

Culture and Race/Ethnicity: Bolder, Deeper, and Broader

By
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The role of cultural analysis in the sociology of race, ethnicity, and immigration varies across subject matter. Primarily for political reasons, it has been marginalized in the study of ethnic/racial inequality, though new work is reclaiming culture in this important context. It has an unacknowledged presence in studies of discrimination and domination, but is explicit in macro and historical studies. This article surveys these subfields and makes a call for bolder, deeper, and broader cultural analysis in the field. More work is needed on cultural assimilation, how inequality and discrimination produce racial and ethnic meanings, how ethnic and racial cultures affect interests through variations in conceptions of the meaning of life, how sending state cultures affect immigrant and ethnic cultures in the United States, and how globalization is Americanizing immigrants before they even leave their homelands.

Keywords: ethnicity; immigration; race; culture; globalization; inequality

The role of culture in the sociological study of race, ethnicity, and the related field of immigration is growing steadily but unevenly. Cultural analysis as a strategy has lagged in one of the most central areas of research: variation between racial/ethnic groups in socioeconomic mobility. Here, largely for political reasons, culture tends to be a “last resort” explanation. The

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challenge for scholars in this area has been to analyze ethnic or racial cultures without putting responsibility on disadvantaged groups for their plight. Although cultural analysis has also lagged in studies of discrimination and racism, it is a growing presence there, as well as in assimilation and studies of the construction of racial meanings and categories.

From the perspective of cultural sociology, the study of race and ethnicity should be bolder, deeper, and broader. By *bolder*, I mean that sociologists should not shy away from cultural questions in achievement and assimilation. This requires assessing the role of culture in ethnic and racial inequality and the nature of American culture. By *deeper*, I mean that we should analyze possible ethnic and racial variations on “existential” questions—the meaning of life itself—as this may play a role in observable variations and patterns. By *broader*, I mean a truly comparative and global approach that sees American ethnic patterns in relation to other societies and understands American immigrant groups as possibly shaped by the cultures of their origins. An issue in all of these areas is the existence and nature of intrinsically ethnic or racial cultures. I am less concerned here with theoretical approach than with subject matter, though I emphasize meanings, boundaries, and repertoires to understand how racial and ethnic culture might matter, as well as a basic insight from cultural analysis: culture shapes interests.

Space limitations allow only a focused overview of the field concentrating on the key literatures mentioned above, all in the American context, which show varying degrees of prominence of culture. I then outline an agenda for the field to become more cultural, emphasizing areas that seem especially ripe for cultural analysis.

The Sociology of Race and Ethnicity in the United States: Key Questions

The field of race and ethnicity has few direct roots to the classical theorists. Tocqueville and Weber provide the most insight. Tocqueville’s (1990) writings on race, based on observations in 1831 and 1832, focused on black slavery and conflict with American Indians in the United States, are impressively perceptive but often neglected. Tocqueville trenchantly articulated his view: blacks and Indians suffered from white tyranny; whites taught blacks self-hatred and stripped them of language, religion, and family; American Indians faced genocide; and slavery would end but be replaced by “Jim Crow” norms of domination. Weber devoted little attention to race and ethnicity but offered a definition that endures: “We shall call ‘ethnic groups’ those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration” (Weber 1968, 389; see Cornell and Hartmann [2007] for a discussion).

These are useful contributions, but compared to other fields such as religion, capitalism, and politics, the classical theorists did not give American sociologists much to build on. Moreover, the American experience with race and ethnicity, so

overwhelmingly defined by barbarous slavery, the slaughter of American Indians, and the dramatic experience of mass immigration, seemed unique in the world and required theories and concepts not derived from European sources. American sociologists rose to the occasion, with du Bois (1903/2005) focusing on the legacies of slavery and Park (1950) and Thomas and Znaniecki (1984) contributing more to the study of immigrant incorporation. The uniqueness of the American experience, however, has led the field—despite the global perspectives of du Bois, Park, and Thomas and Znaniecki—to tend toward an almost parochial U.S. focus.

The key questions of the field today continue to come out of the American experience with racial oppression and immigration. American sociologists of race and ethnicity typically focus on the dynamics of racial/ethnic inequality, providing studies of income, education, discrimination, public opinion about race, and racially marked poor neighborhoods. They also concentrate on how immigrants adapt to life in the United States, often also addressing various inequalities (the reduction of inequalities suggests assimilation is taking place). These subjects may be considered the core of the field, in part because of their long traditions, and in part because they receive considerable support from major institutions, especially the Russell Sage Foundation and the Social Science Research Council.

