

Toward a Vigorous Incorporation of Culture in the Study of Human Development

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Culture signifies a fundamental aspect of human life. It facilitates human interaction by providing meaning to lived experience. The importance of systematically attending to culture is illustrated through examples of benefits achieved in the study of care and health disparities. Accounting for culture in both theories and methods potentially advances the field by connecting the macro and micro levels of human experience. Yet, culture should be understood as dynamic and complex. It fundamentally shapes individuals and simultaneously is shaped by individuals. Future directions include a call to develop questions that better place individuals and groups in context. In so doing, attention to distinguishing ideal aspects of culture from pragmatic realities as well as developing ways to make culture more visible in both research and in public discussions are elaborated. Attention to culture holds great potential for advancing understanding of life trajectories in human development.

INCORPORATING CULTURE TO BRIDGE GAPS

The field of human development holds a special position in the sciences because it simultaneously identifies the advantages in recognizing several levels of analysis for advancing knowledge while drawing from the strengths of multiple disciplines. As a sociologist who studies social relations across the life course, my wish for the study of human development is to incorporate culture as a more central level of analysis. This wish stems from the emerging consensus that culture is not only a particular set of values, norms, and beliefs, but also includes circumstances that lead to the formation of particular group statuses. In other words, culture is a thread running through various systems that organize daily life (Alegria, Pescosolido, Williams, & Canino, 2011). The “cultural tool boxes” (Swidler, 1986) available in various systems, which exist at multiple levels, often reinforce social categories, especially those marked by inequality. Culture, therefore, influences the emergence and continuation of inequalities.

Incorporating culture as a main focus of study in human development research provides potential advantages. It acknowledges an influential and omnipresent aspect of human life. Culture is rooted in the “structures and processes” that “shape the attitudes, beliefs, values, and cultural scripts” (Alegria et al., 2011, p. 365) that individuals, their families, communities, and society-wide systems use in daily life. Attention to culture provides a potential avenue for more concretely linking multiple levels of analysis, drawing awareness to the fact that people are situated within

larger social contexts that represent the structures, mechanisms, and processes through which human dilemmas are experienced (e.g., Pescosolido, 1992). The wish to incorporate culture more centrally is advanced to bridge knowledge gaps in theoretical and methodological enterprises. The sections that follow outline, explain, and illustrate the potential gains to vigorously incorporating culture into the study of human development, beginning with a consideration of expanding traditional definitions of culture.

EXPANDING TRADITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

Culture is the lens through which life derives meaning for individuals. It centrally shapes human development. The concept of culture is traditionally understood through the study of race, ethnicity, and national origin. Indeed, scholarly attention to culture is growing across multiple disciplines due to demographic changes in the United States and increasing contact with different parts of the globe. Data from the most recent U. S. Census indicates that diversity by race and ethnicity is growing at a rapid rate. For instance, more than one half the total U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2010 occurred as a result of dramatic increases in the Hispanic population; moreover the Asian population grew faster than any other major race group between the same time period, increasing by 43% (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). The rise in U.S. racial and ethnic diversity, especially growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations, may be attributed to high levels of immigration, particularly through family reunification policies (Lee, 2013). Immigration facilitates contact between various groups of people, making cultural differences appear tangible and immediate. Beyond immigration, crossing borders also arises due to the ease and affordability of travel, and possibilities now available through technology (e.g., the Internet). Hence, contact between various cultural groups has increased dramatically over the last decades, calling attention to the need to better understand the role of culture in human development.

Although culture is most obviously identifiable through variations in race, ethnicity, and national origins, it is increasingly recognized that diversity in attitudes and behavior within one racial or ethnic group arises due to age and class differences. We consider benefits to the field of human development by viewing age and class differences as a matter of culture.

Differences between age groups within one racial group are often referred to as a generational gap. Yet it constitutes a cultural divide. For instance, African American youth may look at their elders as “old school” and irrelevant, whereas African American elders may look at youth as obsessed with technology (Ajrouch & Fakhoury, 2013). Youth viewing the ways and ideas of older generations as inferior, and vice versa, elders deeming the ways and ideas expressed by youth as less valued, amounts to a cultural shift. Recognizing the cultural dimensions to such occurrences provides a means by which to understand such differences as more than values, norms, and beliefs. The cultural dimension contributes to the formation of age group statuses, which potentially leads to the devaluing of one group by another. There is an inextricable link between structure and culture, which together influences individual development. Interpersonal conflict or disagreement between young and old individuals may then be better addressed by understanding the larger cultural issues that stratify age groups and hence inform perspectives of each group in ways that are often not visible.

