SAGE researchmethods

Idioculture

Other Entries

SAGE Research Methods Foundations

Idioculture has been defined as "a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction" (Fine, 1979, p. 734). This working definition helps to specify the concept of culture, one of the most complicated and contentious words in the English language, that has often been conceptualized as a stable set of meanings and ideas that is tied to large-scale social systems. When seen in light of macrocultures, powerful cultural forces are treated as characteristic of nations and societies. One may speak confidently of American culture, French culture, and Chinese culture and assume that these "collective representations" shape the behaviors of groups and individuals. But in this, culture becomes a swirling mist with no clear set of empirical referents (Ghaziani, 2009).

However, in contrast, another approach treats the idea of culture as an ongoing process, grounding the term in interaction. This approach emphasizes a micro- or meso-level analysis of culture, arguing that culture is actively constructed through interactions in local communities. In this perspective, culture is a form of group practice and a negotiated order, revealed in behavior and its material productions (Fine, 2012). This local conception of culture marks a theoretical shift in terms of defining and analyzing culture from the societal level, as it sees culture as a behavioral domain that is constructed in and indigenous to small groups. Larger spheres of culture occur through the linkage of groups, by means of media productions, institutional commitments, such as schooling, or the intersection of groups. As a result, this approach suggests that the study of culture properly belongs to the analysis of interacting groups, recognizing the presence of idiocultures that are bound to every group's shared past and prospective future. By examining group cultures as the locations for cultural creation and preservation, scholars are able to incorporate interaction as a basis for understanding collaboration in the development of shared meaning.

This entry presents the central theory of idioculture—or local culture—as a concept that helps provide a hinge between the actions of individuals and the structure of systems. It then provides examples of how the concept has proved useful in understanding cultural dynamics in a variety of social domains as well as examining methodological implications of cultural research on the meso-level of analysis.

The Idioculture Concept

The idea of idioculture was first presented in Gary Alan Fine's (1979) article on "Small Groups and Cultural Creation: The Idioculture of Little League Baseball," though recognizing that groups had cultures was not new, as in discussions of small group cultures and microcultures. Group members establish communal traditions and understandings from the very beginning of group life, and these shared experiences can be used to build a shared reality over the course of interaction. Fine has further developed the idioculture concept in a series of ethnographic studies of small groups, such as restaurant kitchens, fantasy-gaming gatherings, mushroom collecting groups, meteorological offices, high school debate teams, chess communities, and master of fine arts programs.

The concept of idioculture and related terms referring to small group cultures has been applied to a wide range of social domains. First, idioculture is evident in a number of leisure groups that feature powerful local norms and shared images. In addition, idioculture can be found in work groups and organizations. Furthermore, idioculture is significant in civic and activist groups as members participate in civic activities for their social and political goals.

As is clear from the diversity of potential research sites, idiocultures are by no means limited to any particular type of groups. Rather, they are to be found in small groups in all institutional domains. Some group cultures have more external influence than others, particularly when they involve those with legitimate power or extensive resources, such as government policy makers (Gibson, 2012) and bureaucratic organizations (Herzfeld, 1993). Group settings that are less familiar to the public may also be hubs for the emergence of robust idiocultures—illustrations range from close-knit military units to Middle Eastern terrorist cells.

Although idiocultures are prevalent at the group level, they are not established randomly. The creation of idiocultures involves a dynamic process of boundary negotiations and a system of sensemaking among group members. As a result, this requires a sociological analysis of how local life is organized and how a sense of group identity is established. Participants build meanings that are understood and shared by other members and negotiate group cultures in interaction. In effect, this constitutes local collective memory. These processes filter or incorporate potential cultural elements that will eventually become part of a set of shared understandings.

To achieve this, a cultural element has to be known, usable, functional, appropriate, and triggered (Fine, 1979; 2012). The *known* culture of the group refers to the background culture that members share and access as a stable base for ongoing interaction. The pools of background knowledge operate as extensive institutional influences, which shape the local scene and link it to external cultural themes. A second criterion is that an item must be *usable*, meaning that it must be suitable for the local context and fit the moral standards of the group. An item might be known by members but not necessarily be shared publicly, given its sacred or deviant nature that stands beyond normative boundaries. To be incorporated in a group's idioculture, an item must also be *functional*. That is, it must meet the instrumental goals that group members desire. Cultural elements that are irrelevant to the needs of group members are less likely to be included as part of a group's idioculture. In addition, an item has to be *appropriate* in order to survive the filtering process. The appropriate culture supports the established status system and does not challenge the group's social structure. Most critically, an item must be *triggered* by the immediate behavior of the group. Some event must occur that sparks the cultural tradition. There is an extensive pool of potential cultural elements that meet the first four criteria, but the triggering mechanism explains why only a few items eventually become part of a group's idioculture. These five elements together constitute the cultural development process, generating the content of a group's idioculture.

