TALK
of
LOVE

HOW CULTURE MATTERS

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In this chapter I ask how multiple cultural framings of the same issue can coexist side by side. I ask first what maintains the plausibility of a cultural worldview, even when people are directly critical of it. And I ask a related question: What larger institutional demands anchor each of the dominant understandings of love? Discerning what circumstances lead people to invoke one of their cultural understandings rather than another is a critical step in untangling the complex relations of culture and social structure.

The middle-class adults I interviewed are not passive victims of popular romance. Indeed, most greet the romantic love mythology with skepticism or outright disdain. Yet I shall show in this chapter that the same interviewees who reject the "movie image" of love use it repeatedly in their own thinking. I will try to account for the persistence of mythic understandings of love in the midst of a dominant, self-conscious "realism." We will begin to see here how culture is organized less by what goes on inside people's heads as they analyze their experience than by the external contexts with which they have to deal. This analysis of two cultures of love, which persist simultaneously even in the minds of the same people, will suggest that culture may be organized as much from the "outside in" as from the "inside out."
LOVE MYTHS

To understand the inner dynamics of the romantic love mythology, it is valuable to trace its origins in European cultural history. Scholars agree that courtly love poetry, which emerged in Europe at the end of the eleventh century, created a fundamentally new vision of love, self, and society (Lewis 1959; R. Bloch 1977; M. Hunt 1994). Sung by troubadours in the courts of feudal France, it told of knights made virtuous by love and of heroic deeds performed in the service of noble ladies. In courtly poetry, love became an ennobling passion rather than the dangerous appetite familiar to Greeks and Romans, or the tormenting temptation described by the early Church fathers. Instead, the love of a knight for an exalted noble lady was what "makes a man virtuous and causes him to perform many heroic deeds" (Capellanus 1957:41, excerpted in Stephens 1968). Love could transform the self, forging noble character.

The other side of courtly love was a tragic vision, in which the love that inspired virtue could also lead to betrayal and death (Rougmont 1956; Lindholm 1998). The paradigmatic courtly love story is that of Tristan and Isolde. Like the later stories of Lancelot and Guinevere or Romeo and Juliet, it portrays an ill-fated love that violates social obligations. A magic potion makes Tristan fall helplessly in love with his king's betrothed, so that only death can ultimately unite the lovers and end their betrayal. Courtly love powerfully reshaped the European imagination. It envisioned a new moral complexity in the relationship between individuals and the social world (R. Bloch 1977; Elias 1994).

For the courtly tradition, love was (1) a sudden and certain passion ("love at first sight") for (2) an idealized lover. Love could (3) transform the self, making a person virtuous; but it also (4) separated individuals from society, leading them to defy social conventions in pursuit of a more personal destiny. The separate self and a conception of virtue in tension with social commitments is central to the appeal of the love myth.

Courtly love and its accompanying ethic of chivalry remained the code of the European nobility for centuries (Elias 1994; M. Bloch 1961). But the courtly ideal of love comes to us reshaped by the bourgeois culture of early English capitalism. As Ian Watt (1957) has argued, that culture took its quintessential form in the eighteenth-century English novel. The writers and publishers who created the novel form courted a newly literate, middle-class reading public and sold their wares in a new kind of cutthroat literary market. Both readers and writers were steeped in the individualism of the world's most capitalist and Protestant nation. Love became the focal myth of that individualism.

The novel that founds the bourgeois tradition of romantic love is Samuel Richardson's Pamela. In Pamela, the essential drama of courtly love is preserved, but with crucial changes in its meaning. Pamela, a virtuous servant girl, resists the determined advances of her employer, Mr. B. In defending her virginity, the physical integrity of her body, she proves the integrity of her character. Her virtue is rewarded when Mr. B. finally abandons his efforts at seduction and marries her instead.

Love in the novel remains a drama about virtue. But rather than simply inspiring heroic deeds, love becomes a test of individual character. In bourgeois love stories, individuals still discover and defend their integrity. But rather than betrayal and death, the bourgeois love story ends with a marriage in which the autonomous individual finds his or her proper place in the social world. Bourgeois love thus alters the tension between individual morality and social demands, reconciling the two through a love that tests and rewards a person's true merits.

In the novel, love both reveals and reforms character. Pamela shows that she is truly virtuous, down to the last fiber of her being. She resists and eventually overcomes not only her employer's lust but all the social forces arrayed against her. While Pamela's character is tested, Mr. B.'s is transformed by love. Pamela's goodness redeems him, and in loving her for her virtue he becomes virtuous himself. Thus love is the drama through which individuals find and define themselves. Individuals who preserve the self against social forces are rewarded by finding a place in the social world.

In the bourgeois myth, then, love is a matter of individual integrity. Love is, first, a clear, decisive, and unwavering choice. Love crystallizes the self, so that discovering whom one "really" loves is discovering one's true self (as in Jane Austen's novels, for example, where heroines outgrow their immature willfulness, learn to know themselves, and then can recognize the true value of their beloveds). Love must thus be certain, as the core of the self is certain.

Second, true love must be unique and exclusive ("one true love"), embodying the uniqueness of the individual self. The loved one is idealized in the sense that only true love could justify an exclusive choice. Third, love can overcome obstacles both personal and social ("love conquers all"). Through love individuals assert their integrity in the face of social forces (marrying for love, not money, for example). Finally, love is enduring, even as the self is enduring. The love story has a decisive ending ("happily ever after") that resolves the dramatic struggle of the individual to define his or her self within the social world.

In sum, bourgeois love is (1) a clear, all-or-nothing choice; (2) of a unique other; (3) made in defiance of social forces; and (4) permanently
resolving the individual's destiny. To put it in different terms: "They met, and it was love at first sight. There would never be another girl (boy) for him (her). No one could come between them. They overcame obstacles and lived happily ever after."  

REAL LOVE

When the middle-class adults I interviewed talked about love, they debunked precisely this mythic vision. "Movie" love is intense, overwhelming, and sure, they said, but real love is often ambiguous, gradual, and uncertain. Indeed, if we examine what people actually say about love, it is almost the opposite of the mythic ideal: (1) Real love is not sudden or certain. It grows slowly and is often ambivalent and confused. Love does not require a dramatic choice but may result from circumstance, accident, or inertia. (2) There is no "one true love." One can love many people in a variety of different ways. (3) The kind of love that leads to marriage should not depend on irrational feeling in defiance of social convention, but on compatibility and on practical traits that make persons good life partners. The fewer obstacles people have to overcome, the happier they are likely to be. (4) Love does not necessarily last forever. Love and marriage do not settle either personal identity or social destiny. Rather than guaranteeing that one will live "happily ever after," love requires continuing hard work, compromise, and change.

I call this antimythic view of love "prosaic-realism." It is just as "cultural" as the mythic view it claims to debunk. It appears both in autobiographical accounts, when people describe how they came to love or marry as they did, and in general observations on what love is or should be.

Betty Dyson, a middle-class homemaker, has been married eleven years and has two children. Actively involved in the Baptist church, she reflects a view of love fairly common among the people I interviewed. For her, love was not a sudden, inexplicable passion:

As for why I married the person I did, he was the right person at the right time at the right place. We met while we were going to school and we spent a lot of time together and we decided fairly quickly that we wanted to be married and share our lives.

Far from claiming that her husband was uniquely right in some ineffable way, she lists quite straightforwardly the traits that make them well-suited:

He's an awful lot like my father. I'm an awful lot like his mother. He was the kind of person I felt I could share a lot with, who had similar ideas and a similar outlook on life. We were very compatible. We enjoyed doing a lot of the same things. We were good friends.

There was no love at first sight. Indeed, she insists on describing as unhurried what was, by some standards, a whirlwind courtship. "It grew very gradually. Well, we were going to school, and he was hanging around a lot... and I was avoiding him a lot, but within two months we decided to get married." Rather than describing a decisive choice, she describes her marriage as something she and her husband fell into without really realizing what they were doing. What a novelist might romanticize, she seems almost intentionally to make prosaic:

I tried to avoid him, but he was fairly persistent, and the more I got to know him, it was all right.... He was attracted to me, but I don't know if you would call it love. Maybe. He was on a rebound. I think, a little bit, having been rejected by somebody else. He was just looking for somebody to be friendly with, but as I say, within two months we had decided that we did want to be married.

This homemaker describes love not as an intense, all-or-nothing passion but as an experience grounded in the small ups and downs of daily life. She is not avoiding emotion in her description, but she reserves intense feeling for the prosaic, everyday kind of love. She is "much more in love" with her husband than when they married because, for her, real love develops only over time. "It's partly just living together and sharing your lives and getting to know each other, and partly because I know more of what love is." Love is "a growing thing" that "will change and will manifest itself in different ways." It involves "caring for each other and the concern and the willingness to share your life and to be part of another person's life, and to take responsibility for that."

For this active Baptist, real love is permanent, but not because one inevitably lives happily ever after:

I think if you love someone enough and you commit your life to them in marriage you'd make it permanent. There will be times when you don't feel like you're in love, but since you've made a commitment and are willing to honor that commitment then you will work towards bringing back the love.

Thus for Betty Dyson, as for many of the people I interviewed, love involves hard work rather than sudden passion. It depends on such ordinary things as compatibility, sharing, and common interests, even when "physical attraction and romance" are also important. If there is a central
organizing principle to her view of love, it is an ideal of maturity. She is "much more in love with [her] husband now," because you can love someone more when you have shared a life together. Far from being a sudden and certain choice of a unique other that resolves the problems of life, love for the prosaic-realistic culture starts out as gradual, uncertain, and conventional and deepens over a lifetime.

**PERSISTING MYTHS**

At times, even the most prosaic view of love can suddenly shift, however, revealing a mythic understanding quite impervious to the "realism" that dominates ordinary experience. Remember, for example, Donald Nelson, whose arguments (see chapter 2) for "respect" between independent spouses were swept away by an image of all-or-nothing love when he contemplated what he would do if his wife were ill: "Nora is the most important thing in my life.... [S]he's important because she's-I love her." This interview was somewhat unusual-both because this rationalist engineer was so resolutely unromantic and because the question may have invited a histrionic answer. But this reemergence of a mythic vision of love occurred over and over in other interviews, even if in less dramatic ways. It was as if something were pulling at the experience of these conventional, middle-class interviewees-something that eluded their commonsense view of the world.

This lurching back and forth between mythic and prosaic views of love also affected Ted Oster, the successful lawyer we met in chapter 2, who had "really flipped" over his wife. In his case conflicting views of love showed themselves as an internal debate he could not seem to resolve. He described having fallen for his wife, in something very much like love at first sight. But he vacillated between the mythic view that there is "one right person" and what he himself saw as the more rationally persuasive idea that many people could be acceptable spouses, with circumstance and accident determining whom one actually married. He reluctantly accepted the "realistic" view after breaking off an earlier engagement: "I suppose ... I had developed the feeling that nothing is perfect in that there wasn't just one person I could be with." But he could not quite abandon the idea of one true love, despite its implausibility: "Maybe I just didn't rationalize it as being simply impossible. It can't be [true] because that many coincidences couldn't happen all the time. You see a lot of people successfully married." Yet despite his rational reservations, he found himself clinging to the belief in one right person. "I had been told, and I really did believe because I wanted to believe the idea, that, boy, when you meet that one special person you'll really know it. I guess maybe there's more than one special person. Maybe there's quite a few. Maybe there are quite a few people with whom you could be equally happy in a different way, but you have to find somebody from that group." For this young lawyer, the mythic idea remained somehow true, despite his conscious skepticism.

How can we understand the alternations in Ted Oster's thinking—and in that of almost every person I interviewed—between a "realistic" and a "mythic" view of love? Let me first try to describe more clearly what I think is happening, before offering an account of why it happens. I do not think that people are simply responding to a culturally induced myth—a kind of brainwashing. As is evident in the quotes above, the prosaic-realistic ideal of mature love is every bit as cultural as the romantic myth. The language people use to reject infatuation and insist that love grows slowly or requires hard work is just as stereotyped as that in which love solves all problems. But what we observe is not just a compromise between mature realism and mythic romance. People seem instead to alternate between different frames for grasping reality, suddenly slipping into a mythic vocabulary at variance with the ways they normally think. While vehemently rejecting "infatuation" or "movie-star love," they periodically invoke images of love-as all-or-nothing, certain, enduring—that violate the commonsense understandings they normally use. These are not delusions or mistakes, however. Instead, there is a structural reality behind the mythic view of love which continually throws people back on a way of thinking they may consciously reject.

**MARRIAGE**

The "mythic" view of love is grounded, I believe, in a structural reality. People recognize that it poorly describes the uncertainty, ambiguity, and impermanence in their own experiences of love, yet they continually return to its way of interpreting certain experiences. That structural reality is marriage. (Even for those who do not marry, or those like gays and lesbians who are denied the legal right to marry, the structural features of marriage provide the dominant model for love relationships.) As I make clear below however, those who truly bypass or abandon a marriage-like model of relationships may also stop thinking of love in mythic terms.

