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What anchors cultural practices

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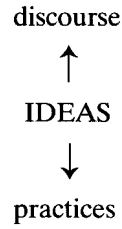
Recent conceptions of culture as 'practice' have made great headway (see Williams 1973; Ortner 1984; Greenstone 1993; Biernacki 1995). But they have also brought new obscurities in their wake. Most important among these is the question of whether there is some sort of hierarchy among cultural practices, and whether and how some cultural practices organize, anchor, or constrain others.

While it is hard to summarize briefly what scholars of several persuasions, driven by differing questions, have meant by 'practice' or 'practices' (and the two terms alone suggest ambiguities), it is easier to point to some of the problems 'practice theory' has solved.

The problem of the subjectiveness of meaning

The central terms of the older sociology of culture were 'ideas,' Weber's major focus, and 'values,' the term used by Parsons. Both theorists shared the assumption that these cultural elements operated by providing the ends toward which actors (individual or collective) directed their action (see Swidler 1986; Warner 1978). For these theorists, therefore, the influence of culture depended on showing that certain cultural elements, whether ideas or values, actually operated subjectively, in the heads of actors, so that 'the "world images" that have been created by "ideas" have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest' (Weber 1946:280). Later theorists, however, had difficulty finding such ideas in any coherent or consensual form in the heads of particular actors (see Wuthnow 1987) or showing that these ideas really influenced action, either through logical implication or by providing the criteria for decisions among alternative lines of conduct (see the critiques in Cancian 1975; Skocpol 1985).

Theories of practice solved these problems in two complementary ways. First, they de-emphasized what was going on in the heads of actors, either individuals or collectivities. Instead these theories emphasized 'practices' understood as routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character. Practices can be the routines of individual actors, inscribed in the ways they use their bodies, in their habits, in their taken-for-granted sense of space, dress, food, musical taste—in the social



routines they know so well as to be able to improvise spontaneously without a second thought (Sudnow 1978; Bourdieu 1976, 1984). Practices can also be trans-personal, imbedded in the routines organizations use to process people and things, in the taken-for-granted criteria that separate one category of person or event from another—'art' from what is not art (Williams 1981; Becker 1982), or the sane from the mad (Foucault 1965, 1983). But whether 'practices' refer to individual habits or organizational routines, a focus on practices shifts attention away from what may or may not go on in actors' consciousness—their ideas or value commitments—and toward the unconscious or automatic activities embedded in taken-forgranted routines.

Practice theory moves the level of sociological attention 'down' from conscious ideas and values to the physical and the habitual. But this move is complemented by a move 'up,' from ideas located in individual consciousness to the impersonal arena of 'discourse.' A focus on discourses, or on 'semiotic codes' permits attention to meaning without having to focus on whether particular actors believe, think, or act on any specific ideas. Like language, discourse is conceived to be the impersonal medium through which (with which) thought occurs (Lévi-Strauss's notion that animals are 'good to think with'). A focus on discourse then reintroduces the world of language, symbols, and meanings without making them anyone-in-particular's meanings. Rather the semiotic system is the set of interrelated meanings that constitutes a cultural system. By analogy with the Saussurian distinction between 'parole' and 'langue,' discourse is not the content of what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything meaningful at all.[1]

The old terrain of ideas and actors thus split into two domains, that of practices and that of discourses:

Finding an observable object for the study of culture

The conceptualization of 'culture' as practices in interaction with discourse solved a second problem as well. By taking culture out of the realm of individual subjectivity (or the realm of transcendent values hovering over or behind social action), the turn to discourse and practices gave the study of culture an empirical object. As Roger Keesing (1974) has observed, Geertz's great accomplishment was to make culture a matter of publicly observable symbols and rituals—the

organization, in short, of discourses and practices, rather than something hidden away in individual consciousness (see Wuthnow 1987). To study culture then becomes to observe closely those publicly accessible practices, either through micro observation of largely mute and unnoticed practices (Knorr Cetina 1981; Cicourel 1968; 1974b; Knorr Cetina and Cicourel 1981) or through 'thick description' of the publicly observable symbolic and ritual practices that structure the possibilities of meaning in a given 'cultural system' (Geertz 1973). (Of course, the 'interpretation' of those meanings does take one back into the realm of the subjective, making implicit claims about what symbols mean to individual actors or groups of actors [see Swidler and Jepperson 1994], but such claims are at least focused on description of a clearly observable empirical object: the ritual, practice, symbol, story, or game treated as a 'text'.)

The enormous fruitfulness of the contemporary study of culture, after its older variants seemed to have run out of steam, has come from this renewed focus on a definable empirical object. The interpretation of such objects may vary, and the underlying structure of which these observations are the supposed signs may be debated, but Foucault's (1979) descriptions of the practices of punishment, of diagnosis and confinement of the mentally ill (1965), or of the diagnosis and categorization of sexual 'perversions' (1978), like Geertz's (1973) depictions of Balinese cockfights or Berber tall tales, or Knorr Cetina's (1981) detailing of the routines of scientific laboratories seem to provide direct ways in which social knowledge, or culture, and the implicit logics they contain, can be directly observed. Both discourses and practices are concretely observable in a way that meanings, ideas, and values never really were.[2]

The problem of culture's link to action

The focus on practices and discourse (sometimes 'discursive practices') also solved, or at least transformed, the problem of how to link culture and action. If culture is only practices, the problematic relationship of culture to action disappears. Culture cannot be treated as some abstract stuff in people's heads which might or might not cause their action. Rather cultural practices *are* action, action organized according to some more or less visible logic, which the analyst need only describe. As we shall see below, however, defining the nature of this 'logic'—discerning the structure of a set of practices—becomes a primary challenge for cultural analysis.