The Sociology of Localism

The focus of this microsociological approach of culture is to understand how group-based local scenes create social order, arguing for a *sociology of localism*. Instead of treating culture as timeless or seeing cultural products as being divorced from social actors, a sociology of localism emphasizes that the creation of group culture is tied to members' recognition of shared pasts and imagined futures. Traditions within a group are situated in time and, as a result, provide stable expectations among participants for ongoing interaction and group cohesion. As a result, traditions unite groups, and idiocultures inevitably have a temporal dimension.

The local can be seen as both a stage and a lens. As a stage, the local is the locus where social order is produced. It draws sociologists' attention to features of arenas, relations, and shared pasts that motivate members' participation. As a lens, sociologists see through the local and conceptualize action as an interpretive mechanism, through which meaning can be treated as consequential within a group. For a local sociology, interaction provides the basis of culture, and local cultures, in turn, shape the content of social relations. In this view, as a form of group practice, culture is tied to the meso-level of analysis, mobilized by members to achieve individual or collective ends.

By emphasizing the local conditions in which shared meaning is generated, this approach proposes general sociological principles. This is evident in Michael Farrell's (2001) *Collaborative Circles*, which presents the temporal stages of culture-producing groups, such as the French Impressionists, the Fugitive poets, and the Freudian circle. According to this theory, a collaborative circle undergoes steps of formation, rebellion, production, collective action, disintegration, and nostalgic reintegration, with changes in the group structure, culture, and individual members that characterize each stage. In addition to the field of arts, the concept of collaborative circles is further examined in leisure (Corte, 2013) and sciences (Parker & Hackett, 2012), addressing how resources and emotions shape a group's development and its participants.

Similarly, studies emphasizing the features of local process show that idioculture is integral to identity and cohesion. The creation of a group's microculture depends on ongoing performances that organize and routinize interaction, creating a group style that comprises boundaries, bonds, and speech norms (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003). Particular group styles and customs shape the contours of civic life and action (Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014) and the narrative dimension of civic organization (Polletta, 2002). As Andrew Perrin (2005) suggests, the group contexts shape the structure and logic of political discussions, constituting varying forms of political microcultures that give rise to civic organizations. In turn, different group structures may produce distinctive "microsocial orders" (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2008).

Empirical studies in this line have further extended the theorization of microcultures. Scholars have shown that ongoing local interactions contribute to the formation of a shared space and collective identity and help participants manage their spoiled group identities. The communication of aesthetic judgments in face-to-face interaction powerfully facilitates the process of group identification, cultivating a "community sense" in the context of developing a shared sense of aesthetic practice (Wohl, 2015). However, an idioculture also has its

contested nature, negotiated through local contention between rival cliques and power centers. Local contexts may shape different gender relations and influence cultural reception and tastes among group members. Moreover, the meaning of a local scene evolves through the course of group interaction, affecting participants' affiliation and the group's cohesion.

Idioculture as a Structuring Device

This model of microcultures as structuring devices argues that social order is generated through the development of shared traditions and understandings. As Randall Collins argues, collective attention, a form of entrainment, constitutes a microfoundation for macrosociology. Individuals negotiate social coalitions in interaction ritual chains, through which group membership is created. Every encounter is based on microresources participants acquire from previous encounters. Groups build on each other through the social relations that cross social boundaries, creating expansive structures through their network linkages. "The aggregate of situations can be regarded as a market for interaction rituals" (Collins, 2004, p. xiii), and these microinteractional markets eventually constitute macropatterns: the network structures that constitute society. In this view, aggregate changes at the microlevel have the power to produce large-scale changes in social structure.

Collins's emphasis on local cultures echoes the process James Scott calls *mētis*—that is, a wide array of local, practical knowledge from everyday experience that helps individuals understand and respond to the constantly changing realities that they face individually and collectively. By advocating "the art of locality," Scott is skeptical of large-scale social engineering and formal schemes initiated by the state. Scott (1998) writes, "Mētis resists simplification into deductive principles which can successfully be transmitted through book learning, because the environments in which it is exercised are so complex and non-repeatable that formal procedures of rational decision making are impossible to apply" (p. 316).

Borrowing Jeffrey Goldfarb's (2006) powerful imagery, focusing on the power of local cultures and bounded communities constitutes the sociology of small things. This perspective captures the *place* of action, addressing the significance of microcultural space in producing consequential political realities. The presence of politics on the microlevel recognizes that civic participation depends on joint action (Mische, 2007; Lichterman & Eliasoph, 2014). Intimate spaces are where discussions about sensitive topics can readily take place, which generate political power and, in the extreme, can lead to key turning points of history. In this regard, Goldfarb suggests that the kitchen table is a central symbol in the resistance against Eastern European authoritarianism that ultimately led to the dismantling of the Soviet bloc. Goldfarb does not suggest that all mundane cultures must be theorized, but, rather, the local environment under which they are produced provides a crucial stage for developing allegiance and shared perspectives that motivate collective action. Similar discussions take place in small places such as bookstores, salons, and clubs, shaping public meetings, and gatherings (Emirbayer & Sheller, 1998; Habermas, 1991). Situated in microcultural spaces, participants assume that others share a referential past, emotional contours, and a sense of belonging, which

encourage present talk.