As an emotional state love may not be all-or-nothing, unique, heroic, and enduring. But despite the prevalence of divorce, marriage still has this structure: One is either married or not (however ambivalent the
The dual character of marriage lies behind the conflicting ways people use the concept of love. Much of the time, they use ideas of love to manage and interpret ongoing relationships. Here they employ a prosaic-realistic view, which is not realism in the sense of a neutral assessment of experience. It is shaped by conventional formulas and ideals, especially that of maturity. But it does attend to psychological variability, and to the ups and downs of daily life, more than does the mythic view. It is an ethic about being married (or "coupled"), offering suggestions about how to manage an ongoing relationship. The prosaic-realistic view has its own romantic ideal of down-to-earth, gradually evolving love. But its fundamental concern is with established relationships-describing how people can get along, understand each other, and work out their difficulties. As Betty Dyson, the middle-class homemaker, put it, "it's not essential at the beginning of a marriage for there to be love, but it is essential that it be a growing relationship and that love will develop from that."

The mythic view persists because it answers a different set of questions-questions, I would argue, about a decisive choice, implicitly the choice of whether or not to marry, or stay married. It reproduces the institutional features of marriage, recasting them as matters of individual volition.

**A Decisive Choice ("Love at First Sight")**

In a revealing exchange, Betty Dyson responded to a vignette-about a woman who must decide whether or not to stay with her severely depressed husband-with a peculiar, but acute, observation. She insisted that the wife's decision could not depend on "how much" she loved her husband:

> It's a yes-or-no situation. You're either for him or agin' him. I don't think there's a measure on love. There are times when you feel more romantic. There are times, you know, when I hate him. You have a lot of emotions involved, but the underlying feelings, the commitment, are always in there.

Earlier she had acknowledged that love can vary in degree or intensity (she loves her husband "more" than when they married), and she asserted it again as a psychological truth: "There are times when you feel more romantic. There are times ... when I hate him." But she nonetheless subscribed to one of the central mythic properties of love—that it is an all-or-nothing phenomenon, that you can't put "a measure on love." And of course she is right—not that love cannot be measured, but that the choice of whether to stay with someone or leave is pretty much a "yes or no" decision.

The dual properties of marriage-as relationship and as institution-also account for the dramatic alternations in the thinking of our sober engineer between prosaic and mythic love. In talking of his marriage as an ongoing relationship, Donald Nelson described such things as getting along, understanding each other, and respecting each other's independence. But a question about what he would do if his wife became ill raised the issue of marriage as a commitment. When the choice was between staying or leaving, the answer was "Nora is the most important thing in my life.... I love her."

I do not mean to argue that choices about whether to marry, or whether to stay married, are actually determined by "love"—or even that the question of love plays a significant role. People may stay married out of convenience; loveless marriages often endure; and many apparently loving ones fail. It is rather that the culture of love—precisely in its mythic form—gives people a way of talking about the all-or-nothing consequences of choices they may be quite confused and ambivalent about making.

It is the decisive consequences of choices about marriage that make the love myth compelling, even when people find its particulars implausible. If a friend seeks advice—about whether to marry, whether to break off a relationship, whether to divorce—we may listen to the psychological and circumstantial particulars, but then find ourselves asking, "Well, do you love him (or her)?" We may know perfectly well that our friend is confused about precisely this point—or she may say, yes, I still love A but I love B too. But none of this knowledge, nor even a distaste for this whole way of thinking about love, is likely to prevent us from acting as if the problem were whether or not she "really" does love A—because in the end she is either going to stay with A or leave. The mythic understanding of love recognizes the structural reality of just such choices.

**A Unique Other ("One True Love")**

The love myth also posits one perfect mate for each person. (This accompanies the ideal of "love at first sight," in which recognition of the "right" one is instantaneous and unwavering.) My interviewees, however, did not describe their courtships or their mates in such romantic terms. While the
young lawyer "flipped" over his wife, and others reported swift engagements, what is striking is how little most interviewees had to say about why they married the people they did:

Well, because he was the one I met, I guess. I could have married someone else had I met somebody else.... It wasn't love at first sight, but it was like a steady growth of support and friendship and love. [thirty-eight-year-old nurse, married seven years, one child]

I always assumed I would get married, there was no question about it in my mind, and I thought I was awfully late at the time.... I felt very lonely much of the time between I suppose getting out of high school until I got married.... I couldn't find somebody that I was happy with. And vice versa, that she would be happy with me.... It has worked out very well. [forty-four-year-old engineer, married seventeen years, four children]

We kind of grew on each other, I guess.... Tough question. I love her. Why her and not anybody else? I guess it's just her personality. She's up all the time. [twenty-six-year-old accountant, married one year, no children]

We met at a time when, I don't know, I guess we just happened to be right for each other at the right time." [thirty-four-year-old travel agent, married nine years]

The word that recurs consistently in these descriptions is "right"-the right person, the right relationship, and the right time. But the word "right" operates in two very different senses; bridging two distinct meanings. One is the prosaic attitude: "There were no fireworks; it just seemed right." The other is the mythic experience in which one's beloved is "just right," special, perfect.

In their everyday experience people see their relationships as contingent, imperfect, and ordinary. Yet in one sense the myth of "one perfect love" is true—true of the structural experience of an exclusive, long-enduring relationship. One may not marry the uniquely perfect person, but that relationship does become unique. One's marriage partner becomes irreplaceable, not because one could not have had an equally happy marriage with someone else, but because one could not have had this marriage, these experiences, this love.

This sense that one's marriage is now the only reality explains why most people give such feeble accounts of why they married the persons they did. It is hard to give reasons for what in retrospect seems inevitable. Indeed, when recounting their decision to marry, many couples describe it as hardly having been a decision, but as having developed naturally out of the relationship itself. One couple, married for twelve years, were high school sweethearts. When they married, the husband said, "there wasn't a lot of discussion." His wife was "the kind of girl I wanted to marry" and "somewhere along the line I just made the assumption that that's where our relationship was headed." But despite this prosaic account, there was a "rightness" that was almost like romantic destiny. The wife said, "I asked my sister... about love.... I was looking for a definition of love because I felt, at eighteen, how could I know that I was in love. But even her words didn't really put it. I knew that's where I was." The husband, too, "spent a lot of time trying to figure out what love should be." But in the end, "I felt so good about us that that's probably what it was. If it wasn't that, I wasn't really concerned about it because that just felt good enough that [that] was the right feeling, the right place."

The young lawyer's reasoned opinion that "there wasn't just one person I could be with" is in this sense less true than his mythic ideal of "one special person." The person one marries is special-legally and institutionally unique, however ordinary or extraordinary his or her personal attributes. A thirty-five-year-old, self-employed businessman explained how being married to someone makes her "right" in the sense that she is both so uniquely perfect as to be irreplaceable and so familiar that her virtues are impossible to describe: "I guess because I've been married for twelve years, and the person I love is my wife, and I don't really remember any other relationships that much. Because this is the only one that really counts." The social organization of marriage makes the mythic image true experientially, whatever the facts.

Overcoming Obstacles ("Love Conquers All")

Very few interviewees described heroic struggles to marry against social or family opposition. Indeed, even where a prosaic remark hints at possible drama ("Even when ... I was trying to date somebody else in college ... I knew I was in love with [him] "; or Betty Dyson's "He was hanging around a lot ... and I was avoiding him a lot"), the drama seems underplayed.
There was an occasional marriage against parental opposition, but little was made of it. These interviewees on the whole seemed perfectly content to have married just the kinds of people their parents wanted for them, and indeed, they frequently said just that.12

Heroic struggle to marry has largely disappeared from the accounts my interviewees give of their lives, but it has been replaced by another powerful heroism—the heroic effort necessary to keep relationships together. Interviewees insist that one must "work at" a relationship. Even more, they assert that a whole range of virtues—from honesty and a willingness to face change, to stamina and a willingness to stick by one's commitments—are necessary to preserve a modern marriage. Thus love again becomes a test of character, but it tests a different kind of character than that of the rebellious youth fighting for his or her true love. This is the mature heroism of adulthood (see Swidler 1980). Its virtues are self-knowledge, honesty, and a willingness to face difficulties squarely.

The heroic themes of the love myth have thus been transposed from the drama of choosing to the drama of sustaining a marriage. In some ways, this violates the pattern in which mythic love is invoked when people think about forming or leaving a marriage, while prosaic realism flourishes when people consider how to manage day-to-day relationships. The secret of this apparent reversal is that the institutional structure of marriage—all-or-nothing, exclusive, requiring a decisive choice—has been partially transformed by the difficulty people have in staying married. The mundane problems of getting along in a relationship continually raise the more decisive question of whether the partners remain committed to work at getting along (see Ilouz 1997:193-96). Thus prosaic love requires heroic commitment. The institutional insecurity of modern marriage introduces a mythic element right into the heart of marital mundaneness, making ordinary, everyday actions heroic tests of individual character.

Here prosaic love and mythic love meet. Interviewees insist on theordinariness of their love relationships as a transmuted myth of the heroic. In this view, even the frequent pettiness and indifference of daily life ("There are times where I don't even think about his day"; "you're living together, see each other every day, you don't sometimes pay attention") simply demonstrate the demanding moral struggles love requires. Love "conquers all" not by overcoming social obstacles but by meeting the mundane demands of ongoing relationships.

I have been arguing that the mythic culture of love relocates the institutional features of marriage-exclusive, all-or-nothing, transformative, enduring—in the interior of individual psyches. The prevalence of divorce has left the institution of marriage intact but has changed some of its social meanings. The prosaic-realistic culture of love is made plausible by this change in the institutional significance of marriage.

Ted Oster, the young lawyer, like almost all the people I interviewed, thinks of marriage at least in part in terms of the possibility of divorce. Asked whether love "is forever," he responded immediately by stressing the need to "work at it to keep it going forever." His sensitivity to the mundane details of relationships, his interest, for example, in making sure he and his wife regularly find time to "communicate," reflects this sense of vulnerability. "It makes me nervous at times because I know that I'm not, or perceive that she's not, working hard at it, or working in the right way, or that I don't have the energy level or the whatever to do what's necessary." The prosaic culture's critique of mythic love comes from its insistence that the really heroic moral struggle is that which occurs within ongoing relationships.

**Love Lasts Forever ("Happily Ever After")**

Despite its fragility, the institution of marriage makes plausible the fourth, and arguably most implausible, element of the traditional love myth: the ideal that true love lasts forever. This, of course, has been the stuff of poetry for centuries—from "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds" to "I'll be yours for endless time"—as poets find ever new ways of saying "forever." (It is also the stuff of ironic poetic reaction as in Andrew Marvell's "Had we but world enough, and time"; Carole King's "Will you still love me tomorrow?"; or Edna St. Vincent Millay's "I loved you Wednesday, yes, but what is that to me?")

The people I interviewed vacillated about whether true love endures. As we have seen, many insist that love does not last by itself, that "You have to work at it." Indeed, they are haunted by the fragility of marriage. Divorce is an evident danger, as well as a continuing option. They recognize that feelings of love are transient, so that, as Betty Dyson said, "There are times when I hate him." And finally, many interviewees responded to the vignettes by saying that a person should leave a relationship when it is no longer satisfying, as long as she or he has made honest efforts to work out the difficulties. While one can pledge love that lasts forever, apparently one cannot be bound by such a promise.

Nevertheless, these interviewees still valued enduring love. Indeed, there is evidence from studies of college students that from the 1960s to the 1980s young people became more "romantic," seeing love as a crucial...
prerequisite for marriage (Simpson, Campbell, and Berscheid 1986:366-67). Furthermore, these college students also regard love as necessary for sustaining a marriage. Among my interviewees, those who were married used the prevalence of divorce as a cautionary lesson. Rather than assuming that they themselves would divorce, they talked about what they must do to avoid it: work on their relationships, keep growing together, or share a commitment to Christ-and, of course, "communicate."

More surprising, these interviewees persistently employed a mythic sense of the word love in which real love must last forever. Thus, without in fact believing that love does last, and while recognizing the fragility of contemporary relationships, they spoke as if love that ends could not have been "real" love in the first place."

For these middle-class Americans, what is "real" love can only be decided after the fact. Sam Woods, a self-employed businessman, married twelve years, sees marriage as a lifelong commitment, sanctioned by God. For him love is not real love unless it is enduring. A vignette about a man tempted to leave his wife for a woman he loves more led him to argue that the man cannot know "which is real love... until it's tested." Love must be "tried, have difficulties come into the relationship. That's when you find out what really love is. What he's experiencing is the exciting part of love, of a love relationship. He feels good; he's excited; he's turned on. He maybe feels younger or whatever." But this is not "real love."

A very different man—a divorced and remarried thirty-two-year-old real-estate broker proud of his "communication skills"—made exactly the same distinction between infatuation, which feels like love but does not last; and love, which may feel like infatuation, but is enduring. Describing his early relationships, Thomas DaSilva said,

I had about four or five relationships prior to [my first marriage] with women I had considered myself to be in love with. I had this image of this ideal love that was perfect, that was made in heaven, and that nothing could touch it, and everything was going to be fine.

But when those relationships failed, it was evident to him that they had not really been love. And when his marriage failed, rather than concluding that love can die, he simply revised his conception of love itself. By examining in detail how this smooth salesman redefined love, we can see more precisely why mythic love remains plausible even in the face of contrary experience. We will see how even one who considers himself thoroughly disillusioned reproduces a mythic understanding of love, because "love" defines not a unique feeling but a unique structural slot in his life.
retained an ideal of "love," precisely, I would argue, because he still envisioned the possibility of marriage. He did not preserve the content of his earlier beliefs about love, but he reopened the structural slot "love" had occupied.