Given the difficulty across many contexts and styles of research in linking what people 'say' to what they 'do' (see Swidler 1986; Cancian 1975; Skocpol 1985; Schuman and Johnson 1976; Hill 1981), it is a relief not to have to link ideas and behavior. Rather, if one studies 'practices,' whether linguistic or not, one is already studying behavior, and the problem of the causal connection between one form of behavior and another is at least staved off, if not resolved.

The culture vs. structure distinction

The problem of the causal relationship of culture and action is linked to a larger and more recalcitrant problem, that of the relationship of culture to structure. Sometimes naively cast as the relation between 'ideal' and 'material' interests, the larger problem of the relative weight of 'cultural' vs. 'structural' factors in explaining social outcomes has continued to bedevil the social sciences. Weber treated the distinction as real and tried through his comparative studies to show that 'ideas' made a real, independent difference in shaping social outcomes. If China, like Europe, had the preconditions for capitalist development, but failed to develop capitalism because it lacked the appropriate cultural ethic, the case for the independent importance of culture was strengthened.

Talcott Parsons took this attempt to integrate an understanding of how material and ideal factors interact in processes of social causation to its most sophisticated level. Parsons (1966), followed by Jeffrey Alexander (1983), argued that material and ideal factors are both essential to social causation, but they operate in fundamentally different ways. According to Parsons' 'cybernetic' model, some causal factors (ideas, symbols, values—culture in general) are high in 'information' but low in 'energy.' An example might be an architect's plans, which provide information about how to build a house, but which cannot, by themselves, provide shelter, or even cause a house to be built. Other causal factors, lower down in the 'cybernetic hierarchy,' are higher in 'energy' and lower in information—in essence, they are the unformed matter, like the pile of bricks, boards, and mortar necessary to build a house, or the energy of a potential worker. But without some input of information, these are no more likely to become a house than to become a wall, a set of projectiles, or simply an impediment. So 'material' factors are necessary conditions for action (like the motive energy provided by the engine of interests in Weber's 'switchmen' metaphor), and in that sense they have the greater power in determining action. But ideas (or information) direct action, and in that sense have the final say in shaping the particular kind of action that occurs.

This Weberian/Parsonian effort to integrate cultural and structural factors in the explanation of human action has come under sustained criticism in recent years. Sociologists have increasingly argued that 'culture' and 'social structure' cannot effectively be separated, and that nothing like the classic quasi-experimental maneuver of isolating culture's independent effect by varying culture while holding social structure constant is possible (though see the impressive work of Fulbrook 1983 and Biernacki 1995). On the one hand, theorists have argued that what is taken to be 'social structure' is itself constituted by culture (see Sewell 1985, 1992; Meyer and Rowan 1983; Biernacki 1995). Conversely, both the content and the domain of 'culture' are constituted through a set of undeniably 'material' practices (Williams 1973; Becker 1982). As Sewell (1985:84) wrote in a kind of manifesto about

culture and structure, we must learn to think of 'ideology' as itself a 'structure,' as 'anonymous, collective, and constitutive of social order.'

Sewell extended his analysis of culture and social structure in an important paper, 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation' (1992). It reconfigures the distinction between culture and structure while conceiving of culture itself as a form of structured practice. But in making a substantial advance over earlier formulations, it also reveals the gaps in our understanding of how cultural practices are *organized.*

Sewell (1992) wants to erase, or at least substantially reorganize, the culture-social structure distinction. He follows Giddens (1981:27) in seeing structures as 'dual,' as 'both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems.' Sewell then defines structure itself as enacted cultural schemas, understanding schemas (again following Giddens) as 'generalizable procedures.' Cultural schemas are generalizable 'in the sense that they can be applied in or extended to a variety of contexts of interaction' (Sewell 1992:8). It is in this sense that, as Giddens notes, schemas are 'virtual.' 'To say that schemas are virtual is to say that they cannot be reduced to their existence in any particular practice or any particular location in space and time: they can be actualized in a potentially broad and unpredetermined range of situations' (Sewell 1992:8).

Sewell (1992:13) departs from Giddens in seeing structure as 'composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual.' A schema is what makes a resource meaningful as a resource (to use Sewell's example, what makes Hudson Bay blankets a source of chiefly power for the Kwakiutl rather than simply a means of keeping warm), but resources are actual in the sense that the schema alone will not bring them into being or determine how much of them one can lay hold of. Sewell then argues that '[i]f structures are dual in this sense, then it must be true that schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources are the effects of schemas' (p. 13). This means, he goes on to note, that 'if resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well. Resources…are *read* like texts, to recover the cultural schemas they instantiate' (p. 13). Finally, structures depend on the mutual reproduction of schemas and resources:

> If schemas are to be sustained or reproduced over time—and without sustained reproduction they could hardly be counted as structural—they must be validated by the accumulation of resources that their enactment engenders. Schemas not empowered or regenerated by resources would eventually be abandoned and forgotten, just as resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay. Sets of schemas and resources may properly be said to constitute *structures* only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time (p. 13).