One must distinguish between an approach that focuses on established and recognized group cultures and ephemeral micropublics (what have been usefully named *Goffman publics*, recognizing the ordered relations among strangers; Ikegami, 2000). Goffman publics challenge researchers to understand how broader cultures permit the establishment of orderly interaction among strangers. That these stranger cultures are often fragile suggests that self-referential groups have advantages in establishing a stable social order through their shared expectations and a commitment to local traditions. In this way, a local sociology is related to, but is distinct from, the orderliness of interaction among distant publics (Goffman, 1983). Although both approaches build on the existence of interaction ritual, *dramatism*, which focuses on free-floating and untethered interaction, is distinct from *localism*, which asserts that action is responsive to the salience of the group and emphasizing the stability of group life through the salience of norms and expectations. In this perspective, *practices*—that is, actions that are recognized through the existence of local cultures—are central. Seeing groups as publics argues that every continuing group constitutes a local version of society. Each local scene is an instance of the larger culture, with style, images, and rules defining how interaction is to be transacted (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003).

Methodological Implications

Although researchers might not always engage the full processes of idiocultural creation, the methodological implication of this approach is to emphasize the significance of a meso-level of analysis. Given that idiocultures are fundamentally local, the study of idiocultures has to be grounded at the group level. On one hand, idiocultures suggest that small groups generate a self-reflexive basis for the interaction order, under which socialization, affiliation, and change take place. On the other hand, participants act in concert and create collective identities, constituting what Fine (2012) calls *tiny publics*, small cultures of shared interest, which provide the basis for a robust civil society. In other words, microcultures are both the cause and the effects of group engagement. Standing at the junction of the interactional and institutional, this approach considers the dimensions of both individuals and institutions, revealing forms of cohesion and disaffiliation. As a result, this group-based approach allows researchers to extend beyond the local and link individuals to larger social systems to which they also belong, a central feature of most sociological analysis. In doing so, it escapes the traditional black box that separates micro- and macrointerpretations.

The advantage of the meso-level of analysis is clearly embodied in Lichterman's (2012) study of religion in public action. Building on the conception of group style that grounds macrolevel collective representations in everyday interaction, the author employs a cultural-interactionist model to examine religious communication and argues that group cultures shape religious expression in public settings. While researchers typically see religion as a stable institution, a group-level approach allows for the considerations of the interplay between macrocultural influences and nonreligious culture over time. Religious experience and articulation in public are scene-specific, converged on a group style.

Scholars have suggested that a meso-analysis of group interaction is also beneficial to organizational studies, emphasizing inhabited institutionalism, the perspective that suggests that organizational structures result from the agentic choices of participants in creating a normative order (Hallett, 2010). Vibrant idiocultures shape organizational life, through which colleagues share embedded meanings, manifested in practices, that shape ongoing organizational activity and outcomes. By examining how colleagues collaborate and challenge one another within the context of interaction orders, this approach emphasizes the local production of structure and knowledge. Researchers can build upon a meso-level of analysis to explore how microsocial orders are produced among coworkers who are at the same time embedded in larger social contexts. Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014) argue that patterned scene styles shape different civic action in complex organizations, refuting a unitary understanding of how voluntary associations influence civic participants.

In addition to the value of a group-level approach in its own terms, studying the development of idiocultures requires detailed ethnographic data collected by means of labor-intensive fieldwork. To this end, Fine (2003) proposes a "peopled ethnography," a methodological perspective based on the close observation of an interacting group, incorporating both theoretical analysis and ethnographic detail. This approach differs from other ethnographic approaches that emphasize descriptive narrative or conceptual theory. In contrast, this perspective grounds the understanding of the environment in a set of detailed vignettes documented and manifested in field notes and interviews through scholar's fieldwork, from which the researcher attempts to generalize the findings to other settings that have elements in common, producing a grounded theory based on the constant comparative method.

There are multiple microsociological approaches to understand how social systems are organized through face-to-face interaction, and each one suggests different methodological and theoretical choices. Emphasizing group cultures—idiocultures—emphasizes the value of watching closely, being present, responding sympathetically, and relying on careful and conscientious note-taking. This approach is based on the belief that participants in a social scene rely on their shared understanding and common experiences and that they can use these understandings and experiences to develop an ongoing and self-referential group culture. It is this belief that permits the suggestion that, while societies and global systems matter, sociology needs to begin on the local level. It is here that meanings develop and social relations are grounded.

Further Readings

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