I think what I was looking for was "what is it that I am looking for?" In the back of my mind I was thinking that I would know it when I saw it. At that time I was still believing largely in the sense of "I'll know it when I see it. It'll hit me and I'm not looking for it particularly. I'm just going about what I do normally."

What then was the "it" he was looking for—this something so special that, although it could not be described, he would know it when he saw it? His original image of love had proved false. Neither passionate emotion, nor traditional marital roles, nor happiness-ever-after had worked. But disappointment did not end his quest for "it." He had given up the specifics of his original ideal of love, but not the structural shape of the love myth. He was still searching for a unique, exclusive, special "it"—because only such a love could correspond to the institutional properties of marriage.

After his divorce, Thomas DaSilva had transcended the ideal of one right person:

I had this narrow thing I was looking for before. And all of a sudden I became aware of the fact, jeez, there isn't anything in particular to look for except that you want to find a person.... All of a sudden that concept of a single person started to dissipate. It went away. All of a sudden, I said, jeez, that's kind of silly. You could take seven, eight, nine, or ten of these people and you know that you could be married to any of these people and have a marriage that is a good one, maybe different from your other one.

But despite his experience that "as I got to know more and more women, I liked them all," the quest for someone mythically special did not disappear, even though "They were all so different in different ways. I liked this about this person. I liked that about that person." But after dismissing the mythic idea (more decisively than the young lawyer could bring himself to do), he described his second wife, Melinda, in just such terms:

Q. So then what was it like when you met Melinda?

Melinda was so different than anybody I had ever met before. I was struck immediately by Melinda, but I was so guarded about that. "Wait a minute now. Where have you ever seen it like this before?"

Q. How was she different?

She was so damned perfect.

Love had certainly acquired new meanings. "Infatuation" was still enjoyable, but Thomas DaSilva had developed a more mature, realistic view of love. He and Melinda "had a lot of things in common about what [they] liked and didn't like." They found that their "families were very similar in a lot of ways." He had changed, so that he liked her independence, the fact that she would not expect him always to take care of her. "I could cry with her. I could be other things than what I was able to be with other people. She was able to be the same with me." Indeed, he explicitly contrasted his understanding with his earlier conception of love. "I felt that it wasn't a lonely feeling when I was away from her as much as it was a feeling like I can get more out of my life with this person with me.... I know that with this person my life will be fuller because there are so many things here that we can do and work at."

Thomas DaSilva changed his conception of love. After divorcing and dating many women, he had adopted the prosaic-realistic culture of equality, emotional sharing, communication, and "working at" things together. He had stopped thinking that there was "a single person" he could be married to. But the underlying structure of the love myth reasserted itself with compelling force as he talked about the woman he did in fact marry.

Actual love stories, of course, do not always end in marriage. That is what makes novels, movies, or TV dramas exciting. But it is the structure of marriage as an institution that makes the love myth plausible. Even when lovers are separated, the mythic story asserts that there is one right person. Even if fighting for that person fails, there is a decisive choice in which the hero finds out what she or he really wants. Even when love stories are about relationships outside of marriage (or about the loss or re-discovery of love within a marriage), they embody the ideal of a single, exclusive love, a unique relationship to one other person, a heroic fight against obstacles, and the possibility of an all-or-nothing certainty about that choice.

My argument is that the features of the love myth—an exclusive, unique passion, a decisive choice that expresses and resolves identity, a struggle to overcome obstacles, and a commitment that endures forever—correspond neither to personal experience nor to the observations people
make of others they know. But its power is not an illusion. Rather, the love myth accurately describes the structural constraints of the institution of marriage. These constraints affect those who marry and those who divorce or remain unmarried, as long as they are implicitly or explicitly asking of every relationship whether it is the "right" relationship—one that is, or could be, or should be a marriage.

**LIFE STRATEGIES**

What can we learn about culture more generally from this analysis of the culture of love? Although the domain of love is a specialized one, the relationship between institutional constraints and cultural meanings that we have found here has wider implications. By examining how people organize action around institutional demands, we can develop a broader understanding of what reproduces cultural meanings, how people use culture to construct lines of action, and what sorts of "realities" culture actually describes.

**Cultural Persistence**

This chapter has shown how images of romantic love continually resurface even among people who consciously disavow them. When cultural understandings persist in this way, culture critics have argued that a dominant ideology holds people in its thrall, either because of manipulation by the culture industry (Gitlin 1983; Thompson 1990) or because the ideology is so hegemonic that no one can envision an alternative. But if ideological hegemony means the unthinking acceptance of dominant views, that is clearly not the case here. If it were, researchers should not find widespread cultural dissent (see Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1980; Mann 1970), such as the rebelliousness of the working-class London boys in Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977) or the skepticism Americans express about the availability of the "American dream" (Mann 1970; Huber and Form 1973; Rainwater 1974; J. Hochschild 1981:114-47; Kluegel and Smith 1986:53-73; Reinarman 1987; Swidler 1992).

As our analysis of love has shown, criticism alone will not dislodge contested culture. Middle-class Americans are sharply critical of the romantic love myth. In fact, they insist that such beliefs are dangerously misleading (see Illouz 1997:158-60). And they counter the romantic love myth with an alternative, prosaic-realistic imagery.

But if the love myth is not hegemonic, if respondents are not brainwashed by popular culture, why does mythic love persist? I have argued that the institutional features of marriage make mythic love plausible, even when people reject it as a guide to ordinary experience. Let us examine this claim more closely.

Mythic love persists because, while the prosaic view is more realistic as a description of experience, description is not the only or the most important use to which cultural meanings can be put. Culture does not describe external reality so much as it organizes people's own lines of action.

Two cultures of love persist, neither driving out the other, because people employ their understandings of love in two very different contexts. When thinking about the choice of whether to marry or stay married, people see love in mythic terms. Love is the choice of one right person whom one will or could marry. Therefore love is all-or-nothing, certain, exclusive, heroic, and enduring. When thinking about maintaining ongoing relationships, however, people mobilize the prosaic-realistic culture of love to understand the varied ways one can manage love relationships. Prosaic love is ambiguous, open-ended, uncertain, and fragile.

The institutional demands of marriage continually reproduce the outlines of the mythic love story. Neither hidden ideological hegemony nor brainwashing by mass culture is necessary. Indeed, the institutional properties of marriage may explain why dramas of love retain their popular appeal.

Evidently people can live quite nicely with multiple, conflicting ideas about the world (and with huge gaps between beliefs and experience [see Swidler 1992; Schlozman and Verba 1979]). Criticism of a dominant ideal will not eliminate it as long as it still provides a useful guide to action. Thus students of ideology would do well to examine the institutional encounters that lead people to reproduce even discredited parts of their worldviews. After all, it was Marx and Engels (1970:60) who said that the true communist does not seek "merely to produce a correct consciousness about an existing fact" but rather to "[overthrow] the existing state of things." Only if we discern how people actually use ideas to organize action can we understand why some ideas are enormously resilient while others fail to take hold.

**Culture and Action**

It is not quite correct to say that mythic love describes the institution of marriage. Rather it describes the inner contours of individual action (and feeling) oriented to marriage. The basic structure of the love myth corresponds to, and helps organize, the lines of action individuals construct when deciding whether to enter or leave a marriage (or relationship...
modeled on marriage). People learn to ask themselves whether their feelings for another person are "real love"—love that can be exclusive, certain, life-transforming, and enduring. They thus reconstitute the institutional characteristics of marriage as intrapsychic states. The love myth answers the question, "What do I need to feel about someone in order to marry [commit myself to] him or her?"

Culture develops capacities for action, and culture proliferates where action is problematic. Recently problems of "structure and agency" (Giddens 1981, 1984; Archer 1988; Sewell 1992) have preoccupied sociologists. Many scholars have pointed out that social structure is itself constituted by culture and that culture exists only when it is enacted in concrete forms, so that no firm line can be drawn between culture and structure (Williams 1973; Sewell 1985, 1992; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997; Boli and Thomas 1992). But I would like to depart to some extent from this current conventional wisdom. From the point of view of individual actors, some parts of the social world stand as obdurate structures with their own reality, while other arenas are left to be organized by individual action. (It might be better here to say "organized by actors," acknowledging that actors and repertoires of possible actions are themselves institutionalized, so that actors may be tribes, nations, or families, not just individuals. In the contemporary West, the individual person is constituted as "the actor." This is one of the core institutionalized realities around which Americans must organize their actions.) Marriage is an institution persons may accept or reject, seek or avoid. But its structure is at least provisionally fixed, from the perspective of individual actors. Courtship, however, the process of finding a person to marry—is something the individual has to do on his or her own. She cannot simply apply for a license, go before a judge, and have it done. While both individual choices and institutional structures are cultural, the way they are cultural differs.

Love and marriage provide a perfect example of this relationship between culture and institutions. Individuals, I have argued, develop strategies of action that provide them with a basic life organization. An institution like marriage solves many problems of life organization simultaneously. In general, marriage settles one's living arrangements—with whom one shares a household, and usually income and expenses; one's sexual obligations and opportunities; with whom one socializes; who will care for one if one is sick. Marriage defines a life-partnership, a unit that produces joint rather than purely individual goods. Marriage changes one's public status (and sometimes one's name) and it defines a unit in the larger social world.

Marriage is thus an institution that decides, or at least redefines, im-

portant elements of one's life organization. But at the same time, forming a marriage is left almost entirely up to individual initiative. There is no institutionalized path to marriage as there is for finding a college or career—fill out an application, take a test, be called for an interview, wait for a letter of acceptance or rejection. Even matchmakers, families, or brokers who arrange marriages can only introduce people to each other, not actually arrange the marriage itself. Thus it is up to individuals to form marriages, to link their life strategies to the institutional structure marriage provides.

The culture of love flourishes in this gap where action meets institution. In order to marry, individuals must develop certain cultural, psychological, and even cognitive equipment. They must be prepared to feel, or at least convince others that they feel, that one other person is the uniquely right "one." They must be prepared to recognize the "right person" when that person comes along. In addition, people must mobilize the psychic energy to make the life changes that marrying involves, from sharing money and living arrangements to sharing such things as a social identity, a dinner hour, a kin network, or children.

Love, then, is the quality of "rightness" that defines the particular, unique other that one does marry, it is the emotion that propels one across the gap that separates single from married life; and it is "commitment," the psychological concomitant of the all-or-nothing, exclusive, enduring relationship constituted by a marriage. The popular culture of love both prepares persons for and helps them to organize and carry through the aspects of marriage that depend on individual action.

In more general form, I am arguing that culture is elaborated around the lines of action institutions structure. As we saw in describing settled and unsettled lives, people consume and create more cultural "stuff"—that is, they elaborate more self-conscious symbolic meanings—when their lives are unsettled, when they must construct new lines of action. In this sense culture provides complements or reciprocals to institutional structures. The aspects of institutional life that are firmly structured do not require cultural elaboration. Individuals instead develop cultural supports for lines of action that link them to institutions. The culture of love flourishes because, while marriage is institutionalized, the process of getting married (or deciding whether or not to leave a marriage) and—in the contemporary period, the procedure for staying married—is not. As marriage has become more fragile, no longer fully settling the lives of those who rely on it, a second culture of love, prosaic realism, has blossomed alongside the old. This new love culture helps people be the kinds of persons, with the kinds of feelings, skills, and virtues, that will sustain an ongoing relationship.
Thus people create more elaborated culture where action is more problematic. As institutions constrict discretion, they reduce the need for cultural elaboration. So those who are anxious about maintaining enduring relationships actively consume "love culture." They buy self-help books on love, watch Leo Buscaglia, attend Marriage Encounter weekends, visit therapists and marriage counselors, and read The Road Less Traveled. Other aspects of social life, such as receiving payment for the work one has done or keeping others from taking one's possessions (see Colson 1974), are the focus of enormous cultural and ritual elaboration in societies without formal governments and legal institutions, but they are much less culturally elaborated in our own.

Culture then flourishes especially lushly in the gaps where people must put together lines of action in relation to established institutional options. Culture and social structure are thus, in the widest sense, reciprocal. People continue to elaborate and shore up with culture that which is not fully institutionalized.

What Culture Describes

The sociology of culture has often run aground on the problem of what culture describes, or, to put it differently, what makes culture plausible. It is clear that culture is in some sense "about" the world, and that a culture that no longer fits the world around it may be discarded. But what kind of "fit" do cultures have to their world?

The culture of love I have described does fit. But it does not directly fit experience or observation of the world. Rather it describes persons' own organization of action, one that is simultaneously culturally constructed. That organization of action is, in turn, constrained by the external world, but it does not correspond to it feature for feature. Think of an actor as a hiker ascending a mountain, with culture as her description of the path she follows. The mountain's topography will certainly affect her route. She will pay attention to a boulder she must cross or go around, to steep or flat places, to openings in the trees. But other features of the mountain that do not directly affect her climb may be irrelevant. She may misconstrue the larger shape of the mountain, yet well describe her own path.

Of course, thinking of culture as "description," even description of our own organization of action, is clearly inadequate. Culture also describes (and helps to constitute) the personal capacities and resources the actor will use as she follows her path. Thus her knowledge of the strength of her legs, the energy she brings to the task, even her ability to jump over boulders is integral to her organization of her own line of action.