Next, we consider the utility of understanding class differences as a matter of culture. A recent study of child rearing demonstrated that race mattered less in children’s daily lives than did class

(Lareau, 2011). Middle-class Black children have much more in common with White children in their class than they do with Black children from the working or poor classes concerning their child-rearing experiences. The infamous culture of poverty thesis proposed by the Moynihan report (1965), for example, suggested that culture is the reason for poverty among urban poor Black families. This thesis placed culture, in other words being Black, as the explanation for high levels of poverty among African Americans. Culture was conceived of as a category, not a thread that links multiple levels to one another. Lareau's findings, by contrast, identify invisible inequalities as cultural capital that is categorized according to class position. Traditional studies that account for culture by focusing only on race or ethnic patterns are, therefore, incomplete. Class shapes cultural difference in more profound ways, at least when it comes to child rearing, than does race. These patterns, identified when children were age 10 years, appear to have a cumulative effect. Life trajectories dramatically differed between the middle class and working class/poor in young adulthood, with the latter struggling and the former excelling in chosen career paths.

Culture is increasingly identified as an omnipresent element at all levels of human life, from the macro to the micro. The field of human development draws heavily from theoretical frameworks that identify multiple levels or systems of analysis such as the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), life course theory (Elder, 1974, 1999), and most recently, relational developmental systems (Overton, 2013). Although developmental frameworks certainly recognize culture as important, moving beyond assigning culture to one level, for example, macro, is important as it provides an approach for understanding how each level links to the other. By recognizing culture as a thread running through various levels of society, from the macro to micro, we are better poised to identify the ways in which various levels influence others. Although each level is linked by access to resources and social interactions (Connidis, 2014), culture represents one central connector because of the meaning it provides with each enacted encounter.

In sum, giving voice to the role of culture in human development is a compelling and important direction for future research. The movement toward more centrally identifying culture as a form of capital, and hence a marker of stratification and inequality holds important implications. Incorporating culture as a key element of scientific inquiry will potentially illuminate causal pathways for understanding attitudes and behavior from birth until death, thereby advancing the field in notable ways.

ADVANCING THE FIELD

Including culture as a central element in human development research will advance the field significantly because of the way it illuminates connections between macro- and microlevels of human experience. *Culture* does not simply refer to values, norms, and beliefs associated with a particular category, for example, whether one is White or not, and poor or not, but must be understood as a confluence of circumstances and experiences that permeate every aspect of the institutions that shape life experiences. Centrally, culture must be understood as the fiber that connects societal level and individual-level experiences. It includes institutional practices and societal circumstances that lead to individual and group the expectations. Recognizing that culture permeates various levels of human experience has potential to challenge traditional boundaries and applications of culture, to instead suggest the omnipresence of culture at various levels. Two

areas are considered to illustrate the benefits of vigorously incorporating culture into the field of human development: care and health disparities.

How do we care for our elders? What expectations exist among the young and old? Studies around the globe show consistently that young people fully expect and desire to care for their elders (Jackson, Antonucci, Brown, Daatland, & Sellers, 2008). However, the means and resources available to care for older family members within a society differ, which furthermore may shape expectations among older adults for their own care. Institutional practices in the United States, for example, promote independence. Support for programs and policies that facilitate elders living alone and away from family signify the value of independence, yet has the effect of defining at a societal level what the expectations are, and simultaneously devalues practices that stray from the projected ideal. This cultural value of independence, nevertheless, connects society to communities, families, and individuals—albeit sometimes in a conflicted manner. Identifying the cultural aspects of an issue such as care, and recognizing its potential to stratify and devalue groups who do not necessarily adopt the same values, holds great potential to advance research and policy.

It is well established that health outcomes vary across groups. Ethnic minorities and those with lower socioeconomic status have poorer health and lower life expectancies than dominant groups and those with higher socioeconomic status (Williams & Collins, 2002). Yet the reasons why such disparities exist remain elusive (Myers, 2009). A focus on culture provides unique insights. It situates individual preferences and decisions within the same structures and dynamics that create disparities throughout the life course (Alegria et al., 2011). For instance, the decision to avoid medical treatment is sometimes understood as a cultural preference. An individual's decision about whether to seek treatment has enormous implications for health. Although identifying the attitudes, beliefs, and norms at the individual level that result in such a decision may explain to some extent such action, a more complete account of the role of culture would include attention to larger systems of norms. Family and community preferences may align with an individual's decision, yet the decision to not seek medical treatment may be equally influenced by previous encounters with a health care provider. Encounters are the mechanism that links individuals from one system (community) to the other (health care). The health care provider may practice medicine within a system that does not permit examinations that last more than 15 minutes. The physician's decision to practice in such a manner is aligned with the organization, policy, and markets in which she or he works. Such encounters, repeated over time, come to signify a particular norm, or culture of the health care system. In other words, individuals and physicians are embedded within larger systems of norms that arise and continue to provide meaning to accepted ways of practice. A focus on culture clearly draws attention to the intersection of individuals, family, and organizations. Looking at how culture is present at various levels of the human experience illuminates how disparities are shaped by entire cultural systems, thus broadening traditional frameworks of disparities.

