Culture and Microsociology: The Anthill and the Veldt
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The authors argue that sociologists must use the investigation of interpersonal situations as a strategy through which “culture” can be understood in practice. Culture includes a broad range of social processes, institutions, and value systems. In contrast to perspectives that treat groups and individuals as units to be shaped by powerful cultural forces, the authors contend that culture is established, manipulated, and promoted by individuals and groups. Microsituations serve as arenas of action in their own right, locations where culture is both produced and experienced. Drawing examples from five areas of microsociology—groups, cognition, identity/self, performance, and emotion—the authors demonstrate how a distinctively microsociological perspective allows sociologists to examine how culture, across its various conceptions, has an effect on actors and, in turn, is affected by actors. By exposing the workings of culture in situ, microsociology forces us to theorize the connections between meaning, behavior, and structure.

**Keywords:** culture; microsociology; social psychology; small groups; identity; cognition; interaction; emotion

The sociologist is an explorer who observes anthills or the veldt. Trekking through the wild, you are a camera, but how should your attention focus? There is so much to observe. The world is, in the words of William James (1911, 50), a “blooming, buzzing confusion.” James was referring to infant perception, but

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the phrase applies to anyone in a domain that is characterized by cognitive overload. It is not only that there are many scenes to see, but also any scene can be appreciated anew by changing choices of breadth and depth. One can view a landscape from afar, spying the major features of the sweeping veldt, considering how they shape the totality of the scene, or one can inspect that world in exquisite, microscopic detail. Rather than survey the vista, one can inspect anthills. Both viewers appreciate the terrain, but they rely upon different lenses.

Examining anthills—their architecture, their routine, and their culture—is the task of the microsociologist, the social psychologist. Few constructs reveal better than culture how both broad and focused analyses can productively coexist. Given the stretch, even looseness, of the culture concept, we should not be surprised that culture can be described through multiple layers. Culture is both a landscape and an anthill: the microsociologist privileges entomology over geology, microcultures over national culture, self over demography. Less poetically, the microsociologist emphasizes performance over norms and practices over cultural logics. In this, the focus is upon the doing of culture as opposed to external constraints that channel, promote, or discourage action. Emphasizing performance and practice, culture for the microsociologist is a matter of circumscribed agency. Agency is always shaped by externalities (such as norms and logics), but the creation of cultures results from choices by parties to action.

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Sociologists are skilled in emphasizing the power of structure in top-down models, but they are less concerned with the ways actors shape structure from the bottom up. Up and down, top and bottom, sociology depends on analytic incorporation of multiple levels.

As microsociologists, we operate from the stance of “sociological miniaturism” (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001). This approach interprets social processes, institutions, and cultural systems through a perspective that is fundamentally microsociological, analyzing large-scale social forces by means of the systematic investigation of small-scale interactional domains. Sociologists must use the investigation of interpersonal situations as a strategy through which broader social forces, properties, and processes can be understood as constituted in practice. Sociologists are skilled in emphasizing the structure of the society and the ways actors shape structure from the bottom up. Up and down, top and bottom, sociology depends on analytic incorporation of multiple levels. As Randall Collins (1981) pointed out, microsituations provide the foundations for and simulate the dynamics of larger social units. Equally important, microsituations are arenas of action in their own right, where culture is produced and experienced.
Sociological miniaturism asserts that cultural processes transcend levels of analysis in several ways. First, a cultural phenomenon that is observable at one level of analysis (for instance, the interpersonal) will routinely be found on other levels (for instance, the institutional or interorganizational) (Harrington and Fine 2000). Culture can be conceptualized as a local or a societal phenomenon. Alternatively, culture is also a set of available meanings embedded within mass society. Within the realm of emotions, altruism or aggression can be defined as tied to individual actors or to normative social systems. Second, the action of individual actors can be treated, at least at certain critical moments, as representing larger entities. The individual stands for the group and, more significantly, is taken by others as representing that group. This is the theory of the representative who embodies the culture of an organization: the museum director, politician, or social movement spokesperson. In this sense, Martin Luther King, Jr. or Steve Jobs is not merely an individual but represents an organization. The failure or success of this representative is treated not only as emblematic of the failure or success of the employing organization but also as constituting the success or failure. Although individuals need not always represent the organizations to which they belong, nor need they always be taken as such, the operating assumption is that such a linkage is present. This behavioral synecdoche is grounded in commonsense interpretations about the relationship of actors and organizations. And while we must be cautious when extending these commonsense interpretations, this is an insight that social analysts cannot lightly dismiss. Third, we argue that local situations and settings can be meaningfully generalized. This assumption is essential for justifying a methodological stance that often depends on the close investigation of a particular scene, whether that scene is observed through controlled laboratory experimentation, detailed conversation analysis, or ethnographic observation. An account of the actions of a Little League baseball team on one warm June afternoon stands for many gatherings in many communities on many days. While care must be taken when extrapolating from individuals/microsituations to collectives/macrosituations, sociology would have little predictive or analytic power, and would be limited to descriptions, if cases only stood for themselves. Finally, sociological miniaturism allows for an understanding of microsituations as the locations where the recursive nature of culture is most visible. At the microlevel, it is possible to analyze how cultural objects, traditions, and beliefs affect individuals and groups, as well as how actors’ use of culture spreads outward from their local group to larger social segments. For instance, if one is interested in musical taste creating an auditory culture, one might begin with bands or orchestras in which music is created, discussed, and evaluated but then examine how those performances are diffused to larger populations where they may be repeated, recalled, and again evaluated.