Culture then describes our own organization of action. And multiple cultural meanings remain in suspension as long as we have many kinds of action to organize. The fact that as descriptions of the world, or even of our own experience, such cultural meanings may be contradictory or incomplete does nothing to undermine their plausibility. As long as cultural meanings help people mobilize the internal and external supports they need for action, the culture is "true." It is in this sense that both the insurance executive and the successful lawyer found it true that there was one right person different from all the others. The woman Thomas DaSilva married was different in a different way than other women were different because she filled that slot in his life for which there could be only one, unique occupant. The lawyer kept his belief in "one right person" even though he knew "it couldn't be true" because he found the one person who became uniquely right in the sense that, as another businessman said, "she is the one I did marry, so this is the only one that really counts."

For these men, as for most respondents, "real love" remains mythically enduring because love that does not last is, in retrospect, not real love. That is, the belief that real love lasts forever does not describe the world. My interviewees would be the first to insist that love dies all the time. But the culture of love does describe the line of action my interviewees are trying to sustain. That line of action involves keeping themselves and their partners committed to an enduring relationship. And here "love" serves as the all-important term for cultivating that set of feelings, that reading of one's own psyche and the psyche of another, that internal propagation of firm decision and perpetual vigilance that can sustain a marriage. Love describes reality, but its reality is the internal contour of our own action. We take into account features of the world as those features impinge on or structure our own lines of action.

Sources of Cultural Coherence

I began this book by insisting that culture is not organized into unified systems, but that people keep on tap multiple, often conflicting cultural capacities and worldviews. But in this chapter we have seen that culture can sometimes be more coherent than it might appear at first glance. Even though experts on love offer multiple, competing kinds of advice (and many people listen indiscriminately to all of them (Lichterman 1992)) and beliefs about love range from practical homilies to transfiguring inspirations, consistent themes can be discerned beneath the chaos. But where does this "consistency" or coherence reside? I have argued that institutions provide coherence because many persons shape their action.
around the same institutional constraints. They then resonate to very similar cultural formulas. Standard institutional dilemmas produce coherent cultural strands, even when each individual's worldview taken as a whole may seem incoherent. Coherence resides in the cultural supports for particular lines of action, and consistent patterns appear in the culture of many individuals when they all confront similar institutional constraints and organize action around those constraints.

The effects of marriage on the culture of love provide one of many examples of how culture can be structured from the "outside in." Even when individuals are confused about what they believe, when their culture contains many inconsistent beliefs and strikes a cacophony of discordant notes, the effects of culture can sometimes be quite coherent. But to understand why culture can have systematic effects even when it is not systematic in the minds of individuals, we must examine sources of cultural coherence operating outside individual psyches.
CONCLUSION

TOWARD BETTER QUESTIONS

Over the past two decades sociologists have developed increasingly complex, theoretically sophisticated conceptions of culture. Despite these advances, however, we still rely on remarkably one-dimensional images of how culture works, how it affects experience and action. One purpose of this book has been to develop conceptions of culture's effects that match the sophistication of our analyses of culture itself.

Simply posing more pointed questions, which might form the basis for future research and theorizing, constitutes progress in a field as inchoate as the study of culture. Therefore I want to return to some central themes of this book to see what questions remain unanswered. I hope in this way to take stock of where we are, to focus future theoretical debate on questions that can be explored empirically, and thus to encourage cumulative development in the sociology of culture.

IS CULTURE COHERENT OR INCOHERENT?

When we talk with ordinary people, even (or especially) about so fundamental a matter as love, their responses are often disjointed, self-contradictory, or fragmentary. But how does this square with the image of culture as a "system"? Robert LeVine (1984:72) has noted that "[n]othing is more characteristic of contemporary anthropologists than the conviction that the customs they study are connected and comprehensible only as parts of a larger organization-of beliefs, norms, values, or social
action." This view is shared by sociologists as well. Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander and Smith 1993) has argued for the continuity and coherence of American culture, while Richard Biernacki (1995:12-13) sees coherence as the very criterion of distinctively cultural explanation: the "line of reasoning specific to cultural analysis" is that practices form "a meaningful constellation" such that a distinctly cultural argument is "configurational, attached to an overarching pattern of techniques rather than to a simple outcome."

Yet anthropologists and sociologists also repeatedly report incoherence along two dimensions—whether cultural meanings are internally consistent and whether they are shared. Roy D'Andrade (1984:90), the anthropologist, notes that "[a]lthough the conception of culture as consisting of the shared knowledge of individual minds marked a clear advance over earlier theories of culture ... many things one would want to call cultural are not completely or even generally shared." Those who attend to how ordinary people talk and think note, as Michael Billig (1987) does, that commonsense understandings develop in a continual process of argument that constantly doubles back on itself, crossing and recrossing its own tracks. People generalize from a few cases, formulate something like an all-purpose rule, attend to exceptions to the rule, and then form new generalizations, in a process that never reaches closure. In Talking of the Royal Family (1992), Billig notes that people routinely take both sides of the arguments they have with themselves and others, insisting, for example, that "the Royals" are no better than anyone else, while repeatedly presuming that it is precisely because the Royals are so superior that to be just like them is to be superior oneself. Like my interviewees when they discuss their marriages, British commoners offer not an axiomatic system of first principles and logical consequences, but a "kaleidoscope of common sense" (p. 48)—a swirling pattern of shifting justifications.

If we no longer build into our assumptions and our methods the notion that culture is by definition a "system," then we can focus on the unanswered questions that evidence of both cultural coherence and incoherence raises. The issue is not whether the glass is half-empty or half-full, but what creates cultural coherence and in what places, and what accounts for the extent and shape of cultural incoherence.

Keeping One’s Options Open

I want to begin with the sources of cultural incoherence. It is important to note that while cultural contradictions, confusions, and inconsistencies may worry researchers, they do not seem to bother ordinary people in the course of their everyday lives. Indeed, as I have argued, people are better equipped for life if they have available multiple approaches to situations, if they can shift justifications for their actions, and if they can mobilize different meanings to organize different lines of action.

The anthropologist Lawrence Rosen (1984), in a classic study of Moroccan kinship, points out that for Moroccans, statements about the world-in particular claims of kin relationship—are not statements about a fixed, external reality so much as positions to be negotiated. Since kinship groups are themselves flexible, indeterminately bounded "personally-centered action groups" (p. 163), a kinship claim is neither true nor false until it is realized. In negotiations over correct terminology, the "practical question is how to convert mere utterances into truth-bearing propositions and how to do this most advantageously" (p. 122). Rosen points out that since life is uncertain, Moroccans employ strategies of network diversification, seeking not to keep all their eggs in one basket, but hoping to have an alternative if their preferred strategy fails. But this uncertainty is not a feature only of life in Morocco. It might be said of middle-class suburbanites' understandings of love, as much as of Moroccan kin terminology, that "[at] their very heart the terms that imply some form of obligation or reciprocation ... remain incompletely defined, open textured, until, by a process of mutual negotiation, an actual relationship comes to be conceptualized under them" (p. 118).

Cultural meanings, then, often remain fluid, waiting to be filled and made real by the relationships, they help to create. And because life is uncertain, people keep multiple cultural meanings on tap. In this sense, what appears as cultural incoherence is also adaptability, flexibility, keeping options open. And this is as much a cognitive as a relational reality. A worldview that could be shattered by a single setback or contradiction would be a very fragile one (see Padgett and Ansell 1993; Leifer 1991).

How Meanings Mean

Many researchers assume that cultures must be coherent because coherence is an essential property of the semiotic systems through which meanings can be conveyed. William Sewell Jr. (1999:39-40) explicitly argues that while individual cultures may be incoherent and disorderly, "culture" as an analytic aspect of human societies is necessarily coherent because it is only through structures of relationally defined meanings that meaning can be communicated. But this picture of how meanings systems work is misleading.

If culture is a communicative system, its meanings are neither fixed
as the structuralist image of a semiotic code might suggest, nor loosely related like the set of overlapping associations that Wittgenstein described. Rather, culture conveys meanings through adherence to and deviations from locally established expectations or conventions. There are three aspects to this incoherent coherence: First, cultures communicate by ringing (usually small) changes on established expectations, so meaning systems are necessarily more innovative and unstable than we usually imagine. Second, partly because of this innovativeness, semiotic systems often have intense local variations, so that a small subgroup, or even a subgroup within a subculture, may experiment with new variations on established meaning systems. Third, this local variation means that while particular semiotic codes have systemic qualities, people necessarily keep multiple ones on tap. Thus the problem of meaning and of cultural, coherence cannot be solved without some way of understanding how people switch from one code to another, what contextual cues signal which code is in effect, and how people keep multiple interpretations of action available simultaneously, crystallizing situations and meanings only occasionally.

To take the first point, cultures communicate as much by violating as by adhering to established meanings and expectations. The rebellious British punks Dick Hebdige (1979) describes created a powerful subculture that systematically violated conventions of middle-class respectability to convey contempt for bourgeois taste and values. Through exaggerated stylization punk youth communicated that they defied convention intentionally, that it was members of the conventional middle class who did not really understand what was going on. (Middle-class observers presumably felt befuddled, perhaps a more common experience than theories of meaning usually allow [see Rosaldo 1989:91-126].)

If codes "communicate" when people violate expectations, cumulative violations make the codes themselves dynamic. Of course, expectations must exist in order for violations to be experienced as meaningful (L. Meyer 1956; Alter 1981). And meaning systems can be stripped of their expressiveness by overuse. It is hard to write a stellar recommendation when everyone uses superlatives; intentionally torn or "ugly" clothing conveys contempt for the status order only until it becomes a fashion statement. As violations accumulate (as did the use of "vibrato" to emphasize important musical passages), what is conventional is itself changed (vibrato became standard, so that passages are highlighted now when played without vibrato [L. Meyer 1956]). Many social processes appear to work this way, from the status distinctions established by having a certain kind of taste or lifestyle (Weber 1968:926-40; Fallers 1966; Bonfenbren-
ner 1966; Bourdieu 1984) to the codes that define in-group and out-group membership (Frith 1981; DiMaggio 1982; Lamont and Fournier 1992).

This dynamism of meaning systems then leads to the second point—that codes often are local, both in the sense that they may be shared by a local subgroup (and indeed, the more intensively organized the subgroup, the more dynamic its transformations of the meanings of a semiotic code may be—as any student of the meanings conveyed by teen subculture dress-styles, for example, can attest)—and in the sense that a semiotic code may organize a single domain of action-gang turf claims or faculty teas—and be largely unknown or incomprehensible outside that domain.

If cultures are made up of many semiotic codes and these vary locally, then—and this is my third point—any given individual can read or communicate in several different codes. People participate in multiple spheres of action and interact with different social groups, and thus they usually communicate in and move among many different semiotic codes.

Each of these semiotic codes may be orderly and rule-like in its own terms (even if, as Bourdieu [1977] emphasizes, the "rules" exist because there is the possibility of breaking them); but because the "rules" are a moving frontier, and because people vary in terms of where they are in relation to multiple frontiers, it is highly unlikely that their knowledge of or participation in a variety of semiotic systems will amount to a coherent culture. At any given time particular people may be able to maneuver quite well in relation to the codes that currently apply to them or that they can "read" in the behavior of those to whom they are oriented socially, but this capacity to construct, renovate, and navigate within semiotic systems would be unlikely to produce coherence. Indeed, what something "meant" would depend very much on the context in which it was offered and understood. This is not just a matter of confusing the problem of the coherence of concrete "cultures" with the coherence of "culture" as an analytic aspect of human experience, as Sewell (1999) suggests. The nature of semiotic systems themselves, precisely as communicative systems, necessarily generates multiple, overlapping, if locally systematic, meanings.

Unanswered Questions about Coherence

This way of thinking about the numerous and perhaps shifting codes that constitute any meaning system raises a number of difficult questions. First, if the meaning of a particular action, or the overall scheme of interpretation that is to govern a particular encounter, depends on the context, how do people establish or negotiate the context that is operative in a situation?
Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:94-115) writes about "fields" as arenas in which particular criteria of valuation become established (see also Boltanski and Thevenot 1991); and Goffman (1974) analyzes the "frames" that govern particular interactions. Sewell (1999:56-57) suggests that the state may play a central role in organizing and making coherent what could otherwise be disconnected arenas of discourse. But we still understand far too little about how people know what situation they are in and what codes apply.

Of course, "mistakes" may occur—from the police officer stumbling upon a movie filming of a robbery to a misunderstanding about when a business lunch has become a date. But what is more remarkable are the relatively smooth ways people navigate transitions from one situation to another and from one semiotic code to another. Even when multiple potential framings are available simultaneously—as they are when people talk about "love"—people easily assume one frame and operate within it and then switch frames when the implicit situation seems to shift. Remember, for example, that how interviewees reacted to a vignette depended on how they framed it, and often they could offer multiple readings as they thought through one framing after another. When discussing their own life experiences, people first anchored themselves in a context—a real or imagined situation—and then derived beliefs or arguments from that situation. Imagining a lasting marriage, for example, they were able to deduce a range of sometimes contradictory arguments about why one would want to stay married. But when some question provoked a shift in the imagined context that anchored their thinking, their entire orientation could shift.