The dominant methodologies in these studies include quantitative analyses, especially regression, performed by sociologists, demographers, and economists. Equally prominent are qualitative studies, most typically interviews and ethnographies, to get at the subjective experiences of ethnicity and race. Many studies combine the two methods.

Another more recent strand of research unites sociologists with political scientists, anthropologists, historians, and legal scholars. It focuses on how races are defined, categorized, constructed, and dominated, and is typically more historical in methodology. Unlike studies of inequality, these works are more macro in scope and look at patterns of racial hierarchy over long periods or sometimes in remote history.

Explaining Achievement: Culture Is the Last Resort

Studies of ethnic or racial variations in economic or educational achievement have long been at the center of the sociology of race and ethnicity. With a few exceptions, such as the study of ethnic variations in entrepreneurship (e.g., Light 1972), however, cultural analysis in this area has lagged behind other subfields of research since the 1960s. This is primarily for political rather than sociological reasons. However, scholars have made important recent attempts to bring culture in while avoiding political pitfalls.

The political implications of cultural explanation

Orlando Patterson (2006) has argued that scholars avoid cultural explanations of racial inequality because of misconceptions: that cultural explanations blame

the victim; that they are deterministic, turning people into robots; and that culture does not change. Although Patterson singled out scholars in economics and political science, the ghost of Oscar Lewis (1969), the originator of the “culture of poverty” argument, has haunted the sociology of poverty (Lamont and Small forthcoming) and also the sociology of ethnicity and achievement. Most simply put, Lewis argued that cultural practices and values of the poor—especially a lack of value on achievement—kept them in poverty.

The misconceptions Patterson noted arose in part from political commitments. The politics of cultural explanations of black poverty exploded in 1965 when the so-called Moynihan Report, named after the author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a social scientist and assistant secretary of labor, was leaked to the press. Moynihan argued that slavery had destroyed the black family and that stable families were key to upward mobility. Press accounts created an angry backlash from those who believed Moynihan was calling for policy to remake black families (and thus black culture) rather than simply provide jobs (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). The controversy showed that for many, identifying ethnic or racial cultural beliefs and practices that contribute to poverty is bad because it blames the victim, and blaming the victim is bad because it implies there is no shared responsibility for ethnic inequality (Patterson 1997).

One might add another reason to those listed by Patterson for the marginality of culture in this subfield: some early attempts to invoke ethnic culture were very weak. Steinberg (1981/1989) used comparative analysis to attack cultural arguments that he called “ethnic myths” (e.g., that Jews are academically oriented and Catholics are not). He showed that many cultural theories of achievement were based on faulty assumptions that different groups are similar in skill and education levels.

In this view, culture was only a trait that people had in varying types, rather than a constitutive force that defined groups themselves or elements of their ethnic worlds. This view fit well with quantitative analyses of inequality, where culture is often a residual variable. Sociologists thus learned to appeal to culture only as a last resort—*after* controlling for all ostensibly noncultural factors to explain variation in achievement, such as human capital, economic opportunities, social capital, and other “structural” variables. Mostly neglected by the Left, cultural explanations of black or Latino poverty became the province of the Right (Patterson 1997; Hein 2006).

Analyzing culture without blaming the victim

In this environment, it was a bold move when Wilson (1987), a supporter of a generous welfare state, acknowledged the reality and independent effects of certain cultural traits, such as a tendency toward tardiness or absenteeism at work, when explaining the poverty of the black “underclass.” In a later work, Wilson (1996) used sophisticated cultural sociological concepts to show that detrimental behavior can become entrenched and self-reproducing. However, Wilson also

argued that culture was externally created and uninteresting from the point of view of race and ethnicity. He explained that “culture is a response to social structural constraints and opportunities” (Wilson 1987, 61) and that “group variations in behavior, norms and values often reflect variations in group access to channels of privilege and influence” (Wilson 1987, 75).

This view—that culture has effects but is decoupled from ethnicity or race, is not a fundamental cause, and thus is not appropriate as a focus of social policy—can be found in other works. For example, Anderson (1990, 3) discussed new role models in the black inner city who, contemptuous of low-status jobs, arose due to the lack of good jobs; and Waters (1999) presented a study of recent black immigrants, whose proachievement culture withered away in the face of continual experiences with discrimination. This approach represents a sociological as well as political move: it takes cultural explanations back from the Right, and then banishes them from policy discussion because culture is epiphenomenal. Why talk about culture, or direct policy toward “fixing” cultures of poverty, if those cultures are simply a response to social and material conditions? Moreover, this theory of culture avoided blaming the victim by denying that racial or ethnic cultures were in play at all. Rather, a culture of blocked opportunity (somehow) arises in any poor group to shape behavior (Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005).