This miniaturist perspective avoids the ghettoization of social psychology as a distant, idiosyncratic specialty field within sociology. Social psychology has often been treated as being reductionist, rather than constituting a genuinely sociological perspective. A standard line is that social psychology involves the examination of individuals, allergic to larger entities, even while recognizing that individuals and their
social relations constitute these entities. While social psychology has long been part of sociology in institutional terms (the first sociological social psychology textbook, that of former American Sociological Association president Edward A. Ross [1908], was published a century ago), its level of analysis has contributed to its being seen as marginal to the disciplinary mandate, composed of distinct practitioners, similar perhaps to demography or criminology. In this image, microsociology might be taken as standing apart from the sociology of culture, which, in contrast, is now seen as intellectually central to the sociological enterprise.

The development of the sociology of culture has had several consequences for social psychology. When examining individual action, one might reasonably argue that everything is culture. All human action—including political and economic decisions—has been socialized through a system of norms, traditions, rituals, values, and customs. Culture can be taken as the means by which individuals are “civilized”—not in the sense of a hierarchy of culture—but in the recognition that individuals can knowingly and effectively participate in civil society (Alexander 2006). If one takes culture in the broadest sense—a conceit that will appeal to the imperialist designs of sociologists of culture—all social psychology is cultural sociology, even if not all cultural sociology is social psychology. Social psychological analysis is also well suited to less expansive approaches to culture that focus on the movement of specific cultural objects or cultural forms. With emphasis on detailed observation of the social world, microsociological perspectives are well positioned to see culture—treated as a domain of content—as it is developed and put into action.

With emphasis on detailed observation of the social world, microsociological perspectives are well positioned to see culture—treated as a domain of content—as it is developed and put into action.

The mid-1970s proved to be a critical moment for the development of a sociology of culture and was marked by the influential publication of two related articles in the pages of the American Sociological Review: one by Howard Becker (1974; see also H. Becker 1982) on “Art as Collective Action” and one by Richard Peterson and David Berger (1975) on “Cycles in Symbol Production: The Case of Popular Music.” Both articles helped to create what came to be known as the “Production of Culture” approach, an orientation that suggested that the creation
of cultural products should be viewed as comparable to the production of all material objects. However, these papers differed in important ways. Becker, operating within the symbolic interactionist tradition, approached the analysis of cultural productions as a microsociological problem, examining how culture was created in practice, through linked interactions and negotiated conventions. Put broadly, art is the outcome of behavioral choices, set within the standards and expectations of a community. Peterson and Berger, in contrast, focused on how institutions, notably for-profit corporations, created cultural products in the face of uncertain markets and variable competition, an approach linked to organizational and economic sociology, operating on the macro level. We examine a set of research traditions that follow from the Becker impetus, although not limiting ourselves to the sociology of art or the production of culture approach. Not all of these studies are directly linked to Becker's collective action (“art worlds”) approach, but each emphasizes the importance of cognition, self, interaction arenas, and group dynamics as integral to a sociological model of culture.