Just what structures such framing processes, and how people keep multiple potential frames on hold, seem central questions for cultural analysis.6 By assuming that symbolic activities have a single meaning, we compromise our ability to understand what skilled interactors do. The challenge is to accept that cultures are multiplex, fluid, and contradictory, and then to rethink models of when and how culture constrains action and experience.

Given the importance of contexts, we have few clues about what are the defining features of social contexts or situations, or about how people "read" the crucial features of situations and how they invoke one situation and its codes versus another. Despite the enormous attention cognitive psychologists have given to scripts and schemas, which define situations, they have focused on their cognitive-processing aspects without trying to understand the basic structure of the situations those scripts and schemas describe.

Sociologists who want to understand what mediates between cultural meanings and action, or, indeed, what variations in cultural meanings signify, will need a richer, more systematic way to analyze contexts. Whether there is some fundamental set of situations out of which particular situations get constructed as social psychologists tend to imply, or whether situations are culturally constructed in the same fluid and sometimes contradictory ways as other cultural elements, sociologists of culture would benefit enormously from a more systematic analysis of contexts as they structure meaning and action.

WHAT IS A CULTURAL "LOGIC"?

Almost all of those who work on culture assume that cultures have "logics." Even if we do not subscribe to the notion that each culture is a unified whole with a single overarching logic, we assume that each subpart of the culture, each semiotic code or institutional arena, has its own logic. Indeed, here even (or especially) the very cultural-studies analysts who promote the notion that cultures are fragmented and fluid specialize in finding the deep logics that link up consumption and capital, gender and patriarchy, love and individualism (see, e.g., Butler 1990, 1993; Haraway 1983, 1991; Baudrillard 1975, 1983; Illouz 1997). But the key unanswered question is what a cultural "logic" is—or rather, by what kinds of logics different kinds of cultural elements are integrated.

To think about this question, we need to consider what people do with culture, what different kinds of culture are "used for." In chapter 4 and subsequent chapters, I argue that cultural meanings operate less as logical structures that integrate ends and means, and more as tools or resources that cultivate skills and capacities that people integrate into larger, more stable "strategies of action." But that kind of integration is different from the logic that sociologists and anthropologists have traditionally assumed.

The Logic of Deductive Inference

For Max Weber, interpretive analysis (verstehen) linked ideas and action through deductive logic. The analyst entered imaginatively into the ideas and motives of those whose action he or she was trying to understand. Beginning with the logical and psychological premises of action, the analyst could arrive at an understanding of how those starting presuppositions led to particular kinds of action in the world. While such cultural logics might rest on irrational premises, and while many factors besides a cultural logic
could influence concrete historical outcomes, the power of sociological analysis was its ability to tease out the logic of the ideas and presuppositions fundamental to a cultural system.

In analyzing the basic forms of social action, Weber (1968:5-6) argued that "rational action" was the baseline for cultural analysis. Given a set of ends and the facts about the world as understood by the actor, the analyst could understand the action that would flow from those premises.

What, then, was the "logic" of Weber's logic? At bottom, it was straightforward deductive logic (see Weber 1968:6). If one believes in an all-powerful creator and judge who will send one to heaven or hell, then one will try to earn salvation by living up to that God's commandments; if one believes that human suffering is caused by alienation from the divine, then one will seek to unite the self with the divine through mystical contemplation. Even Weber's recognition of the power of nonrational motives testified to the power of the logic of ideas. In a famous footnote to *The Protestant Ethic* (1958a [1904-5]: 232), Weber notes that:

The Calvinistic faith is one of the many examples in the history of religions of the relation between the logical and the psychological consequences for the practical religious attitude to be derived from certain religious ideas. Fatalism is, of course, the only logical consequence of predestination. But on account of the idea of proof the psychological result was precisely the opposite.... The *electi* are, on account of their election, proof against fatalism because in their rejection of it they prove themselves.... The practical interests cut off the fatalistic consequences of logic (which, however, in spite of everything occasionally did break through).

One candidate for cultural logic, then, is deductive logic; and implicitly or explicitly, many cultural analysts see the way a culture "hangs together" in such terms. But there is ambiguity about where such logics are located. Weber clearly saw logic—even when its presuppositions were irrational and its implications thwarted by practical constraints—as residing in individual thought. Weber recognized, of course, that socially influential ideas were the product of the collective life experiences of carrier groups. Nonetheless, Weber thought about the logic even of large social formations such as authority systems as if they were exchanges between parties to a debate, and he analyzed such phenomena as the relationship between class and status claims by exploring the deductions individual or collective actors would draw from their ideas.

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1. have argued that such constraint by logical deduction rarely influences social action directly. While people vary in how thoroughly they articulate their understandings of their experience and how coherently they present these understandings, throughout this book I have shown that people are little constrained by logic. Other researchers, studying a variety of problems, report very similar results (see DiMaggio 1997). Especially in settled situations and in the realm of common sense, logical consistency is a scarce commodity. Indeed, deductive logic is not the place to look for the most important links between culture and action.

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Looser Logics

Even if full-blown deductive logic is not central to the organization of cultural systems, nor a primary link between culture and action for individuals, in recent social theory other more limited logics have been seen as central to the way cultural systems are organized. The issue of the kind of logic is often confounded with the question of where the logic is located socially (in the consciousness of individuals, in collective discourses, in embedded social practices, or in institutions) and with the question of what substantively the logic organizes (discourse, semiotic codes, practices, interests, lines of action, institutions, etc.). But here I want to look at alternative candidates for cultural logics themselves—logics that may be less determinate in their constraint over outcomes than rational-deductive logic, but that may offer better models of how cultural elements are actually organized.

**Binary Oppositions**

Since Levi-Strauss and Jakobson (and indeed since Durkheim) analysts have seen cultural logics as organized around binary oppositions. In part, as Kenneth Burke (1970) emphasized, symbols themselves create the possibility of imagining (or articulating) oppositions. Lévi-Strauss (1963) located the role of binary oppositions in organizing symbolic systems (totemic organization, kinship, and myth, for example) in fundamental properties of the human mind, but others have seen such oppositions as fundamental to the nature of symbol systems and to the capacity of symbols or discourses to convey meanings (see Leach 1976). If semiotic systems define meanings relationally, then opposition is at least the elementary operation by which meaning can be defined.

**Narratives**

Another logic that appears to organize many social processes is narrative. While the temporal form of narrative may sometimes trace causal connections that could be described under formal logics, narrative i...
rigidly structured. Nevertheless, narrative forms are fundamental devices for ordering understandings of the social and natural worlds.

There is an enormously rich literature on narrative and narrative forms (Propp 1968; White 1973; Chatman 1978; Todorov 1969,1977). Anthropologists and sociologists have noted that a culture's logic can be carried by its dominant narratives, either recounted or enacted. Victor Turner (1974), for example, describes how societies continually reenact certain dramatic narratives, whether in the form of repeated ritual enactments like pilgrimages or processions, or that of typical social dramas.

Sherry Ortner (1989), analyzing the founding of the first celibate Buddhist monasteries among the Sherpas of Nepal, offers an example of the way narratives (what she calls "schemas" or "scenarios") order social transformations. Drawing on Sahlin (1981) and Geertz (1980), she describes "cultural dramas or scenarios, that reappear over time and that seem to order the ways in which people play out both conventional and historically novel social encounters" (Ortner 1989:60). The monasteries' founders, she argues, reenacted traditional Sherpa narratives in which a hero fights for supremacy, is driven into exile, acquires powerful divine and/or human protectors, and then returns to triumph over his rivals and establish a new order.

Homologies, Resemblances, Resonances

If "cultural logic" ultimately means cultural ordering, then there are other forms that cultural logics might take. One of the simplest is associating like with like, generalizing a pattern of resemblances. Of course, these resemblances may be organized in a wide variety of ways. Huizinga (1954) pointed out long ago that medieval European culture saw "sympathies" or what we would call analogies operating everywhere. Plants could be linked with diseases because of some physical resemblance between the plant's flower and the organ it was thought to cure; the twelve apostles were connected to the twelve months by their number; and the four-petaled dogwood blossom represented the cross.

While such resemblances seem too fuzzy to constitute a "logic," many claims of cultural ordering depend upon precisely such metaphorical linkages. Even Geertz's (1973b) attempt to identify "ethos" (typical "moods and motivations") as central to cultural "systems" suggests that resemblance in emotional tone or mood is basic to cultural logics. The difficulty of course is that if cultural logics can move along such varied paths, with such diverse outcomes, it is hard to know when a cultural logic is at work.

The Logic of Practice

The term "practice" in contemporary cultural sociology has acquired a range of meanings. Ortner (1984) emphasizes practice theorists' focus on agency (itself a highly fraught term)-on the ways active, strategic agents reproduce, resist, or change social structures and rules. This focus on agency, reproduction, and power is confounded with another set of issues--"practice" as unconscious, embodied, or habitual action, contrasted with articulated, conscious ideas (S. Turner 1994; Biernacki 1999: 75-78). This meaning of practice at least overlaps with the notion that cultural organization is located less in conscious ideas or shared cultural symbols than in the routines of institutions and actors, routines that, to return to our theme, have a logic of their own.

Michel Foucault (1978, 1983) has attempted to uncover the logic of practices that define categories of human beings, or that redefine human properties, pathologies, or potentials. He usually (at least in his more "structuralist" phase [see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983]) has identified a L6vi-Straussian binary logic as the core feature of practices that "divide," "confine," or categorize human beings. But the source of these logics is not some universal feature of minds, or even of symbol systems. The division of human beings into different "kinds" of persons-separating the normal from the pathological, or the criminal from the mad, for example-depends not on universal human mental organization but on the organization of institutional, practices themselves. Thus, in Madness and Civilization (1965), it is the existence of practices of exclusion-setting apart a group to be isolated in a distinctive physical space—that creates the framework for such categorization. Foucault writes hauntingly of the leper houses, which set the pattern of confinement that would, centuries later, undergird the categories of the mad and the sane:

Leprosy disappeared, the leper vanished, or almost, from memory; these structures remained. Often, in these same places, the formulas of exclusion would be repeated, strangely similar two or three centuries later. Poor vagabonds, criminals, and "deranged minds" would take the part played by the leper, and we shall see what salvation was expected from this exclusion, for them and for those who excluded them as well. With an altogether new meaning and in a very different culture, the forms would remain—essentially that major form of a rigorous division which is social exclusion but spiritual reintegration. (p. 18)
Other sorts of practices—the pastoral practice of the modern welfare state or the probing practice of the confessional, re-created in psychoanalysis and therapeutic self-scrutiny—have very different structures and thus generate logics with very different ordering principles (Foucault 1978). These forms can be generalized or transposed to new arenas, but the shape of each logic cannot be deduced from any universal mental structure.

Institutions may anchor a semiotic system, given plausibility by that set of practices. But the "logic" derives from the practices themselves. So, for example, in a system that differentiates the deserving from the undeserving poor, a line is drawn between those who can work and those who cannot—with women, children, and the insane categorized together and separated from the criminal and the vagrant. But it is the existence of confinement—the workhouse, and later the prison and the asylum—that gives the categorization of the poor versus the criminal versus the mad its plausibility. The pathbreaking work of Mohr and Duquenne (1997) demonstrates how a system of categories and a set of practices can mutually constitute one another. Welfare clients form categories based on kinds of services they receive (ranging from the monetary to the minatory), while welfare services are categorized by the kinds of clients to whom the services are available. Thus a set of practices and a system of categories mutually constitute one another.

Despite the apparent logic in the linkage of practices and categories in Foucault's work, it is not clear what kind of logic this is. The image of power as a kind of self-multiplying practice, probing and penetrating wherever it finds an opening, continually constituting new realities, does not suggest logic in the usual sense. While some practices of power may penetrate further when they are more systematic (like the Enlightenment legal regulations that made punishment proportional to the severity of crimes [Foucault 1977]), other practices may resist systematization. The perpetual proliferation of new practices of power and resistance is not really compatible with the notion of an overarching logic.

In The Logic of Practice (1990:86), Pierre Bourdieu adduces an array of reasons why "practice has a logic which is not that of the logician." For Bourdieu, "practice" refers to action that is oriented to practical outcomes, is strategic, and is largely organized by unconscious schemas, so that it operates as an intuitive skill or tactic. Practice cannot follow "logical logic" first because of its relation to time. In arguments familiar from Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977), Bourdieu stresses that for practice, unlike logic, "[i]ts temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning" (p. 81). Practice requires instantaneous judgments anticipating future actions, as when "a player who is involved and caught up in the game adjusts not to what he sees but to what he fore-sees ... in response to an overall, instantaneous assessment of the whole set of his opponents and the whole set of his team-mates, seen not as they are but in their impending positions." He does so under conditions of "urgency" that "exclude distance, perspective, detachment, and reflection" (pp. 81-82).

Practice, Bourdieu (1990) insists, has a "practical logic": it "is able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles, which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole." But it can achieve coherence precisely because it ignores the niceties of formal logic. It sacrifices "rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality." To fulfill its "practical functions" the logic of everyday life requires "uniform and regularities" and also "fuzziness and ... irregularities and even incoherences" (p. 86). This is an "economical logic" in which "no more logic is mobilized than is required by the needs of practice." The same term may be used in contradictory ways in different situations because "it is very unlikely that two contradictory applications of the same schemes will be brought face to face" (p. 87). Its schemes are simple and since they operate "without conscious reflection or conscious control ... [t]he most characteristic operations of its 'logic'- inverting, transferring, uniting, separating, etc.-take the form of bodily movements, turning to the right or left, putting upside down, going in or coming out, tying or cutting, etc." (p. 92).

