

2 Culture, self, and society

How do good people create a good society? How does a good society create good people? These questions are bound up with understandings of whether and how cultures produce both the good society and the good person. Ancient though they be, these questions shift in their significance as the circumstances of people's lives change. Debates about the moral order were very much a part of early social science, but they fell out of favor with the growth of positivism and empiricism in the twentieth century. In recent decades, active public debate about moral issues has revived, both in the United States and in other countries. In the 1970s – labeled “the me decade” in the media – and the 1980s – labeled “the decade of greed” – politicians, intellectuals, religious leaders, and the media expressed concerns about the moral order. In the years since, serious debates have emerged about morality – both public and private – in issues as diverse as abortion, corporate scandals, former U.S. President Bill Clinton's sex life, and the sexual behavior of priests. At world courts, trials have been held of those accused of genocide in Rwanda, and of Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, accused of crimes committed in the context of war.

A number of social scientists have taken up questions about the good person and the good society, and they have addressed the issues in popular books reaching broad audiences. In the United States, understandings of American individualism are central to the debate. Dominating the critical discourse is a pessimistic evaluation that describes a “modern” culture as having reached its zenith. Leading American critics argue that the replacement of “traditional” (often religious) values by a “therapeutic culture” has created a culture that promotes “individual fulfillment” at the expense of community and society. These “internal” critics find odd bedfellows among writers from other cultures who critique “Western values” (see Chapter 4). There is an alternative to both the American and the external critiques, however, with a different view of the nature of the self and the connection between the self and society. This perspective sees the self in relation to others, and considers people's ongoing location in time and space to be a foundational issue.

In looking at alternative perspectives on self and society in the present chapter, we examine how social critics in one Western society – the United States – use the concept of culture to explore the moral order. This theoretical debate has been complicated by the emergence of “identity politics,” in which any given person's community is no longer assumed simply to support and be supported by the dominant culture. Rather, identity politics locates the self in a community that exists in tension with the dominant culture.

One strand of the sociological tradition, stretching from Emile Durkheim to Talcott Parsons, theorized that culture works to tie together individuals and integrate a society. This tradition focused on the ways in which shared norms and values create social order. This formulation implies that culture is a kind of system for the social control of individuals, and that it integrates them into society, to the benefit of both individuals and the society. Yet this concise model may not apply very well today, since a major feature of modern society has been toward “freeing” individuals from constraining norms and rules. Precisely in the context of modernity, some scholars ask if a culture’s rules might offer so little constraint that both the society and the individuals within it suffer. This, indeed, is Durkheim’s (1951) explanation of anomic suicide, which he argued happens when normative regulations are relaxed to the point that they no longer offer sufficient guidance for human behavior. In the face of this threat, Durkheimian functionalists presumably take heart in the proliferation of normative popular culture, with the publication of books and magazine articles spelling out the rules on a wide range of topics, from dating to etiquette. A search for books through Amazon.com on “etiquette for children” in the fall of 2002 listed 130 titles, including *Be the Best You Can Be: A Guide to Etiquette and Self Improvement for Children and Teens*, by Robin Thompson; *365 Manners Kids Should Know: Games Activities, and Other Fun Ways to Help Children Learn Etiquette*, by Sheryle Eberly; and *How Rude! The Teenager’s Guide to Good Manners, Proper Behavior, and not Grossing People Out*, by Alex J. Packer.

Despite the revival of etiquette in some quarters, for others attempts to sustain a general normative culture seem basically backward looking. In its place, they celebrate a proliferation of diverse communities, as well as new ways of making connections. There is a “moral discourse” here as well, about people looking for the meaning of life, and for ways to enhance life for themselves and others. When the local “Ultimate Phrizzbee” group signs on to pick up trash by the highway, they may not be making a political statement but they are engaging in a moral discourse, expressing a certain idea of the good person in the good society – one that is somewhat different from that which the rule books offer.

Alternative approaches have become the grist of a public debate on the nature of the good person and the good society. The writers considered in the present chapter – social scientists and public intellectuals – are concerned about how people think about the rules, what the rules are, how they are changing, and with what consequences. They also are concerned about who makes and disseminates the rules. Yet these writers do not simply stand outside the society observing it. They are (and for the most part see themselves as) engaged in the society and its culture. Their arguments are not only texts *about* a culture, their texts are *part of* that culture. No doubt this is true of all writings about the social, but because these writings have attracted a broad audience (a number of them have been best sellers in the U.S.) their impact on culture has been much more direct. Because the works of these scholars are not just interpretations of culture but a part of the culture on which they comment, the texts are of particular interest for a cultural analysis.

Individualism and therapeutic culture

In *Habits of the Heart* Robert Bellah and his coauthors (1985) questioned whether, and how, Americans sustain morally coherent lives. *Habits of the Heart* has generated

lively debate about the nature of American culture. It is the best selling book written by sociologists since *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman *et al.* 1950). Drawing from the nineteenth-century Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, Bellah and his coauthors described a fundamental tension between the individual's desires for self-fulfillment and the needs of the social order – in their terms, between individualism and commitment.

Alexis de Tocqueville was a young French aristocrat when he visited the United States in 1831. His observations of American politics, social relations, and cultural mores were published as *Democracy in America* (1945). Already early in the nineteenth century, Tocqueville saw Americans as having broken loose from the constraining forces that bound Europeans to traditional authorities. He admired the freedom, equality, and individualism of Americans, although he was concerned about the repercussions of the continuing existence of slavery in the southern states, and he did note a relative lack of freedom among married women (single women he found free in comparison to their European counterparts).

Yet Tocqueville also worried about the balance between American individualism and a collective social order. If Americans lacked sufficient commitment to common goals, he feared that they would not be able to govern themselves and the American experiment with democracy would fail. However, Tocqueville found evidence of two factors that could mitigate against the destructive aspects of individualism in American culture. First, he suggested that Americans saw a convergence between “self-interest rightly understood” and the collective interests of the society (1945, pp. 129–32). Second, he observed high levels of participation in voluntary associations. This participation, he asserted, both created ties between individuals and gave them the experience of participating in something larger than themselves. For Tocqueville, democracy depended on the development and maintenance of civic culture, and he found sustenance for the emerging civic culture in associations of volunteers as well as involvement in institutions such as churches, which, in America – unlike many European countries with established state churches – looked a lot like voluntary associations.

Individualism in American culture

One and a half centuries later, Robert Bellah and his coauthors worried that the negative effects of individualism had not been avoided. On the contrary, they argued that modern individualism is producing a way of life not personally or socially viable. They found that individualism has deep roots in American culture, and that it existed in several variations among the middle-class Americans whom they interviewed for *Habits of the Heart*.

When asked about the goals of a morally good life, these people spoke about success, freedom, and justice. Bellah and his associates described four different types of individualism, each type embodying particular strands of the American cultural heritage, each providing a different rhetoric for balancing the basic goals: first, “biblical individualism,” represented by the Puritan John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; second, “republican individualism,” represented by Thomas Jefferson; third, “utilitarian individualism,” represented by Benjamin Franklin; and, fourth, “expressive individualism,” represented by Walt Whitman.

Biblical individualism and republican individualism are the older strands. The high regard for self-reliance and independence embedded in both traditions is moderated in biblical individualism by a connection between success and participation in an ethical

community, and among republican individualists by a commitment to political equality (Bellah *et al.* 1985, pp. 28–32).