At the core of the microsociological approach to culture are a few constructs that orient the research tradition(s). These concepts are drawn from microsociology more generally but have particular relevance for examining culture as object and as action. To demonstrate the relevance of microsociology to the examination of culture, we discuss five domains of research that demonstrate how culture and microsociology are linked, although in practice there is considerable variability in each as well as much overlap. To organize our discussion, we point to research in small groups, identity/self, cognition/boundaries, interaction/performance, and emotion. Embedded in each is the problem of the construction of shared meaning. In providing a microsociological guide to the culture concept, we argue that the microsociologist provides a crucial interpretation of the linkage between meaning, action, and structure. When strategies within the sociology of culture erase attention to microsociology, they do so at a cost to the validity of culture as lived experience.

**Microcultures and Their Groups**

Perhaps the most direct connection between culture and microsociology involves the question of how cultural forms—the practices and products of culture—become linked to small groups. This approach was reflected in Fine's (1979; see also McFeat 1974) article on “Small Groups and Culture Creation: The Idioculture of Little League Baseball Teams” and subsequent studies that applied the “idioculture” model to other social domains, such as mental health organizations (e.g., Wiley 1991), congregations (P. Becker 1999), or social movements (Polletta 2006). This approach suggests that culture is established through the creation of tradition, shared references, and customs within ongoing performances that organize and routinize interaction. The metaphorical linkage of local creativity to the societal production of culture is readily apparent, merely magnified and transformed by more extensive institutional influences. The backgrounds of
participants, coupled with the needs and expectations that stem from group interaction, contribute to the group’s ongoing meaning system when a triggering event occurs—an event that sparks the shared recognition of collective experience. Once established, cultural forms provide a means through which individuals recognize their group as a salient unit and build affiliation with fellow participants. Any group has access to a combination of background culture (the known culture of the group), the moral standards of discourse (the usable culture), the instrumental goals that culture is to achieve—intentionally or not—(the functional culture), and the status hierarchy (the appropriate culture). This pool of potential cultural items is selected through immediate interaction needs. Of course, whether one accepts the details of this model of microcultures, the focus of a group approach is to understand the creation of culture through processes embedded in interactional arenas, emphasizing a sociology of localism. A sociology of localism requires mapping the creation and the spread of culture, rather than examining cultural products as divorced from social actors who produce and communicate traditions or by treating culture as a set of ideas that transcend time and space. The sociology of culture must analyze how traditions bind groups together, providing a cultural grounding of trust, affiliation, and cohesion that subsequently generates shared action and the creation of collective identity (Farrell 2003). Tight-knit groups create culture, and culture facilitates the establishment of tight-knit groups.

Idiocultures operate in groups in all institutional domains. The examination of family cultures, gangs, sociometric cliques, workgroups, sports teams, cults, and fraternal organizations provides instances of the effects of local cultures. The culture of the group provides a cognitive and emotional structure through which individuals can understand their collective pasts and plan for their shared futures (Katovich and Couch 1992). By recognizing a small group culture, participants recognize that they share traditions and that these traditions can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members and can be used to address challenges to the group.

Cognition/Boundaries

During the 1990s, as a consequence of the influential work of scholars such as Eviatar Zerubavel (1997), Paul DiMaggio (1997), Jeffrey Olick (Olick and Robbins 1998) and Michèle Lamont (1992), sociologists came to recognize that how individuals think relies on collective regularities, acquired through socialization. Cognition, traditionally one of the building blocks of social psychology, is socially organized, not merely idiosyncratic or biologically fixed, a recognition that has long been part of the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 1966). As that list suggests, cognition is not the exclusive domain of self-defined social psychologists, even if the question of how meaning is recalled and transformed is inevitably tied to the “thinker” and the “thought.” Mind, self, and society merge. Even if cognition is no longer located within a pulsating brain, most authors recognize
cognition as having a personal locus, even when shaped by social forces. While these authors vary in their disciplinary identities, much of this work is in debt to Freud, Mead, Cooley, and others who see the nexus of mind and society as shaped within interactional arenas.