Prominent in this approach is the theory of “segmented assimilation” (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), where immigrants vary in three background factors, including human capital, family composition (e.g., whether both parents are present), and context of reception (e.g., whether a group faces significant racism or whether it receives assistance as refugees). Low human capital, broken families, and racism make it more likely that an immigrant group will experience “dissonant acculturation,” where the children—but not the parents, who find their children difficult to understand and control—assimilate into the “oppositional cultures” of poorer American minorities. Although this may appear to be a culture of poverty argument, in fact the stress here is on how cultures are *not* brought to America by particular groups but are created by or learned in structural conditions in the United States.

Is a theory of ethnic or racial culture (as opposed to a culture of class and blocked opportunity) possible in this context that does not appear to blame the victim? Carter’s (2005) work suggests that it is. Focusing on the school context and using a variety of concepts from cultural sociology, including cultural capital, cultural tool kits, and symbolic boundaries, she examined the distinctions between the cultures of low-income African American and Latino students and the cultures of public schools. She argued that these students develop positive cultures of solidarity and distinction, creating cultural boundaries between themselves and others. School success depends in part on how they do this. In Carter’s analysis, the most successful are the “cultural straddlers” who are able to deploy tools to play by the cultural rules of the school as well as the cultural rules of the peer group. Carter distinguished her approach from those who view cultures as epiphenomenal: “For many African American and Latino youths, their ethno-racial cultures

are important sources of strength and are not merely reactive or adaptive by-products of their positions in a stratified opportunity structure” (p. vii).

Another way to use cultural analysis and avoid blaming the victim is to discuss the role of culture in ethnic or racial group *success*. Kao and Thompson (2003) noted that cultural theories are prominent to account for Asian American educational success, which remains distinctive even after controlling for human capital variables. Neckerman, Carter, and Lee (1999) assessed the cultures of middle-class African Americans, showing that these groups exhibit “minority cultures of mobility,” or cultural strategies and tools for getting along and moving upward in a predominately white world that may misjudge and repress them. Using techniques such as “caucusing” for solidarity and support, or conspicuously dressing and speaking in particular ways that signal their class status, they minimize the impacts of negative treatment from whites.

Other recent moves have brought creative cultural arguments to the study of disadvantaged minorities but do not use culture to explain achievement. For example, Lee (2002) found a key role for “cultural brokers” in stores owned by Korean or Jewish merchants in Harlem. These are black employees (though typically black immigrants rather than African Americans) who help storeowners understand inner-city black culture. Lee showed that these cultural brokers play an especially important role in mitigating conflict. In dialog with Robert Wuthnow, McRoberts (2003) analyzed the cultural impact of black churches in poor neighborhoods, arguing that their “religious presence,” or the ideas, rituals, and symbols that they generate, has a positive impact on voluntary association. Small (2004) used cultural analysis to explain why neighborhood poverty is sometimes associated with low social capital and sometimes not. In his view, neighborhood “frames” differ in how conducive they are to participation; those who find their best opportunities for upward mobility in their neighborhoods are more likely to hold frames conducive to participation (p. 179).

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Sociologists, then, are making more attempts to understand the cultures of ethnic groups in the contexts of inequality and poverty. Politically, it is a delicate endeavor, and even the most explicitly cultural accounts often avoid describing any intrinsically ethnic cultures, internally generated or traceable to ancestral homelands, that impact achievement.

Studies of Racial Domination

Scholars of racial domination, and specifically discrimination and racism, typically make cultural arguments without acknowledging that they are doing so. “Prejudice” and “stereotypes” have cognitive components, but studies rarely analyze them explicitly as cultural phenomena or systems of meaning. Similarly, studies defining discrimination and racism as part of a system of power share with neoinstitutional theory the notions of taken-for-granted meanings, rules, and scripts, but these studies seldom engage neoinstitutionalism (see, for example, Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes 1994).

We can also find unacknowledged cultural arguments in public opinion studies of discrimination and racism, which typically see attitudes as social-psychological phenomena (Edles 2002). Consider “symbolic racism” theory in public opinion studies. In this view, white Americans view black Americans as lacking in traditional values such as work ethic, individual responsibility, and ability to defer gratification. These attitudes—or more precisely, these *meanings* many European Americans perceive in African Americans—are correlated with opposition to policies to benefit blacks (Kinder and Sanders 1996). In Bobo’s (2001) view, the driving force behind white opposition to policies to benefit blacks is not a liberal ideology but a perceived threat to white status. Although Bobo’s view seems to emphasize group interests, it still has a strong cultural component because it is *perceptions* of threat—a cognitive, cultural phenomenon—that drive white interests and attitudes (p. 206).