In turn, modern individualism encompasses “utilitarian” and “expressive” strands. The utilitarian strand echoes Tocqueville’s “self-interest rightly understood.” In its most general form utilitarianism holds that the rightness or wrongness of an action is judged by the goodness or badness of its consequences. Utilitarianism originated as a political philosophy in the eighteenth century with English reformer Jeremy Bentham, who believed that utilitarianism provides a rational basis for developing social policy. For utilitarians, the end goal that defines moral action is “the greatest good to the greatest number.” Bellah and his coauthors, however, feared that contemporary utilitarian individualism provides an easy rationale for individuals to pursue their own wants and desires with little thought for the common good. As for expressive individualism, with its goal of the cultivation and expression of the self, Bellah and his colleagues argued that it provides few reasons for making commitments to a community, given that self-expression is the primary good (1985, pp. 33–5).

All four traditions of individualism emphasize self-reliance. In the past, the first three types were also tied to traditions that defined the common good and provided reasons for individuals to contribute to it. However, over time, Bellah and his colleagues argued, “a primary emphasis on self-reliance has led to the notion of pure undetermined choice, free of tradition, obligation, or commitment, as the essence of the self” (1985, p. 152). In turn, in the domain of love and marriage this notion fuels an ascendancy of the “therapeutic attitude,” which has become much more widely diffused than the older notions of obligation and willingness to sacrifice oneself for others. In other words, the middle-class mainstream sees the authentic self as the source of their standards, and good relationships are based in self-knowledge, self-realization, and open and honest communication (1985, pp. 98–9). “For such expressive selves,” Bellah and his colleagues maintained, “love means the full exchange of feelings between authentic selves, not enduring commitment based on binding obligation” (1985, p. 102).

The therapeutic attitude that takes one’s own feelings as a starting point has profound implications for moral culture. Bellah and his colleagues described a “view of personal relationships centered on contractual exchange, enacted in communication and negotiation and grounded in each person’s ultimate responsibility to himself or herself alone” (1985, p. 129). The healthy person follows a plan directed to the achievement of self-fulfillment. However, this emphasis on self-fulfillment means that joint decisions can be reached only through daunting negotiations:

In theory, each person is supposed to decide what it is “important” to do in relation to the other and “judge the relative merits” of acts in relation to the other’s reactions. Each must do so in the light of self-set values and accept that “you can only be responsible for your own actions.”

(Bellah *et al.* 1985, p. 129)

These assumptions in turn make politics impossible, both because the therapeutic attitude does not allow for moral consensus and because the ability to negotiate decisions breaks down with large numbers of people. Not surprisingly, then, many people interviewed by Bellah and his colleagues found interest-group politics repugnant.

The expressive individualism that Bellah and his colleagues found to be gaining dominance in American culture is based in a therapeutic culture derived from the practice of psychoanalysis pioneered by Sigmund Freud. Although Freud himself saw a need for individual submission to the social, psychoanalysis developed in the opposite direction. It undermined traditional moral authority and helped individuals break free from the inhibitions and repressions of bourgeois morality. In the rest of this section we review Freud's thesis and then look at the ideas of two social critics concerned about the modern destruction of moral authority. Like the writers of *Habits of the Heart*, these critics regard the individual as existing in conflict with the moral order.

The advent of therapeutic culture

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many intellectuals, artists, and scientists identified with the modernist movements of the times, and saw themselves in rebellion against "traditional culture," which they regarded as dominated by arbitrary rules with little payoff for individuals. In their lives and writings, critical theorists such as Wilhelm Reich (1960) and Herbert Marcuse (1962) and artists like Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin (depicted in the movie *Henry and June*) championed sexual experimentation as a way to break down middle-class morality. The response of authorities suggests how threatening their writings seemed. Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, originally published in Paris in 1931, was banned in the United States as pornography. Only in the 1950s did that book, along with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, by D.H. Lawrence, become test cases in trials in Britain and the U.S. that resulted in the rolling back of censorship of materials deemed obscene. Anaïs Nin's most famous work, her diaries, was not published until the late 1960s.

Psychoanalysis contributed in important ways to the rebellion against the restrictiveness of nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Freud, like many theorists of his day, defined culture as inherently restrictive. His ideas provided a theoretical rationale for the rebellion, and his "talking cure" laid the basis for the development of "therapeutic culture."

A member of Freud's circle of psychoanalysts and students, Geza Roheim, once commented: "In general we have no cause to deny the hostility of analysis to culture. Culture involves neurosis which we try to cure. Culture involves superego which we try to weaken" (quoted in Rieff 1991, p. 321). For some writers in the early part of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis was to personal life what Marxism was to economic life – a revolutionary way of thinking that could free people from the repressive order of the past. Psychoanalysis was intended to replace authoritarian moral culture with a therapeutic culture. Yet, starting with Freud, some psychoanalysts and interpreters of psychoanalysis retained a certain ambivalence about the permissiveness of the therapeutic culture that was replacing the restrictions imposed by the older moral order.

The psychoanalytically based critics acknowledged that their theory and practice participated in a (perhaps necessary) destruction of the old morality and the traditional authorities, but they worried about the "moral anarchy" that they saw as the consequence of destroying the authority of the father figure. For them, therapeutic culture presents its own dangers. Freud himself saw an inherent antagonism between the demands of civilization and instinctual desires. This view had its parallel in the sociological thought of Emile Durkheim, who, coming from a different angle, wrote in his

Moral Education about the “need for restraint” and the “limitations imposed by the discipline” of the social order (Durkheim 1989). For Freud, what was to be restrained shifted as his theory developed. Initially he framed instincts (or drives) primarily as sexual and attributed them to the id (the subconscious part of the psyche associated with demands for immediate satisfaction of primitive needs). Later, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1962), he developed the argument that humans must curb both sexuality and aggression for the survival of human society. In Freud’s view, humans trade some of their possibilities for happiness for the security that civilization offers. As this metaphor suggests, the “trade” is not without cost. For Freud, the cost takes the form of guilt, inflicted by a punishing superego. In Freud’s system, the superego acts as the conscience, judging the actions and intentions of the ego (the relatively conscious part of the psyche that works to balance the demands of id and superego).

Freud originally described the process for boys. The individual’s superego is formed in the developmental process when external authority becomes internalized. This happens when the child renounces his desires for his mother and recognizes the authority of his father as internally valid. Because this account is based on male children giving up their mother in the process of identification with the father, Freud called it the Oedipus complex. His explanation of girls’ ego formation process was less satisfactory. It included the claim that because girls did not have to break with their primary relationships to their mothers in order to achieve identification with the same-sex parent, their superegos never develop as fully, and therefore girls’ capacity for justice is always less than boys’ (Freud 1990).¹

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* Freud posited an analogy between the development of the superego within the individual and civilization’s development of cultural ideals and ethical codes. He argued that the two are interlocked, but that

the mental processes concerned are actually more familiar to us and more accessible to consciousness in the group than they can be in the individual man. In him, when tension arises, it is only the noisiness of the superego which, in the form of reproaches, lets itself noisily be heard: its actual demands often remain unconscious in the background. If we bring them to conscious knowledge we find that they coincide with the precepts of the prevailing cultural superego.

(Freud 1962, p. 89)

For Freud, then, individuals suffer conflict both within themselves and in relation to civilization. The need for society can be met only through restrictions imposed by culture.