Microsociologists treat cognition as essential to social organization and community affiliation, and their work has been featured prominently in the “cultural turn” in cognition. The central tenet of the cultural turn is that cognition is organized through cultures—thought communities (Zerubavel 1997)—and not only through biological brains. A sociology of thinking differs from cognitive universalism (which suggests that all humans think in fundamentally similar ways) and cognitive particularism (which suggests that each individual, as a result of distinctive experiences, thinks in a unique fashion) (Zerubavel 1997). A sociology of thinking posits that culture organizes thinking by providing the frames and schemas that individuals and their groups use to process and translate their environment.

Research finds that cognitive categories are cultural in their origins and effects (Lamont and Fournier 1992). Microsociological analysis exposes how the process of categorization bears on meaning structures, and it highlights how mental categories structure perceptions of the social world. Research, attuned to the vagaries of particular interaction contexts, challenges the assumption that the influence of culture on cognition is consistent and constant, again emphasizing the importance of local conditions. For instance, in examining the dynamics of meaning activation, Hong et al. (2000) posited a “dynamic constructivist” approach to explain variation in meaning attribution. Conceiving of culture as loosely structured, domain-specific knowledge structures, they used experimental methods to activate a “frame shift” in bicultural, Westernized Chinese students that affects the meanings they attribute to a range of social behaviors. Their findings suggest that individuals have access to a toolkit composed of multiple “cultures” and that subtle priming activates particular cultural frames at particular times. Verkuyten and Pouliasi (2006) found similar effects of priming in the frame switching among bicultural Greek respondents living in the Netherlands but found that group identification mediates the relationship between framing and perception. Such a cognitive effect that recognizes the importance of code-switching has also been discovered for African Americans (Wofford 1979; Garner and Rubin 1986; Billings 2005).

Since the classic writing of Thomas and Thomas (1928; see also Bateson 1955; Goffman 1974) on “definitions of the situation,” sociologists have emphasized how actors instigate and organize framings of social reality, particularly as it relates to social movement rhetoric (Snow and Benford 1992; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982). Research in this vein shows how the framing process can be subtly invoked to produce culturally determined interpretations of the social world. Building off a similar insight in the realm of politics, Tali Mendelberg (2001) demonstrated how political advertising primes cognitive boundaries by encouraging voters to think in terms of racial categories without being stigmatized for promoting explicit racial messages.
Although this approach to cognition initially appeared as a novel and brazen attempt by sociologists to extend their intellectual dominion, it has influential roots in the work of Emile Durkheim and his students, notably Marcel Mauss (1990) and Maurice Halbwachs (1992), who emphasized the importance of collective representations as a means of creating social order. Those scholars who follow from Durkheim, such as Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) or Magnuson (2005), treat these collective representations as a means of organizing ongoing interaction arenas, treating group affiliation as operating through cognitive filters that shape the boundaries of group belonging. But in so doing, they sometimes downplay the reality that these cultural logics are situated within a Goffmanian frame of strategic action.

This model emphasizes the salience of boundaries, exemplified through shared representations, as constituting the cognitive limits of belonging. In this view, boundaries exist in the mind but also have a powerful reality in shaping social intercourse (Lamont and Fournier 1992). As Garot (2007) suggested, the labeling of participants as inside or outside groups (in this case, gangs) contributes to boundary work through collective identity. Shared category systems are essential to social life (Rosch 1978). Through individual and collective action, we map and then imprint our cognitive categories onto the social world.

These cognitive categories are so powerful that on occasion they can cause us to think in ways that run counter to obdurate realities. Our categories can become more important than lived experience. Freeman (1992) illustrated how perceptions are categorized even when the world we perceive does not fit into easily categorical patterns. Freeman confronted two empirical regularities: (1) when people observe interaction, they see its patterning as partitioning individuals into groups, and (2) though interaction is patterned, it is not structured in such a way that interacting individuals can be placed directly into groups. The process of categorization allows people to “see” groups or collective identities where none exist. He hypothesized that individuals use a variety of cultural cues, only one of which is actual interaction, to “fill in the blanks” of missing information necessary to partition their social world into meaningful groupings. This research suggests that internal mapping of the social world is not entirely dependent on empirical reality. Furthermore, the mapping of social spaces and ideational concepts provides a critical linkage between mental processes and organizational distinctions (Freeman 1992; Carley 1994; Grant 2001). The microsociologist recognizes that how individuals and groups think about the world—and the divisions of that world—provides an opening to understanding societal divisions that contribute to a macrosociology.

