INTRODUCTION

It's hot. 105 degrees in the shade. Unfortunately, there isn't much shade to speak of, just the still heat under the shadow of the shelter we've made. It's a minor work of art, this shelter, with a frame made of jute and bamboo, covered with nylon and burlap. Bill dreamt it up after studying rough drawings of Bedouin tents. Right now, it's the only thing keeping us from crisping in the desert sun. We lie about in lawn chairs and try not to move, waiting for a breeze, the slightest breath of cooling wind. We had spent the cooler hours of the morning wandering and making chilled coffee drinks for the artists and creatives who stumbled into our camp, some bleary-eyed and wobbly from the night before, others clear-headed and voluble, spinning detailed descriptions about artworks, installations, and strange performances scattered across the desert. But now the heat makes us all retreat and scramble for shade.

As evening falls, the wind finally comes up, but brings a dust storm with it, and we have to abandon the sturdy shelter quickly. The dust, incredibly fine and whiter than snow, drives us choking into the stifling death heat of our cars. My friend Lincoln isn't having a very good time of it. The dust has brought on a fierce asthma attack (who knew he had asthma?), and he's sick, puking bile and white dust out through his nose. He looks like he's vomiting yellow plaster. In the car, the dust puffs in through the cracks in the doors and windows as gusts of wind rock us violently. Outside, our half-prepared pasta dinner is lost in the swirl of whiteness. I look into the rearview mirror and ask myself what the hell we are doing here.

My first thought was that it was Sky King's fault. Sky King, a.k.a. Richard Dillman, was the intrepid radio man in charge of coordinating communications for all of the protests, demos, banner hangings, direct actions, and other forms of guerrilla theater undertaken by Greenpeace, San Fran-

cisco, where I worked at the time. A year before, on a Tuesday morning in September 1992, I found Sky King in his office, his visage burnt red, his black hair and beard coated in fine white dust. He looked like he had just come down from the mountain after an appointment with God. "Geez," I asked, "what did you do over the weekend?"

He proceeded to tell me about his trip to an event called Burning Man and recounted the things he saw there. Burning Man now bills itself as an arts festival in the high mountain desert of northwest Nevada, but in 1993, it didn't really know what it was about and we just called it a gathering of the tribes. The focal point of the event, then as now, was a ritual burning of The Man, a 40-foot-tall figure constructed of wood, burlap, and neon and packed with explosives, fireworks, and diesel fuel. The burn takes place every Labor Day weekend in the Black Rock Desert, 70 miles outside of Reno. At over 1,000 square miles, it is one of the largest flat expanses of wilderness in North America. The reigning ethos of the event—if there was one—was that we were there not just to witness art, but to be the art we wanted to see. There was only one rule to guide our community: No Spectators!

Years later, Sky King's recollection of his arrival went something like this:

> We clamored into the VW microbus and off we went, cheek by jowl, crammed in there in this little can, creeping up over the mountains, past Dutchman flat, past Donner Pass, down towards Reno and out north into the wild country. Of course we had breakdowns, we had difficulties, we had delays. We didn't get there in the middle of the day as we expected. It was dark, it was night, past ten o'clock when we finally pulled into Gerlach and gassed up at Bruno's.
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> Nobody around, just lights way off in the distance. You could see a train coming on an enormous train track that cut straight across like an arrow. We said, "We're trying to go to the Burning Man. What should we do?" There had been a couple of people who had come through earlier so they knew and they said, "Well, just go up the road. Up the road and turn right at the fork, then go another ten miles and turn right."
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> Now, there was no road. It was turn right off the highway and directly onto the playa. Up until this point, we'd been having a good time. We'd been joking and kidding around. We'd been yapping and ribbing each other. Well, we made that right turn out onto the playa and the conversation became subdued because nobody had ever been in a place like this before.

> It was pitch black and we'd heard about the quicksand, and we'd heard about the spots where you get stuck and nobody can get you out again, we'd heard about these things. But still . . . We kept going. We didn't know where we were going. The highway was long gone now . . . This was a wild area that we had no reference for . . .
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> When the sun came up in the morning it was an astounding sight. There's nothing there but somehow there's everything there. And when you stand up at dawn on that desert, your shadow goes on infinitely from your toes all the way out to the horizon and you see nothing. Not a blade, not an insect. Nothing. We had no idea where we were. We knew we were someplace on the face of this infinitely large, infinitely flat plane, but we didn't know where we were, really.
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> We got out the binoculars, looked around the horizon and saw this little whisker sticking up somewhere in the vast, vast distance. Just this one feature, the only thing we could see. Well, it had to be the Man that they had already erected so we struck the tents, got back into the microbus, and set a course towards that one little feature because it's not like driving, it's like navigating. It's like being at sea. You set up a course and you just hold it and eventually we got there and began a festival of drugs and alcohol and high explosives. Exactly what you're looking for. Add to that the most creative artwork, the most unbelievable displays and you really have something that nobody had ever experienced before, and there we were (Dillman 2012).