The notion that 'structures' such as factories, social class systems, or greeting practices among university colleagues can be 'read' for the (virtual)

cultural schemas they embody, and that enacting such schemas in turn generates arrays of resources, finally recasts the culture-social structure distinction. Rather than 'material factors' being a kind of shapeless matter, given form by intangible 'ideal' factors, Sewell has understood that the very structures of material life are structures only because they are patterned by cultural schemas, and he has simultaneously shown that these arrays of resources are 'read' as cultural texts. Structures are reproduced as repeated instantiations of 'virtual' cultural schemas that make the structures what they are.

=> Practices are structures in just this sense, simultaneously material and enacted, but also patterned and meaningful, both because they enact schemas and because they may be read for the *transposable* schemas they contain. Sewell (pp. 16–19) has brilliantly argued that this revised conception of how structures are formed from schemas and resources allows a substantive account of human agency. Because structures are multiple and intersecting, because schemas can be generalized to new situations and can sometimes generate unpredictable resource outcomes, and most importantly because the schemas implicit in arrays of resources can be 'read' in multiple and sometimes competing ways, transformation as well as continuity of structures is possible.

WHAT STRUCTURES STRUCTURES?

The view of structures and practices as multiple and sometimes inconsistent, and of everything from capitalism to handshakes as structured practice can be liberating, but it can also lead to trouble. If practices are part of unified 'systems' reflecting some single, underlying logic, then we can say a great deal about what any one part of such a system implies about other parts. If we can describe the underlying deep structure, we can understand where the practices we observe come from and we can see how they fit together. But if there is multiplicity, multivocality ('polysemy' in Sewell's terms), and contradiction between structures, which vary from great and enduring to minor and transient, then the reinterpretation of structures may lead to its own dead ends.

Sewell (pp. 22–6) sees the problem, and suggests that structures differ in 'depth' (how pervasive, invisible, and taken-for-granted their schemas are) and in 'power' (how great the resources they generate and depend upon). But this way of categorizing structures, and even the substantive claim that more visible, resource-rich structures may be less stable than others because they become foci of social conflict, does not really help us think about the different kinds of structures and practices and about whether or when some practices govern others.

Are all practices equal, or are some more equal than others?

I proceed inductively here, examining several concrete cases to see how some practices anchor, control, or organize others.

Let us return first to the hypothetical example of an architect's plan for a house versus the materials and labor required to build the house—the kind of example Parsonians would use to illustrate the role of ideal versus material factors in social causation. The Parsonians would see the architect's plans as exerting a 'controlling' influence over the less symbolic, more material ingredients required to build the house. But practice theorists would find this analysis deficient from the start. Like Howard Becker describing *Art Worlds* (1982), practice theorists would note that long before the architect could draw up plans for the house, constraints on the possible design of the house were built into taken-for-granted practices on two fronts. First, the architect assumes the standard kinds of materials that are available, and ignores the potentially infinite set that is unavailable. The standard sizes and properties of bricks and mortar, poured concrete and steel girders, door-frames and skylights, provide the ingredients from which the architect assembles his plans. Like composers who seek to write music for which there are no instruments (Becker 1982), architects will be unable to build houses that require materials no one can make.

Second, the plans any architect draws are inevitably incomplete. Even when the skills of a contractor or builder are added, the plans for a house leave unspecified most of what will be required to build it. Key among the unspecified elements are practices: the informal skills of craft workers (Stinchcombe 1959), the ways workers with different specialties coordinate their activities, and the uses they see as appropriate for standard objects and materials.

Indeed, lying behind the architect's drawings are yet other practices, so taken-for-granted as to be nearly invisible. One, of course, is the implicit knowledge of what a house is and how people use one, including such 'normal' practices as whether people sleep alone or collectively, whether sleep should occur in a room different from that reserved for eating or bathing, etc. Another is the set of social practices against which aesthetic experience is set off, which provides the vocabulary of meanings that an architect, or any artist works with to produce an effect (see Baxandall 1972; Geertz 1976). Yet another is the set of practices that links architects and clients, including who pays whom and which kinds of judgments each party to the transaction is entitled to make (the clients get to decide how many bedrooms they want, but the architect decides whether a given design is technically feasible [see Baxandall, 1985]). And finally, the assumptions that a house is something one can own, that paying wages will mobilize the labor of others such as architects or bricklayers, that how big a house one can have depends on how much money one has, that one has many choices and must decide what one wants— in short, the whole set of practices associated with a capitalist market economy—are necessary to make the architect's plans a meaningful document that could mobilize or direct activities in such a way as to produce a house.

Practices thus lie behind every aspect or level of social causation. And, as Sewell has argued, practices are enacted schemas, schemas which can be transposed from one situation or domain to another and which are expressed in, and can be

read from, practices themselves. The question is whether among all these various kinds of practices we can distinguish some that are more central, more controlling, more determinative than others—in given kinds of situations—or whether we are simply awash in practices, each patterned and habitual, each subject to revision as it is transposed or replicated, and none more influential than any other.

Practices that anchor constitutive rules

We take for granted that some structures and their associated practices are, in Sewell's sense, deeper, more fundamental, more powerful than others. So the structures of capitalism and its associated practices, such as paying to buy or build a house which one then owns, are more fundamental—more enduring, more pervasive, more influential in shaping or constraining action—than this year's fad in kitchen countertops, or even the practices of housewifery that make an easy-to-clean countertop desirable. But does such a hierarchy of practices, corresponding roughly to the nested (or un-nested) hierarchy of social organization, really capture the causal significance of cultural practices?