Identity/Self

How can one’s identity—one’s sense of self—be anything but cultural? Of course, as sociologists have used it over the decades, “identity” has many different
meanings. We take identity to represent the individual’s thoughts and feelings about herself or himself. Identity in this sense encompasses “one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 17). Others have called this aspect of identity “self-identity” (Giddens 1991), “self-understanding” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000), “senspratique” (Bourdieu 1990), “self-concept” (Rosenberg 1979; Gecas 1982), or the “real self” (Turner 1976). Whichever term we rely on, who we are is grounded in what it is possible to be within a social context. This depends upon a reading of our cultural environment. The self is a cultural and reflexive construction (Markus and Kitayama 1991) in which changes in culture can affect self-images (Callero 2003). These claims can be disputed, especially by those who argue that a sense of self is natural and biological, part of our human equipment. Rampant biologism has appeal, but it does little to explain the sophisticated differentiation and individuation that is an outcome of self-work.

The construct of identity develops from that of self. For some, identity is self as performed to others (Snow and Anderson 1987). Identity is the means by which persons connect the self into social organization by treating and enacting their selves (to themselves and as public markers) as the kind of individual society demands that they be. Because identities are presented, selves are never isolated from the communities in which they reside—selves belong to groups—and, as such, social psychologists recognize that cultures—both macro and micro—influence how individuals will see their selves and how they will reveal those selves to those around them. Both the internal introspection and the external performance of the self depend on culture. Issues of values, norms, practices, rituals, and customs—the bulwarks of a sociology of culture—come to play an essential role in understanding selves. Persons transform local cultures into selves—as Charles Horton Cooley (1902) suggested in understanding the looking-glass self—and then take those selves and display them to others in appropriate behavioral, organizational, and institutional domains.

Culture also provides markers of identity. Cultural objects (Griswold 1994) feature prominently in the identity construction process. Microsociological examination of this process affords cultural sociologists the opportunity to recognize how individuals rely upon culture to provide building blocks of the self. A central task of the identity construction process is connecting the self to a series of meaning structures that are culturally grounded. Glaeser (2000), in his ethnography of German police officers, argued that identities are produced by connecting the self with itself at other points in time; with other persons; with beliefs, ideas, and values; with the world in the widest sense. . . . If identifications are repeated and reconfirmed by others and thus stabilized, they congeal into parts of identities. (Pp. 9-10)

Cultural objects (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981)—like fashion (Crane 2000), music (Bennett 2006; Williams 2006), consumer brands (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, and Garolera 2001), or physical space (Glaeser 2000)—often serve as elements of identity. Silver (1996) argued that new college students
make considered decisions about which objects to leave at home and which objects to bring to school. The objects left at home anchor old identities, and the objects brought to college mark new, more independent identities. As a result, the consumables that individuals display are critical in assessing who they are and who they wish to be (Veblen 1899; Chapin 1935; Laumann and House 1970).

Cultural objects that we use to construct identity are not always tangible. Indeed, we often draw from more abstract cultural elements in performing identity, in part because the abstract nature of these concepts provides more flexibility for social actors. Narratives are often the means through which individuals engage in the self-reflexive process of identity construction. The stories people tell about themselves reflect on the self, and those stories are cultural in their content, structure, and mode of presentation. How people locate themselves in space, time, and social networks generates identity for self and others. The opposite is also true—the way individuals or groups are situated in others’ narrative also works to impose identity from the outside.

Mason-Schrock (1996) highlighted the constitutive power of narrative in the process of transsexuals’ construction of their “true self.” He demonstrated that narrative is particularly important to transsexuals because they must look beyond their biological bodies for signs of their “true” gender. To construct a self, transsexuals use cultural tropes to construct self-narratives that invoke a differently gendered body. This process is also cultural in that it often occurs in group settings, dependent on the interactional affirmation of others. Somers (1992, 1994) likewise stressed the importance of narrative to social life while showing how narratives both represent and constitute social actors and worlds in which they live. It is “narrative location [that] endows social actors with identities—however multiple, ambiguous, ephemeral, or conflicting they may be” (Somers 1992, 618).