After hearing Sky King's tale, I vowed to go with him the following year. That's how I ended up at Black Rock Desert, Nevada, over Labor Day weekend in 1993, sweltering in my car in the middle of a ferocious dust storm. I had trekked out with 2,500 other hardy souls to experiment with community. We plunked ourselves down in the middle of this vast alkali playa, a prehistoric seabed surrounded by towering purple mountains. We had all come here to form an intentional but impermanent community, a kind of tempurban space.[1]

There are all sorts of people in Black Rock City, as the settlement has come to be called. Like all cities, it is a living, breathing encyclopedia of subcultures: desert survivalists, urban primitives and bohemians, artists, rocketeers, steampunks, aging hippies, queers, pyromaniacs, musicians, ranters, eco-freaks, acidheads, straight edgers, punks, gun lovers, goths,

1. For more on my early experiences at Burning Man, see Wray (1995). To hear Sky King's recollections, see Dillman (2012).

erotic dancers, S/M and bondage enthusiasts, nudists, swingers, metalheads, refugees from the men's movement, anarchists, hipsters, ravers, transgender types, Wiccans, and New Agers (and that's just the short list!).[2] Most gather in one of the hundreds of theme camps that form the basic social structure of the city. These camps are like mini-neighborhoods, communes dotting the tempurban landscape. In the course of the weekend, participants will, among other things, set up FM radio stations, print daily newspapers, build rave camps, and soak in the muddy heat of surrounding hot springs. Mostly they will build art projects, large and small, and then they will burn or otherwise destroy them.

I'm trying to describe Burning Man to you with words, but as the founders like to say, "trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color looks like to someone who is blind."[3] Even if I could nail the description—getting all the whos, whats, wheres, and whens just right—my words would probably still leave you wondering about the whys.

Why would anybody do this? Why all this high desert weirdness? Why are Burners (as participants are called) so devoted to and fulfilled by this event? Why the growing popularity of Black Rock City, which now attracts over 50,000 Burners every year? Why is this event happening and why is it happening now?

Of course, if you and I are going to answer these questions, then we have to have a theory that helps explain what drives human actions and behavior, especially when those behaviors are, well, a bit strange. We also need some theories about how groups organize themselves to work cooperatively and meet their collective goals, as well as some concepts that help us figure out how groups define goals for themselves in the first place. In short, to answer these questions, we need social theory.[4]

2. For a more complete list of the types of subcultures represented at Burning Man, see the archives of annual reports at http://afterburn.burningman.com/ (accessed September 24, 2012), which list thousands of camps.

3. www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/ (accessed September 25, 2012).

4. In recent years, Burning Man has attracted the attention of an increasing number of social theorists. The best sociological work to date is Chen (2009), which focuses on the organizational structures of Burners, and Turner (2009), which analyzes the event in relation to media studies. Other useful accounts focus on the political implications of the event (Doherty 2004); its ritualistic and spiritual dimensions (Gilmore 2010); and its relation to consumer culture and marketing (Kozinets 2002). See also the wide-ranging essays in Gilmore and Van Proyen (2005).

FROM SOCIAL THEORY TO CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Social theorists try to understand the relationship between two big things: human action and social order. Usually, we call human action "agency" and social order "structure." These sound like they might be difficult concepts, but really, they refer to easy-to-understand things.

Action or *agency* refers to the things that individuals, groups, or organizations say and do. People make decisions, say and write words, and take actions, singly or collectively. Organizations and institutions do this too. All are active participants in the world. Theologians and philosophers have often referred to agency as "free will," and though it's not a term that sociologists use, the concept is analogous to agency.

Order or *structure* is the set of forces and facts that limit and constrain people's actions and agency. For instance, a system of laws is a structure, as are economic and political systems. Biological facts such as death also set limits to human will (making it not so free). These forces and facts give order to and shape patterns of action and behavior among individuals and groups. To use a common metaphor, order and structure are the rules of the game: They tell you and me what we can and cannot do, as well as how to win or succeed.

These two big things—action and order—fascinate sociologists for two reasons. One reason is that they are present in every society social scientists have ever observed. People do what they do (action), but seldom in conditions of their own choosing (order). Sometimes people's actions line up nicely with the structures they find themselves in and sometimes they don't. But order and action are always in play, be it in discord or in harmony.

The second reason is that—and here is where it gets really interesting—*structure* can be conceptualized as the historical result of previous actions. Structures are calcified residues of actions taken by people who came before us. They are built up over years and years of collective effort. Sometimes major shifts—wars, revolutions, famines, landmark court cases, fundamental shifts in policy, even major innovations in technology—alter structures relatively swiftly and in lasting ways. More typically, however, structures change incrementally, sometimes in measures so small that we are only aware of them retrospectively. In fact, an entire subfield called *historical sociology* has emerged to sharpen sociologists' focus on how

structures and actions in the past have produced the outcome we call the present.

In either case, whether change comes quickly or slowly, people find ways to adapt their actions to the new structures, either conforming to or resisting them. And over time, these new actions lead to new structures. Do you see the circularity? Actions → structures → new actions → new structures. Around and around we go, in a ceaseless cycle.

This chicken-egg quality of the social world plays havoc with the logic of causation and often leaves sociologists feeling like we are chasing our own tails. But it is an exhilarating chase, this business of trying to understand the complex relationships between social order and human action. For the past 150 years or so, sociological theorists have been engaged in a quest to produce coherent systems of concepts and methods to solve the puzzles of structure and agency. Consequently, we have built up a very large body of sociological theory and methods.

