandom 1994, Rouse 2007). This gerrymandering objection to practices is analogous to the problem of cultural boundaries that infected the semiotic model of culture, but it goes further. Treating different performances as appropriate or inappropriate will specify distinct practice norms; but the practices determine which practices are appropriate. The matter seems circular. The gerrymandering problem goes further because it argues that even if we were to stipulate which set of practices were correct, more than one (nonequivalent) rule would be exemplified. Practices seem epistemologically inscrutable.

Both Turner's argument about transmission and the gerrymandering problem arise when practices are conceived as regularities or patterns of behavior. Joseph Rouse (2002, 2007) has argued that there is an alternative way to conceive of practices, one he finds articulated in Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit* (1994) and Donald Davidson's later work, and is to be uncovered in appropriate readings of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In anthropology, something very like Rouse's conception of practice is at work in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (Tedlock and Mannheim 1995). Rouse summarizes the position this way:

[A] practice is not a regularity underlying its constituent performances, but a pattern of interaction among them that expresses their mutual normative accountability. On the "normative" conception of practices, a performance belongs to a practice if it is appropriate to hold it accountable as a correct or incorrect performance of that practice. Such holding to account is itself integral to the practice, and can likewise be done correctly or incorrectly. If incorrectly, then it would appropriately be accountable in turn, by responding to it as would be appropriate to a mistaken holding-accountable. And so forth. (Rouse 2007, 269–270)

The first point is that performances respond to one another, and this is what constitutes them into a practice. The performances are thus not repetitions of one another, but corrections, elaborations, inferences, or permissions. Each performance is thus already normative insofar as it is a response to a previous performance as correct or incorrect. Moreover, there is a sense in which each subsequent performance is, like taking a turn in a conversation, a reinterpretation of the previous moves. There is no attempt to capture the totality of the pattern that leads to the gerrymandering problem. Performances in the present are responsible to future performances in the sense that they may be criticized (or praised) by them, but nothing in the past determines those future performances. Practices, on this view, are importantly open-ended and indeterminate.

While Rouse's conception of practice arguably overcomes some of the difficulties that faced earlier conceptions, challenges remain. Practices have become so open and indeterminate that their stability becomes a surprising fact. Why do practices persist at all? Here, it might be helpful for practice theorists to look to some of the cognitive mechanisms to which the epidemiological theorists appeal. Such a

rapprochement between practice theory and anthropological epidemiology, however, has not yet materialized.

16.7. CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATION OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

Throughout this chapter, we have seen various manifestations of two philosophical problems: the methodological individualism issue and the structure-and-agency issue. In their traditional guises, both philosophical debates presuppose a conception of an agent who is, in a sense, self-sufficient. The agents in question have beliefs, intentions, desires, and interests, and their intentional actions proceed from these. While the content of their propositional attitudes might depend on the local culture, the existence of such agents and their properties is independent of culture. Only with such a robust conception of agency in play can the metaphysical question of whether cultures reduce to the actions or intentional states of agents be raised. Similarly, the question of the explanatory priority of social structures or agents only arises if we presuppose that intentional action could be independent of the existence of one structure or another. The striking feature of both epidemiological models and practice theory is that they do not have a robust and traditional notion of the agent. What becomes of these traditional philosophical problems in the context of contemporary models of culture?

With respect to the methodological individualism issue, neither epidemiology nor practice theory proposes an ontological reduction. It is tempting to read Sperber's talk of populations of representations as reductionist, but this would be a mistake. Representations are relational, they are objects that represent something to someone. And not all representations are mental; public representations are a crucial part of the causal chains with which Sperber's epidemiology is concerned. Practice theory, whether it conceives of practices as regularities or the normative interaction of performances, is similarly positioned. Both models thus take some form of relationship to be a fundamental and irreducible feature of the account. At the same time, neither seems to need an ontological category over and above either the performances (for practice theory) or the material objects that constitute representations (for epidemiology). Both views seem content with a materialist ontology. Even more interesting, both views of culture depend on relating social-level phenomena (representations, practices) to something that is, so to speak, below the level of agency. This is clearest in the case of epidemiology: The fundamental explananda are cognitive mechanisms and public representations. While some older versions of practice theory juxtapose agents (as traditionally conceived) with social structures, the newer versions take agents to be created by structures. This is more striking if one adopts the kind of Brandomian account of content that Rouse uses as the basis

of his account of practice. Once again, agency arises from the interaction of those capacities that make practices possible and the social practices themselves.

With respect to the structure-and-agency issue, both epidemiological models and practice theories have something analogous to structure, even if they have dispensed with a conception of culture/society as a system of rules. What corresponds to structure in an epidemiological view is the distribution of traits, but these distributions have little or no explanatory value. On the contrary, they stand in need of explanation. At the same time, epidemiological models of culture do not emphasize agency in their explanations either. For Boyd and Richerson, a notion of choice is operative in their analyses, but it is a rather thin notion that plays a minimal role. For Sperber or Atran, agent choices play no role: The explananda are subpersonal cognitive mechanisms. For an epidemiological model, then, it seems that neither structure nor agency has explanatory priority. Practice theories, on the other hand, give substantial explanatory value to practices, and these stand in for the structures of traditional theory. Their distinctive advance on these views, however, is to treat the practices and the performances as mutually constitutive. Neither has explanatory priority over the other across the board, and the direction of the explanatory relationship seems to depend on the context and what needs to be explained. This position becomes even more nuanced as we move to the kind of interactive conception of practices recommended by Rouse. The capacity to make intentional choices must be constituted by the subpersonal capacities that make performance possible, and the practices that give them content. Once again, we start to lose our grip on what would count as the agency side of the problem.

Contemporary models of culture are a fertile ground for reformulating the epistemological and metaphysical issues of the social sciences. Because they both elide robust, traditional conceptions of individual agency, the issues of methodological individualism and structure-and-agency do not arise in their classic forms. Analogous issues do arise: Both views are saddled with an ontological position analogous to non-reductive materialism in the philosophy of mind. Practice theory faces the further problem of untangling the explanatory relationship between practices and performances. These problems are new ones, not the philosophical chestnuts with which we are familiar. They are, therefore, important topics of continuing philosophical research.

NOTES

1. This quotation makes clear that, when put into contemporary philosophical jargon, Bidney's realism would be described as a form of *anti*-realism, or better, reductionism, about culture. His idealism is *realist* insofar as it takes culture to exist in addition to the individuals who inhabit it.

2. This division is not intended to be exhaustive. These three are important and widespread ideas, and they are also interesting from the point of view of the philosophy of social science.

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