Explicitly cultural approaches to racial domination are more common in historical work. Omi and Winant (1994) focused on the process of “racial formation,” itself based on “racial projects,” which they defined as “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56). Edles (2002) put culture front and center in her definition of racism, which is “a specific kind of racialized system of meaning . . . in which (implicitly or explicitly) physical ‘racial’ differences between groups are assumed to reflect internal (moral, personality, intellectual) differences, and that these differences are organized both biologically and hierarchically, i.e., racist systems of meaning suppose that on the basis of genetic inheritance, some groups are innately superior to others” (p. 101, emphasis removed).

Similar models of culture play a prominent role in big-picture, comparative-historical studies of racial domination. Glenn’s (2002) study of racial and gender domination through citizenship and labor in the American South, Southwest, and Hawaii captured this approach well and showed how the creation of racial meanings through domination is an interactive process. She structured her comparative analysis with three main dimensions—representation (symbols, language, and images that express race and gender meanings), micro-interaction (focusing on social norms), and social structure (rules regulating power; p. 12), showing the different ways employers used race and gender to control labor and the ways subordinated groups resisted. Patterson (2005) presented a framework for

understanding race stratification in different parts of the African diaspora, including in his analysis a variety of interacting factors, such as the kind of slave system present, geography, African cultural background, the ethnic demography of the host society, and the nature of European culture. His approach shows why, for example, North America produced a “binary mode” characterized by the one-drop rule as an instrument of oppression, while the Afro-Caribbean mode has race as continuum, where black and brown people dominate politics and the professions and play a significant role in business in a culturally pluralistic society.

There is no obvious reason why culture plays a clear and explicit role in macro, historical studies of racial domination while it is often muted in studies of the contemporary United States. Rather than political concerns, the likely reason for the absence of explicit cultural analysis is that the agenda in this research is to document that discrimination occurs and to measure its effects rather than to understand how and why it occurs.

The Social Construction of Race

Work on the *construction* of racial categories and identities, which may or may not have a domination component, is also strongly cultural in orientation (e.g., Nagel 1994; Cornell and Hartmann 2007). These studies typically see the construction of race and racial or ethnic identity as an interactive process—part assertion and part ascription—through which race gains meaning or significance. Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov (2004, 45) invited us to think of ethnicity as a cognitive phenomenon: “Race, ethnicity, and nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world—not ontological but epistemological realities.”

The state may be a key actor in the categorization process. Skrentny (2002, 2006) has shown how policy makers’ cultural, cognitive process of analogizing some racial categories (Latinos, Asian American, American Indians) and even nonracial (women, the disabled) as similar to African Americans, while excluding others (white ethnics, gays/lesbians) shaped the political dynamics of inclusion in minority rights programs. Regarding race/ethnicity, this process created panethnic categories that became the American state’s “official minorities.” The state may also play the role of institutionalizing categories that are the result of political or even scientific contestation. In his analysis of how political pressure led the U.S. government to require that members of different races be included as research subjects in medical studies, Epstein (2007) showed how the categories of racial belonging and political mobilization also came to serve as categories for scientific purposes. At the same time, he considered how this new attention to the biology of racial difference alters the broader meanings of race in U.S. society.

However, works such as these are mostly about how political processes—movements and the state—create racial meanings. Lamont’s (2000) analysis of black and white working-class men in the United States and France shows how

in everyday life these men draw symbolic or moral boundaries that specify position in relationships and assign moral meanings to racial markers. In the U.S. case, she found that blacks and whites both use moral criteria to distinguish themselves from others. Whites are more likely to use a standard of “the disciplined self,” which emphasizes integrity and work ethic. Blacks, on the other hand, are more likely to use “the caring self” as a standard, looking with disapproval on those they consider exploitative or lacking in compassion.

Studies of the construction of race, where race is a dependent variable, are by their very nature cultural. This approach can be brought fruitfully into (currently) less cultural areas of the field to show how race is constructed through everyday social interaction, which may include discrimination and domination (e.g., Staiger 2006) and/or assess how racial inequality creates racial meanings.

New Frontiers for Cultural Analysis: Bolder, Deeper, and Broader Approaches to Ethnic Cultures

A bolder, deeper, and broader questioning of ethnic and racial cultures would bring cultural analysis to new or understudied topics. Especially ripe for more energetic analysis are assimilation, the racial/ethnic mapping of American culture on “existential” questions, attention to sending state cultures to understand ethnic cultures in the United States, and the impacts of globalization on ethnic culture.