The triumph of therapeutic culture

Philip Rieff, a major sociological interpreter, regarded Freud’s description of ambivalence at the core of human nature as his major contribution. For, unlike previous conceptions of a divided self in Greek and Christian cultures, Freud did not judge the warring factions. He did not think that human nature is “fallen”; nor did he see the superego as “above” the id and ego. Among psychoanalysts, the “modern project” involved setting the individual free from guilt, free from punishment by the superego. For Rieff, the success of this project – that is, the “triumph of the therapeutic” – has meant “the defeat of culture,” where culture stands for traditional moral authority

that was the source of feelings of guilt. What does the concept of culture entail when used in this way?

The common use of the term “culture” to describe a people’s whole way of life includes a range of behaviors and norms, as well as material objects. By contrast, culture in psychoanalytic theory is more narrowly construed as moral culture – the cultural proscriptions that restrict and inhibit the behavior of individuals. It distinguishes between “maximalist” cultures (those with many rules and proscriptions) and “minimalist” cultures (those that tolerate a wide range of behavior).

A maximalist culture is described by Lynn Davidman in her book about Jewish women returning to orthodoxy. A rabbi explaining to a group of women why they might want to observe the rules of a kosher kitchen tells them: “[T]he bottom line of Judaism is the sanctity of life. Keeping kosher is a way of beginning to *limit* the life you eat” (Davidman 1991, p. 138; emphasis added). Orthodox Judaism is a maximalist culture with rules that govern many aspects of daily behavior. Keeping a kosher kitchen is one example. The rabbi uses the word “limits” in the same way as Rieff does when he talks about the essence of culture being that it puts limits on what is permitted to us as humans, for whom all things seem possible.

Critics like Rieff regard the twentieth century as a period when Western cultures moved from maximalism to minimalism (see Figure 2.1). Traditional moral authorities such as the churches and parents no longer have (or, in many cases, want) the power to make rules and enforce them. There is a sense in which, compared to other eras, almost anything goes. Rieff argues that this new freedom has released the contemporary middle class from the excesses of guilt that were part of the Victorian bourgeois childhood of Freud’s youth; but, in his view, the lack of restrictions has been pushed to the point that individuals and society now no longer have any direction.

For Freud and Rieff, culture provides the “limitations” that are necessary to give shape and direction to human activity. Yet culture is not just a set of rules; cultures also provide symbolic forms for expressing forbidden desires, for example rituals that invert the social order by exalting the deviant or mocking conformity, and art, which – through sublimation – is expressive and repressive at the same time. Culture, then, amounts to a set of controls and releases. Both Rieff and Freud studied the tension between them.

Rieff invoked the Greek and Christian philosophers who had argued that individual fulfillment comes through positive identification with cultural symbol systems and subordination of the self to the social order. In this view, the healthy person and the good citizen are the same, and the therapeutic and the moral are connected. However, in the emerging industrial order individuals were increasingly integrated through economic interdependencies rather than social ones. This new social order did not demand the classic sacrifices.

Rieff argued that the modern project destroyed *religious* culture based in *interdiction* (rules) and replaced it with a *therapeutic* culture based in *relations*. For Rieff, meaning and direction come from the ability to set limits, and the replacement of maximalist culture by a minimalist culture destroys this ability, and thus the possibilities of order, morality, and truth. Indeed, in a fascinating essay on the trial of Oscar Wilde, Rieff argued that “repression is truth.” He explained:

A culture in crisis favors the growth of individuality.... Hypothetically, if a culture could grow to full crisis then everything could be expressed and nothing



Figure 2.1 The Roman Catholic Church exemplifies the trends that Rieff describes. Between the first Vatican Council in the 1870s, with its rejection of modernism and the uncompromising position on the authority of the pope, and the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, with its endorsement of the authority of the People of God, following the rules marked practicing Catholics as separate from other people. After Vatican II, the Catholic Church both moved away from its emphasis on rules and changed some of the remaining rules. Although maintaining the rule that women cannot be ordained as priests, as we see in the above illustration of the two girls assisting the priest, altar girls are now permitted.

Source: photo by Rita Reed, from *Growing Up Gay*, 1997, p. 33.

would be true. To prevent the expression of everything: that is the irreducible function of culture.

(Rieff 1991, p. 279)

This understanding of culture is both elitist and public. It is public in its focus on the expression of communally shared norms and values rather than private behavior. And it is elitist in its focus on the rules rather than what people actually do. In turn, rules require guardians who spring from a cultural elite. This cultural elite may be identical with social and political elites, but it may also be separate from, or even opposed to, these other elites. Whatever the cultural elite's relation to other elites, in a maximalist culture it expresses, even embodies, moral demands (Rieff 1966, pp. 246–9).

As Rieff noted, one of the ways that guardians protect a culture is by maintaining a separation between public and private worlds. For instance, consider the relatively “maximalist” culture of fundamentalist Christians: the rule that “wives are submissive to their husbands” shapes public culture, and it is regarded as appropriate that men

hold the leadership positions. However, in private women exercise power in many ways (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997). For guardians of fundamentalist Christian culture, the prospect of checking to make sure that women are submissive in every context (and punishing those who are not) would be self-defeating: not only would it be a lot of trouble for the guardians, but it would probably result in a loss to the community of the creative energies of the women. As Rieff has stated, “the very life of every culture depends upon its powers to mask and transform private motive into something very different, even opposite, when it appears in public” (1991, p. 282). Thus, guardians similarly need to leave room for rituals and art – not only high culture but popular genres such as romance novels and horror films – for they translate between the public and private spheres, sometimes offering remissions that serve the culture by keeping the public zone normatively intact.

Ironically, as Rieff himself recognized, therapeutic culture – a minimalist culture – itself has been carried by a cultural elite. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, therapeutic culture has undergone a remarkable diffusion. No longer is it primarily situated in intimate relationships between therapists and patients. Instead, self-awareness movements and a complex of entrepreneurs and small companies reproduce the therapeutic culture through self-help books, workshops, seminars, tapes, and videos that they distribute to a mass audience. Some critics now wonder to what extent the therapeutic culture has eclipsed both a work ethic and ethical sentiments of responsibility for others.

The democratization of therapeutic culture

Christopher Lasch shared with Philip Rieff the view that Western cultures have substituted a minimalist culture of toleration for the punitive rules of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Lasch looked to psychoanalytic theory to explain, not the guilt of the Victorian bourgeois, but the narcissism of twentieth-century managers, artists, academics, and others. He saw the “devastation of personal life” as a fact of life in advanced capitalist society. His most popular book, *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), can be read as a sequel to Rieff’s *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966). Here, Lasch addressed the democratization of therapeutic culture through the spread of the personal-growth and self-awareness movements. Unlike others who have critiqued the self-awareness movements, Lasch saw them as symptoms of the problem, not the problem itself. Why, he asked, do people have so much trouble sustaining relationships? Why is the divorce rate so high? Why do so many fathers fail to support their children? We might add, what kind of society produces a situation where school children take guns and kill teachers and other students in their schools?

Some have explained the therapeutic culture – and especially its democratization in the rise of the self-awareness movement – as a result of the post-World War II rise of affluence and leisure, which provided money and time for the pursuit of the self. Lasch resisted such an explanation. He suggested instead that the therapeutic attitude is a typical middle-class attempt to apply typical middle-class problem-solving techniques (education, self-help) to a significant problem – the collapse of personal life. This problem is a consequence of many factors, Lasch argued, among them the growth of bureaucracy and technology and the collapse of liberalism. But he suggested that a growth of the psychological condition of narcissism holds the key to understanding what he portrayed as moral crisis in the U.S.

