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Chapter 25. Theories of Culture, Cognition, and Action

Sun-Ki Chai, University of Hawai`i

Introduction

The theoretical study of culture across the social science disciplines has long been hampered by a common malady: the tendency to view cultural theories and theories of action as disjoint, or even opposing, modes of analysis. This chapter investigates the nature and causes for this split, then surveys the growth in recent years of diverse attempts at theoretical synthesis. All these syntheses are to some extent interdisciplinary, but because of their origins in widely varying academic communities, they rest on fundamentally different bases. Nonetheless, it will be argued that they share something in common, something that holds promise of collaborative work in what up to now might have been seen as fundamentally incompatible paradigms. Not only has there been work in multiple fields that tends to look at the (mutually) causal relationship between culture and action, but there has been a common recognition in all of these fields that in order to examine this, greater focus has to be placed on the cognitive activity of the mind and the motivational forces impelling such activity has as the process through which culture's effect on action is mediated.

There are so many theoretical and methodological approaches that appropriate the word "culture", conceiving of it in so many contradictory ways, that any attempt at survey of all major

cultural paradigms in the social sciences is likely to be an exercise in futility. If anything, the number of working definitions of culture in the social sciences has multiplied since Kroeber and Kluckhohn compiled their grand review and critique of 164 definitions over half a century ago (1952). It is for that reason that I have chosen, rather than attempting something so grand and ultimately impractical, to focus on the particular subset of theoretical innovation that seeks to elucidate the relationship between cultural and action.

The chapter examines three major lines of work: The first arises from criticisms, both external and internal, of general predictive theories of action, drawn largely from the rational choice tradition, which are applied primarily in economics, political science, and to some extent sociology. These criticisms have led to a call for a new version of these theories, one that views culture as a primary determinant of the preferences and beliefs upon which decision making rests. The second line of work comes from the interstices of anthropology, psychology, and sociology, particularly the development of mental typologies and models that are used characterize societies and their cultures. Here, the key development has been moving beyond looking at culture as a set of taxonomies, and looking towards the way in which individual-level culture generates models of the world that impel action. The final line of work is the literature on epistemological "standpoints" that, developing from a base of feminist studies, examines the ways in which the structural positions of individuals affects their access to knowledge. This literature has had to deal with the tension between asserting the privileged knowledge of particular groups based on their common culture and recognition of significant differences in standpoints between members within such groups. It is moving towards a solution that recognizes analysis of individual self-construal as the way to sort out such similarities and differences.

Despite the wide differences between these three literatures, one characteristic shared by all is that analysis of the relationship between culture and individual action is seen as requiring approaching culture in a micro-macro fashion, not only as an attribute of a society as a whole, but in terms of individual qualities. The focus is thus not only on the causal implications of cognitions and motivations for action, but also the social process by which such cognitions and motivations are formed over time by culture, and sometimes on the feedback loop by which actions in turn affect culture. Hence it is possible to see common purposes and even possibilities for integration between these literatures, even if they are typically (particularly the first two versus the third) as representing incompatible views on the philosophy of sciences. In this light, it is useful to look at the issues that divide contemporary syntheses, and discusses possibilities for reconciliation. It is not that unification of cultural theories of action is feasible or desirable, but that mutual critique and influence is preferable to parallel development.

Needless to say, even though I will only be surveying a small subset of theoretical work that purports to deal with culture, it is inevitable that huge swathes of literature will be covered in a small amount of space. It is hoped that what is written is not taken as some kind of general (or even partial) critique of these literatures, because it is not intended in that fashion. Instead, it is an attempt to identify certain trends that seem common to all of them. These trends in turn represent only parts of these literatures, and are often highly contested by older, “mainstream” versions. Nonetheless, the fact that there is significant theoretical movement in each literature towards roughly the same set of goals is notable and favorable to greater unification of the social science approaches to the relationships between culture, cognition, and action.