Let me take a concrete example. Elizabeth Armstrong (forthcoming) has studied the proliferation of identities within San Francisco's lesbian and gay community from 1964 to 1994. Having coded identity information for each organization in the community during those years, she first looked at how identities changed substantively, tracing the implicit practices of categorization that defined varieties of gay identity. When did identities based on specific sexual practices emerge? When were identities that combined sexual identifiers with racial or ethnic categories at their height? When were identities that linked standard occupational or leisure activities with sexual identities most common?

After closely examining her data, Armstrong realized that what she was really seeing was a critical change in the larger discourse that made having an 'identity' a crucial feature of membership in the wider lesbian and gay community. She notes a turning point, right around 1971, when attempts to build a single, unifying organization to represent San Francisco's homosexual community were replaced by an organizing strategy that encouraged the proliferation of literally hundreds of organizations focused around diverse identities and interests. The community's diversity was enacted—and celebrated—in the Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade, inaugurated in 1971, with floats, contingents, and marchers representing a panoply of more or less flamboyant identities.

Armstrong's most striking argument is that this understanding of the nature of the 'gay community' (currently, with the proliferation of identity terms, the 'Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Community'), once established, seemed able to resist challenges, reabsorbing them into its discourse about identity. So, for example, the attempt to create a 'queer' politics that would unify the

community politically and define its politics as beyond sexual orientation *per se*, was reabsorbed so that 'queer' became just one other identity choice.

How then can we describe this abrupt but apparently resilient change in the implicit rules and associated practices that defined the nature of San Francisco's lesbian/gay community? Roy D'Andrade (1984), the anthropologist, drawing on the work of John Searle, introduces the term 'constitutive rule,' to describe a particular kind of culture—or perhaps we should say a particular kind of cultural *act*—that defines what shall count as what:

> A marriage ceremony, a baseball game, a trial, and a legislative action involve a variety of physical movements, states, and raw feels, but…the physical events and raw feels only count as parts of such events given certain other conditions and against a background of certain kinds of institutions…
>
> These 'institutions' are systems of constitutive rules. Every institutional fact is underlain by a (system of) rule(s) of the form '*X* counts as *Y* in context *C*' (Searle [1969] quoted in D'Andrade [1984]: 91).[3]

One way to think about the change Armstrong describes is to say that the 'constitutive rule' defining the gay community changed from a group defined by common interests to a community made up of diverse subgroups. The new constitutive rule then entailed a whole set of new understandings: that diverse identities did not split the community, but united it; that organizers should not aspire to create a single unified organization to represent the community; that the discovery and public assertion of new identities was part of the communitybuilding project.

What anchored this set of 'constitutive rules,' making it so resilient? Why (or how) was it that, once established, the notion that the community consisted of its diverse identities persisted, generating ever more elaborate identity discourses (naturalized by participants, who saw themselves as discovering or expressing their real, authentic identities)?

This situation, in which a set of larger, but implicit 'constitutive rules' anchors an elaborate discourse, like that about identity, creates a real puzzle for cultural explanation. Since the constitutive rules are something no one in the community formulates explicitly, and indeed something they might have trouble seeing even if it were made explicit, what is it that holds the constitutive rule in place, not only reproducing it, but allowing it to drive out competing rules? Bourdieu's (1977) arguments provide a piece, but by no means all of the solution. The idea that the larger rules of the system are reproduced, not by people directly knowing those rules, but by people acting strategically in a world that presumes those rules, fits this situation well. Within the community the way to assert influence, the way to be recognized, the way to matter is to assert an identity; a neglected or demeaned identity creates especially powerful claims on others. But this is hardly a matter of a deeply internalized habitus, inscribed in the body—the

system of sense perception, tastes, and so forth. Indeed, the whole discourse is only a couple of decades old, and people latched onto its terms immediately, inventing themselves, and elaborating the discourse, as they went along. Practices are indeed crucial here, but not the sort of deeply internalized, taken-for-granted practices Bourdieu describes.

Armstrong argues that a critical anchor for the constitutive rules that define the lesbian/gay community is the Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade itself. She argues that the practices involved in setting up the parade, in which groups apply to have a contingent or a float included in the parade, and the parade itself, in which the more different groups participating and the more diverse their identity displays the more successful, exciting, and newsworthy the parade is, themselves anchor the definition of the 'community' as composed of multiple identity groups. Thus a practice, of recent origin, and very much a public ritual rather than an inscribed habitus, anchors a larger set of constitutive rules and their attendant discourses. In essence, the parade creates a situation of action in which the enacted schema is that membership in the community equals having a group to identify with, and a set of practices in which asserting one's membership in the community means creating or joining a group which then claims a spot in the parade. Thus a practice encodes the dominant schema—encodes it as a pattern of action that people not only read but enact—a schema that is never explicitly formulated as a rule.

The Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade is a public ritual practice, one that enacts, without explicitly describing, the nature of the community it creates. In Sewell's (1992) terms, as long as it attracts adherents and the adherents manage to bring the event off (the 'resources' part of the equation), the schema the parade actualizes will continue to be available. And in that case, Armstrong argues, it is the practice itself that anchors, and in some sense reproduces, the constitutive rule it embodies.