Incorporating culture facilitates links between society and the individual. Beyond the aim to link multiple aspects of the individual and society, the field of human development aims to move beyond segmented life stages to consider links between earlier and later points of time during the life course. A focus on culture provides important insights into dynamics across the life course as well as within and between various systems, having the potential to identify important mechanisms. Such an approach will thereby advance new directions in human development research and application, potentially informing programs, policy and interventions meant to promote a good quality of life for all.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A clear map for the future requires that the field of human development consider developing new questions and further embracing multimethod approaches. We need to ask questions that tap into the fact that culture permeates all levels of human experience. Although a focus on the individual and group is important in studies that incorporate culture, it is clear that the context of individual and group experience matters. Therefore, developing questions about the standards (i.e., values) upheld by societal institutions are of central importance. Such questions may be answered by content analysis, participant-observational approaches or survey methods. Two key areas around which new questions could develop are (1) distinguishing real from ideal elements of culture and (2) developing a narrative to make visible the (now) invisible. These issues are reviewed to illustrate ways to vigorously incorporate culture into the study of human development.

Real Versus Ideal Culture

Culture must be understood as ideal and practice, each of which does not necessarily operate in tandem. Distinguishing the real from the ideal leads to a more sophisticated understanding of how culture shapes and is shaped by human behavior. The topic of care addressed above provides a case in point. Ajrouch (2005) explored the topic of social support among Arab American elders. As older adults described what they expected and then actually received in terms of care and social support, tensions between cultural ideals and pragmatic realities arose concerning relations with family and the state. Hence, the focus on individuals and groups in context emerged. In discussing the topic of care and support from children, there was clear rhetoric around the preference for independence. Yet older adults expressed a simultaneous appreciation of children caring for them while wishing not to burden their children. Furthermore, Arab American elders mentioned state-sponsored support as providing material resources and care that could facilitate independence, but the state was also named as a source of discrimination toward Arab Americans because of their national origins. Documenting the ways in which older adults made sense of their situations included initial assertions of cultural ideals that their children would care for them in times of need, but were modified by more realistic expressions of support expectations, for example, children are faced with their own life demands. Distinguishing between the real and ideal that spans from the individual- to society-level situations may help to clarify care strategies that alleviate demands and stresses on the older adults and their families. Acknowledging that various factors—from the individual, to family, to community, to society—each inform the ideal and real expressions of culture will illuminate the way forward. In sum, culture is dynamic and complex. Recognizing how cultural ideals get expressed and practiced uncovers “taken-for-granted” assumptions that facilitate on the one hand, or hinder on the other, effective approaches to care.

Making Culture Visible

Uncovering “taken-for-granted” assumptions has the distinct potential advantage of making visible the invisible power of culture. Yet still needed is a vocabulary to achieve that goal (Lareau, 2011). For instance, the cultural belief that most everyone in the United States is middle class makes it challenging to find ways to make tangible the notion of class inequality. Americans

resist ideas of class inequality, and perhaps more centrally adhere to a notion of meritocracy, believing that everyone in the United States has an equal opportunity to get ahead and become successful. This powerful ideology that accompanies the U.S. class system renders differences by social class and obstacles to socioeconomic success unrecognizable and invisible. This is further solidified by the fact that those of the same class often live in similar social worlds. Thus, comparisons most likely occur among those in the same class, not between classes. Here, aspects of culture are so taken for granted, seeing them is difficult.

As illustrated in the health disparities case above, one way to make visible the invisible is to focus on encounters between different systems. Identifying the norms valued by various systems contributes to a deeper understanding of why individuals think and act as they do. Furthermore, showing how the power that expectations, norms, and ideas that institutions value privileges some groups over others is key. In particular, naming the cultural processes at work ultimately illuminates how some people benefit more than others, making culture visible. Such depictions make possible the development of a vocabulary for beginning to understand the inequality cultural systems create and sustain. Recognizing that culture is enmeshed at all levels—from the individual through societal—provides direction for how to make visible what is to most, invisible.

In sum, culture facilitates human interaction by providing meaning to lived experience. It is increasingly clear culture permeates different levels while connecting multiple levels within and across systems. The wish for culture to be more central in the human development field holds great potential for advancing understanding of life trajectories.

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