Finally, and most crucially for Bourdieu, practical action is driven by urgent necessities. Cultural analysts may divide the world into sets of oppositions, but the most important life activities—for the Algerian Kabyle, "marriage, ploughing or harvesting"—require rituals "to overcome the specifically ritual contradiction which the ritual taxonomy sets up by dividing the world into contrary principles and by causing the acts most indispensable to the survival of the group to appear as acts of sacrilegious violence" (p. 97 and pp. 210-70 ff.). Examining the contradictory interpretations that have been offered of Kabyle rain-making rites, in which key ritual objects can be seen as sometimes male and sometimes female, sometimes the source of rain, sometimes in need of rain, Bourdieu notes that "this distinction, which has worried the best of interpreters, is of no importance ... the two perspectives being equally valid by definition when it is a matter of reuniting contraries" (p. 264). This is not a matter of an elegant ritual logic that creates and then resolves contradictions. Rather "practical logic," driven by urgency, "never ceases to sacrifice the concern for coherence to the pursuit of efficiency, making
maximum possible use of the *double entendres* and dual purposes that the indeterminacy of practices and symbols allows" (p. 262). Especially in desperate "situations like drought ... the threshold of logical requirements [is] lowered even further so as to exploit all the available resources" (p. 264).

Bourdieu’s Kabyle are in this respect not very different from the middle-class suburbanites I interviewed who used all the sometimes mutually contradictory arguments and understandings at their disposal when they shored up the hope that their marriages would last or explained having married the "right" person for them. But understanding the partial, overlapping, indeterminate logics of practical action still leaves unclear what organizes the practical agendas around which practical logics swarm.

The Logic of Existential "Fit"

What makes accounts of cultural logics persuasive is the apparent "fit" among different aspects of a culture. To see how an account of such a cultural "fit" is constructed, let us consider the problem, which Geertz among others has repeatedly dealt with, of what kinds of selves are constituted in different social worlds. In an early essay, "Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali" (1973h), Geertz links Balinese naming practices, the Balinese sense of time, and Balinese rules about conduct. To oversimplify, the dominant naming practices are relational, so that a given person's name changes over the lifecycle (as our terms "Mom," "Grandma," and so on do), and cyclical, so that the same generationally specific names recur (as if the term for "Grandma" and "great-granddaughter" were the same). Geertz argues that these practices tend to deny historical change, so that change becomes simply the recurrence of things that have already been. It is not persons' uniqueness, their "special, never-to-be-repeated, impact upon the stream of historical events—which are culturally played up, symbolically emphasized: it is their social placement, their particular location within a persisting, indeed an eternal metaphysical order. The illuminating paradox of Balinese formulations of personhood is that they are—in our terms anyway—depersonalizing” (p. 390).

The "depersonalizing" Balinese "conception of personhood" is in turn "linked" to a "detemporalizing (again from our point of view) conception of time" (p. 391). The Balinese calendar defines the ritual significance of each day (determined by the ways multiple day-naming cycles overlap), categorizing time rather than measuring its passage. The calendrical "cycles and supercycles ... don't tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is" (p. 393).

Balinese time and personhood join with a third factor, "the ceremonialization of social intercourse," to form "a triangle of mutually reinforcing cultural forces" that eliminate, so far as possible, the "consequential" relations among human beings (Geertz 1973h:399): "To maintain the (relative) anonymization of individuals with whom one is in daily contact, to dampen the intimacy implicit in face-to-face relationships ... it is necessary to formalize relations with them to a fairly high degree...." Balinese "ceremoniousness" is "a logical correlate of a thoroughgoing attempt to block the more creatural aspects of the human condition—individuality, spontaneity, perishability, emotionality vulnerability—from sight" (p. 399, emphasis added).

Geertz (1973h) sees these Balinese cultural practices as linked by a distinctive kind of "logic" that I term "existential." He begins: "'logic' is a treacherous word; and nowhere more so than in the analysis of culture. When one deals with meaningful forms, the temptation to see the relationship among them as immanent, as consisting of some sort of intrinsic affinity (or disaffinity) they bear for one another, is virtually overwhelming” (1973h:404). But "meaning is not intrinsic in the objects, acts, processes, and so on which bear it." Rather the nature of "cultural integration"—what makes cultural patterns fit together, or come into conflict, or change—must be sought in "the experiences of individuals and groups of individuals as, under the guidance of symbols, they perceive, feel, reason, judge, and act" (p. 405).

Cultural logic, for Geertz, turns out to be an existential matter of how "experiential impacts play into and reinforce one another."

A penchant for "contemporizing" fellowmen blunts the sense of biological aging; a blunted sense of biological aging removes one of the main sources of a sense of temporal flow; a reduced sense of temporal flow gives to interpersonal events an episodic quality. Ceremonialized interaction supports standardized perceptions of others; standardized perceptions of others support a "steady-state" conception of society, a steady-state conception of society supports a taxonomic perception of time. And so on.... (1973h:406)

In the end Geertz comes back, as he often did in the essays of this period, to universal features of the existential human situation:

The close and immediate interdependency between conceptions of person, time and conduct which has been proposed in this essay is, so I would argue, a general phenomenon ... because such an interdependency is inherent in the way in which human experience is
organized, a necessary effect of the conditions under which human life is led. But it is only one of a vast and unknown number of such general interdependencies.... (p. 408)

The universal "conditions under which human life is led" to which Geertz refers here are presumably those of the succession of generations, the balance between individual personhood and social interdependence, and, as we shall see below, human similarity and difference, among others. This existential argument makes cultural logic a matter of the basic psychological way human beings solve universal problems of human experience across different domains of social life.

The existential logic Geertz articulates operates at an abstract, psychologized, almost aesthetic level quite apart from the practical problems people normally use their cultural resources to solve. How people find allies, arrange marriages, inherit land, or feed their families is never visible. The logic Geertz finds is real, but the source of its coherence is mis-specified by ignoring the role of institutions.

Institutional Logic

To see how a more institutionally grounded analysis might push the same questions further, let us turn briefly to Geertz's later treatment (in "From the Native's Point of View" 1983b) of conceptions of personhood in Morocco, Bali, and Java-this time comparing his analysis of Moroccan personhood to Lawrence Rosen's description of the same Moroccan city Geertz studied, Sefrou. Geertz observes of the Moroccan use of the *nisba*, a kind of additional surname or tag that locates a person in some geographic or group identity that differentiates him in his immediate local context, that

> the nisba way of looking at persons-as though they were outlines waiting to be filled in-is not an isolated custom but part of a total pattern of social life. This pattern is, like the others, difficult to characterize succinctly, but surely one of its outstanding features is a promiscuous tumbling in public settings of varieties of men kept carefully segregated in private ones-all out cosmopolitanism in the streets, strict communalism (of which the famous secluded woman is only the most striking index) in the home. (pp. 132-33)

The logic here is manifestly functional, in the experiential sense: Moroccan society does not cope with its diversity by sealing it into castes, isolating it into tribes, dividing it into ethnic groups, or covering it over with some common-denominator concept of nationality, though, fitfully, all have now and then been tried. It copes with it by distinguishing, with elaborate precision, the contexts-marriage, worship, and to an extent diet, law, and education-within which men are separated by their dissimilarities, and those-work, friendship, politics, trade-where, however warily and however conditionally, they are connected by them.

To such a social pattern, a concept of selfhood which marks public identity contextually and relativistically ... would seem particularly appropriate. Indeed, the social pattern would seem virtually to create this concept of selfhood, for it produces a situation where people interact with one another in terms of categories whose meaning is almost purely positional, location in the general mosaic, leaving the substantive content of the categories, what they mean subjectively as experienced forms of life, aside as something properly concealed in apartments, temples, and tents. (p. 133)

In contrast to Geertz's existential account, one can begin to see how the practices of naming and identity, and ways of defining contexts as public or private, might "go together" in Morocco if one adds to the analysis institutions and their effects on practical action (which Geertz seems almost calculatedly to ignore). Lawrence Rosen (1984), Geertz's sometime coauthor (Geertz, Geertz, and Rosen 1979), also describes the Moroccan use of the *nisba* to highlight, context-based social identities. But he adds the additional pragmatic element that makes the culture's patternedness make sense.

Because Moroccans are continually trying to establish relationships for trade, exchange, and marriage alliances, information that locates others socially is acutely important:

> For to know another's origins, in this broadly geo-social sense, is to know what kinds of personal characteristics a person does or is most likely to display or acquire, what kinds of ties he or she may already possess, according to what customs one is most used to forming relationships with others, and-perhaps most importantly-what bases exist for the establishment of a personal bond between another and oneself. (Rosen 1984:24)

Thus Rosen also identifies a fit between social practices and cultural understandings. But it is not "fit" in the sense of experientially compatible solutions to universal dilemmas. Rather, specific institutional features of Moroccan society-the importance of alliance and exchange networks:
the use of social identities to establish ties of mutual obligation—provide the pragmatic basis for cultural practices such as the nisba. When one Moroccan hears another identified by a nisba, “that information itself begins to clarify some of the contexts through which the other, and potentially oneself, can be conjoined and known” (p. 24). This complex of belief, behavior, and symbolic action fits together because it is oriented to the same institutional order—one in which allies are a key social resource. In such an order, it makes sense to think of the self as having identities that create similarities with and differences from others, to "bargain" for social ties, and to name oneself and others in a way that highlights bases for making claims and forming alliances while leaving open precisely what kind of relationship will be established.

This kind of logic is not deductive nor is it in any strict sense "semiotic." The fit among cultural practices is due to their common link to practical problems generated within an institutional order. The institutional order is itself, of course, culturally constructed (Scott 1994; J. Meyer et al. 1997). And the existing repertoire of cultured capacities (Moroccans’ verbal facility [Geertz 1976], their flexible opportunism, and what Rosen [1984:28] describes as the extraordinary ability to absorb information about diverse social groups, customs, and particular others that might someday be useful in "forming networks and assessing others") constrains the kind of institutional order that is possible. But the continuing plausibility or reality of the meanings an institutional order generates, the eagerness people have to master the skills it requires, and the strategies individuals form in relation to its possibilities are linked by the institutional pattern itself.

Such a pragmatic logic may be conveyed through cultural symbols and stories; it is reproduced through unanalyzed social practices (like naming people with a nisba); but it is taught and enforced through the pragmatic structure of life-problems.

An important recent study (Collier 1997) traces a dramatic transformation in such institutionally grounded cultural logics. By following the impact of market logic as it shifts the ground of cultural meaning, Collier demonstrates that such logics are not anchored in some self-reinforcing circle of experience but in institutional orders that, when they change, rapidly alter understandings of personhood, time, and conduct as well.

In the rural Spanish village of Los Olivos in the 1960s, a family's wealth and social standing depended on the land or other property it owned. In such a world, families thought of their "honor" (the purity of their women and thus the integrity of their claims to inheritance) as the key to their family's well-being (Collier 1997). The practical "logic" of such a system was reproduced because a family's honor affected its children's marriage chances; and an advantageous marriage (and the habits of thrift and diligence that preserved the family estate) was the way families acquired or retained property. With the collapse of the agrarian economy in the post-Franco era, land became essentially worthless. In less than a generation, from the 1960s to the 1980s, the logic of market work supplanted that of agrarian inheritance.

In the earlier period women spent their adult lives promoting their family's honor by suppressing any sign of their own sexuality, advertising their "obligations" to others, and working to build up the stock of home furnishings that would make their children good marriage prospects (Collier 1997). In the market world, however, such "self-sacrifice" no longer made sense. Each person now had (market) value based on her talents and abilities. Rather than dressing in black and becoming matronly upon marriage, women dieted, wore makeup, and dyed their hair. Rather than valuing sacrifice for others, people sought to increase their own value by improving themselves. Sacrifice on behalf of others came to be seen as hypocrisy, a failure to act on one's true feelings. In short, the logic of family honor was replaced by the logic of market individualism.

This shift in pragmatic logic altered what Geertz would think of as understandings of the self, along with the public vocabularies in which people justified their behavior to themselves and to others. Collier (1997: 183-87) describes, for example, the heavy black mourning clothes worn by the women of Los Olivos (woolen stockings and layers of heavy wool clothing even in summer) to show "respect for the dead." Younger women rejected mourning dress as a "stupid custom" because what one wore could not express one's true feelings. It was not simply that older and younger women disagreed about mourning customs. It was that they no longer communicated in the same cultural language: for the younger women, what behavior meant had to do with one's motives and wishes; for the older women, behavior signaled willingness to perform social obligations and to maintain family honor. Even when younger women wore black dresses (usually stylish ones) to please their mothers, they explained that what really mattered was what you felt. In their mothers' world, however, following one's own feelings or wishes was a sign of self-indulgence, putting distractions ahead of obligations. Social signals that the daughters saw as guarantees of good conduct—sincere feelings, loving one's family, wanting to make them happy—only distressed the mothers who longed to hear that their daughters would sacrifice their own wishes to meet their obligations to others (Collier 1997:192-94).