Whether material or abstract, culture provides the constituent components of self-identity, and microsociological analysis is required to see how those components are put to use. In an influential article Spencer Cahill (1998, 131) pointed to what he labeled as “A Sociology of the Person,” examining the “socially defined, publicly visible beings of intersubjective experience.” Cahill argued that identities are “produced”—and then revealed—through a set of cultural strategies. This extends Cooley’s model of the production of selves, by incorporating intersubjective meanings, linking selves and cognitions. Cahill’s argument transforms the idea of the self from something that is alternatively perceived as an obdurate brain function—a biological feature of homo sapiens—or an idiosyncratic outcome of life experiences. In contrast, Cahill suggested that the person is linked to collective meanings, which are historically situated, as described by Ralph Turner (1976) in asserting the change in attitudes toward the self from being grounded institutional forces to operating from impulsive needs. Individuals, relying on the moral standards of their culture, can persuade themselves that their selves are real or authentic (Turner 1976; Mason-Schrock 1996; Williams 2006): as they feel, so are they truly. Unlike other, less cultural scholars of self, Cahill recognized that the person is an achievement that depends upon shared values. Selves can only exist within social systems that provide meaning.
This argument parallels that suggested by Zerubavel (1997) in his claims for a sociology of cognition: the self, like thinking, is neither universal nor individual but is situated within a community of identities.

**Interaction/Performance**

While the examination of interactional regimes has long been a critical component of the microsociological approach to social organization, essential to the development of symbolic interaction (Blumer 1969), and has been part of the philosophical tradition since Plato, the systematic linkage of interaction to performance was a decisive contribution of Erving Goffman (1959; but see Evreinov 1927). The idea of a performance suggests the centrality of cultural scripts and the intersection of actor and audience, and so links this approach into group cultures and to a sociology of thinking. That we comfortably refer to a cultural script suggests that consensual agreement exists on behavioral expectations. The dramaturgical perspective in sociology (Messinger, Sampson, and Towne 1962; Brissett and Edgley 1990) establishes cultural understandings as central to action. Recent theoretical advances in the examination of public displays and commemorations (e.g., Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006) have incorporated performance, ritual, and commemoration into Alexander's (2006) “Strong Program” of cultural sociology to bridge the division between individual action and social forces. Although performance can be viewed as separate from the choices of individuals to act (or not) in particular fashions, this approach grows out of the argument of Randall Collins (1981, 2004) that macrosociology has a microsociological foundation, a foundation that depends upon shared attention, expectations, and emotional entrainment. Collins provided an important bridge for treating sociology as a seamless whole, but it requires that performance should not only be theorized but also observed in situ in teams, families, congregations, clubs, bars, and other “stages.”

Magnuson’s (2007; Schwalbe 1996) treatment of the mythopoetic men’s movement illustrates how social interaction and performance are guided by cultural scripts, transmitting shared and validated meanings. Magnuson demonstrated that small group leaders draw from the authority embedded in the role of leader to structure the identity of the group and create the conditions of socialization by which group culture is conveyed to participants. Interaction occasions, whether sponsoring rituals or sanctioning breaches, are the means through which cultural meanings about masculinity are transferred and reproduced. The definition of masculinity results from negotiations and contingency within a local system of norms, values, and expectations. Interaction links the understanding of how broader structures, like the meaning of masculinity, emerge from the situated social relations. Studying interaction as a domain in itself provides cultural sociologists with tools for understanding how meaning structures are reproduced through microlevel performance.
Not only does the performance metaphor borrow from the image of the theater, but it is also, significantly, a perspective that depends upon institutions that have cultural authority. The metaphor of performance implies the presence of performers, technicians, and audience (Goffman 1959; Messinger, Sampson, and Towne 1962), and along with this a means by which lines of action (Blumer 1969) are coordinated. Such an image of dramaturgy builds on both culture with a capital C and culture with a small c. In examining performance, the process of negotiation becomes centrally relevant. It is not only that “interaction happens” as if on a stage, but also that interaction is ritualized in such a way that it becomes predictable, replicable, and part of the cultural DNA of society. Microsociology, with its focus on how actors shape behavior while adjusting to their immediate context, emphasizes how social actors negotiate to produce common alignment (Strauss 1978; Stokes and Hewitt 1976). As actors negotiate, context both liberates and constrains their performances. This happens through the cultural logics that their communities permit, but also in how actors use the cultural tools available to them to act in (and on) the world. With the attempts of social theorists—haute cultural theorists (Amy Binder, personal communication, 2007)—to establish a macro-micro link (Giddens 1984; Sewell 1992), the recognition that cultural structures are both liberating and constraining (facilitating and limiting agency) has become widely acknowledged. As sociologists recognized once they began using cultural domains as their case, the intersection of the person and institution is essential to appreciating how a malleable and yet real social order is possible. This owes much to the now fashionable emphasis on meaning as crucial to how societies are simultaneously situated and structured.