So if that is what sociologists do, what do cultural sociologists do? How is our objective different from general sociology?

One very obvious reply to this question is that while not all sociologists are interested in studying culture, cultural sociologists definitely are. We're certainly not the only scholars interested in doing this, nor were we the first. Anthropologists pioneered the study of culture in the early decades of the twentieth century and invented many of the methods we use; historians turned to the study of culture in the late 1980s and taught us how to take the long view, tracking cultural developments and changes over decades and centuries; and cultural psychologists show us how the ways humans think about the world are deeply influenced by the cultures they inhabit.

Culture fascinates people across disciplines because it has the potential to explain a lot. But what sets cultural sociologists apart from other students of culture like anthropologists and cultural historians? One answer is: Not much. Cultural sociologists are often very interdisciplinary, drawing upon insights from anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and political scientists to get a grip on this thing we call culture. But another, more satisfying answer is that sociologists' objects of study tend to be different from what those in other disciplines tend to choose. Furthermore, the ways that we study culture—our preferred methods—tend to be different as well. So, if cultural sociologists differ from other students of culture (to the extent that we actually *are* different) because of how we define culture and how we study it, let's begin with that.

DEFINING CULTURE

There is no agreed upon sociological definition of culture. My own definition starts with the point I mentioned earlier, that human actions always have local contexts. Human agency doesn't happen in a vacuum. Typically, people don't just do any random thing. Everyone has routines, rituals, preferences, and habits that they stick to. We have predictable behaviors that we share in common with people like us.

Of course, there are other people with different sets of behaviors. The way "we" do things is different from the way "they" do things. Routines, rituals, preferences, habits, and everyday behaviors vary quite a lot from place to place. Explaining this variation is one of the major tasks of cultural analysis. The consensus of social scientists is that differences in everyday habits, behaviors, and preferences arise from different ways of seeing the world, different social circumstances, and different historical traditions which are all related to different social structures. These different ways of seeing and doing things are called *cultures.*

Cultures sit in the space between order and action, structure and agency. Culture is not the same as structure, but structure is deeply influenced by culture. Neither is culture the same as agency, although agency is strongly shaped by culture. Sociologists like to say that *culture mediates both structure and agency.* That is, it acts as a kind of go-between, a bridge that joins these two major concepts.

Culture can be seen as the soft tissue that connects muscle (action) to bone (structure). Culture is the ligament, tendon, and cartilage of the social body. Without it, agency would be disconnected from structure, and structure from agency. When culture (connective tissue) ages and hardens into a durable shape, it is more or less indistinguishable from structure (bone). When it is new and flexible, it is more or less indistinguishable from agency (muscle). At a quick glance, muscles, bones, and connective tissues seem very distinct from each other, but when studied under a microscope, one discovers that they are composed of the same basic building blocks—cells. Something similar happens when sociologists study culture, structure, and agency. In most cases, we have no trouble distinguishing them from one another, but at times, a great deal of confusion arises from the difficulties of drawing precise lines between them.

But what exactly are the building blocks of culture, structure, and agency? What are the cellular elements of culture? There is no definitive list, but a broad survey of sociological work on culture, past and present, reveals six elements that are commonly identified as core components of cultural sociology. I detail these six elements below, but before discussing them, it will be helpful to say a few words about how the discipline of sociology has characterized the concept of culture in the three major theoretical traditions of the discipline: functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.[5]

Culture in Functionalism

Functionalism is a branch of sociological theory that views society as a complex system of individuals and organizations that work together to promote the stability and functioning of the whole. Émile Durkheim was an early proponent of this view, positing that culture played a key role in social functioning by providing shared norms and values that bound people into groups, and groups into societies. Social systems could be stable and productive (i.e., functional) only if individuals and institutions adapted to the needs of the system. Culture was the means for accomplishing this adaptation in each successive generation, through a process called socialization.

In the 1950s, the structural functionalist theory of Talcott Parsons furthered this basic concept by viewing culture as an implicit feature of social life, one that provides the moral underpinnings for human behavior and social action. Parsons believed the major task of sociology was to observe objective things like social actions, roles, and institutions, which reside in social space. His theory did not leave much room for the consideration of subjective things like norms and values, which reside in people's hearts and minds. How these consensual norms and values developed is of less interest to Parsonian functionalism. Instead, the important questions concern how norms and values work to support the larger social whole. Seen through the lens of functionalism, culture plays an important role in sus-

5. These three theoretical traditions are by no means the only major traditions within the discipline, but most undergraduate sociology majors will be familiar with them. For a useful overview of the many theoretical approaches enlivening the discipline today, see Turner (2001).

taining consensus and solidarity in society, but it is never allowed to take center stage in sociological analysis.[6] As a school of thought, functionalism was eclipsed in the 1960s by conflict theory, but it still has adherents today.