“Cultural Choice” Approaches

After a long imperialistic march to become the dominant social science paradigm for modeling human action (Radnitzky 1987; 1992; Tommasi and Ierulli 1995), the rational choice approach has tottered at its moment of seeming triumph, and has faced somewhat of an identity crisis in recent years (Lichbach 2003; Van den Berg and Meadwell 2004). Its basic assumptions have come under question, and critics, many of them internal, have begun to question its ability to perform with sufficient accuracy what has always been seen as its main methodological purpose, the general and testable prediction of behavior. As the scope of rational choice analysis has expanded, predictive anomalies and indeterminacies have multiplied. To deal with these problems, a number of “fixes” to the approach have been proposed, many revolving around bringing into analysis the concept of culture, which has traditionally been excluded from rational choice analysis, and indeed giving it pride of place.

Increasing, it is being recognized that cultural analysis, rather than being the antithesis of rational choice (e.g. Barry 1970), can coexist and even provide the solution to the paradigmatic crisis that the approach faces, while allowing rational choice to retain its existing theoretical strengths of generality and testability. To begin with however, some terminological issues must be clarified. The term *rational choice* can be defined into two different ways. A “thin” concept of rationality includes only the notion that an individual has a well-ordered set of preferences, logically and probabilistically consistent beliefs, and acts to maximize her preferences in light of her beliefs. This definition of rationality leaves open the question of what these preferences and beliefs are and how they are derived, thus rendering it incapable of making testable predictions. A “thick” concept of rationality makes prediction possible by including a model of preferences and beliefs (Elster 1983; Taylor 1987; Ferejohn 1991). The problem with the thick concept that has

been used in conventional rational choice is that it is based upon simplistic model of self-regarding materialism and “information” (inference from observation) that is an anomaly-generator in environments that are not dominated by formalized, predictable, and purpose-specific institutions.

Attention to cultural factors can fill in the thick concept of rational choice, yet do so in a way in way that is more realistic than the conventional model of preferences and beliefs. In this way, rational choice and culture, far from being at odds, are actually complementary modes of analysis (Chai 1997). Culture allows for assumptions about preferences and beliefs that are not pulled out of the air, but rather based upon sustained empirical studies and inductive generalizations from those studies. However, this requires a way of measuring the cultural milieu. One way of doing this is taking physical and symbolic manifestations of culture, and converting them into internal motivations and cognitions. Another is modeling the generation of “internal” cultural through endogenous models of preference and belief formation.

In economics, investigations of ways to modify the conventional assumptions of rational choice have not only reinvigorated of the field of behavioral economics, but turned it into what is generally recognized as the cutting edge of the economic theory (Fudenberg 2006; Pesendorfer 2006; Camerer et al. 2004; Diamond 2007). While behavioral economics comprises a large number of theoretical threads, a major part of its focus has been on modeling the social forces that determine individual preferences, with a particular focus on other-regarding preferences, as well as those towards time discounting and risk.

The first type of preference in particular the focus of a large literature that looks at the role of cross-national or cross-ethnic cultural differences in determining preferences, much of it tied into the equally quickly expanding field of experimental economics, which provides much of the empirical data to inform the theories being generated in behavioral economics. The field of “social

preferences" (Fehr and Fischbacher 2002; Rabin 2006; Leavitt and List 2007) has focused on three major ways in which individual preferences can be other-regarding, each with distinct implications for behavior.

The first is perhaps the simplest: altruistic preferences, i.e. the tendency to incorporate the welfare of others, whether all or a delimited group of others, into your own preferences over outcomes (Andreoni and Miller 2002; Charness and Rabin 2002). The implications for action are then fairly clear-cut – if one has the opportunity to contribute to a "public good" i.e. one that benefits an entire group rather than an individual, altruistic preferences towards that group will raise the incentives for an individual to make such a contribution, even when the private benefit of doing so will be exceeded by the costs. It has been long recognized that if such preferences exist, they can help to explain cases where individuals cooperate with one another even when there are opportunities to "free-ride" (Olson 1965), hence overcoming problems of collective action (Phelps 1975; Collard 1978; Margolis 1982; Stark 1995), but only recently has altruism been widely incorporated into mainstream economic theory.