Why practices dominate

The second example I want to consider is Richard Biernacki's magisterial book, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914* (1995). Using a staggering accumulation of meticulous historical scholarship, this work develops one of the strongest, most original, and most important arguments about culture's influence in recent decades. Biernacki argues that the fundamental difference between British and German labor relations was the way labor was constituted as a commodity. British textile manufacturers purchased labor as it was embodied in commodities, so they worked out payment schemes based on the length and quality of cloth a worker produced. Prussian manufacturers, in contrast, purchased labor power, which they remunerated by measuring how many times the laborer sent the shuttle back and forth to create a given length of cloth. The two systems both rewarded workers for the length and the thread-density of the fabric they produced. But the wage schemes operated on fundamentally different

principles, and each produced a scale of remuneration that was linear (that is, created a consistent relationship between remuneration and the quantity of labor) within each country's assumptions but produced irrationalities when transposed to the other country's assumptions.

Biernacki (1995) goes on to show that this difference in the way labor was commodified ramified into the entire system of industrial relations in Prussia vs. Britain, affecting the design of factories, the organization of labor protest (British strikers struck when each weaver finished his piece of cloth and left his loom; German strikers withheld their labor power, staying at their looms but ceasing labor simultaneously at a given hour), and much else.

Biernacki (1995) argues strongly that the difference between the German and British systems did not rest with different *ideas* about labor. Indeed, he argues that the different practices of commodifying labor led theorists from the two traditions to theorize labor very differently. (Marx's understanding that what the worker sold was his labor power was based on German industrial practice.) Biernacki is explicit in separating concrete practices and their influence from the ideas people held about what they were doing. And he gives clear causal priority to practices: 'the schemas encoded in silent practices within the private factory lent workers the concept of labor they used to voice demands in the public sphere' (p. 3). Or again, 'The cultural definition of labor as a commodity was communicated and reproduced, not through ideal symbols as such, but through the hallowed form of unobtrusive practices' (p. 36).

What are these practices to which Biernacki (1995) gives such stark causal priority? He contrasts his approach with views of culture as a 'consistent world view' unifying 'separate cultural beliefs attached to different domains of conduct' or ideas used to legitimate institutions (p. 91). Rather, 'the commodity form of labor constituted from within the form of industrial procedure. In the textile industry, the operation of the weavers' piece-rate scales, the assignment of looms, the replacement of absent workers, the recording of earnings all these instrumentalities assumed their shape and were reproduced by virtue of the definition of labor as a commodity they sustained' (p. 92). Why did practices have such power—power to define reality such that even when workers were struggling with the irrationalities created by their own wage scales, and even when they had available examples of alternative wage schemes from other countries, they simply could not revise their understandings?

Biernacki develops an argument very close to Sewell's. Practice is culturally constituted, and it directly conveys meaning: 'Comparative study of procedures on the factory shop floor reveals that the micro-practices of production were *constituted* as signs, whether or not they served as the objects of a system of verbal representations' (Biernacki 1995:93, emphasis in original). He goes on to insist that '[t]he template of labor as a commodity came to life not in the subjective outlooks of individuals but in the orchestration of practice to fulfill a signifying function' (p. 93). If Biernacki is correct, these humble practices, the ones that directly constituted the day-to day routines of workers and managers as

they negotiated the actual structure of work activity, apparently controlled and provided the model for the more elaborated 'system of verbal representations.' Furthermore, the schemas that were enacted in these day-to-day practices seem to have organized and constrained other schemas.

Because many interconnected practices embodied the same schema for constituting labor as a commodity, the 'established concept of labor' was highly resilient, even when technological changes (for example, a loom imported to England that automatically counted 'labor time' by counting actual shots of the shuttle) altered some of the practices that embodied that concept (Biernacki 1995: 494). On the other hand, the divergent English and German conceptions of labor did not simply persist out of inertial habit or some hidden well of taken-for-granted assumptions. Biernacki makes clear that when the specific practices of wage-setting—the piece-rate scales, the assignment of looms and so forth—were disrupted, the differences in the constitution of labor as a commodity evaporated. Biernacki notes that the German and English conceptions of labor were fundamentally transformed when, during World War I, governments intervened in wage-setting, thus eliminating the practices of piece-rate negotiation that had reproduced the divergent British and German constructions of labor (p. 495).

The extended case Biernacki develops is fundamentally unsettling for traditional understandings of culture. It acknowledges the omnipresence of discourses, but it sees discourses largely as commentaries on concrete realities which are culturally constituted in and through practices. 'Silent' as they are, these practices constitute the unspoken realities upon which more directly symbolic or linguistically mediated activities are based. But the case Biernacki describes is unsettling for 'practice theory' as well. Stephen Turner (1994) has attacked the notion of practices as silent, hidden assumptions, pointing out the insurmountable problems in accounting for both transmission and change of something that is invisible. He proposes substituting the more limited, more economical notion of 'habit,' suggesting that people can learn habits by imitating the public performances of others until they have mastered the capacity to produce those performances, without necessarily having identical internal states or capacities from which those habits flow. But Biernacki's work suggests that this notion of 'habit' and the argument from which Turner derives it is too individualistic. The crucial thing about social practices—and the feature that differentiates them from most habits—is that they are the infrastructure of repeated *interactional* patterns. They remain stable not only because habit ingrains standard ways of doing things, but because the need to engage one another forces people to return to common structures. Indeed, antagonistic interchanges may reproduce common structures more precisely than friendly alliances do. The antagonistic negotiations of workers and owners over wages—the ways workers and employers used piece rates and other work rules to press their own advantage—may have been what held specific conceptions of labor as a commodity so rigidly in place.