Culture in Conflict Theory

Conflict theory has its classical roots in Karl Marx and Max Weber (see pp. 7 and 37), but in the 20th century, this tradition is more closely aligned with Marxist theories of class struggle and economic determinism. Rather than seeing society as a functioning whole, conflict theory paints a picture of different groups struggling to assert and maintain dominance and power over each other. In the 20th century, this viewpoint was best represented by C. Wright Mills, whose books on the American class system are widely regarded as sociological classics (Mills 1948; 1951; 1956).

Mills and other conflict theorists also relegated culture to a supporting role in society, but unlike the functionalist view of culture as a widely shared set of values and norms, conflict theorists viewed culture as a set of ideologies and beliefs that tended to shore up the power of dominant classes. Culture was not an implicit system of values and norms, but an intentional product of organized efforts by groups struggling for power. This viewpoint echoed the classic statement by Marx (p. 8) that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." Cultures were ideological and the norms and values they expressed were not based on broad, collective consensus, but rather on narrow class interests like money, power, and prestige. Culture, then, reflected the ideologies of dominant groups and were little more than a sideshow that distracted people from the real operations of power—the manipulation of economic and political systems by elites.

Beginning in the 1970s and '80s, the work of Marxists like Raymond Williams (p. 51) and other scholars at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK led conflict theorists to take a deeper interest in culture, seeing it not just as a reflection of class ideologies, but as one of the arenas where class struggle occurred.[7] Working class people had culture too, it was argued, and they often used their cultures as symbolic

6. An important exception is Alexander (2003), who has argued for a neofunctionalist theory that places culture and cultural activity at the center of all sociological analysis.

7. For overviews of the intersection of cultural studies and cultural sociology, see Long (1997); Wolff (1999); and Calhoun and Sennett (2007).

weapons to fight back against the elite and middle classes. With this shift, culture was seen not only as an explicit product of class struggle, but also as a force that could potentially create oppositional identities and countercultural movements (see Willis and MacLeod, pp. 483 and 507). As conflict theory rose to prominence in the 1970s and '80s, its newfound respect for culture as a social force inspired a new generation of sociologists to refine their theories and methods for studying culture. In 1986, the American Sociological Association formally recognized cultural sociology as an important subfield by creating a special section of its membership devoted to the study of culture.

Culture in Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a branch of sociological theory that views interactions between individuals and groups as the building blocks of society. It has classical roots in Georg Simmel (p. 22) and George Herbert Mead, both of whom placed individual human interaction at the center of their theories. In contemporary sociological theory, this tradition is best represented by Erving Goffman (p. 80) and Herbert Blumer. In an influential summary, Blumer described symbolic interactionism as consisting of three core premises. First, that human beings act toward things in the world (objects, people, institutions) on the basis of the meaning those things have for them; second, that the meaning of those things (i.e., how individuals personally symbolize them) is not inherent in the things themselves, but arises out of interactions with other people; and third, that these symbolic meanings are subject to and modified by an interpretive process people use as they encounter things in the world (Blumer 1969). Symbolic interactionism places subjective meanings and their interpretations at the heart of social life.

Where does culture fit in symbolic interactionism? Inasmuch as culture is, among other things, a set of symbols and meanings about the world, one can say that culture is a focal point for symbolic interactionism. Far more than functionalism or conflict theory, interactionism sees the major tasks of sociology to be the investigation of meaning-making as it happens between people, and the examination of what people do and how they act based on those meanings. While functionalism and conflict theory are lenses that bring into sharp focus the objective social facts and constraints of the social world (i.e., structure), the lens of symbolic interactionism high-

lights the subjective responses and reactions (i.e., agency) of individuals and groups as they encounter that structure. Symbolic interactionist theory continues to inspire cultural sociologists today because it provides concepts and methods that render meaning-making visible for analysis and interpretation.

The changing fortunes of the culture concept within sociology can be summarized by noting three points: First, there are traditions of sociological thought that effectively relegate culture to the margins of sociological inquiry, seeing it as immaterial and, to use a word common in these circles, epiphenomenal. Second, while values and norms remain an important area of inquiry for cultural sociologists, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism have proven to be much more fruitful, yielding a greater number of insights and concepts widely used by cultural sociologists today. Finally, while functionalism and conflict theory view culture in its objective form (as shared values and norms or class ideologies) and treat it as a social product that has observable effects, symbolic interactionism views culture in its subjective form (as intersubjective meanings and symbols) and treats it as a social process with effects that must be interpreted rather than measured.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF CULTURE

To return to the questions posed above: What are the building blocks of culture? What does culture look like at a cellular level? Given that *culture* means different things to different thinkers, it is prudent to offer a set of overlapping factors that together constitute culture. I have identified six elements, although there are other important factors that I do not consider here.[8]

8. For instance, there is important scholarship on "material culture"—the everyday objects, artifacts, and technologies that are present in all cultures, but that vary in form and function from one culture to the next. For key works on the sociology of material culture, see Mukerji (1994); Molotch (2003); and Epstein (2008). Likewise, there is a growing body of work, mostly derived from Pierre Bourdieu, that attends to culture as practices and strategies. Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *field* are central to this work—called practice theory—but since his theories are not often taught at the undergraduate level, I do not attempt to explain them in this volume. For an introduction, see Bourdieu (1990). For broader introduction to practice theory, see Calhoun and Sennett (2007). To distill these six elements of culture, I drew upon a multitude of sources. Primary among these were Lee and Linnenberg (2000); Griswold (2008); Holt (2005); Jacobs and Hanrahan (2005); and Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010).