The second major way in which social preferences have been theorized is as embodying a desire for reciprocity (Rabin 1993, Dufwenberg and Kirchsteiger 1998), whereby individuals seek to reward those who have helped them in the past and punish those who have hurt them. This version of social preferences is more complex to model than altruism, since "history" in the form of one's partners past actions must be built into an individual's preferences. It is also important to distinguish reciprocation as an action (Fehr et al. 2002) from reciprocity-desiring preferences. The latter tend to promote the former, but are not the same thing, and are neither necessary nor sufficient to cause reciprocating behavior.

The final major theorization of social preferences is difference/inequity aversion (Bolton and Ockenfels 2000, Fehr and Schmidt 1999). Such preferences either seek to minimize the difference between one's own welfare and that of other members of the group. If it is the latter, the "reference group" against which an individual compares herself must be defined as well. Inequity aversion will imply that an individual will be willing to suffer losses to her own welfare, if by doing so she will cause gains to those below her or losses to those above her. Hence they amount to a kind of effective negative altruism towards the "haves" and positive altruism towards the "have nots".

Each of these investigations of social preferences allow for variations among individuals in the extent to which a particular social preference weighs against a preference for personal material welfare. Moreover, to extent that they theorize the causes for these variations, the implicit theory built into them is that the variations are caused by differences in individuals' cultural backgrounds. This in turn has triggered experimental investigation of social preferences that looks specifically at how people from different cultural backgrounds or identity groups vary in the strength of a particular social preference.

Questions about the role of culture and identity in determining action generated literature examining variations in behavior across groups, typically national groups, in controlled experiments. The pioneering experiments of this kind transplanted common experimental treatments such as the "ultimatum game" to 15 relatively small-scale societies (Henrich et al. 2004; 2005). The ultimatum game involves two players, one who proposes how to divide up a fixed amount of goods, and one who either accepts or rejects (in which case neither players get anything). Observation indicated that there was a large amount of variation between societies in what was considered an unacceptable division of goods, that patterns of behavior did not contrast in any

simple fashion manner with observed patterns in Western societies, and that there appeared to be some relationship such patterns and experiences within institutions, particularly market-style transactions. A later set of experiments looked primarily in 16 large, industrialized societies, and examined a different kind of game, the "voluntary contribution mechanism with punishment", in which individuals are given the opportunity to contribute an amount of their choosing to the provision of a collective good, and to later penalize those whose contributions are judged to be inappropriate (Herrman 2008). Again, a wide variation in behavior between societies was noticed, as was a tendency in some societies to punish those whose contribution was too *high* as well as those whose was too low. It was seen that the tendency to punish high contributions corresponded inversely to the strength of legal institutions and political stability.

Culture and Cognition Approaches

The examination of the relationship between culture and individual attitudes and actions has had a long history in American cultural anthropology, where the "culture and personality" paradigm was the dominant from its early days until the 1970s, and since transformed itself into the field of psychological anthropology (Bock 1994; Moore and Mathews 2001; Casey and Edgerton 2007). Within psychological anthropology, the field of cognitive anthropology (D'Andrade 1995; Holland et al. 1998; Quinn 2005; Garro 2007) is specifically focused on determining the internal worldviews of individuals and groups being studied.