In the narcissistic condition, the formation of the self is disrupted. The result, in psychoanalytic terms, is not the neurosis familiar in Freudian days (i.e. hysteria and obsessional neurosis), but rather character disorders. Despite illusions of omnipotence, the narcissistic person needs others to validate his or her grandiose self. This modern condition differs from that of the nineteenth-century individualist. In Lasch's view, "For the narcissist the world is a mirror, whereas the rugged individualist saw it as an empty wilderness to be shaped to his own design" (1979, p. 10).

Drawing heavily on psychoanalytic theories, Lasch (1979, pp. 37–40) put together the following catalog of characteristics of a narcissist: vagueness; diffuse dissatisfaction with life; feelings of futility and purposelessness; emptiness and depression; wild oscillations of self-esteem; an inability to maintain meaningful human relationships; heightened self-esteem coming only through attachment to a strong admired figure from whom acceptance is craved; the tendency to act out impulses rather than to repress or sublimate them; and the tendency to cultivate a protective shallowness in emotional relations and to be sexually promiscuous, even polymorphously perverse. The narcissist finds it difficult to play, to have close involvements, or to mourn. Although the narcissist can get along in the world (and may be a charming person), his or her devaluation of others and lack of curiosity reinforce feelings of emptiness and an impoverished inner life. The narcissist's self-esteem is dependent upon the constant approval of others. Yet fear of emotional dependence and fear of commitment, together with a manipulative and exploitative approach to personal relations, make these relations unsatisfying.

Lasch attributed such importance to the psychoanalytic personality disorder of narcissism for two main reasons. First, he thought that changes in the prevalent form of pathology reflect changes in society as a whole. For Lasch, narcissism is the psychological dimension of people's increasing dependence on bureaucracy, the state, and corporations. Just as people have grown dependent upon the society to meet various practical and organizational needs, narcissism represents dependence upon others for self-esteem (1979, p. 10). Second, Lasch suggested, a certain fit between the narcissist and the demands of the social order may give narcissists a certain market value:

The narcissist rises to positions of prominence not only in awareness movements and other cults but in business corporations, political organizations, and government bureaucracies. For all his inner suffering, the narcissist has many traits that make for success in bureaucratic institutions which put a premium on the manipulation of interpersonal relations, discourage the formation of deep attachments and, at the same time, provide the narcissist with the approval he needs in order to validate his self-esteem.

(Lasch 1979, pp. 43–4)

It is the apparent "success" of the narcissist that led Lasch to postulate a "culture of narcissism." Lasch thus moved from the discourse of individual pathology found within the psychiatric community to the argument that American culture supports and expresses narcissism. Just as Freud argued for a correspondence between the individual superego and the cultural superego, Lasch argued for a correspondence between individual narcissism and cultural narcissism.

Lasch criticized modern society as "over-organized," and he connected the growth of narcissism to the changing relation between workers and their work, embodied in the relocation of work from factories to offices. When people feel no personal respon-

sibility for an end product and style is more important than what one actually does, doing good work ceases to be a source of self-esteem. What counts is recognition by others. Lasch saw the roots of contemporary narcissism in the deterioration of the work ethic, which, he argued, no longer makes sense: it does not offer the key to “success” in most people’s work contexts. Furthermore, Lasch argued, the changing definition of success at work has repercussions for leisure, which becomes increasingly tied to consumption. These changes in the nature of work and play have undermined other institutions, particularly family life and education, which, Lasch maintained, used to provide some distance between the individual and the economy.

In a recent book, James Nolan (1998) has extended Lasch’s argument, claiming that the therapeutic culture now dominates American public policy in many areas. He demonstrates how United States civil case law, criminal case law, public education, and welfare policy have all become aligned with a therapeutic ethos that celebrates an emotional and unencumbered self. In Nolan’s account, a self closely resembling the narcissistic self that Lasch described is now taken as normative in the ordinary actions of the state.

Many parallels can be found among the various arguments of the social critics concerned about U.S. culture. Bellah and his coauthors, Rieff, and Lasch all theorize social life in terms of an essential antagonism between the desires of the individual and the demands of the culture. They all describe a contemporary moral crisis in the U.S. related to the growth of a therapeutic culture. In their views, this culture allows the expression of individual desires to such an extent that moral culture is undermined. Yet they do not see the main *source* of the problem in the motives and behaviors of individuals. Lasch explicitly refutes this common misinterpretation (1984, p. 19). Thus, they do not think that the problems of moral culture can be resolved by simply exhorting Americans to be better people – to be less selfish, for example. Rather, they suggest that people do not really have the degree of choice heralded by expressive individualism. Changes in the division of labor and the development of bureaucracy are among the causes of modernity, and it is modernity itself that fails to support commitment.

Overall, the writings we have considered here foster an understanding of the problems created by modernity, but offer few solutions. Part of the attraction of psychoanalysis is that it captures so well people’s experiences of the internal tension between immediate wants and desires and their sense of what is socially beneficial or morally good. Freud departed from earlier religious formulations about this tension by arguing that the repression of desire could have harmful effects. He held that culture – defined as the rules of society – can be overly punitive. Yet by defining culture largely in terms of its rules and negative sanctions, psychoanalysis helped to promote the imbalance that critics like Freud and Lasch regarded as threatening.

What does the approach of Bellah and his colleagues add to the discussion? Early on they stated their main purpose: “to deepen our understanding of the resources our tradition provides – and fails to provide – to enable us to think about the moral problems we are currently facing as Americans” (Bellah *et al.* 1985, p. 21). By using the language of individualism rather than psychoanalysis, the very language of *Habits of the Heart* helps put readers in touch with particular American rhetorical traditions. In the act of analyzing the American discourse on moral action, Bellah and his coauthors also promoted a discourse that more seriously engages moral issues.

Is the contemporary situation, then, one of individuals pitted against society, striving for freedom against the constraints of social institutions and relationships

with others? The understandings offered from Freud to Lasch may unnecessarily pose an opposition between character and culture, and between traditional communities and modern societies. There are other theoretical approaches to moral culture. One such approach, coming out of feminist theory, treats the person in relation to the culture and society rather than in opposition to them. Another approach eclipses rules and sanctions as the bases of moral culture. Instead, moral culture is defined by concrete practices – stories, rituals, expressions – that create ties between people in various kinds of communities. Rejecting Freudian theory and the critique of individualism, these approaches begin to recast the discussion of moral culture.

Narrative identity and moral culture

Sociologists often lament the individualism of modern society (and of people in the United States, where these cultural characteristics of modern life are most fully embodied). Yet, at the same time, most mainstream sociological theory has taken for granted an understanding of the modern person as an autonomous individual. In Chapter 5 we will examine the historical processes of rationalization accompanying the rise of modernity that produced conditions for a kind of individual existence radically different from what preceded it. Here we are concerned primarily with how the historical shift to the “modern man” was conceptualized by social theorists. The notion of the modern person as a separate and autonomous individual is central to the work of political theorists from Thomas Hobbes in seventeenth-century England to the contemporary philosopher John Rawls. Social contract theory – from Hobbes to Rawls – is based upon a set of premises about the actions of free and autonomous men. These premises are easily found in the economic modeling of rational-choice theory. However, critical theories, including Marxism and psychoanalytic theory, also posit a radically separate individual – either alienated from or in conflict with society.