Bolder approaches to cultural assimilation and American culture

For several years, “assimilation” was almost a dirty word as scholars preferred to study “acculturation” or “transnationalism.” But it has made a comeback, partly on the strength of Portes’s work (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001) and that of Alba and Nee (2003), and partly because it is undeniable that there is a process whereby ethnic differences disappear. That is, ethnic groups become *assimilated*. What has been surprising is how easily “culture” can be written out of a concept that seems to have a significant cultural component—“cultural assimilation” was a key idea in the early sociology of race and ethnicity (Gordon 1964). More typically, sociologists today measure assimilation quantitatively in statistics of residential patterns, language use, employment, and marriage partners (e.g., Waters and Jiménez 2005).

Recently, however, sociologists have taken the assimilation concept into new, explicitly cultural directions. Alba (2005), for example, building on work in cultural sociology, has moved toward conceptualizing assimilation as a process of movement across or movement of cultural boundaries. Examining language acquisition and religion as cultural phenomena, as well as citizenship and race, Alba showed how boundaries separating immigrant groups from the majority may be “bright” (unambiguous) or “blurry.” Individuals may cross boundaries by assimilating, or the boundaries themselves may shift, redefining formerly immigrant practices as part of the mainstream.

The more expressive aspects of ethnic culture, however, and the ways these fit into the wider American culture, are relatively understudied. Yet there is promising work in this direction. Building on work on symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979; Waters 1990) that emphasized the ways white ethnics have maintained ties to their ethnic background through rituals, foods, and elective ties after leaving their ethnic neighborhoods, Jiménez (2004) explored the identities and cultural lives of multiethnic Mexican Americans (individuals with one Mexican-descent parent and one white, non-Hispanic parent). He showed how their Mexican side is continually replenished through contact with Mexican neighborhoods, political movements, and celebrations whereas the “cultural stuff” of their non-Mexican ancestry, which is typically a European ethnicity or a mix of European ethnicities, tends to be in short supply. Following Cornell (2000), who used the cultural concept of narrative to understand ethnic identity, Jiménez (2004) documented the tensions of mixed-background Mexican Americans’ participation in the “Mexican American narrative” that is only partially their own.

A related area of inquiry is the distinctively American yet still divergent cultures developed by ethnic groups in the United States. Here, scholars address not just culture as cognitive patterns but also art, fashion, and other forms of representation. Lee and Zhou’s (2004) edited volume on young Asian Americans shows the potential of this approach. Bringing an American-style sociological sensibility to the Birmingham School theorists, they showed how Asian American youth have created a new hybrid culture—not clearly American, not clearly Asian—out of American and Asian elements. Their authors examined such cultural forms as beauty contests, import car racing, gangs, consumer culture, and campus religious groups and revealed their meaning and significance within ethnic cultures.

Another approach is to examine the role that race plays in mainstream institutions’ interpretations of racial and ethnic groups’ expressive culture. For example, we can build on Binder’s (1993) comparison of media constructions of harm in two popular music genres of the late 1980s—heavy metal and rap, both of which were assumed to have racially distinct producers and audiences. While writers expressed concern that young white audiences might indulge in self-inflicted, harmful activities as a result of listening to heavy metal—taking drugs, having sex, and attempting suicide—they articulated an altogether different concern about black rap audiences, who were seen to inflict harm on the rest of society, by raping women, killing cops, and engaging in gang warfare. Controlling for the content of the lyrics in both genres, Binder demonstrated that broad cultural ideas about race inform how the media (and others) perceive popular culture objects.

Clearly, there is more to be done in this area. What are the sources of the new ethnic cultures? How are they similar to or different from mainstream white or black cultural styles? More important, studies of cultural assimilation lead to questions of what *American* culture is in the first place.

A full understanding of ethnic cultures would need to be comparative—ethnic minority cultures must be understood in relation to majority cultures. Too often, research on race and ethnicity is only on racial and ethnic *minorities* (the American Sociological Association has a Section on Racial and Ethnic Minorities, rather than

simply on Race and Ethnicity). Note, for example, that Portes and Rumbaut's (1996) study of second-generation assimilation makes a strong argument about the impact of nonwhite race yet contains no data on non-Latino white Americans. But if we do not know what white culture or "American" culture looks like, how can we know what is distinctive about nonwhite groups, or about immigrant groups?

Alba's (2005; Alba and Nee 2003) and Lamont's (2000) works on boundaries are important steps toward an approach that takes American culture seriously. We can conceive of American society and culture as a set of boundaries that define some groups as "in" and others as "out." But we can know more of the cultural stuff within the boundaries. For example, if we are to claim that import car racing makes Asian American youth culture distinctive, we need to be able to describe the practices of comparable white or black youth. But a bolder approach to ethnicity, race, and American culture would also need to get deeper.