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This case has in common with the Armstrong example, discussed above, that the anchoring practices operate as enactments of 'constitutive rules,' acquiring their power to structure related discourses and patterns of activity because they implicitly define the basic entities or agents in the relevant domain of social action (defining what constitutes labor as a commodity, or what defines the gay community). But the Armstrong and Biernacki examples are very different in that the anchoring practice of the Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade is a very public ritual, while the practices Biernacki describes are nearly invisible arrangements for organizing everyday tasks and transactions.

What may unite the cases Armstrong and Biernacki describe, however, is that the anchoring practices in both cases constitute socially negotiated realities, so that the practices coordinate basic social relationships. Perhaps practices are more persistent and more likely to structure other domains of thought and action when they constitute social relationships (the negotiations between managers and workers; the relations that are the 'gay community') than when they are simply habits or assumptions held by individual actors.

If we now reexamine Bourdieu's concept of the habitus and Sewell's concept of schemas, we see that both have a remarkably individualistic underlying imagery. Granted, both theorists argue that their core theoretical constructs make no sense except as social products: the habitus is inculcated as the internalization of one's place in a social field; Sewell's schemas are read from prior social practices. Nonetheless, the underlying theoretical imagery leads us to think of an individual person carrying around with her the habitus of her childhood, the skills and dispositions she learned there, mobilizing them strategically as she encounters new social situations. Similarly, Sewell's description of how structures are reproduced allows us to imagine an individual 'reading' the schema from an existing array of resources and attempting to reproduce that structure. Indeed, different individuals can read the existing structure differently and reproduce an altered structure.[4] But perhaps the really persistent practices, those that come to structure wide domains of social life, are those that coordinate actors' actions and thus cannot be changed without disrupting collectively established realities. This, I think, is the implication of Sewell's most recent work on 'events' (Sewell 1996). In an analysis of the storming of the Bastille, Sewell shows that the creation of a new form of social practice—a new constitutive rule that equated the French 'nation' with 'the people' and a new associational pattern for collective behavior—occurred in a highly charged, public ritual occasion, where new meanings were forged and made visible before many people simultaneously. The full working out of the implications of those new patterns awaited the further unfolding of the event and its interpretation, but like the original Gay Freedom Day Parade, the very public event almost immediately established a new form of social practice.

What then can we say about what anchors social practices, or why some social practices seem more firmly anchored—more enduring and more influential—than others? The first claim is that practices of a particular kind those that enact

constitutive rules that define fundamental social entities—are likely to be central, anchoring whole larger domains of practice and discourse. The second suggestion is that practices may be more firmly anchored when they are at the center of antagonistic social relationships. Third, the establishment of new social practices appears not so much to require the time or repetition that habits require, but rather the visible, public enactment of new patterns so that 'everyone can see' that everyone else has seen that things have changed.

Where are constitutive rules located?

The third example I want to explore is more problematic. I describe a rich set of mutually reinforcing practices and a constitutive rule—voluntarism as the basis for group formation—that might be seen as the 'deep structure' patterning many spheres of American social life. But it is harder to know in this case what specific practices anchor the rule or account for its apparent pervasiveness, coherence, and persistence.

In a recent book, Nina Eliasoph (1998) analyzes the impairment of political discourse in America. In a variety of social action, social service, and recreational groups, Eliasoph finds that even those who claim a political agenda avoid direct discussion of political matters. When such topics are raised, they are typically ignored or met with joking comments to divert the discussion back onto safer ground.

Eliasoph describes many social processes that contribute to silencing political discussion in contemporary America, from the ways news media report political events to the presentation-of-self activists favor (local people concerned about the well-being of their own families). But a central factor inhibiting political discussion appears to be politeness, which makes any topic that could introduce conflict and disagreement seem threatening. Americans have conversational practices, ways of seeming friendly and agreeable in groups, which make any serious discussion that might lead to disagreement problematic. So, at least at first glance, a relatively minor 'practice,' about how informal conversations are supposed to be conducted, can have farreaching implications for other, apparently more 'important' issues, like the possibilities for political discussion and action. (It is not that people cannot join forces to act politically, but how they act is affected by practices that inhibit open, energetic political discussion even among comrades-in-arms in a movement.) As Europeans always note, Americans like to appear 'friendly,' but that customary friendliness is a practice with important consequences.

There is, however, a deeper 'structural' explanation of the social meaning of these practices. Hervé Varenne (1977) has put in more formal terms what observers since de Tocqueville have noted: American friendliness is related to Americans' tendency to form associations. Varenne speaks of a 'cultural code' (a constitutive rule in the terms we have been using here) in which groups are formed by the voluntary choices of individuals seeking to satisfy their interests.

The underlying schema (which in Bourdieu's or Sewell's terms is transposable to new situations and can be used to interpret even highly dissimilar group experiences, like those of families, as well as political groups or garden clubs) is that groups continue to exist only as long as they serve their members' individual needs, and so conflict can easily destroy the group. Thus the norm of polite friendliness is reproduced by the very real fear that conflict in a group can destroy the voluntary participation upon which it depends.