Taken alone, each specifies a distinctive—albeit more restricted—piece of culture. Together, they reveal the breadth and scope of contemporary scholarship in cultural sociology.

I. Norms, Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs

Norms and values are shared beliefs that serve to guide individual and collective behavior along paths that a community deems appropriate and acceptable. Laws and rules are not norms or values, although they do resemble each other. The difference is that laws and rules are more formal and the consequences of violating them are quite serious. Norms and values are informal and flexible and the consequences of violating them are usually less severe. Examples of norms and values in mainstream American culture are hard work, individual responsibility, and being a good citizen.

There has been a great deal of sociological debate about how much norms actually influence behavior. The theory (typically associated with structural functionalism) that they do so predictably and reliably has received little empirical support (see Swidler, p. 111). While we don't always follow norms and we don't always live up to our own values, we nonetheless share them with other Americans. Americans who don't share widely accepted norms and values are usually viewed by those in the mainstream as "weird" or "immoral," or to use an old-fashioned term, "deviant." For example, many Americans would consider some of the behaviors that occur at Burning Man to be quite deviant, despite the fact that most Burners see themselves as adhering to a well-developed moral code.

Values at Burning Man

According to its founders, the community has come to recognize ten core principles that serve as a set of guiding norms and values for participants:

- **Radical Inclusion**—Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

- **Gifting**—Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift-giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.
- **Decommodification**—In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.
- **Radical Self-reliance**—Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise, and rely on his or her inner resources.
- **Radical Self-expression**—Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.
- **Communal Effort**—Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote, and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.
- **Civic Responsibility**—We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state, and federal laws.
- **Leaving No Trace**—Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than we found them.
- **Participation**—Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.
- **Immediacy**—Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers

> that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience.[9]
>
> Larry Harvey, the creative visionary behind the event, has played a key role in formulating this ethos and creed.

Norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs remain important to cultural sociologists in large part because they are part of the cultural criteria that help define belonging in mainstream groups. Even those excluded from the mainstream may aspire to the values and goals of the mainstream (see MacLeod, p. 507). As sources of inspiration and aspiration and as indicators of inclusion and exclusion, norms and values have key sociological significance.

II. Frames and Symbolic Boundaries

If norms and values orient people toward common goals and influence—however weakly—their actions, then frames and symbolic boundaries are the ways that individuals define their social situations. The basic idea behind frames is twofold: first, how a person acts toward others depends on his understanding of the social context, and second, different people from different backgrounds will define the same social situation differently. This often leads to misunderstandings, controversies, and conflicts as people regard others as behaving inappropriately according to their own definitions of appropriateness.

If frames are commonly agreed upon ways of looking at the world, symbolic boundaries are the ways humans define themselves in relation to others, especially those we perceive to be above and below us in the social hierarchy. Symbolic boundaries are essentially schemes of classification (see Durkheim and Mauss, p. 12) that people use to distinguish themselves and people like them from others. At their core, symbolic boundaries are moral distinctions, assigning finely graded categories of worthiness

9. From www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html (accessed September 25, 2012).

to individuals and groups. When individuals engage in this sort of differentiation and categorization of self and other, they are doing what cultural sociologists call *boundary work* (see Bryson, p. 387).

Cultural sociologists are in wide agreement that people use frames and symbolic boundaries to define their situations and locate themselves in social spaces. As their names imply, frames and boundaries draw lines and

Symbolic Boundaries at Burning Man

Subcultures have a reputation—deserved or not—for being quite factional and splintery. Like dividing cells, subcultures often spin off other groups due to conflicting and divergent identities. Frequently, the conflict is over questions of authenticity, like "What does it mean to be a real ____ ?" This is a classic example of symbolic boundary work—defining "us" and "them" in oppositional or conflictual terms. Questions of authenticity are alive and well at Burning Man, as Katherine Chen's (2006, 2009) research has shown:

> During my years studying the organizing activities behind Burning Man, I've noticed that attendees, or Burners, struggle with a conundrum. At one sunset during the 2008 event, while I strolled back to my camp along a temporary street pressed into the desert's dusty surface, a banner caught my attention. Large, hand-written letters proclaimed the camp's theme: "The Museum of It Was Better Last Year." It captured the simultaneous joy and angst evident in Burners' accounts of their event experiences. When Burners long for the wonder and novelty of their first year participating in the festival, they may embark on a trip down memory lane. Their experiences every year after their first pose invidious and revealing comparisons about authenticity.
>
> To validate worth or confer esteem, people seek out what sociologists call authenticity—that sense of meaning and dignity, or a connection with other people and experiences. People pursue authenticity in their workplaces and neighborhoods, or through consumption and relationships, and as their experiences change, so too do their perceptions of authenticity.
>
> As Burning Man enters its third decade, several changes to the event have challenged hard-core Burners' conceptions of its authenticity.

