Soc. 530w: Sociology of Culture: An Introduction
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Term: Spring, 1999 (9:00 am – 12:00 noon, Thursdays)
Place: Princeton University, Department of Sociology

Purpose: The seminar is intended to survey the field, exposing you to major research traditions, themes, and areas of study. In so doing, it provides an overview for the curious and a platform for those who wish to do further work (research, comprehensives reading, teaching, etc.) on culture, broadly defined.

Eligibility: Enrollment in this six-week "mini-seminar" is open to any graduate student in Sociology, to graduate students in any other social-science department or the Woodrow Wilson school, and to undergraduate sociology majors. Graduate students in other departments may apply to instructor for admission.

Scope: Sociologists use the word "culture" to mean many things, some cognitive (ideas or schemata), some behavioral (e.g., rituals, speech), and some physical (art works, sermons, the periodic table). We shall attend to all kinds, as long as they have something to do with meaning (whether divined from the structural relations among cultural elements or inferred from utterances and writings of people dead or living).

Discussion: Sociology of culture is among the broadest, fastest-moving, and most fuzzily-bound of sociology's "subfields," encompassing sociology of the arts (including sociologies of art, literature, and music); sociologies of mass media and of popular culture, of religion, science, law, and language; cognitive sociology, sociology of knowledge and of ideas; and doubtless others I have forgotten. Moreover, cultural analysis is an important aspect of other sociological subfields, such as historical sociology, economic sociology, and the study of social inequality. Although the seminar's topic makes institutional sense, it is intellectually odd, because "culture" is less a distinct area of social life than an aspect of almost any phenomenon one might study. This raises four temptations in syllabus-building, two of them OK, and two of which I have resisted.

1. A bias towards institutional studies: If one identifies the sociology of culture with the study of distinct institutional areas (art, religion, science, law), one has the great advantage of a bounded subject area, the study of which can attend even-handedly to the full range of practices and structures that constitute the institution in question. Arguably, sociologists of culture have made particular headway in these areas, which are represented on the syllabus but do not dominate it.

2. A bias towards studies with cultural "dependent variables." Studies may be recognized
as cultural in so far as they are concerned with explaining cultural phenomena – ideologies, attitudes, values, schemata, or discourse, for example. There is lots of good work of this kind, and it will be represented on the syllabus.

The third and fourth temptations reflect not conventions of classifying subject matter, but an irony associated with the fact that every phenomenon has a cultural aspect. If an article attempting to explain something that is not itself "culture" -- for example, a behavioral or structural regularity or historical event -- appears to be about "culture," the author is likely to have overestimated the influence of culture and slighted other factors. In so far as culture is integrated properly into the analysis, the work may appear not to be "about culture" at all. This invites the syllabus-maker to indulge:

3. A bias towards metatheory: If in empirical work a preoccupation with culture may lead to an analytic imbalance, in theoretical work it is perfectly legitimate to ask how cultural aspects of phenomena can best be conceived and studied. This is important work -- sociology's theoretical and methodological treatment of culture is far less advanced than its treatment of structural phenomena -- but only as a guide to, not a substitute for, research. Rather than start with meta-theory, we spend the first 5 weeks on empirical work, which prepares us to consider programmatic claims in week 6.

4. A bias towards studies that overemphasize the importance of the cultural aspect of their subject. The sociology of culture suffers in so far as its practitioners are tempted to cheer for cultural variables for their own sake. (The situation has gotten worse as culture has become more fashionable: when most authors ignored culture, a paper that merely acknowledged culture's importance seemed to be "about" culture. Now that everyone believes that culture matters, the threshold is higher.) We will be vigilant in our efforts to detect any tendency of the authors we read to place a thumb on the scales when weighing the importance of culture.

Aside from all this, there is so much interesting work spread out over such a vast substantive terrain that selecting just enough for six weeks -- the perpetual problem of mini-courses -- is even harder than usual. A syllabus that organized weeks around really interesting substantive or theoretical questions about which there is a tradition of good work would run on for many semesters. (I've limited myself to six assigned, and eight recommended, readings per week. For more, see the supplementary reading list, awarded as a door prize to all students attending the first meeting.)