Getting deeper: An existential cultural sociology of race and ethnicity

We should also know more about the subjective experiences and meanings, as well as distinctive practices, that might profoundly shape experience. This is the key contribution of cultural sociology: showing how culture shapes interests. Of course, mapping American culture is a daunting task to say the least. Given the class and regional differences in the United States, does it even make sense to search for a mainstream American culture—and its relation to ethnic and racial cultures?

One useful place to start might be the classic study of how Americans find meaning in their lives, *Habits of the Heart* (Bellah et al. 1985). Bellah and his colleagues (1985) limited their focus to white, middle-class Americans but provided unprecedented depth and sophistication in their analysis. They showed how American cultural traditions of "utilitarian individualism" (the belief in self-improvement through individual initiative) and "expressive individualism" (the cultivation of the self) are manifested and, in particular, in the ways white, middle-class Americans think about success, justice, and freedom. In other words, they showed how culture can shape interests.

What is needed is a truly comparative *Habits of the Heart*: an analysis of different ethnic or racial (or indeed class) groups within the United States. Wary of blaming victims or casting cultures negatively, many sociologists of ethnic achievement emphasize or assume similarities, or even uniformity, in what different ethnic groups, on average, want out of life. They assume all ethnic and racial groups have the same interests. But is this a credible assumption? To be sure, studies indicate similarly high educational aspirations of nonwhite and white youth. But it is far from clear if it means the same thing when individuals from different ethnic or racial cultures say they want to go to college or graduate from school (Kao and Thompson 2003). Given all of the variation in ethnic cultures, and the cultural diversity so often celebrated in the American mosaic, is it likely, or even possible, that all groups on average want all the same things out of life, in the same degree, and balance competing demands in the same ways? Does everyone see the same meaning in life?

Lamont (2000) offered a start toward a multicultural *Habits of the Heart*. As discussed above, she specifically compared black and white working-class men on a variety of factors—including definitions of success. And she found some variation. “Compared to whites,” she wrote, “blacks are more likely to define success in financial terms (half of blue-collar blacks compared to a third of their white counterparts) and to praise ambition (a third of black workers compared to a fourth of whites). In fact, more black workers value standards of evaluation associated with the upper half, such as money” (p. 117).

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Variations in the meaning of life likely can be found between ethnicities within racial groupings. For example, Kao (1995) found strong evidence of cultural effects in explaining Asian American educational patterns showing high achievement. Even after controlling for human capital factors, Asian Americans earn higher grades than whites. After adding variables for ethnicity, however, she found variation between Asian subgroups. Only Chinese, Koreans, Southeast Asians, and South Asians earned higher grades than did whites. Filipinos, Japanese, and Pacific Islanders earned grades similar to whites, and Pacific Islanders showed more signs of education disadvantage than other groups typically considered “Asian.” Desmond and Turley (2007) showed the importance of “familism” among Hispanics, particularly Mexican Americans, and specifically the importance of remaining at home during college years—a choice that often leads to lower levels of achievement.

The common practice of grouping all whites together is also unwarranted on “meaning of life” questions. For example, Stryker (1981) found Jewish American understandings of success emphasized educational and occupational status when compared with other whites. Alba (2006) found underrepresentation of Catholic white ethnics on the faculties of elite universities and concluded that white elites draw distinctions between whites and discriminate, particularly against Italian Americans. Massey (2006) countered with an alternative explanation that also suggests cultural variation among whites, arguing that Italian American underrepresentation could be the result of “the selective movement of Italians toward other, more

attractive occupations” (p. 548). Waldinger (1996) showed that ethnic employment niches exist for Jewish Americans and Italian Americans, as well as nonwhite groups in New York. In these occupational sectors where members of particular ethnic groups are found in concentrated numbers, wages may be higher than in other sectors, suggesting either discrimination outside the niche or some special (cultural?) resolve that allows for superior performance. Intermarriage is another area where we may see variation in cultural orientations as well as intraracial variation. In an examination of mobility in the United Kingdom, Peach (2005) found that the Irish and black Caribbean immigrants resemble each other and are moving toward integration, whereas Jews and Indians, despite higher incomes and greater penetration into suburbia, show lower integration, particularly regarding intermarriage.

These variations suggest the need for more debate on what is going on—is it possible that ethnic and racial groups vary in their career preferences and what they consider to be a satisfying or meaningful life, including a satisfying marital or personal life? If so, how do they vary? Most important, how does behavior correspond to perceptions of the meaning of life? Sociologists of race and ethnicity are uniquely situated to offer insights on the nature of U.S. culture and should take nothing for granted on the existence and nature of ethnic cultures within racial groupings and a diversity of “habits of the heart” for different populations. Doing so would hardly be a radical move. From the view of cultural sociology, the point is simple: culture can shape interests.