> Some believe the event's longevity, exponential population growth, and increasingly complex rules and regulations have eroded its authenticity. In contrast, more supportive attendees uphold a dynamic conceptualization of authenticity: they view change as a creative process crucial to the event's rejuvenation.[10]

mark off borders and edges. They are the natural tools humans use to make mental maps of the social world.[11]

III. Repertoires and Rituals

The concept of cultural repertoires is simple: individuals keep catalogues of how to do things in their heads. Everyone has ideas about how to behave in specific situations and how to accomplish specific things, but these can vary remarkably depending on people's backgrounds and life histories. Swidler (p. 300) analogized repertoires to toolkits from which people select tools for the job at hand, but others have proposed concepts like *cognitive schemas* (DiMaggio 1997) and *situated learning* (Lave and Wenger 1991) that pose sharp challenges to the toolkit approach. Regardless of which approach is used, the idea of repertoires is meant to counter the functionalist idea of norms and values as determinants of action.

Rituals are key aspects of cultural life and they are among the most obvious markers of cultural difference. Culture influences common, everyday rituals like how people greet one another as well as less common rituals like baptisms and funerals. Wedding rituals are likewise governed by codes and customs that can vary dramatically from one culture to the next, yet they often have a common function: they are performed at major life transitions and often mark changes in social status (such as the shift from being single) by requiring a brief separation (such as a honeymoon) from the usual routines before assuming the new status (married). Rituals

10. Chen (2006) p. 65.

11. Goffman (p. 80 in this volume), drawing directly from tenets of symbolic interactionism, provides key theorization of the framing concept. Lamont and Molnàr (2002) offer a broad survey of symbolic boundary theory. For more on symbolic boundary theory, see Wray (2006), especially pp. 1–17.

are designed to guide individuals, their friends, their families, and their communities safely as they navigate these disorienting life changes.

IV. Arts, Ideas, and Cultural Capital

One commonsense understanding of the word "culture" has to do with the creative arts and humanities. Culture, in this sense, means the world of theater and performance, music and dance, poetry and literature. It conjures up thoughts of museums and bookstores, and visions of a highly cultivated appreciation of the finer things in life. These are cultural habits, preferences, and tastes associated with membership in the upper class. Indeed, these are regular features of all modern societies. Cultural sociologists are deeply interested in these forms of human expression, but not because we believe them to be worthwhile in and of themselves (although many surely are) and not because we take aesthetic pleasure in consuming them (although many of us surely do). Instead, we're interested in cultural expression in the realm of arts and ideas because of what they can tell us about the societies that produce and consume them. How does culture of this sort get produced? Who consumes it and who doesn't? Why does it exist? To what ends is this sort of high status culture put? What social functions and purposes does it serve aside from providing education, entertainment, or aesthetic pleasure?

One answer to these questions is that knowledge about arts and ideas—and the ability to appreciate their significance—is a kind of marketable currency. *Cultural capital* is the term we use to designate this feature of high-status culture: middle- and upper-class parents pass it along to their children, investing them with the knowledge they need to appear sophisticated and mannered, but parents in working-class and poor families do not. As Lareau (p. 518) demonstrates, one consequence is that kids with the right cultural capital are poised for success at an early age. Cultural capital is one of the most widely used concepts in cultural sociology today, in part because it links culture to social inequality in measurable ways.

V. Discourses & Narratives

One of the key premises of symbolic interactionism is that humans are symbolizing beings—we tell ourselves stories about the world all of the time. Cultural sociologists embrace this notion and pay particular attention to two kinds of stories: discourses and narratives. Discourses are like

meta-stories. They are ways of describing things (like social problems or categories of people) that follow their own set of observable rules, conventions, and terminologies. There is, for instance, a well-developed and ever-changing discourse on criminality. By labeling those who have served sentences as convicts or felons, labelers create a discourse that separates "them" from "us," in effect alienating "them" from society, and drawing "us" closer together in shared condemnation of the other. The concept of discourse is most often associated with the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), who drew attention to the ways that discourses tend to construct and produce the objects that they purport merely to describe. Discourses, he pointed out, reflect hidden cultural norms and frame social objects in powerful and subtle ways, dictating what can be thought or said about a given issue at any particular historical moment. Cultural sociologists find this and other, related ways of thinking about the power of discourse to be quite useful, as Bourdieu (p. 495) shows.

Narratives focus on how people describe themselves and understand their personal histories and social situations. Narratives reveal people's self-perceptions and social identities. They are important to cultural sociologists because, following symbolic interactionism, we believe that people are likely to act and behave in ways that are consistent with their personal narratives. Thus, capturing and understanding narratives is one more key to understanding human agency.

VI. Institutions & Identities

The concept of institutions is central to sociological inquiry (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In fact, when sociologists refer to structure, we most often have various kinds of institutions in mind. For instance, the state is a vast complex of institutions composed of other institutions such as our legal, educational, and health care systems, which are themselves composed of institutions like courts, jails, prisons, schools, and hospitals. On a smaller scale, the family is an institution. For sociologists, institutions are those established organizations or regular patterns of interaction that play important and decisive roles in the lives of people in a given society. As I have noted several times, institutions (structures) can be conceptualized as products of human agency, past and present, and they are of great interest to cultural sociologists because they forcefully shape how people act and interact with one another and interpret those actions.