Instead, the approach of this seminar is to begin with relatively "micro" perspectives on culture -- cognitive, constructionist, etc. -- and to move towards more "macro" perspectives over the course of the seminar, ending with a theoretical stock-taking in week 6. This approach has the advantage of producing a fairly broad survey, for as one moves...
from micro to macro the sorts of constructs people use to represent culture tend to
change, as do the kinds of things they study and the means they use to study them.

The syllabus reflects a bias towards empirical articles. I focus on articles because they
are shorter than books, and therefore we can read more of them. (Some books I'd like to
assign are listed under "recommended readings.") I focus on the empirical because the
point of the sociology of culture is to explain things -- about either culture or other phen-
ona that cannot be understood without reference to culture. (Note that this does NOT
entail a rejection of interpretation, as sociological explanations of culture usually require
interpretation as a necessary step.) I define "explanation" broadly, but exclude opining
without evidence. Other biases: against duplicating other graduate courses (mine on
culture and cognition, Professor Lamont's version of this one); and (though I've tried to
fight it), towards literatures (e.g., on the arts rather than science, micro or meso rather
than macro issues) with which I am more familiar.

Requirements
A. Students are expected to do the reading thoroughly before the class meeting for which
it is assigned, and to participate actively in class meetings. Emphasis is on mastering, re-
sponding critically and creatively to, and integrating the seminar's material. Be able to
answer the following questions about each assigned reading:

1. What research question is the author trying to answer?
2. What is the author's definition of "culture" (or the aspect of culture on which
she or he focuses)? How does the author operationalize the cultural element and how
tight is the fit between operationalization and definition?
3. What is the nature of the author's evidence and how does she or he bring that to
bear on the research questions?
4. How satisfactorily does the author link the evidence to the conclusions?
5. What does the paper accomplish? What have you learned from it?

B. You are required to submit (preferably as an e-mail attachment) a memorandum of
approximately 500-1000 words on the week's readings before four of the six class
meetings. (No credit will be given for memoranda handed in late, as part of the point is
to prepare you to participate actively in seminar discussion.) Please view memoranda as
writing/thinking exercises, not as finished products. Use them to engage the week's mat-
rials, respond with questions, criticisms and new ideas they suggest, and put into words
impressions that seem worth developing. Use at least two of your memoranda to discuss
how, if at all, the week's readings inform your own research agenda -- e.g., by suggesting
ways of posing questions, or new approaches to operationalization or research design.)
Memos also provide a means by which I can give you ongoing individualized feedback.

No term paper or research project is required, nor is there a final examination.

Readings: Two copies in seminar box in mailroom, at least one week before seminar.
OUTLINE AND READINGS

Thursday, Feb. 6 Week 1: The Micro-Sociology of Culture
Berger and Luckman's ideas about constructionism are so fundamental to the sociology of culture that we begin with a selection from their classic book. My paper reviews a lot of empirical results from cognitive and social psychology and argues that they bear significantly on sociological concerns about culture. The remaining four papers are empirical studies coming out of different theoretical traditions - Eliasoph from Goffman's dramaturgical approach; Erickson from anthropologically informed ethnomethodology; Martin from gender theory and symbolic interactionism, and Ridgeway et al. from the status-expectation-states research program in social psychology.


Recommended:
Thursday, Feb. 13

Week 2: Culture in Organizations, Communities and Networks

Here we move to the meso level, with research on culture in formal and informal organization. DiMaggio and Mohr use Bourdieu's theory (itself influenced by Bernstein) but reinterpret it in a network framework and test it with survey data. Erickson, critical of Bourdieu, reports fascinating findings about social differentiation and culture use in an occupational community. Hofstede et al. represent the state of the art for using survey methods to explore how national-level cultural differences influence organizational cultures. Dobbin summarizes and illustrates the neoinstitutional approach to organizations as cultural constructions. Finally, Morrill and Wacquant’s superb ethnographic case studies demonstrate the role of culture, respectively, in two corporations and a local industry (prize-fighting) that is organized largely informally.