One notable exception to the individualizing tendency in modern social theory is pragmatism, which developed a more social conception of the individual (Wiley 1994). More recently, feminist theories explore ideas of connected or relational selves. And, as we will explore below, poststructuralist theories of identity also challenge the modernist conception of identity as rooted in the conflict between individual actors and society, but from quite a different direction. They *deconstruct* the ideas of inner identity and outer society, and, indeed, the notion of an authentic self. In postmodernist writings, the image is thus of the self as fluid and transitory.

As Somers and Gibson have pointed out, ideas about the autonomous self and the conflict between actors and society are the legacy of nineteenth-century social theory. In the face of this legacy, they argue, there are now openings to new possibilities for understanding identity and social agency that incorporate the dimensions of time, space, and relationality. They seek to understand action as contextualized, occurring in particular times and places:

Researchers outside of sociology are coming to grips with a new historically and empirically based narrativist understanding of social action and social agency – one that is temporal, relational, and cultural as well as institutional, material, and macro-structural.... Everything we know is the result of numerous crosscutting story-lines in which social actors locate themselves.

(Somers and Gibson 1994, p. 41)

Following this line of thought here, we look at two examples of contemporary theorizing about the self and identity, both of which are grounded in the social movements of the 1960s. The first comes out of particularistic claims to identity by participants in the movements; the second, out of a critique of the essentialism of those claims. After considering these moments of identity politics, we will return to the narrativist understandings that Somers and Gibson invoke.

New social movements and identity politics

One impetus for the opening to new theories of action and identity has been the emergence of new kinds of social movements beginning in the 1960s. These movements for change will be considered in their cultural aspects in Chapter 11. At this point we want to explore the ramifications of these groups and their practices for theories about identity.

Hobbes's social-contract theory imagined self-interested individuals. The French Enlightenment went a step further, positing these self-interested individuals as driven to repel the forces of authority – the church, the family, and the state – in the name of freedom from domination. The movement into modern society imagined a move away from tradition and constraint and toward freedom. Social movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily organized people around the issues of class and nation, with the European labor movement being perhaps the prototypical social movement. These movements were never as strong in the United States as in Europe (Sombart 1976), but they did provide a paradigmatic set of cases for social-movement theorists, both in the U.S. and elsewhere.

The new social movements with their origins in the 1960s, in contrast, have incorporated a broad definition of politics, extending cultural issues into public arenas to an extent much greater than did the class politics at the heart of the Marxist left. They often organize around categorical features of individuals. Black, feminist, and gay liberation movements and the Greens have fought legal battles for rights, but they also have advocated and carried out various kinds of cultural politics. For example, the famous “Miss America protest” of 1970 was a media event, addressing a cultural issue – appearance norms for women – in a cultural mode. In the new social movements, groups of people who previously felt marginal to the system have joined together on the basis of shared identity to pursue goals that are often defined as “expressive” or “self-actualizing.”

For African-Americans, the civil rights movement initially addressed issues such as voter registration and segregation. But Black Power, Black Nationalist, and Afrocentric movements fought battles on cultural terrains, and these struggles moved into the universities as well. Thus, the scholar Cornell West stated in an interview with bell hooks that “the intent of Black Studies is to redefine what it means to be human” (hooks and West 1991, p. 52). In other words, there would be a normative break with the dominant white society. A new politics of identity would be pursued through new practices. One example is the celebration of Kwanza. This week-long holiday at the end of December is an amalgam of several African festivals marking the first fruits of the harvest. Maulana Karenga, a Black Studies professor in California in the 1960s, created Kwanza to symbolically connect African-Americans to a common, imagined past. As we will show on other fronts in Chapter 4, such “invented traditions” create ties among participants: taking part in Kwanza makes a statement about both one's individual and collective identity.

Identity can be expressed in ways accessible to others through self-conscious adaptation of particular cultural contents, most significantly music, dress, and styles of banter. These sorts of expressions are often regarded as trivial, but they are vital for the sustenance of individual and group identities (see Figure 2.2). The body itself carries meaning, and participants in particular subcultures manipulate it in various ways to express various sorts of meaning (Sanders 1988).

Symbols, of course, are “multi-vocal” – they can carry more than one meaning. In an evocative essay, Andrea Benton Rushing (1988) writes of her life, and of her daughters and her mother, by talking about her hair. As the essay begins, she has landed in Ghana, accompanying her engineer husband to a job. She and her three daughters all had their hair styled in Afros, but found the heat uncomfortable: “One-third of your body’s heat escapes through the scalp’s pores. While it struggles to fight its way through six inches of hair, you just plain suffer” (1988, pp. 325–6). So they did the practical thing: they changed their hairstyle to the local closely braided cornrows. However, actions are rarely only practical. Six years later, back in the U.S. and still in cornrows, Rushing states, now “wherever my three daughters and I go...people stare at us” (1988, p. 326). The cornrows have different meanings for Rushing and the people who see her in various situations.



Figure 2.2 Appearances convey identity markers even as players from Senegal and Sweden compete in a sport that transcends national boundaries at the World Cup Soccer Finals, in Oita, Japan, in June 2002.

Source: Reuters/Kimimasa Mayama.

In Rushing's essay we learn of her "conversion" from the straightened hair that was the standard in her childhood. She recounts the embarrassment that she felt when as a child she once let her straightened bangs get wet – snow melted on them – and they suddenly curled. She recalls seeing the singer Odetta at a nightclub in the early 1960s: "I was mesmerized by her stunning face framed in its short kinky halo" (1988, p. 334), but it was ten years before she adopted "natural hair." She told her disapproving teachers that "the personal is political," and she tried to convert others to the natural style. As for her children, "long before they were born, back in the glory days of black being beautiful, I'd vowed that no daughter of mine would have her hair straightened as long as she lived with me" (1988, p. 328). Rushing's hair provides a way of instantly communicating her identification with Afro-American culture.

Yet Rushing also makes a confession: speaking of a daughter's pleading for "just a little Vigoral or Lustrasilk in her hair to make it easier to comb," she says, "I have kept faith with the nappy pride of black is beautiful. And, yet I've betrayed my heritage after all. I am, you see, a beautician's daughter" (1988, p. 328). In her narrative Rushing performs a "transformation" herself: for her daughters, who have lived in Ghana, she reinterprets the work of her mother, aunts, and grandmothers as ritual priestesses, symbols that her daughters recognize – but perhaps the women whose stories she tells would not. Using the symbolism of hair, Rushing locates herself within several traditions; she speaks of the "black is beautiful" brothers and of her hairdresser mother. Rushing's cornrows signify her identification with a multi-layered African-American culture.

As with Rushing's live identity politics, so identity politics more generally challenges the ideas of "universal man" integral to modern social theory based in the Enlightenment. Participants in the new social movements have refused the status of "outsiders" who deviate from the supposedly universal norm by making the argument that the supposed "generic man" was in fact a very particular man: white, male, middle class, Western, and heterosexual. They insist that what constitutes deviance in society often is only so when measured against some idea of what is "normal," and that what gets considered normal often reflects the ability of groups with power to set the definitions. As Somers and Gibson note,

New theories of identity politics have shifted explanations from the notion of the universalistic social agent to particularistic categories of concrete persons. Based on the assumption that persons in similar social categories and similar life-experiences (based on gender, color, generation, sexual orientation, and so on) will act on the grounds of common attributes, theories of identity politics posit that "I act because of who I am," not because of a rational interest or a learned value.