Broadening horizons: How do immigrants’ national cultures and globalization matter?

Scholars of race and ethnicity give little attention to the connection between ethnic cultures in the United States and how they originally appeared in their sending states. Despite growing interest in transnationalism, it is more common for scholars’ attention—and thus their theorizing—to begin and end at the U.S. borders. This is perhaps most explicit in the theory of segmented assimilation, which places great importance on “contexts of *reception*.” Immigrants might bring human capital, or intact or broken families, but that is pretty much all they bring. Inattention is also apparent in attempts to understand the effort and success of East and South Asian students in American education. Typically, scholars either emphasize strategies to counteract discrimination in the United States or casually invoke Asian values on education to explain the relative success of Asian Americans (see Kao and Thompson [2003] for a review).

There are of course exceptions. Some sociologists know well the source countries of the immigrants and/or consider their impacts on immigrants when they come to the United States (e.g., Massey, Durand, and Malone’s [2002] work on Mexico; Waters’s [1999] attention to conditions in the West Indies; and Morawska’s [1985] study of Eastern European immigrants at the turn of the past century). Studies of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs note their importation of rotating credit associations to finance business ventures (Lee 2002). But attempts to systematically theorize the impact of sending state experience or culture on immigrants in the United States are far rarer.

Hein's (2006) study of Cambodian and Hmong refugees in the American Midwest offers a model on which to build. He developed an "ethnic origins hypothesis" to understand how homeland experiences affect patterns of integration and assimilation. There are four elements: religious values (including individualism vs. collectivism), norms of constraint and choice in networks, effects of inequality in national institutions, and effects of intraethnic and interethnic political conflicts. Hein stressed that ethnic culture is not primordial but that cultural norms emerge from interactions of cultural and noncultural factors in the homeland and destination state. This approach gives prominent place to culturally shaped cognition: "Immigrants use memory and imagination to continuously tap into the histories, politics, and culture of their homelands" as they create lives in the new context (p. 31).

More can be done in this area. First, we can use cultural theory to understand the mechanics of this process. Hein (2006) distinguished between cultural factors (values and norms) and other "effects" that arise from experiences in sending states. But these are easy to conceptualize as cultural. Scripts or schemas shape behavior in institutional contexts. Immigration provides an excellent opportunity to study how reactions to the United States are conditioned by experiences in sending states. Immigrants do not come with a tabula rasa. They come with habits, understandings, and perceptions of meaning ingrained over years.

Second, sociologists can explore sending states to understand how these contexts matter. For example, consider again Asian American educational achievement. The substantial effort and money devoted to education by Asian immigrants to the United States, as well as the building of institutions such as "cram schools" (Kao and Thompson 2003), appear much less as immigrant-only phenomena and much more as transported cultural and institutional arrangements from sending states. Cram schools are a major industry in Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere in Asia, and the importance of educational success, as well as the status gained from the most prestigious schools or occupations, are common themes in everyday life and popular culture (Skrentny 2007). In 2007, Korean society was rocked by a major scandal involving political leaders and celebrities who inflated their educational credentials to get ahead.¹ A popular Korean soap opera, *Catch a Gangnam Mother*, showed the value on status and education differently. It details the sacrifices of a mother in the Gangnam section of Seoul, known for mothers who are particularly obsessed with their children's education. She works in a gentlemen's club to earn money to send her son to private tutoring school in the hopes that one day he will earn a place in a prestigious university.² Great sacrifices for children's education are in fact common in Asia, including mothers living with children abroad—sometimes for years—so that the children can gain useful language and other educational benefits (Douglass 2006). Similar educational beliefs and practices of Asians in the United States and in Asia suggest not all behavior patterns are a response to the U.S. context.

National cultures, globalization, and assimilation

Another way to broaden the use of cultural analysis in the study of race and ethnicity is to consider the opposite dynamic: immigrants may be bringing

distinctive national cultural patterns to the United States, but they also may be taking on American cultural patterns before they even arrive. In other words, sending state cultures are changing due to globalization, and this may be affecting the dynamics of assimilation. Because of the narrow vision in much of the research on race, ethnicity, and immigration, as well as the inattention to cultural assimilation, studies of assimilation typically do not consider how globalization is changing sending states before their emigrants even depart their shores. Sociologists of immigration often seem to assume an anachronistic image of immigrants moving between discrete and disconnected national societies. But most sending states are awash in images of the United States, and American styles are popular, if not dominant, in all regions of the world.