Recommended:

Thursday, Feb. 20\ Week 3: The Institutional Production of Culture
This week's readings (and week 5's) were the most painful to pare down, and final choices bordered on arbitrary. Start with Bourdieu, who sets out the critical metaphor of field, some version of which is necessary to unify analysis of different cultural spheres, and some useful ways to think about it. Then move to the arts, where the Bielbys demonstrate how hard data and field work can reveal the institutional logic of a production system and Griswold demonstrates how creative research design can yield replicable findings about cultural change. The remaining papers deal with cuisine, science, and religion, respectively. Fantasia investigates a surprising case of cultural change and cultural contact. The longish but fun-to-read selections from Gieryn's new book explicate the importance of social classification as both a resource for and product of struggle, illustrated by the Cold Fusion debate. Finke et al. advance a perspective that emphasizes the ways in which religious systems are like competitive markets in order to explain church attendance and growth in 19th-century New York state.


*Recommended:*


**Thursday, Feb. 27: Week 4: Cultural Consumption and Reception**

Again, we start with Bourdieu, this time *Distinction*, a richer, more interpretive, less economistic work that those that preceded it: We read his chapters on cultural choice among the upper middle and working classes. Again, the readings strive for diversity in method and institutional realm. Halle uses ethnographic methods to interpret the meaning of sacred art in U.S. homes. Peterson/Kern look at survey data on patterns of musical taste -- the latter at how many things people like and the former about what they dislike -- to make inferences about social organization. Shively's paper also deals with intergroup differences in response to the popular arts (John Wayne films) but uses focus group and
interviewing methods to explore their reception. Morawska uses a multi-method approach to examine change in the role of religion in the lives of Jewish residents of a small Pennsylvania City over 20 years. Sadly, there has been little comparable work by sociologists on the reception of science; so we turn for inspiration to Robert Darnton's wonderful description of popular beliefs about science at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.


Recommended:
Thursday, March 6

Week 5: The Macro-Sociology of Culture

So many types of research fall under this rubric that many wonderful papers ended up on the cutting room floor. I expanded the "recommended" list to reflect the fact that we really needed two weeks to even scratch the surface of such work. The readings de-emphasize the kinds of ambitious comparative or historical studies that require books, not papers, to report, and fail to represent work that uses formal modelling or survey data to generate insights about culture at the level of national societies or beyond. Meyer et al. lay out the most “macro” view of culture, I know – a constructionist world-systems approach – and discuss results of several research projects animated by their perspective. Mohr uses data from charity directories to divine underlying shifts in the classification of social problems and the people associated with them in the first decades of the 20th century. Binder and Pescosolido analyze two kinds of texts to make inferences about underlying social representations of race in the U.S. Whereas they and Mohr use small clues to reach conclusions about big cultural issues, Collins takes a more conventionally Weberian approach in his analysis of religious (and other) roots of Japanese capitalism. Hilgartner and Bosk’s paper represents an effort to understand how local actions generate shifting preoccupations at the system level, with a focus on the political issue-attention cycle.


**Recommended:**


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**Thursday, March 13**

**Week 6: Taking Stock -- Programs and Prescriptions**
After examining a wide range of research on culture in its various guises, we should be prepared to come to some generalizations about what ideas and methods bear fruit (for which purposes) and which do not; and therefore to evaluate programmatic statements. This week's reading range widely in focus and perspective. Alexander and Smith call for a multidimensional neo-Durkheimian perspective on culture, while Friedland and Alford develop the idea of institutional logics, proposing to place culture at the center of the study of political sociology and social change. Swidler's classic paper argues that it is more fruitful to think of culture as a set of recipes for action than as coherent sets of values or norms, and her paper with Jepperson draw implications for empirical research. Schudson derives lessons from media studies on how and why symbols influence social action. Two intriguing papers by anthropologists close the set: Hannerz develops ideas about how to study culture in a world in which it is more likely to be found in and carried by transnational networks than closed communities; and Sperber argues for studying cultural change through an "epidemiology of representations."


*Recommended:*