A study of gang identity, Garot (2007), exposed this dual role of culture in everyday performance. Interaction rituals related to claiming gang identity are tense performance venues where gang members are constrained by the cultural scripts that structure interactions. Cultural rules dictate that once asked, “Where you from?” a response is required. This demands the announcement of a situated identity. If not enacted properly, the response can lead to an initiation of violence. While culture—through shared scripts—demands a response, it also provides “props” within that interactional environment through which actors can present protective and appropriate performances. “Knowing how to work these alternatives in the appropriate circumstances comprises tools for molding identity,” and this becomes an important skill in navigating the landscape of gang territory (Garot 2007, 77). This recognition of the importance of an integration of a structural grounding for interaction and agentic choice provides the basis for an interaction order (Goffman 1983; Rawls 1987): structural, but always linked to micro-sociological concerns.
Emotion

When sociologists first began to colonize emotion in the late 1970s (Hochschild 1979; Shott 1979) the dominion of sociology appeared complete. For if a phenomenon seemingly so internal, so psychological, so biological as emotion could be tamed by the social, the human was sociological in its warp and woof, in anger and in love. As a response of individual actors the examination of emotion comfortably belongs to microsociology. As Arlie Hochschild noted in her influential 1983 volume, *The Managed Heart*, emotion must be understood as a generated and constrained cultural system: in her case, the culture of work organizations, such as airlines and collection agencies. Emotion constitutes a form of labor that is required as part of being a competent and moral worker (Domagalski 1999; Ashforth and Humphrey 1993).

Extensions of the emotion management approach continue to feature prominently in sociological research on emotions. Much research uses the workplace context to explore how specific social worlds, and their attendant social rules, structure displays and responses to emotion (Sanders 2004; Francis, Monahan, and Berger 1999; Saavedera and Van Dyne 1999; Ashford and Humphrey 1993). However, the relevance of an emotion management approach extends beyond work contexts. Across domains, attention must be paid to the actors, setting, and timing of emotion within any cultural context. For instance, Greer (2002) examined how inmates in a women’s prison manage emotions within both the institutional order of the prison and the rules of interpersonal interaction among fellow inmates. An environment with such restricted emotional expression inhibits “emotional achievement” (Yang 2000) and leads to a “vicious interaction cycle, one that limits the development of individual resources for coping with emotional experiences and discourages formulation of . . . supportive social relationships” (Greer 2002, 134). Status distinctions within an organization also dictate the emotional responses expected, displayed, and reciprocated, with the more powerful able to set the standards of emotional display (Stein 1989). Emotion is a part of the expressive (hence, cultural) repertoire of a social system. Affect can be socialized and rewarded or sanctioned and stigmatized, but emotional display is inevitably a mechanism through which a culture is given form and expression.

This claim is applied to a range of emotions, both positive and negative, and sociologists debate the extent to which emotions are internal or learned as a part of culture (Kemper 1978). Discussing sympathy biography and sympathy margins, Candace Clark (1987) forcefully argued that emotion can only be understood as situated within interactional regimes. Clark concluded that sympathy—and, by implication, other emotions—are embedded in local situations; sympathy becomes meaningful as part of a cultural repertoire, learned and used within local contexts. This view of emotion is congruent with studies of embarrassment that reveal the importance of role distance to avoid stigma (Gross and Stone 1964; Modigliani 1968; Goffman 1961) and of humor and laughter as strategies.
of social control (Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Mulkay 1988; Billig 2006). While these displays contain considerable affect, not always fully under conscious control, the situations that produce them and their responses are linked to cultural and institutional demands.