In Los Olivos, mourning dress did operate as a semiotic code. The
language of "showing respect" for the dead made sense, and wearing heavy black mourning for years asserted status, when one's prospects in life were determined by inherited property. Collier notes that "[i]n the early 1960s, villagers argued endlessly over exactly which items of mourning dress a woman who was 'touched' [by a death] had to wear, and for how long. But they all agreed on the basic principle that a woman's mourning dress should reflect her genealogical relationship to the person who died" (p. 188). The extent of mourning also conveyed information about inheritance: "[b]y observing which women put on which items of clothing in the days following a death, villagers could assess, with fair accuracy, not only the genealogical relationships through which inheritances were supposed to pass, but also the quality of relationships among living family members ... [as well as] a woman's possibilities for inheriting from distant kin" (pp. 190–91). Furthermore, being known as a person who maintained appropriate mourning customs, despite discomfort and inconvenience, may have "attracted inheritances" (p. 191). A woman who demonstrated willingness to sacrifice for her obligations signaled childless elders that she might make a good caretaker and heir.

Younger women, oriented to market and marriage, demonstrated their ability, sincerity, talent, and drive by their appearance and attitude and by the testimonies they offered to the sincerity and depth of their feelings. They sought to demonstrate that they did things not because they were obligated to, but because they wanted to. Love became the best predictor of whether a couple would marry, rather than "the properties and reputations of their respective families and ... the couple's respect for social conventions" (p. 103). Women sometimes succumbed to passion, in part because withholding sex until marriage came to seem calculating in a world that valued sincere feeling and rejected conformity to social conventions. Younger women no longer sought to "subjugate" their children (as their parents had to keep them from risking family honor and the chance of an advantageous marriage). Rather they sought to foster their children's talents and to teach them independence.

In the contrast of these two cultural patterns, we can identify a kind of cultural logic. But in what does this logic consist? Is it not the resonance of a unified ethos across various spheres of life (in fact, as Collier notes, in modern Spain calculation in the market sphere has been accompanied by the expectation that family life will be emotional, intimate, and free of mercenary motives [see pp. 108-10; 132-35]). Nor does a cultural logic link one sphere to the next through the experiential interdependencies Geertz would see among solutions to existential human dilemmas. And these cultural logics are not abstract deductive systems. The logic, including the logic of the associated semiotic code, hangs together to the degree that its various elements derive from (and help constitute) the same institutional order. When dominant institutions create similar dilemmas of action, there will be what looks like a unified cultural logic. To the extent that institutions develop divergent patterns (as, I have argued, the state, the family, and the market do in contemporary societies), there will be multiple, sometimes non-overlapping cultural patterns (see Friedland and Alford 1991; Friedland and Hecht 1996). And even a single institution creates dilemmas and uncertainties that elicit multiple, sometimes contradictory strategies of action.

In contemporary America, I have argued, two different ways of understanding love are rooted in different aspects of the institution of marriage. The contemporary structure of marriage as an institution-exclusive, voluntary, life-transforming, and enduring-generates no single logic. Rather, it poses tasks or practical difficulties of action, to which the wider culture generates many different, sometimes competing, and always only partially satisfactory solutions. The culture of "prosaic-realistic love" addresses the problem of how to make a relationship last. "Mythic" or "romantic" love focuses on the problem of deciding: whether to commit oneself to a relationship and how to choose whether or not to stay in a relationship. The culture of romantic love reproduces the institutional features of marriage as psychological states, honing the capacity to identify one other person as the person whom one loves and to know that this relationship is "it."

While basic institutional contradictions-in this case the contradiction between the voluntariness and the permanence of marriage-generate dilemmas for actors, the cultural solutions to those dilemmas are not simple reflexes of the institutional order itself. The solutions share a logic, not in the sense that they share similar ideas but because they provide alternative routes to the same destination. There are wide variations and sometimes dramatic shifts in theories and techniques for solving these dilemmas, even while those varied solutions share a common orientation to the institution itself. The prosaic-realistic love culture, for example, may teach patience, the value of affection over infatuation, and how to discount strong emotions in favor of more constant thoughts and feelings, as well as such skills as "communication," "sharing," sexual intimacy, and managing conflict. These are skills that many contemporary Americans believe make the difference between relationships that last and those that fail. But shared religious commitment and the quest for personal fulfillment may also at one time or another, for one group or another, be envisioned as ways of making relationships last.
Alternative strategies of action not structured by the model of lasting marriage are also possible, although I found only scattered hints of this among the middle-class married and/or divorced suburbanites I interviewed. As I mention in chapter 6, older, divorced women who had largely given up on marriage occasionally used a different logic in talking about love, one in which friendship, mutual support, and fair exchange were the criteria of a good relationship, and the word "love" no longer made sense. Some research on gay relationships suggests alternative strategies of action in which life is organized around finding a single, lasting relationship but around friendships in which love and sex mingle, without "love" implying a lasting, exclusive relationship (see Popovitch 1989; Nardi 1999:74-101).

The culture of romantic love has a stricter logic, presumably because it is more tightly bound to the key institutional features of marriage. Nevertheless, romantic love may enshrine sudden passion, a gradually growing inner certainty, or careful weighing of pros and cons as ways to know whether a relationship is worthy of commitment. These cultural solutions are not united by their inner logic, nor by pervasive schemas that are transposed from one arena to another. Rather, however internally diverse, fluid, or incoherent they are, these cultural patterns are given unity by the institutional dilemmas to which they are addressed.

Institutions

The concept of an institution plays a large role in this book, yet I have not explored it directly. The best definition of an institution is probably that of Ronald Jepperson (1991:145), who treats institutionalization as a matter of the degree to which a practice or structure is stable and self-reproducing:

An institution is then a social pattern that reveals a particular reproduction process. When departures from the pattern are counteracted in a regulated fashion, by repetitively activated, socially constructed, controls—that is by some set of rewards and sanctions—we refer to a pattern as institutionalized.

Others (Bellah et al. 1991:10-12,39-41; Scott 1994; Selznick 1957,1992; Friedland and Alford 1991) have emphasized that institutions are stable, patterned systems based around culturally defined purposes. In this view, some stable social practices (what aisle holds fresh produce versus meats at the supermarket) may still not be "institutions." And similarly the university, or baseball, is an institution because it has a set of core meanings that define its purposes—even when particular universities or baseball teams, or perhaps even the whole academy or all of American baseball, fail to live up to those ideals. That is, the "institution" is defined by the existence of a set of rules or purposes that transcend any particular organizational or social embodiment.

The "new institutionalism" of John Meyer and others (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Fligstein 1990) emphasizes how institutions import fundamental elements of their purposes and structures from outside themselves. John Meyer (1983, 1987; J. Meyer et al. 1997) has postulated a kind of floating environment of institutionalized rules about what features and associated purposes constitute a nation-state, a corporation, a school, or a marriage, and he sees the instantiation of a relatively stable set of externally available rules as the defining feature of institutions. For Meyer, environments become more "institutionalized" as the comprehensiveness and elaboration of the rules that define entities and the kinds of entities that can exist expand. But this alerts us to a central feature of institutions—that they are patterns of "constitutive rules."

One of the most helpful discussions of the nature of institutions as culturally constituted entities comes from the cognitive anthropologist Roy D'Andrade (1984). D'Andrade (1984:90), paraphrasing Geertz (1973c:11-12), notes that "[m]arriage is part of American culture, but marriage is not the same thing as knowing how to marry people or knowing how to get married or understanding what it is to be married. Most Americans have an understanding of what banishment is and how to banish someone (were they Richard II), yet these understandings do not make banishment a possibility in American culture." He quotes John Searle, the philosopher, on the special quality of certain statements (such as saying "I do" in a legal marriage ceremony) that, within the constitutive rules of an institution, create a certain state of affairs:

It is only given the institution of marriage that certain forms of behavior constitute Mr. Smith marrying Miss Jones. Similarly, it is only given the institution of baseball that certain movements by certain men constitute the Dodgers beating the Cubs 3 to 2 in eleven innings. 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 1969:52, quoted in D'Andrade 1984:91)

An institution, as D'Andrade (1984:94) points out, depends on "social agreement that something counts as" something, and on adherence to (or enforcement of) that rule and the "entailments incurred by application
of the rule.” As D’Andrade conceives them, these "entailments" are linkages between the rules that constitute an institution and norms (regulations of action) that flow directly from the constitutive rules. As he emphasizes, these norms "are not a matter of logic, but rather consist of the assumption that such linkages exist." Thus, he argues, "wearing a tie" is "linked to constitutive rules by which formality is defined and created," just as, we might note, wearing heavy mourning was linked to the rules that constituted kinship and inheritance in Los Olivos in the 1960s.

Thinking of such behavioral entailments as "norms" is probably not as useful as thinking of them as semiotic codes: a tie signals the formality of an occasion while mourning dress signals (and enacts) the closeness of a kin relationship. All institutions have signaling systems that permit monitoring and enforcement of the basic structures of the institution. The institution of family inheritance in Los Olivos entailed an elaborate system of codes by which people demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice for their family obligations, including the mourning dress that showed "respect for" the dead. Indeed, Bourdieu (1977) rejects the idea of normlike rules for behavior precisely because he recognizes that any institutional order creates corresponding "games" through which individuals manipulate what the codes that define institutional positions allow them to "say" (see also Crozier and Friedberg 1980).

Unanswered Questions

Wide variation in kinds of cultural "logics" suggests that social analysts need to consider carefully what kind of account they are offering when they claim to have uncovered a cultural logic or to have observed a logic being played out. Part of what we mean by cultural explanation is that some logic internal to culture itself drives social processes. Yet we understand all too little what we mean by various claims that particular cultural processes have a logic, and we know less about how much those logics are constraining.

I have suggested that the notion of a "logic" as some form of rational, deductive logics (albeit with "nonrational" premises) does not really capture what analysts in concrete cases understand as "logical" about the cultural logics they analyze. But it is still an open question how far deductive logics (or other kinds of formal logics, like the binary logic of Levi-Straussian structuralism) play an independent role in structuring cultural processes. There are, for example, hints in some cultural analyses that cultural oppositions are linked, so that a change in one impels change in others (for example, Wright's [1975] study of the changing plot struc--
logical"-in one place self-sacrificingness might be signaled by intensity and duration of mourning, while in another by the burdensomeness and expense of funerary rituals or by willingness to go hungry to feed one's children. As I suggested in chapter 8, there can be social debates about the codes that signal various traits or properties (such as current debates over what traits are masculine or feminine) so that the content of a (semiotic system can shift, while its underlying "point"-what it seeks to convey—remains pretty much constant. But we know relatively little about how tightly linked semiotic codes and institutional orders are. In some cases institutional orders may remain stable while the semiotic codes in terms of which they operate shift. In other cases, a semiotic code may be adapted to convey new meanings, linking it to a different institutional order than the one in which it originally made sense.

Finally, we need to understand the contexts in which "logical logic" does make a difference in social life. To the extent that individuals use cultural resources not only to organize strategies of action but also to justify their actions to themselves and others, those accounts may have logical entailments. This is certainly the burden of Weber's (1968) analyses of legitimations of authority, of the symbolic content of status claims, and of the independent effects of religious worldviews. Without trying to revisit Weber's arguments about rationality and rationalization (see Swidler 1973), or to judge how far some inherent propensity toward logical consistency plays a role in social life, I want to suggest that once we stop assuming that "cultural logics" are transparent and that how the logic generates implications is obvious, we may develop more powerful ways of analyzing cultural logics-even if those logics turn out to be multiple, overlapping, and varied in their structure.

DO SOME CULTURAL ELEMENTS CONTROL OTHERS?
The biggest unanswered question in the sociology of culture is whether and how some cultural elements control, anchor, or organize others. Indeed, this partially subsumes other questions of cultural integration or cultural logic.

If we have finally won the Weberian battle to demonstrate that cultural factors influence human action, we are nonetheless in great danger of losing the war. For if everything is culture-from the structure of organizations, actors, and nation-states (Thomas, Meyer, Ramirez, and Boli 1987), to the fundamental constituents of economic life such as markets (Reddy 1984) and labor (Biernacki 1995), to the dynamics of revolutions and social movements (Sewell 1980, 1985; Tarrow 1998; Johnston and Klandermans 1995)—we need to differentiate the culture concept to explore which kinds of cultural elements organize others, and which control particular kinds of social processes (see Jepperson and Swidler 1994).

We can see the difficulty by turning to William Sewell Jr.'s important essay, "A Theory of Structure" (1992). Sewell recasts the perennial problem of the relationship of culture and social structure by redefining structure itself, as "composed simultaneously of schemas, which are virtual, and of resources, which are actual" (p. 13). In a brilliant inversion of the older view of culture as the unexplained residuum left over when material factors have had their causal impact, Sewell argues that structures themselves can be "read" for the schemas they contain, and that reproduction of a structure is the reenactment of a schema using human and material resources. Because of the "multiplicity of structures" and the "polysemy of resources," structures can be reinterpreted to generate schemas different from those that originally produced them. Thus human agency is possible (indeed ubiquitous) in "the capacity to reinterpret or mobilize an array of resources in terms of schemas other than those that constituted the array" (p. 20).

Sewell (1992:22) directly confronts the major difficulty this new conceptualization raises. If everything from "structures that shape and constrain the development of world military power to those that shape and constrain the joking practices of a group of Sunday fishing buddies or the erotic practices of a single couple" is a structure organized by schemas, then it is essential to differentiate among kinds of structures—to analyze, in my terms, whether and how some structures organize or constrain others.