(Somers and Gibson 1994, p. 53)

These theories dispute claims by Freud and other theorists of socialization that identity is learned through a process in which the rules of society are internalized. To the contrary, in these accounts identity manifests itself from the inside out.

The relational self in feminist theory

The core idea of the women's liberation movement, that the personal is political, is emblematic of the enlarged scope of issues important within the new social move-

ments. Many participants in the women's liberation movement feel that their collective action is based on a common identity they share as women. Out of that experience, some feminists have developed alternative ideas for talking about the self, community, and moral culture. Feminist writers, for example, have articulated an ethics based on practices of caring. The strand of contemporary feminist theory that we look at here posits a model of the self connected to others. This model differs from the model of the self as separate and autonomous. Indeed, it argues that any increasing autonomy for the individual in the modern shift from community to society reflects the experience of men more than women (Hartsock 1983).

Nancy Chodorow (1978) argued that the connected or relational self develops out of early childhood experiences. Males must develop their gender identity in households where "women mother" and fathers are largely absent. Boys therefore establish their gender identity by becoming "not female" in the presence of their mothers. Girls, by contrast, identify with their present mothers, with whom they remain in relation. They never separate in the decisive ways that boys do.

What are the consequences of differential structural conditions of socialization? Gilligan's (1982) work on moral development speaks to this issue. She has portrayed girls with "connected selves" as working through moral choices in ways markedly different from males. Subsequent work has emphasized that the observed differences in behavior are not due to some essential characteristic of women (even one that is based in nearly universal early childhood experiences), but rather come out of particular experiences of subordination. This strand of feminist work counters the premise in mainstream social thought since Hobbes that morality resides in the actions of free and autonomous men who agree to observe the social contract. By elaborating a kind of morality based in relation rather than autonomy, this approach contests the view of those who, because they assume nurturance by women to be "natural," fail to see it as "moral."

Psychological theories of moral development glorified separation as a mark of maturity, placing the achievement of autonomy at the top of their maturation scales. Freud is not the only one who found women less individuated and therefore less developed in their sense of justice. Gilligan's own work came out of her puzzlement about the studies by her teacher, Lawrence Kohlberg, in which males always seemed to come out "at a higher stage of development." Commenting on Kohlberg's studies, Gilligan noted a paradox: "the very traits that traditionally defined the 'goodness' of women: their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development" (1982, p. 18). Gilligan went on to describe a different path to moral development based on what she calls an "ethic of care," as opposed to Kohlberg's "ethic of rights."

Both Kohlberg and Gilligan used a research methodology in which they presented people of various ages – most often adolescents – with a set of hypothetical dilemmas and then asked them what they would do. Kohlberg formulated the problem of "Heinz": his wife is dying and needs a drug that Heinz cannot afford to buy for her. Kohlberg asked the participants in the study if Heinz should steal the drug to save his wife. Males tended to weigh the rights of the pharmacist to receive money against the rights of the wife to life. On the other hand, Gilligan found, females were less likely to accept the terms of the problem. For example, Gilligan cited one participant who sees the problem as the pharmacist: if the pharmacist knew that Heinz's wife would die without the drug, he would surely give it to her (1982, pp. 26–9).

On the basis of tests like this one Gilligan came to argue for the “different moral voice” of the women she studied. She saw three ways that the ethic of care differs from moral development as described by Kohlberg. First, it emphasizes responsibility and relationship instead of rights and obligations. Second, it employs a form of moral reasoning that is concrete and contextual rather than formal and abstract. Third, it does not consist of a set of abstract principles, but rather of activities and daily practices. A mature person, according to the ethic of care, recognizes her connection to others and theirs to her, and at the same time can articulate her own wants and needs. In Gilligan’s account, “Morality is seen by these women as arising from the experience of connection and conceived as a problem of inclusion rather than one of balancing claims” (1982, p. 160).

Gilligan’s theory came out of a critique of Kohlberg’s universalizing of a male construction of morality. In turn, a number of writers have questioned whether Gilligan’s theory should be described as a female morality. Joan Tronto has argued for an “ethic of care” as an alternative form of moral reasoning, but not limited to women. She cautioned that the claim for the existence of a distinct “women’s morality” could be dangerous insofar as it reifies differences between men and women. But Tronto also cautioned against simply seeing the ethic of care as “a complement to traditional moral theories based on justice reasoning” (1987, p. 663).

In reviewing previous research Tronto found evidence that members of other subordinate groups, including African-American and working-class people, behaved much like the females in Gilligan’s study (Tronto 1987, pp. 649–51). She argued that the life experiences of people in subordinate groups frequently require attention to relations between people. Tronto cited Robert Coles’s study of Chicano, Eskimo, and Indian children who criticized Anglos for their lack of attention to others and to the earth (1987, p. 450). She suggested that an ethic of care will necessarily be contextual, with moral decision-making based, not on abstract rules of justice, but on the needs of individuals in particular contexts. In the studies she reviewed, Tronto did not find the moral individual portrayed as the isolated person, separate and autonomous, released from the bonds of community and independent of society, doing his job and riding off into the sunset. The middle-class girls Gilligan studied, like the working-class men studied more recently by Lamont (2000), placed a high value on caring about others.

Gilligan’s work and the controversies that have arisen around it have stimulated an alternative discourse about moral culture. Developmental psychologists, philosophers, sociologists, and others are talking about a form of moral reasoning that is contextual rather than universalistic, that is embedded in relationships rather than isolated in the actions of an autonomous individual. The different voice that Gilligan has made available for people to hear differs not only from the voices of Lawrence Kohlberg’s subjects, but also from the “individualistic voices” that Bellah and his colleagues identified.

Gilligan, like Freud, developed her understanding of identity in the context of theories about human development. In neither case, however, do the ramifications of their understandings of culture hinge on accepting the particular details about developmental stages contained in their developmental models. Gilligan makes it possible to consider a model of culture in which the individual exists in relation, rather than opposition, to others. Her work also suggests that culture does not consist of rules, but rather of activities, practices, and contextualized interpretations. Implicit in this approach is a challenge to the emphasis on rules in theories of moral culture – from Durkheim and Parsons, as well as Freud and Bellah.

Essentialism and identity in cultural studies

In order to pursue further the ideas of relationality, context, and practice, it is first important to consider charges that the categorical identities associated with many of the new social movements have been susceptible to essentialism – the idea that identities are based on inherent characteristics. In the essentialist view, identities are “naturally” given, rather than socially constructed. There are two major problems with this approach. First, it is ahistorical and, second, it downplays differences among members of a category in favor of highlighting differences between categories.

For example, to return to the theory of Nancy Chodorow, the claim that women are more relational than men because women engage in mothering must be formulated carefully. For Chodorow, mothering is a *social* relationship, not something that is biologically given. However, others have used her theory with less care. Although she theorizes that when men engage extensively in mothering it alters the social dynamics of mothering, Chodorow herself pays little attention to how the social relation of mothering varies in different times and places.

The use of categorical identities suppresses difference. As the feminist movement emerged, for example, women of color, lesbian women, poor women, older women, and younger women began to see that they had different interests. African-American women found themselves allied with black men and white women, but it was a struggle to carve out recognition for themselves in either place. Participants within the overall feminist movement found themselves unable to define the distinctive characteristics that identified “women’s experience.” The category was useful for some purposes, but not for others.