In psychology, the existence of subfields of social psychology called "cross-cultural" (Berry et al. 1997; 1997a; 1997b; Matsumoto 2001; Bond et al. 2006) and "cultural" (Shweder 2003; Lehman et al. 2004; Kitayama and Cohen 2007) psychology is often confusing to the newcomer, something that is not helped by the presence of scholars who work in both fields and debate about

what separates the two. Even to the expert, "the differences between cross-cultural and cultural psychology are small" (Triandis 2007, 68). The most sweeping distinction that is made between the two is that cross-cultural psychology tends to study cultural differences at the aggregate, typically national, level, while cultural psychology looks at cultural differences at the individual level, as mediated through structural constraints. Another is that cultural psychology often focuses on identifying mechanisms specific to particular cases, while cross-cultural psychology focuses primarily on identifying dimensions of culture that are transportable across cases.

Finally, in sociology, the emerging field of cognitive sociology (DiMaggio 1997; Zerubavel 1997; Cerulo 2002) has attempted to inject cultural sociology with the methodological innovations associated with the cognitive revolution elsewhere in the social sciences. Classic cultural theories in sociology, influenced greatly by Talcott Parsons, began from the point of view that cultures are determinative of the individual through the process of socialization. This tendency was caricatured rather succinctly many years ago by Wrong (1961; see also Barry 1970), and while much had changed since the 1960s, cultural theories but have generally not made much effort to bridge the micro-macro link, instead drawing a line directly from culture to institutional and structural outcomes.

These five fields, being inherently interdisciplinary, do not ignore work that is being done by similar researchers other disciplines, and indeed the questions of psychological and cognitive anthropology are the same as that of cross-cultural and cultural psychology (for a short discussion of their mutual origins, see Shore 1996, 20). Furthermore, these fields each face a similar issue, which is how to model the impact of culture on cognition such that its implications for action are clear. As stated in an influential book in psychological and cognitive anthropology, the problem with much individual-level theorizing in anthropology has been its origin in "ethnoscience", an

approach that was devoted largely to taxonomies and "tended to squeeze the life out of culture by limiting cultural knowledge to abstract classificatory schemata divorced from human action" (Shore 1996, 35).

The solution to this, proposed by a large number of scholars in these fields, but particularly in cognitive anthropology, is that representation of individual-level culture should supplement or replace of abstract dimensions and taxonomies with cultural models, which are shared schemas representing empirical reality and its causal relationships, but which can also include values and motives (D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Strauss and Quinn 1998). In cultural psychology as well, the solution to problem of action is seen increasingly as the representation of individual-level culture as consisting of beliefs and values (Shweder 1996, 20), the same representation that is seen in the thin rational choice and "cultural choice" theories described in the previous section.

Standpoint Theories

Standpoint theories (Harding 2004; Hartsock 1998) can be distinguished from the previous cognitivist paradigms in that the assumption that cognition is determined by culture is taken further, and is used to challenge the very basis for conventional philosophies of science. Basically stated, a standpoint theory argues that an individual's structural position provides access to situated knowledge that is not accessible to those who do not share the same position. A particular emphasis is privilegedness of the social knowledge uniquely possessed by dominated and oppressed groups (Smith 1974; Hartsock 1983; Rose 1987). It avoids the criticism of essentialism by arguing that the feminist standpoint is not genetically endowed but acquired through common gendered experiences within a patriarchic society.

Based on Marx's notion of the standpoint of the proletariat (18th Brumaire), the original formulation of feminist standpoint theory sought to use is as a force for resistance against those who took androcentric assumptions as universals in designing social theory. The dominance of feminist thought over contemporary standpoint theories is indicated by the fact that the terms "standpoint theory" and "feminist standpoint theory" are often taken as synonymous. This is understandable given that the sheer volume and insight of theory arising from the standpoint outlook in feminist studies, and its ties to feminist studies of the scientific method (Keller and Longino 1996; Kohlstedt and Longino 1997; Mayberry et al. 2001).