Varenne (1977) thus provides a unifying explanation of both Americans' insistence on their individualism—people need to display distinctive traits, interests, and tastes that make them candidates for affiliation with compatible others—and Americans' conformity—people can remain part of a group only because they share similar interests, needs, or tastes. In this view, then, practices of friendliness are not simply culturally learned skills and habits (Swidler 1986). They are derived from the code for constituting group life according to a particular schema, and they are reproduced by the day-to-day experience of the fragility of group life—the dependence of groups on everyone 'getting along.'

The underlying code according to which what makes an individual unique also makes him or her uniquely valuable to the group is not really tacit. Indeed, while it is not consciously held or frequently explicated as a rule, it is elaborated in paradigmatic myths and stories from *Don't Cry, Big Bird* (Roberts 1981) (Big Bird is too tall to play games with his Sesame Street friends, but when Betty Lou's kite gets stuck in a tree, only Big Bird can save the day) to cowboy movies and hard-boiled detective dramas (Wright 1975; Cawelti 1976).

Many scholars explain America's voluntarist individualism by arguing that America is ideologically an 'individualistic' society, as is evident in its founding documents, the religious beliefs of its founding groups, and ideological beliefs of its leaders and publics throughout its history (Hartz 1955; Horwitz 1979; Verba and Orren 1985; Bellah et al. 1985; Lipset 1990). The difficulty with this approach, as many scholars have discovered, is that cultural traditions turn out to contain many competing alternatives (Zuckerman 1982)—in the American case the 'quest for community' as well as the assertion of individualism (see Bender 1978; Hewitt 1989; Swidler 1992).[5]

If an explanation in terms of ideology is unsatisfying, some simple appeal to 'practices' is equally problematic. If Americans indeed learn to think of themselves as autonomous individuals because, for example, from an early age they are expected (indeed, forced) to make choices, so that having preferences and acting on them become part of what defines one as a person (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989), Americans also learn to compete (Dreeben 1968), to both obey and defy authority (Metz 1978), and to feel diminished or enhanced by their position within bureaucratic and status hierarchies (Collins 1981). Americans' typically voluntarist strategies for organizing collective action, and their individualist understandings of their own practice, cannot therefore be due to the fact that they know only one set of practices. They are not doomed to reproduce

the dominant structures because of the habits or styles they internalize in childhood.

Then what anchors Americans' voluntarist individualism, and what role do practices play in this process? Another way to describe American voluntarism is to say that Americans act as if there is a constitutive rule that individual agents create groups and, conversely, that groups are the products of their members' choices. A constitutive rule says that something will count as something in a particular context. Practices play a crucial role as repeated ritual confirmations that something is indeed what it is. For example, as John Meyer (1987) and his colleagues have argued, there are increasingly wellinstitutionalized understandings about what it is to be a nation-state, and the world system is increasingly constituted by nation-states and the abstract individuals those states exist to serve. But concretely, becoming a nation means becoming one of those units that the other units called states recognize as one of themselves. And this is accomplished through conformity to a set of ritual practices. A state has a name, a flag and an anthem (Cerulo 1995), a constitution (Boli-Bennett 1979), and is recognized as a state by the United Nations—with a seat, a vote, and most important recognition in the form of UN membership (McNeely 1995). In a similar way, Erving Goffman (1967, 1971) has delineated the interaction rituals that confirm the status of persons as persons. Moving aside when we pass someone, addressing a person by name, making eye contact, respecting someone's space—all these practices reconfirm the constitutive rules of modern Western selfhood.

Practices also play a key role in recreating the structure of American voluntarism. Varenne himself, who described the underlying code so brilliantly, has focused on discursive practices: the ways in which anything that is said that has 'un-American' content or implications is simply reinterpreted or ignored so as to conform to dominant ways of talking (Varenne 1984, 1987). But I do not think discursive practices in themselves hold the key to the reproduction of such structures. Nor do I think the ordinary practices that instill in Americans a distinctive habitus—the tendency to think of themselves as autonomous selves, their experienced facility in making choices (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989), their expectation that each person will have his or her 'own' opinion on every possible matter (Jepperson 1992), their willingness to advertise their interests and talents to anyone they meet, or their tendency to evaluate others on the basis of moral character more than cultural accomplishments (Lamont 1992)—are the real anchors for the fundamental schema that constitutes persons and groups.

For Americans, the actual creation of groups—establishing church congregations, clubs, support groups, or interest associations—is a recurrent but necessarily intermittent activity. Yet the deep concern with being the kind of self—autonomous, endowed with its own interests and opinions, energetic and ready to take initiative, able and willing to choose—that could form or join a group is a continuing preoccupation (Bellah et al. 1985). For most Americans, the central institutional spheres of action are the market economy, where most people must

find places as workers, the bureaucratic state which generates obligations and claims of rights and benefits, and the family where informal as well as legally regulated obligations hold sway. In all modern capitalist societies, encounters with the labor market, in particular, lead individuals to experience themselves as the possessors of skills and capacities which define their social value (see Collier [1997] for an analysis of how labor market experience generates individualized personhood).[6] But none of these are the primary locus of voluntarist individualism. The specific practices that reproduce America's distinctive voluntarist individualism are those people use to negotiate collective action. To act in the wider public sphere, from the neighborhood, to the workplace, to collective political action, to the creation of community alliances and attachments, Americans draw on a diffuse public culture imbued with many elements of the sacred (see Swidler 1992). It is the paradigmatic practices of this wider public sphere, ritual enactments of a civil religion (Bellah 1968), which anchor the fundamental patterns of American voluntarist individualism. Thus when American children choose group activities, or when schools encourage after-school clubs, or when Americans join a church and pay dues, as when on important civic occasions they celebrate 'freedom,' they participate in ritual practices that reinforce voluntarist individualism. This pattern is resilient, I think, precisely because it lies outside the major institutions of bureaucracy, market, and family and thus provides the 'default option' for organizing collective action. In this sense it has something in common with both the 'silent practices' that constituted labor as a commodity in England versus Germany and the public role the Gay Freedom Day Parade played for San Francisco's lesbian/gay community. In all three cases, a practice anchors other forms of practice and discourse because it enacts a constitutive rule that defines a social entity—the 'gay community,' the labor relationship, the 'group' or 'community.'