Cowen (2002) offered one of the more perceptive analyses of this process. Two points seem especially relevant. First, he pointed out that there is no such thing as a “pure” national culture. Despite the claims of nationalists, all cultures are hybrids, and even the most cherished cultural practices or forms of representation have foreign elements. Second, globalization is producing cultural homogenization *and* heterogenization. By this he meant that national cultures such as Germany and France are more similar today than they were in the past. Trade and shared technology have led these nations, and others around the world, to become more similar—in effect, an assimilation process involving a reduction of differences is going on across the world. At the same time, individuals within a national culture are now more diverse than before. Globalization has given individuals more choices. He explained, “Only in a world of globalized culture can I collect nineteenth-century Japanese prints, listen to the music of Pygmy tribes, read the Trinidadian author V.S. Naipaul, and enjoy the humor of Canadian Jim Carrey, while my neighbors pursue different paths of their own choosing” (p. 128).

While Cowen’s (2002) example is particularly middle-class, the process that he described is hardly so limited. American culture, especially African American culture, has swept the globe. Rap music, variously interpreted, can be heard in Europe, Asia, and Africa. The National Basketball Association is popular all over the world—as is the style of play pioneered by African American players. Hip-hop clothing and language are global (Mitchell 2001).

The notion of immigrants coming to America’s shores and then “acculturating” and “assimilating”—as if they are extraterrestrials—seems quaint at best. There is room here for sociologists of race, ethnicity, and immigration to join with cultural sociologists in a project of tracing how and which culture moves from the United States to other states, is reinterpreted and reproduced, and is reintroduced to the United States. Assimilation can occur *before* immigrants reach American shores, shaping how immigrants behave and adapt to U.S. society when they arrive. In short, an international sociology of assimilation and acculturation can show that immigrants sometimes transport distinctive national cultural patterns to the United States *and* that their Americanization may begin even before they arrive to our shores.

Conclusion

I have argued that cultural analysis has an uneven but growing presence in the sociology of race, ethnicity, and immigration. More and bolder efforts are needed especially in the study of inequality. Many of the best culturally oriented works in this area have treated culture as epiphenomenal or shied away from asserting that ethnic cultures are in play, although we can build on Carter (2005) to identify the role of ethno-racial cultures' role in achievement. Unlike works on the social construction of race or macro/historical studies of domination, studies of everyday discrimination and public opinion on racism and discrimination typically lack a cultural sensibility. Sociologists could fruitfully link them to cultural sociology, using insights from social constructionism, or build on their existing arguments that now only implicitly invoke meanings, beliefs, and taken-for-granted rules or scripts.

[A]n international sociology of assimilation and acculturation can show that immigrants sometimes transport distinctive national cultural patterns to the United States and that their Americanization may begin even before they arrive to our shores.

We can also do more to explore cultural assimilation and to understand the extensive variation in ethnic and racial expressive cultures. Another approach would be to ask deeper, more existential questions. Understanding how different ethnic and racial groups tend to see the meaning and purpose of life would get at one of the unique and valuable contributions of cultural sociology: the cultural constitution of interests. It appears to be assumed in most studies that all groups want the same things in life—that groups with different ancestral homelands are all identical on the deepest questions—as if they are all toy robots facing different obstacles but going the same direction. Lamont's (2000) and Kao's (1995) work suggests that this assumption is flawed. We should include studies of white ethnic groups as well for a full, relational understanding. Although I have used the terms "ethnic" and "racial" loosely here, we will need efforts to determine whether it even makes sense to talk of "racial" cultures. Mapping the ethnic variations in the meaning of life could yield insights into inequality and could aid in the development of more effective social policies.

Another way to bring culture into the study of race and ethnicity is to take a broader focus. Unlike other fields, such as political sociology, where many scholars study both the United States and other countries, race and ethnicity studies have a division of labor where some scholars focus on the United States and others do comparative work. There is little communication between them. But comparative studies can yield insights, especially where we can trace ethnic or immigrant cultures in the United States to likely origins in the cultural and institutional contexts of homelands. Ethnic orientations to deep questions on the meaning and purpose of life, and their repertoires for how to live it, may be brought from homelands or developed as hybrids of homeland culture and U.S. culture and social structures. The other part of this broader vision would attend to the effects of globalization on sending states; a broad and full understanding of ethnic culture would acknowledge that the reduction of ethnic differences now begins before immigration.

Studying the cultures of ethnic and racial groups is a political and sometimes emotional minefield. A commitment to social justice, however, can and should include a commitment to full understanding.

Notes

1. See, for example, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200707/200707200014.html>.
2. See <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200707/200707270011.html>.

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