The relationship between culture and emotion is not unidirectional, with culture shaping the management and display of emotion. Emotion also shapes culture. Garot (2004) illustrated how client's emotional displays at a Section 8 housing office motivate social workers to move beyond their role as detached, neutral bureaucrats. Vince (2006) showed how managers' efforts at controlling emotions produce additional, unintended emotional dynamics within an organization during a company takeover. Both pieces illuminate the reciprocal relationship between emotions and culture and, in doing so, push microsociologists to examine how emotions can change rules as well as how “feeling rules” manage emotions.

Emotion is now a central research node in which culture and microsociology have been integrated. Culture channels emotion, and emotion channels cultural performance. The literature on emotion in work, in social action, in family dynamics, and at play is now extensive, but in each instance actors display emotions because of their propriety and suitability, and this recognition of the strategic deployment of emotions—both cognitive and behavioral—suggests that our heat and coldness derive from cultural training, scripts, and interpretations.

Conclusion

Some domains of sociology treat groups and individuals as merely units to be shaped by a powerful, robust, if invisible, societal culture. At times, this has characterized elements of the sociology of culture, not necessarily explicitly, but implicitly because the focus has been on what is described as “the big picture.” Such an approach—emphasizing “social fact”—is part of the Durkheimian birthright of the discipline. This view reflects what we might describe as a passive sociology: a world in which things happen—happen systematically, of course—but without strategic and heedful actors making them happen. Erasing the actor from the process of cultural creation, diffusion, and consequences requires that one turn away from the interactional and performative moment.

Such a reading, although understandable, excises humanity, as well as many recent developments in cultural theory. Our approach examines how personal or group choices shape institutional meaning, while simultaneously understanding how these choices depend upon the powerful constraints under which individuals and groups operate; what Hallett and Ventresca (2006) spoke of as “inhabited institutions” (see also Binder 2007). Ideas do not just appear and spread; they are established, manipulated, and promoted by individuals and groups. Yes, we ride on steel tracks laid down by others, but at critical moments we may become switchmen. A strong program of cultural sociology depends both on action and limits.
The contribution of a microsociological analysis is to illuminate agency in cultural theory. We recognize agency in the development, diffusion, and deployment of cultural forms and objects. Admittedly the process is recursive. Interactional arenas have been shaped and channeled by larger forces, but these forces are themselves created through the remarkable cloaked power of agency. Microsociology offers students of culture an opportunity to examine the workings of this recursive relationship. The methodological tools of microsociology—ethnographic observation, experiments, interviews—are well suited to deliver the fine-grained analysis necessary to reveal how individuals and groups build culture and how culture builds individuals and groups. Although microsociological approaches offer this characteristic way of seeing the world, their usefulness to cultural scholars extends beyond the empirical. By exposing the workings of culture, microsociology encourages us to theorize the connections between meaning, behavior, and structure.

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The five core concepts that we have presented in this article—groups, cognition, identity, performance, and emotion—blend into one another. There is no separating them, as all rely upon behavioral demands, dramaturgical preferences, communities of thought, and conceptualizations of personhood. This is as it should be. Everything is bound to everything else—groups, individuals, behavior, cognition, and affect—yet together they provide a distinctive way in which sociologists can examine how culture, across its various conceptions, has an effect and is effected. In the end, the sweep of broad savannahs may be appealing for a photographer with a wide-angle lens, but if one wishes to observe life in motion, one must look just beneath the surface where action lies. The task of the social psychological culturalist is to use the sociological microscope to reveal that bustling domain in its local glory.

Note

1. The labels of microsociology and social psychology refer to overlapping, but not identical, domains within sociology. As a general rule, all social psychology—with its focus upon individual action, self, perception, cognition, attitudes, interaction, and groups—can be defined as falling within the rubric of microsociology. Some forms of microsociology, however, do not presume internal states but constitute a microstructural sociology that focuses on the analysis of relations or situations, rather than individual selves or motivations. The writings of Simmel (or, later, Goffman or Sacks) are microsociological, but they are
distinct from traditional sociological social psychology since they ignore characteristics of individual actors and rather, emphasize situated or structural relations. Still, the overlap is large. In this article that focuses on individuals, groups, and cultures, we use the two labels interchangeably when we refer to the entire approach that examines culture in light of individuals and groups.

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