This issue became central for how cultural-studies scholars thought about identity. Also influenced by the new social movements, these scholars largely responded negatively to the essentializing of identities. However, within cultural studies, the intellectual roots of the concept of identity draw, not from social psychology, but from poststructuralist philosophy. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophers who produced modern social theory had a conception of the individual, but it was a “universal individual.” They gave little attention to the problem of differences among individuals. The issue of difference came to the fore in a compelling way with the critique of essentialism. The poststructuralists, especially those who build on the work of Derrida, take the problem of difference to be fundamental.

Eli Zaretsky offers the following review of poststructuralist thought in relation to the philosophical tradition:

Identity in philosophy refers to at least two separable questions – first, what gives a thing or a person its essential nature, i.e., its *eidos* or form, and thus its continuity through time, and second what makes two persons or things the same. The notion of identity involves negation or difference – something is something, *not* something else. Poststructuralists such as Derrida problematized identity, for example by arguing that identity presupposes differences, that it involves the suppression of difference, or that it entailed an endless process of deferral of meaning. Poststructuralism, therefore, contributed to the complication of identity politics by introducing what is sometimes termed a politics of difference, a politics aimed less at establishing a viable identity for its constituency than at destabilizing identities, a politics that eschews such terms as groups, rights, value, and society,

in favor of such terms as places, spaces, alterity, and subject positions, a politics that aims to decenter or subvert, rather than to conquer or assert.

(Zaretsky 1994, pp. 199–200)

In Zaretsky's view, the poststructuralist take yielded what he calls theories of "non-identity" (1994, p. 211).

Identity politics then, helped to produce theory in cultural studies that speaks not of persons and selves, but rather of locations and subject positions. Thus, for example, discourse theory posits that culture is composed of "subject positions," not individuals. It challenges the assumption, central to modernist thought, that in each of us there is an underlying person who is the same across different contexts. The implication of the modernist view is that the person is somehow independent from social life.

In the 1970s, the development known as the "linguistic turn" turned cultural and social theories toward the model of language (Bonnell and Hunt 1999). Again, Zaretsky provides a useful summary:

[T]he famous distinction between *langue* and *parole* suggested a fruitful way of conceptualizing the distinction between the individual and society, according to which each individual carries the society (*langue*) around in his or her head, but also that each time we speak we do so on the basis of codes that have dissolved and been remade within us (*parole*). On this basis, gender, race, and other social factors could be understood as "codes" possessing a grammar and a semantics all their own, while these codes – i.e., "culture" – are constantly being remade in different discourses and so can interpellate different subjectivities.

(Zaretsky 1994, p. 209)

With this formulation, the opposition between the individual and society disappears.

The contribution of the French philosopher and sociohistorical analyst Michel Foucault to theoretical movements associated with the linguistic turn is very important. Foucault rejected the idea of modern individual autonomous selves in conflict with society. This meant that he also rejected ideas such as repression and alienation, which start from the premise of such a conflict. Foucault's ideas about power are discussed further later, especially in Chapters 5 and 8. Here we are concerned with his ideas about the processes through which human beings are made into subjects. He saw knowledge as intimately bound up with discipline, rather than with freedom or liberation, as the Enlightenment philosophers believed. Through studies of prisons, schools, and hospitals, Foucault examined how discursive practices work to produce "order" in modernity. In his studies of the confessional and psychoanalysis, he argued that even in the most intimate and personal aspects of our lives, in our sexuality, for example, we observe and discipline ourselves through our participation in discourses that organize our thought and action. Discipline works not through constraining individuals and their actions, but by producing them. For Foucault, there is no single power structure operating outside of individuals. Rather, he saw modern human beings as "self-observing subjects." In his understanding, the older distinction between a powerful external social order (society) and an autonomous, perhaps resisting, self does not hold. How, then, did Foucault conceptualize society? He regarded it as "separated into a plurality of power strategies, discourses, and practices, all of which intersect, succeed one another, and are distinguished by the type of discursive

formation to which they pertain and by their degree of intensity, but not by their relation to any totality” (quoted in Zaretsky 1994, p. 211). For Foucault, there is no essential self that can be liberated – either by therapy or by revolution.

The implications of poststructuralism for the study of identity are important and diverse. Some poststructuralists have taken on the project of deconstructing categories that themselves organize the social, for example the notion of the “homosexual” (Sedgwick 1990) or “woman” (Wittig 1992). Others have explored the idea that identity is an enactment or a performance. Judith Butler’s (1990) brilliant deconstruction of gender is an effort to make gender and the body unintelligible to any project of defining identity. Identity is enacted or performed, constantly renewed and asserted. Judith Halberstam (1998) asks the reader to contemplate what “masculinity” might be about if it becomes disconnected from maleness – that is, if a categorical space is created for “female” masculinity.

Consider the difference between these authors and Christopher Lasch. For Lasch, late capitalism is a period in which the possibility of attaining and sustaining personal identity is collapsing, and the narcissist has no core self. By contrast, the postmodernists celebrate fluid identities as a central characteristic of the postmodern condition (discussed in Chapter 7).

The idea of identity as something that is performed, thus something fluid and constantly shifting, may resonate with many experiences that people have, but most individuals also experience their own selfhood as having some core sameness that carries over from minute to minute, day to day, over a lifetime. The face validity of these two radically different experiences of identity and self raises a key question: how might it be possible to theorize about continuity without essentializing identity, and in a way that acknowledges the insights of the deconstructionists? One possible answer comes from considering how the self is constituted in practices of storytelling.

Constitutive narratives

Building on both the feminist work on relationality and the critique of essentialism, Somers and Gibson explore the potential of narratives to generate a different approach to understanding identity and moral culture. Narrativity offers a way of conceptualizing identity that is neither universal nor essentialist, but rather temporally and culturally specific. Somers and Gibson offer the following definition: “Narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, connected by causal emplotment” (1994, p. 59). Narratives are “constitutive”: it is through them that we come to be who we are. Through narrative we make events understandable. However, though each story is different, in the account of Somers and Gibson, narratives are largely not of our own making. Instead, people weave their own narratives in part by appropriating cultural scripts that have broader social existences, what Somers and Gibson term “social narrativity.” What is the relation between individuals and social narratives? To address this question, let us return to the issue of American individualism.

One of the criticisms about American culture in *Habits of the Heart* is that when Americans talk, individualism is their “first language.” Bellah and his colleagues contended that Americans lack resources for discussing moral issues because no meaningful concepts or rhetorical devices exist for conferring legitimacy on the making of commitments to others. Yet Americans do make commitments. Bellah and

his coauthors therefore admitted that “second languages” exist – languages of “tradition and commitment.” These languages can be found in “communities of memory”:

Communities, in the sense we are using the term, have a history – in an important sense they are constituted by their past – and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a “community of memory,” one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget its past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative.

(Bellah *et al.* 1985, p. 153)

In *Habits of the Heart*, constitutive narratives include tales of exemplary individuals, as well as stories about a community’s origin and its collective hopes and fears. In addition, community rituals commemorate the past and make it meaningful in the present. In the fullest enactment of community, members are “socially interdependent.” They “participate together in discussion and decision making, and...share certain practices which both define the community and nurture it” (1985, p. 333).