The notion that certain key practices anchor others and that these anchoring practices may share common features cannot be demonstrated fully with the evidence presented here. I would like, however, to conclude by reemphasizing three points. First, when we invoke the importance of social practices, it is worth asking whether all practices—how scientists in a laboratory turn the lights on and off, how men shave in the morning or how women put on their makeup, whether and where family members gather for dinner, how a social group incorporates new members—are of equal importance in shaping or constraining other social arrangements. I have tried to show that, at least in some cases, there are 'anchoring practices' which play a key role in reproducing larger systems of discourse and practice.

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Second, I have suggested that we pay particular attention to the situations in which practices anchor or reproduce constitutive rules, rules that define things as what they are. I have also suggested that while sometimes such practices may be deep, habitual, and taken-for-granted, this need not always be the case. Some public ritual practices seem able to create and then anchor new constitutive rules.

3. Third, I have tried tentatively to identify kinds of social relationships that might reproduce such constitutive practices. The fact that the differing English and German definitions of labor were central to the ways workers and employers bargained about wages may account for why those defining practices were so enduring and had such wide-ranging ramifications. The examples of the Gay Freedom Day Parade and the many-stranded practices of American voluntarism suggested that ritual practices that define socially central but informally structured social relationships may play an especially important anchoring role. Continued attention to carefully developed empirical cases, where we can see how key structures are constituted by practices, may finally help us to a better understanding of when and how practices anchor or organize systems of practice, discourse, and action.

Notes

1 Sewell (1985:60) notes a similar shift toward more 'structuralist' thinking about ideology:

> Theorists as diverse as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Clifford Geertz, and Raymond Williams, to name only a few, have shifted the emphasis from highly self-conscious, purposive individuals attempting to elaborate or enact 'blueprints' for change, to the relatively anonymous and impersonal operation of 'ideological state apparatuses,' 'epistemes,' 'cultural systems,' or 'structures of feeling.' For these theorists, the coherence and the dynamics of an ideological formation (under whichever title) are sought in the interrelations of its semantic items and in their relation to social forces, not in the conscious wills of individual actors. Ideologies are, in this sense, anonymous, or transpersonal.

2 The lengths to which cultural analysts had to go to elicit evidence of values, ideas, and meanings illustrate the problem. Scholars like Rokeach (1973) and later Ronald Inglehart (1977) who thought 'values' were important were forced into the uncomfortable position of using respondents' forced-choice rankings of verbal statements of 'terminal' and 'mediating' values as proxies for the deep values that were in theory guiding action. Others used survey-type research, asking respondents how much they agreed or disagreed with various statements as a way of getting at their ideas—their 'beliefs' (like belief in God), 'attitudes' (such as their approval or disapproval of abortion under various circumstances), or their 'values' (like desire for material comfort, versus a clean environment, versus peace on earth). Even brilliant anthropologists like the Kluckhohns were stuck with asking people from different cultural groups about their ultimate values and then trying (without much success) to treat the answers to such decontextualized questions as somehow independent 'causes' of respondents' actions (see Cancian 1975).

3 D'Andrade (1984:91) develops the concept of a 'constitutive rule,' using marriage as an example:

> Marriage is a culturally created entity—*an entity created by the social agreement that something counts as that entity.* To agree that something will count as something else is more than simply knowing about it, although knowing about it is a necessary precondition. The *agreement* that something counts as something else involves the *adherence* of a group of people to a *constitutive rule* and to the entailments incurred by the application of the rule (emphasis in original).

He goes on to offer another example:

> Games make the most effective illustrations of constitutive rule systems, perhaps because the arbitrary nature of games makes the separation between the physical events of the game and what these events count as quite apparent. When a football player is declared 'out of bounds,' everyone understands that the physical fact of stepping over the line counts as being out of bounds only with respect to the game being played (p. 91).

4 It is significant that in his most recent paper on 'events' that transform structures, Sewell (1996) focuses on a dramatic public ritual, the storming of the Bastille, which loudly, publicly enacted new practices that could coordinate collective action in new ways. See also the argument in Swidler (1992).
5 See the very similar argument in Skocpol (1985) who points to the difficulty of demonstrating that ideologies shaped the outcome of the French Revolution given that leaders of the revolution held inconsistent beliefs and that their actions were often in conflict with their beliefs.
6 Where the institutional order mediates market demands, as in Japan, it can also inhibit the development of many aspects of modern individualism—so that, for example, people may strive to demonstrate individual accomplishment or skill in order to win the favor of a patron or mentor who is the real key to security and success. And of course modern individualisms vary, even among the capitalist democracies (see Stephenson 1989).