Institutions are important shapers of people's personal and collective identities. For example, families are primary influences on who a person will become as she grows up, schools shape people's minds and social selves, and religious institutions shape individuals' beliefs and moral identities. Institutions like the state also set the official terms of group membership. Racial and gender identities, for instance, are assigned by the state at birth, a process sociologists call *ascription*. Institutions write people into specific identities and social categories that typically stay with them for the rest of their lives. Institutions are, therefore, incredibly powerful forces shaping people's personal and collective destinies.

Institutions of Burning Man

Rather than just being a utopian wish list, the core principles of Burning Man have instilled in many Burners a sense of real possibilities for social change. They return from the playa with fire in their hearts—engaging their local communities, and seeking to make their off-playa communities conform to their on-playa worlds:

> The impact of the Burning Man experience has been so profound that a culture has formed around it. This culture pushes the limits of Burning Man and has led to people banding together nationwide, and putting on their own events, in attempt to rekindle that magic feeling that only being part of this community can provide. The Black Rock Arts Foundation (BRAF) promotes interactive art by supporting public art that exists outside the event, and has a special interest in supporting art at regional events. Additionally, Burning Man has over two thousand volunteers who work before, during and after the event (many who work year-round) to make the event a reality.[12]

In addition to BRAF, Burning Man has given birth to other institutions like Black Rock Solar, a nonprofit organization dedicated to installing solar panels and promoting renewable energy sources in poor and underserved communities—for free.

12. From www.burningman.com/what is burningman/ (accessed September 26, 2012).

> Black Rock Solar starts by focusing on the social—rather than financial—bottom line. We look at who needs help the most and how we can best help them. We find ways to save money on installations and provide our services at the lowest cost possible, relying partly on donations and fundraising efforts. . . . Just to be clear, we're not interested in competing with anyone who does this for a living, and that's why we only take on projects that aren't viable otherwise. That way, we can increase the amount of solar power on the ground while still growing the market for high-paying "green collar" jobs.[13]

That Burning Man did not start out as an effort to create a movement makes it all the more interesting to study its evolution from a weekend gathering to a year-round commitment to social change. The trajectory suggests that temporary communities can have lasting effects through the process of cultural diffusion.

STUDYING CULTURE

Having identified some of the major elements of culture, how do sociologists go about studying them? What methods are best for capturing the data that will become evidence, and what are the best kinds of evidence to draw upon?

The answers, of course, depend on which of the six elements you choose to emphasize in your research. Studying institutions and identities often requires examining historical details about the emergence of groups and their formal organization, while studying discourses and narratives often involves paying close attention to written texts, popular media, and oral life histories. Generally speaking, however, there are a limited number of methods that cultural sociologists frequently employ. Examples of several of these methods can be found in "Analyzing Culture," Section 4 of this volume, but I will briefly define a few of them here, as you will encounter them throughout the reader.

- Content analysis—a method of analysis for discovering the content of human communications. Content analysis has been used extensively

13. From www.blackrocksolar.org/about (accessed September 26, 2012).

to analyze news media, interview data, films, and other forms of popular culture. Typically, it involves *coding*, which is the process of systematically identifying recurring themes or memes in the data. Historically, coding was done manually by the researcher, but increasingly, researchers are assisted by specialized software.

- Ethnographic fieldwork—the process of learning about a group of people or a community through direct, personal observation. Typically, this involves *participant observation*, in which the researcher strives to gain familiarity and intimacy with the research subjects by becoming a trusted and engaged member of the group or community for an extended period of time. Ethnographers typically combine this method with other methods such as interviews and focus groups, content analysis, and historical and archival research. Often, the goal is to understand how group members understand themselves and the world around them.
- Historical and archival research—this approach typically involves locating, retrieving, and analyzing documents and images from the past. The sources, called *primary sources,* are often located in archives, special collections, and libraries, but they may be found anywhere. Researchers comb through sources to identify evidence that supports or contradicts a theory or argument. Cultural sociologists doing historical research frequently rely upon *secondary sources*, which are studies produced by other researchers using primary sources.
- Interviews and focus groups—an interview is the most direct and personal method for collecting data. Interviews can be *informal*, resembling casual conversation, or *formal*, with the interviewer following a structured protocol. They can be conducted in-person or by using some form of telecommunication, such as the telephone or Internet. A focus group is an interview with several interviewees at once. Focus groups allow the researcher to examine group dynamics that are not present in one-on-one settings.
- Mixed methods—not a method per se, but rather any methodology that combines both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study. Examples would include combining statistical analysis of neighborhood-level demographic data with in-depth interviews with residents of those neighborhoods; or conducting ethnographic fieldwork in a community beset by job loss and measuring changes in income and status using quantitative data.

- Statistical analysis—a large group of quantitative methods for comparing one or more variables in a data set. Statistical analyses can be *descriptive,* used to describe data, such as calculating averages or conducting a frequency analysis, or they can be *inferential*, used to make estimates, predictions, and generalizations based on samples of populations.
- Survey research—in its most general form, this method involves asking questions of respondents and recording their answers. Interviews and focus groups are one kind of survey. The other most common form is the questionnaire. When surveying small numbers of respondents, results are most often handled with qualitative methods. When the number of respondents is large, results are typically handled through statistical analysis.