Sewell (1992:22) suggests a categorization of structures by "depth, which refers to the schema dimension of structure, and power, which refers to the resource dimension." These dimensions provide a way of analyzing which structures organize and control others: "deep structures are those schemas that can be shown to underlie ordinary or 'surface' structures, in the sense that the surface structures are a set of transformations of the deep structures." Deep structures are also "pervasive" and "relatively unconscious." A structure's power, on the other hand, is its ability to mobilize resources. So language is a structure that is deep but not powerful, while nation-states are powerful but not deep. "[R] elativelly near the surface of social life ... [s]tate and political structures are consciously established, maintained, fought over, and argued about rather than taken for granted as if they were unchangeable features of the social world" (p. 24).

Sewell's formulation is a great advance in rethinking the distinction between culture and social structure. But the attempt to specify why some
schemas are more influential than others is less satisfactory. As I argue in chapter 8, "deeper" cultural meanings do not always have greater capacities to organize other social patterns. The uncontested, taken-for-granted meanings that pervade much of ordinary social life may be so loosely organized and so internally contradictory that they have little influence on social action (see Swidler 1986; also Billig 1987, 1992). At the same time, sometimes apparently superficial cultural practices, like gift-giving on Mother's Day, can constrain action by defining the meaning of social gestures, while being neither deep nor powerful.

There is a question as to whether "depth" and "power" are the right conceptual tools at all. Labeling a structure "deep" (having the broad capacity to organize other domains of social life) or "powerful" (able to mobilize extensive human action) simply describes the outcome we are interested in, without really accounting for it. Indeed, these metaphors may mislead us about what kinds of cultural schemas (or structures in Sewell's terms) have these effects.

Richard Biernacki’s Fabrication of Labor (1995) suggests why depth and power may be the wrong metaphors for thinking about what makes culture influential. Biernacki traces the effects of the different schemas that constituted labor as a commodity in England versus Germany. These schemas were certainly deep in the sense that they were unconscious and taken for granted. British owners and textile workers "defined the factory employment relation as the appropriation of workers' labor concretized in products" (that is, cloth), while "German employers and workers ... acted as if the employment relation comprised the purchase of labor effort and of the disposition over workers' labor activity" (p. 43). These differing schemas had widely pervasive effects, according to Biernacki, structuring everything from mill architecture, to the timing and shape of strikes, to the fundamental intellectual differences between British political economy and Marxian analyses of "labor power."

Despite being unconscious and taken for granted, however, the core schemas, what Biernacki calls "silent practices" for negotiating labor arrangements, were not "deep" in the sense of lying "underneath" every thing else. They were anchored in and reproduced by specific, everyday practices, not deep conceptual assumptions, and when these practices were changed, the different understandings of labor disappeared with them. It was the negotiation of piece-rate wage scales-reproducing shared assumptions about what there was to negotiate over-that kept the contrasting British and German patterns intact. "The German piece-rate system centered its comparisons of different ways of weaving on the motion of inserting a pick [weft thread], without respect to the visible length of the finished product. The British pattern compared the picks [weft threads] in different kinds of finished products rather than in motions" (p. 50). When the ways laborers and owners negotiated wage rates changed, German-British differences in the constitution of labor as a commodity vanished-essentially overnight (Biernacki 1995:495-97).

During World War I, governments in both countries began setting wage rates directly. This interruption in the practices of negotiating piece rates eliminated the British-German difference in how labor was constituted as a commodity.

Thus what look like relatively unimportant surface practices-such as how wages are negotiated-can organize (indeed define) important characteristics of the physical and conceptual universe. But it is not clear that "depth" is what gives these practices their pervasive influence. The intellectual challenge for students of culture is to think more broadly about why some cultural schemas dominate or organize wide areas of social life. It is an open question, I think, whether such pervasively influential schemas are also the most enduring-although logically it might seem the two should go together. 14

Sewell argues that "deep" structures affect broad domains of life because their basic schemas underlie many "surface" structures that are transpositions of them. But very influential structures do not necessarily work by generating homologous versions of themselves. I have argued instead that social institutions shape action because they define problems actors must solve. The various solutions then share common schemas (or common cultural logics) because they are solutions to the same institutionally structured problem. Thus the mechanism Sewell proposes to explain why some structures are broadly influential (and why some schemas are widely reproduced) may be wrong. It is not self-propagation of schemas through homologous transposition that is at work, but active agents constrained by the same institutional logic who seek out cultural resources to solve similarly shaped problems.

Cultural styles, skills, and habits of the sort I discuss in chapter 4 (and certainly the habitus as Bourdieu describes it) may indeed be propagated by the replication of analogous schemas in the way Sewell describes for "deep" structures. I have argued that culture in the sense of "cultured capacities" for action, feeling, and perception influences action because it is easier for people to use skills they already have and to apply them to new situations than to develop new ones. (People may also develop new cultural capacities by modifying ones they already possess, or by prolonged contact with models whose styles and habits they can imitate.) Homology rather than complementarity is the rule here. But while such cultural
styles have some of the attributes Sewell would identify with "depth"—they may be unconscious and ingrained and, as I have argued, they may be difficult to learn or unlearn—there are usually many such skills and habits, and they may be brought together in diverse arrays rather than by some unifying structural logic.

Of course features of institutions themselves may be generated by cultural schemas transposed from one arena to another—as, perhaps, the logic of free choice and contract structures Americans' thinking about government and marriage, as well as about market transactions. But as both government and marriage illustrate, actual institutional structures do not necessarily approximate the schemas people attach to them. Thus Americans cannot decline the contract government offers, while marriage involves vows that people are not required to honor.

John Meyer and his collaborators might adduce the "rules" that define institutions as examples of "deep" structures. And indeed the cognitive frames—in D'Andrade's terms the "constitutive rules"—that make some structures universities and others nation-states might be candidates for such deep structuring principles. But as the Meyer group has demonstrated in their empirical work, such structures are themselves in a process of constant evolution—sometimes according to quite superficial, faddish principles—so that the "recipe" for making a nation-state, for example, increasingly requires more form (an elaborated constitution, a large number of cabinet departments, and data-gathering capacities, all validated by recognition by the United Nations [Boli-Bennett 1979; McNeely 1995]) and less by way of effective content (a military able to assert sovereignty, effective rule over territory, long continuity of rule).

If "depth" is not the right metaphor for suggesting which structures or schemas will be widely influential, "power" does not solve the problem either. Of course in an obvious way powerful social structures that mobilize vast resources will be widely influential. But thinking about their direct "power," their capacity to mobilize things or people, does not answer the question of whether the patterns they create are central in anchoring or shaping other structures and schemas. Sewell seems to be thinking primarily of the state as the paradigmatic example of a structure that is "powerful" but not "deep." But it is not clear that the state's influence comes directly from its power over resources, so much as from its ability to set the limits or constraints within which other institutions operate. Theorists such as Fligstein (1990, 1996) have increasingly pointed to the state's crucial role in setting constraints that define the limits of rational action for other actors. Thus Fligstein (1990) shows that the American state's legal and regulatory environment—laws against cartels, trusts, and restraints of trade—directly affected the form corporations adopted and the "conceptions of control" their managers embraced. In a similar way, the legal order created by the state anchors the institution of marriage and ultimately affects the way that institution itself is defined. But this role of state action does not quite fit Sewell's notion of "power" as the capacity to mobilize resources. The activities that embody state "power"—say, drafting a large army, collecting taxes, and imposing criminal sanctions—may not shape other structures and schemas in a way at all proportional to the "power" these activities involve. At the least, more analysis is necessary to determine what elements of a state's effects on society are widely influential in structuring other patterns and which have less influence on the shape of other structures and schemas.

If depth and power are not what make some cultural patterns especially influential, recent research offers other suggestions. Biernacki's (1995) analysis of how labor was constituted in England versus Germany suggests that social formulas that mediate ongoing negotiations of antagonistic interests may be particularly enduring. Each side in a dispute, in formulating and pursuing its interests, continually reproduces the schema in whose terms it seeks advantage. Such structured antagonisms may also account for why German versus British schemas for constituting labor had such wide influence. Biernacki emphasizes that these were "silent practices" rather than consciously articulated ideas. The ways people actually defined what they were doing while they worked (producing a length of cloth of a certain value, or sending the shuttle across a certain number of times) and how much they deserved to be remunerated were influential because they were "unobtrusive." But we could make the same point slightly differently by saying that these unobtrusive practices operated as "constitutive rules," defining what it was that employers purchased from workers, and that the other arenas in which this schema was also influential—structuring the ways labor was withheld during strikes, or what factory architecture attempted to regulate, or how employers fined or penalized tardy or absent workers—were all sites where conflicts between workers and employers played out. So rules that constitute something that becomes the ground for repeated conflict may have particularly wide and lasting influence.

Constitutive rules may also be anchored by public practices. Elizabeth Armstrong (forthcoming) has traced the crystallization of a "gay and lesbian community" in San Francisco in the early 1970s. This community was defined by the diverse groups that it comprised—and its constitutive rule was embodied (and annually enacted) in the Lesbian-Gay Freedom Day Parade, which displayed those diverse identities. This new
rule-congealed in a relatively short period of time but almost immediately widely influential-spawned the rapid formation of hundreds of identity-expressive organizations in a population that earlier had supported only a small number of political groups, each of which had tried to represent gay or lesbian interests in general. This example suggests how a key symbolic or ritual practice may instantiate the constitutive rule that defines a social entity, making real, for example, what "membership" in the "community" consists in.

Sewell (1996; see also 1990) has brilliantly analyzed how emblematic public action—such as ritual displays during a revolution—can encode new constitutive rules (that "the nation" now equals "the people"), model new forms of collective action, and enact new understandings of public order and social progress. In the key case he analyzes, that of the fall of the Bastille in the summer of 1789, a new constitutive rule crystallized very quickly and came to organize broad domains of public action. Of course, not every new form of collective action is "successful." The question of why new constitutive rules sometimes take root is precisely what further research along the lines Sewell has laid out would explore.

What is fascinating about the kinds of constitutive rules Armstrong and Sewell analyze is how quickly they can establish themselves, becoming the accepted reality not through long usage but through their capacity to establish a public model of collective life. But even when a schema is neither taken for granted nor unconscious, it may be enduring and pervasive, I have argued, if it is the shared "default option" for collective action in periods of uncertainty. Thus Americans, while they can constitute and navigate formal organizations, contractual exchanges, and governments that require obedience, nonetheless tend to fall back on the notion that action is coordinated by the voluntary choices of individuals (Swidler 1992). It is true that sectors of American social life are organized this way from Bible study groups, to churches, to fraternal organizations. But the schema is not "transposed" everywhere. Rather, it is the fallback position—that form of coordination people assume that others will turn to when the bureaucratic, corporate, familial, or state system isn’t there. There is a great deal of conscious cultural elaboration of such a schema, perhaps precisely because it is less institutionalized. Voluntarist social action survives in the cultural repertoire as a focus of story and myth as well as occasional enactment. People want to know "how to" do it, and they want to see examples of how such action is performed successfully. In other cultures, family loyalty, or sacrifice for the group, or revolutionary exaltation is the "default option" that people assume will solve collective problems.

The difficulty in developing cumulative theory and research about which cultural practices anchor or organize others is exacerbated by confusion about levels of analysis in social theorizing. In contemporary theorizing about culture there is a kind of unspoken assumption that societal-level cultural factors—"discourses"—are impersonal, pervasive, and enduring, while individual-level beliefs and attitudes are particular, concrete, and variable. But it may be instead that there really are public cultures—not simply generalized discourses or semiotic codes (in whose terms many things can be said, but which don’t directly say something in particular) but quite particular beliefs—that are, so to speak, the authorized beliefs of a society about itself (see Jepperson 1992; also Nicolopoulos and Weintraub forthcoming). These might be quite long lasting but nonetheless subject to change in the light of publicly authorized or validated historical experience. In Forging Industrial Policy (1994), for example, Frank Dobbin analyzes continuities in French, British, and American patterns of economic regulation. Dobbin argues that each nation has pervasive schemas that are publicly defined as answering the collective question of how it can maintain social order and produce progress. Those implicit theories, he argues, are established by authoritative interpretations of early successes, particularly in establishing political order. Such modes of problem solving persist until there is publicly defined catastrophic failure and repudiation of specific elements of the available theory of public coordination (as there was in the United States after political corruption seemed to damn the capacity of local government to assure economic progress). Such a perspective would hark back to Bendix’s analysis in Work and Authority in Industry (1974) of how dominant ideologies are constructed. But it would not assume that powerful ideologies operate as deep, largely hidden structures of discourse. Rather it would accept that there are public ideologies that are not reducible to shared private opinions but are instead public realities that directly confront (and sometimes conflict with) individual views.

These are only tentative suggestions about where we might look for distinctions among types of culture that would let us answer the question of what makes some cultural elements able to organize others. At this point, we should take persuasive empirical studies of how culture operates and think inductively about what aspects of a particular cultural schema make it dominating, pervasive, or enduring (or weak, narrow in application, or fleeting). Our empirical studies will make much more substantial contributions if we can begin, however uncertainly, to formulate general theoretical questions about culture that can guide research into the roles that it plays. This book is intended as a contribution to that endeavor.