Nonetheless, it can be argued that this type of equation tends to do harm in isolating feminist standpoint theories from a large body of other social science work that are *de facto* standpoint theories, and may be compatible with certain versions of standpoint feminism, to the mutual detriment of both bodies of literature. Standpoint theories are one form of recent theorizing that seeks to analyze culture and its relationship to action. Indeed, it is hard to conceptually separate a group's standpoint from its culture. As D'Andrade put it, culture is a "socially transmitted information pool" (1981, 181-182). Recognition of this commonality can help not only in providing theoretical integration, but in reducing the anachronistic polemical attacks that theorists from the rational choice and feminist perspectives often launch against each other, often without bothering to familiarize themselves with the "opposing" perspective on its own terms.

It can be argued that the main benefit that standpoint theory can gain from engagement with other approaches to culture and action is its further development as a scientific paradigm rather than a meta-scientific theoretical discussion. While its contemporary incarnation was originally proposed as scientific paradigm and methodology to guide research (Harding 2004, 1), in practice it

has rarely moved beyond meta-theoretical controversy over the nature and extent of the feminist standpoint, and how it relates to other potential standpoints, and well as discussion on how it could affect scientific inquiry. As of yet, despite two decades of discussion, it has not developed its "normal science" component, and there is as of yet very little that can be called "applied standpoint theory" used to explain specific empirical phenomena in the social world.

Indeed, it would be difficult given the current state of the debate, to say what applied standpoint theory might look like. One direction, and perhaps the most consistent with mainstream social science, would be to posit groups of actors, each with its own structural position, and thus each with access to specific information that is not accessible to the other actors. A particular group of actors (oppressed minorities or women) may be said to have specific types of information or even solidarity that can arise only from their own shared experiences in collective action. As a theory, does it need to generate hypotheses that can be tested and confirmed or falsified (avoid dogmatic falsification, of course)? A recent paper presented at the American Sociological Association conference indicates what this might look like (Harnois 2008), one in which black women and men were surveyed regarding their attitudes towards oppression. The study found that the effect of ethnicity was substantially larger than that of gender.

Of course, many if not most feminist standpoint theorists might argue that this is not what they mean by the application of standpoint methodology at all, but they have yet to put forward a unified position on the rules for such a methodology, much less created a line of scientific inquiry that would justify the term "paradigm". Engagement of standpoint theory with choice-theoretic and cognitive approaches can help to aid in this development, since these other approaches have been much more active in building an applied component to their meta-theorizing, generating explanations and predictions of actions that can be compared against real-world events.

On the other hand, what these other approaches lack is the ability to internalize the cultural viewpoint of their subjects to the extent that standpoint theories intend. Mainstream social science has often been criticized for clothing political viewpoints under the label of objectivity, disinterested assumptions, hence providing them with a spurious kind of separation from the real-world outlooks of their authors. This accusation is no doubt true – it is very difficult to think of a theoretical assumption, including that of self-regarding material welfare maximization or beliefs from "information", that does not in some way reflect the world view of its authors.

One way to separate this is to provide the subject with the means to design the architecture of her own response, i.e. to not impose arbitrary parameterizations on the subject's ideas, yet allow for responses that can be used to make comparisons across groups. Standpoint theories take seriously the provision that one should query the viewpoint of the subjects on their own terms, rather than impose some outside structure. While they have scholars have largely contented themselves with meta-theoretical debate about the advisability of taking such a viewpoint, they need to proceed ahead, developing a method for application that scholars can take into the field and use to conduct studies.

Perhaps the major internal critique of standpoint theory is that it typically fails to recognize the cultural diversity that exists among women, tending instead to assign them a single "female" standpoint. On the other hand, attempts to recognize the multiplicity of women's experiences leads to a kind of postmodernist relativism in which all standpoints are different and have equal validity, which dilutes the notion that women's standpoints are privileged compared to those of men (Hekman 2004). However this problem is the very problem that is faced by the two other large bodies of work, which is to examine how group-level culture can be represented at the individual level, and how individual variation can be recognized without erasing the notion that

groups share certain common values and beliefs. Moreover, it then segues into the problem of how that representation at the individual can be used to predict action that has meaning at the aggregate level.

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