Yet Bellah and his colleagues contended that this “strong form” of community is outside the experience of the mostly urban middle-class Protestant people whom they interviewed. These people, unencumbered by commitments, live in “lifestyle enclaves” with other people like themselves: upper-middle-class singles in upscale urban apartment buildings; married people with children in suburban “neighborhoods” segregated by class and race; retirees in “residential communities” of trailers or condos segregated by class. “Communities of memory” may exist, the authors suggest, but if so they would be found in ethnic and racial communities and among some religious groups. Other people – the majority – lack a community with a constitutive memory. *Habits of the Heart* thus recognized the importance of narrative as a resource for moral culture, but concluded that it is inaccessible to most Americans.

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) has argued persuasively that moral arguments only make sense to people when the claims are embedded in a narrative framework. Narratives link actor and community, intentions and acts. Moral culture is about making sense of life, but people engage in making sense, not by referring to abstract principles and rules, but rather in contextualized interpretations that take the form of narratives.

Sara Ruddick (1989) has considered how families develop their own constitutive narratives. Her analysis suggests that families can exhibit some of the characteristics of communities of memory, as described in *Habits of the Heart*. Through storytelling, strong families provide their members with resources for transcending their selves. In the process, individuals may come to see themselves as connected (even in debt) to previous generations and believe that this obligation can be met only by preserving their heritage for future generations.

Ironically, *Habits of the Heart* has little to say about relations between parents and children. Yet Ruddick suggested that mothers use narratives when they tell stories to their children as part of the process of “nurturing a child’s developing spirit.” Through such stories, according to Ruddick, “a mother creates for herself and her children the confidence that her children have a life that is very much their own and inextricably bound up with others.” She posited three virtues of mothers’ stories: realism, compassion, and delight. With realist stories children learn trust; with compassionate stories children learn sympathy; and when their mothers’ stories show

delighted admiration for their normal accomplishments, children learn generosity (1989, pp. 98–101). In Ruddick’s account, good storytelling is something learned within communities of mothers. “Moral teaching” is accomplished through narrative. Bellah and his colleagues missed this because, even though they acknowledged the power of the local (“communities of memory”), they yearned for a cohesive American moral culture and a “national community” (1985, p. 153).

For a long time our society was held together, even in periods of rapid change, by a largely Protestant cultural center that sought to reconcile the claims of community and individuality. Rejecting both chaotic openness and authoritarian closure, representatives of this cultural center defended tradition – some version of the civic republican and biblical traditions – but not traditionalism.... That task has become increasingly difficult.

(Bellah *et al.* 1985, p. 155)

The hope of Bellah and his coauthors for a coherent American culture is at odds with their own argument regarding the thinness of cultural resources available to most Americans in relation to communities of memory. Moreover, their nostalgia for a “national culture” – an elite and largely Protestant cultural center (1985, p. 155) – also neglects an important thesis in Tocqueville’s analysis of nineteenth-century America. For him, the destructive tendencies of individualism can be countered if people participate in institutions and voluntary associations (middle-range organizations that may span several communities but do not constitute a national culture).

Finally, in their opposition between communities of memory and lifestyle enclaves Bellah and his colleagues underestimated the degree to which other kinds of communities – communities of choice – provide resources that support Americans in their moral commitments and ethical stands. Communities of choice can also develop communities of memory. In the United States, for example, religious groups may offer venues for the development and elaboration of constitutive narratives by people who create communities of memory (see, for example, Neitz 1987; Davidman 1991). In a modern pluralist society, individuals who belong to such communities usually participate because of their own *choice*. In effect, they practice “elective parochialism,” deciding to participate in a limited community (R.S. Warner 1988). The research of Neitz, Davidman, and Warner all suggests that a community is made through cultural practices – participating in the rituals, knowing the stories, and passing them on to others. Commitment to others emerges through particular activities in specific communities. Thus, what Bellah and his colleagues described as a “second language” of commitment may well amount to a local dialect, one that is not readily apparent to sociological researchers who study individuals or whole societies rather than concrete groups.

Conclusion

Bringing together narrative and identity provides a conceptualization that suggests identity is relational and processual. It “embeds the actor within relationships and stories that shift over time and space and preclude categorical stability in action” (Somers and Gibson 1994, p. 65). In contrast to the formulation of relationality in some feminist writings as a normative ideal, Somers and Gibson treat it as an analytic variable: everyone is always embedded in a relational setting – that is, “a pattern of

relationships among institutions, public narratives, and social practices. As such it is a relational matrix, similar to a social network” (1994, p. 70). A narrative-identity approach posits that people are “guided to act by the relationships in which they are embedded and the stories with which they choose to identify” (1994, p. 67) Individuals find themselves in multiple, culturally constructed stories, and they formulate and enact stories, not purely as individuals, but rather in a way that is mediated by social and relational settings in which they find themselves, and by the emergent possibilities of appropriating constitutive narratives in those settings.

A thesis of narrative identity avoids the idea that individual identity is formed in conflict with society. Indeed, the very idea of “society” as a totalizing abstraction is abandoned. In its place, Somers and Gibson examine relational settings. There is an important consequence. When identity is no longer theorized as in conflict with society, the “authentic self” is no longer restricted to the emotionally expressive self of the therapeutic model. A narrative identity approach argues that the self is not separate and autonomous; rather, it is formed in relation with others.

Narrative identity also embraces the idea that people all have multiple and incomplete identities. In Craig Calhoun’s words, “As lived, identity is always project, not settled accomplishment” (1994b, p. 27). In turn, the collective project of making meaning in these terms is an inherently moral project. Calhoun observes:

Our identities are always rooted in part in ideals and moral aspirations that we cannot realize fully. There is therefore a tension within us which can be both the locus of personal struggle and the source of an identity politics that aims not simply at the legitimation of falsely essential categories but at living up to deeper social and moral values.

(Calhoun 1994b, p. 29)

The idea of narrative identity thus provides a basis to supersede the modern theories of moral culture based in rules, which implied a conflict between “societies,” which make rules, and “individuals,” who obey or resist the rules. Instead, moral culture is to be located by way of stories and social relations. Once we begin to talk about narratives, however, we are forced to recognize that stories are constructed. Then, new critical questions arise. Whose story is being told? Who is constructing the texts? We begin to explore these questions in Chapter 3 by looking at the important issues of culture and stratification, issues of who defines the value of various cultural resources, how, and with what consequences.

Suggested readings

Amy Best’s *Prom Night: Youth, Schools and Popular Culture* (2000) gives an account of the prom as a site where teens forge identities, with attention to conflicts between the more deeply invested girls and the boys they date. Best is also attentive to differences in the meaning of proms depending on students’ race, class, and sexual orientation.

Stephen Carter, a law professor, in *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (1993), argues that Americans concerned with maintaining the separation of church and state have unnecessarily minimized the role of religion in American culture and politics. Carter believes that public discourse would be enhanced by a greater presence of religion in the public square.

42 *Culture and society*

Amitava Kumar's *Passport Photos* (2000) is an innovative presentation of the complexities of immigrant identities. Kumar brings together photography, poetry, theory, and cultural criticism, organized through the categories of a passport.

Michael Warner's edited volume *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993) exemplifies the debates about identity politics through the writings of gay, lesbian, and queer scholars.

Robert Wuthnow's *Acts of Compassion* (1991) is an interesting empirical study of individualism in the United States. It uses both survey data and interviews to investigate people's volunteering activities.

Note

- 1 Freud's analysis of female socialization has been criticized by many, including female analysts of his own day and feminists such as Horney (1967), Klein (1984), Chodorow (1978), and Flax (1989).