Given the variety of methods available, how does one know which to choose? *Study design* is the term that sociologists use to describe how they select a method or methods appropriate for their chosen research topic. A well-designed study is one where the logic and rationale for selecting the methods are clearly defined and persuasive. Generally speaking, sociologists want to know that the chosen method offers the best chance of capturing data that will answer the research question.[14]

CULTURE AS MEANING MAKING

What the six elements of culture share, despite their obvious differences, is that they all involve meaning and meaning-making of one kind or another. If one had to offer a short definition of cultural sociology, most cultural sociologists could agree to this one: *Cultural sociology is the study of meaning-making.*

What, then, is meaning-making? This seemingly simple and direct question is anything but. Answering it thoroughly would require wading into deep philosophical waters and pondering vexing questions about episte-

14. Readers with prior knowledge of social science methodology will have noticed that the methods listed above tend to be more qualitative than quantitative. This is largely because many of the variables cultural sociologists wish to observe are not easily captured by numerical measurement. However, there is a new generation of cultural sociologists who have argued strenuously for the incorporation of quantitative analysis into the cultural sociologist's methodological toolkit. See, for example, Mohr (1998) and Perrin (2004).

mology (how we know what we know) and ontology (the nature of existence and being in the world).[15]

So let me answer in a more simplified way: meaning-making involves reflecting on one's experiences and creating *symbols*, *categories*, and *interpretations* to make sense of those experiences. *Symbols* are what people use to represent things to themselves and to others. For instance, words are symbols that people use to reference things and communicate ideas. There are, of course, many other kinds of symbols, such as images and icons. *Categories* are bounded sets of things that appear to be more similar than different. When people encounter new experiences and things, they create new categories by drawing symbolic boundaries that set up the systems of formal and informal classification used to bring order to the chaos of the world. When things in the world change, some categories and classifications become outdated, but if they remain useful and practical for making sense of the world, they persist.

Interpretations are the stories and narratives people devise, individually and in concert with others, to make sense of the symbols and categories used to represent the world. When people can't make sense of them they become confused and disoriented.

Why is meaning-making important? Think of the alternative. A life without meaning would be extremely difficult to live, wouldn't it? People must have reasons to get up every day and go to school or work, to fulfill obligations to themselves and to others, and to sacrifice their time and energy in pursuit of sometimes intangible goals. We do these things because we find them meaningful and if we begin to find them meaningless, we stop doing them if we can. Sometimes—and this is perhaps most often the case with our jobs—we can't stop doing them because of constraints (everybody needs money). In that case, we are stuck with going through the motions, which is depressing and demoralizing for everyone involved.

The meanings we assign to actions and structures in our lives are crucial for helping us feel that we lead satisfying and fulfilling lives. Without meanings that sustain us, we can be overcome by distress, anxiety, depression, fear, and other negative emotions that can contribute to illness and

15. Sociologists George Herbert Mead and Charles Cooley addressed these questions within the philosophical context of American pragmatism. For more on the sociological significance of this philosophical tradition, see Shalin (2007) and Gross (2008).

early death (Berkman et al. 2000; Kubzansky & Kawachi 2000). It is not stretching things too far to say that meaning-making can be a matter of life and death. For this reason alone, understanding how meanings are made and the strategies for using them are important questions, the answers to which can help contribute to our individual well-being (see Hall & Lamont, p. 532).

But meanings are not just important to us as individuals. Meanings are essential sources of group belonging and help to establish what sociologists call social cohesion. They are like a glue that binds us to those who have assigned the same meanings to the world that we have. Groups need that glue to attract and retain members, to grow in size, and subsequently, to grow in power and influence. If a group becomes powerful and influential enough, its meanings may sustain a social movement—a mass mobilization of individuals who recognize they are taking part in something larger than themselves. If the movement gains enough social power, it becomes not just popular, but dominant, and will seek to reform old institutions or create new ones devoted to perpetuating and further popularizing its particular worldviews, a process called *cultural diffusion* (see Kaufman and Patterson, p. 218).

Individuals form small groups that can grow into social institutions by putting meaning-making into action and practicing what they preach until enough converts emerge to create a movement; this can eventually produce an institution or a new structure. Maybe one day Burning Man—conceived some 25 years ago by an unemployed landscape gardener named Larry Harvey—will become large enough and influential enough to effect lasting social change.[16] Many of its participants would say it already has.

As you read through this volume, you'll encounter numerous affirmations, refinements, and outright rebuttals to the simple model of cultural sociology I've drawn here; namely, that it is the study of how human agency is linked to social structure by cultural elements, and how yesterday's cultural elements can become the structures of today. There are many ways of conceptualizing the field. I have merely tried to do my job as a teacher, which is to provide a heuristic—a way of discovering something new—that

16. Anyone interested in Burning Man would do well to get acquainted with the writings of Larry Harvey. Many of his most influential ideas are crystallized in Harvey (2000). See also his other writings collected at www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/lectures/la_vie.html (accessed September 21, 2012).

will serve you as you explore the intellectual landscape of cultural sociology. Your job as a student is not simply to watch and observe how cultural sociologists do their work, but to engage in the process of discovery on your own. As we Burners like to say, "No Spectators!"

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