

# Culture, Change, and Cultural Lag: A Commentary and a Challenge

By

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William F. Ogburn (1886-1959) introduced the concept of cultural lag in his book, *Social Change with Respect to Culture and Original Nature*, published in 1922. A staunch advocate of using objective data as the basis for research conclusions, Ogburn played many important roles during his life.

Howard Odum (1951: 147-152), a contemporary of Ogburn's, composed a detailed biography of Ogburn's work and accomplishments. Ogburn earned his M. A. and Ph.D. degrees in sociology from Columbia University (in 1909 and 1912 respectively). After college, he taught high-school age students and later, students at the college level. During his career, Ogburn was also an extraordinarily prolific author of books, articles, reviews, brochures, pamphlets, and book chapters in sociology as well as across disciplinary boundaries.

Among his non-academic roles, Ogburn served as a president of the American Statistical Association and as editor of its journal. He was the first sociologist to be president of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and to chair the SSRC's Problems and Policy Committee. In 1918-19, during World War I, Ogburn served as examiner and head of the Cost of Living Department for the National War Labor Board and as a special agent for the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. He was an extraordinarily prolific author of books, articles, reviews, brochures, pamphlets, and book chapters in sociology as well as across disciplinary boundaries. An important indicator of Ogburn's recognition and esteem among American sociologists was his being chosen, in 1929, as the 19th President of the American Sociological Society (now known as The American Sociological Association).

## About Culture, Change, and Cultural Lag

As Ogburn recognized, culture is a central concept not only to the field of anthropology but also in sociology. Within the first several weeks of the course,

students in Introductory Sociology learn about the meaning and complexities of culture. For example, they learn that culture, described in simple terms as the way of life of a society, consists of both *material* (visible) and *non-material* (invisible) aspects. They learn that the visible items that people produce such as books, tools, inventions, art forms, movies, television programs, and video games are influenced by and, in turn, influence invisible aspects like ideas, theories, values, beliefs, and knowledge.

Therefore, culture may be aptly compared to an iceberg or a large tree with deep roots. Both images convey that some aspects/components of culture such as behavior are visible and other aspects including beliefs, values, and assumptions are invisible or hidden. An iceberg is a lot larger than the part we see above the surface. Similarly, when we look at a tree, we focus on its branches and leaves, or lack thereof, not on its roots. Typically, a tree's deepest roots tend to be hidden from view.

A deeper examination of the concept of culture reveals that it has a number of other characteristics: Culture is *shared* and *passed on* through the process of socialization. In a complex, heterogeneous society like the U. S., the *dominant culture* is shared and passed on by at least the majority of a society's members through instruction and imitation. In heterogeneous societies *sub-cultures* and *counter-cultures* that shape the behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs of some smaller segments of the population are also typically present.

The elements that comprise a culture are *interdependent*, *patterned*, and *structured*-- that is, they fit together in a meaningful way. Therefore, when one area of a culture changes, change usually occurs in another/others, although not necessarily at the same time. This time gap captures the idea of cultural lag; that is, in the process of change, material aspects

often change first and in an out-of-sync way with non-material aspects. Semi- and fully-autonomous vehicles offer a good example. Some of these vehicles are already, or will be, available starting in 2019. However, the attitudes--especially of older drivers/passengers as compared to younger ones, may not be in sync with this technological change when these vehicles become available in large numbers. Equally important is that current federal and state motor vehicle laws will become obsolete in regulating these vehicles. Thus, creating new laws will be necessary.

Culture provides a *design for living* which includes human solutions to the basic physical problems and abstract concerns that human beings across the globe encounter. Humans provide for the continuity of their society by developing the same range of *social institutions* (e.g., some form(s) of family, an educational system, a political system, an economy, religion(s), and a health care delivery system. The forms which these social institutions take, however, may vary considerably from one society to another as well as over time.

As stated earlier, an important characteristic of culture is that it *changes*. Specialists in the field of social change have developed a framework for analyzing the complexities of change. After identifying the phenomenon of interest (the *what*), they examine four other aspects of change: 1) **level** (*where* in the social system the change is taking place-- macro vs. micro level); 2) **duration** (*length of time* a particular change lasts after it has been accepted (e.g., short- vs. long-term); 3) **magnitude** (how *small* or *large* the change is-- incremental/a modest alteration vs. comprehensive/sweeping/structural alterations); and 4) **rate** (*speed* and *pattern* of the change). The nature and scope of the alteration/change depends on the type society in which the culture exists (e.g., more complex, heterogeneous vs. simpler, more homogeneous society).

Although cultural change is not the same as social change, the two bear a reciprocal-- that is, a mutual cause and effect, relationship to each other. Cultural changes can lead to social changes and vice versa. For example, the invention and availability of the automobile, a cultural product, affected social changes including residential patterns in cities, the settlement of the suburbs, recreational patterns of families, and the dating practices of young people.

Ogburn's keen observations of American society of his time led him to introduce the classic concept of cultural lag into the vocabulary of sociology and into the study of social and cultural change. He proposed that most social changes in a modern society arise from alterations in material culture. He used the term cultural lag to point out that the non-material aspects of culture like values, attitudes, beliefs, theories, and philosophies (the things we *cannot see*) tend to resist change and/or to change at a much slower pace than does material culture. Cultural lag results when people, groups, organizations and social structures experience problems in mastering the challenges created by this lag (gap, or "period of maladjustment") that occurs between material and non-material culture.

### Commentary and a Challenge

At the time of Ogburn's death in 1959, the U. S. was a very different country than it is today. During the nearly six decades that have passed since then, this country has experienced significant social and cultural changes. In looking at the U. S. *then* and *now*, we see that the country has undergone an economic and social transformation from being a primarily agricultural to an industrial to a post-industrial society. In 1956, for the first time, white-collar workers outnumbered blue-collar workers, heralding the U. S.'s transition to a service economy where information has become a highly-valued commodity. The country has also grown in geographical boundaries through the addition of Alaska and Hawaii as the 49th and 50th states, in the size of the population as well as in its racial and ethnic composition. Changes in the ethnic and racial composition of a society are social changes which impact on cultural changes in values, customs, beliefs, musical preferences, and technological developments, for example. Over time, social class differences in the U. S. have gotten more extreme especially in regard to the accumulation of wealth. The Wars on Poverty and against Drugs have both failed. Like it or not, newer immigrants have become important contributors to the growth in population size and its diversity. The U. S. population has been described as changing its complexion (e.g., becoming more brown). Although there are still differences based on race, gender, and social class, on average, people in the U. S. are becoming older and living longer.

One wonders if Ogburn could have imagined the fast pace of change that would take place in the U. S. in the

decades after his death and some of the transformations that would be brought about by technological changes alone. Although coined 96 years ago, cultural lag remains a useful concept in understanding social and cultural changes and periods of maladjustments in post-modern societies including the United States. However, cultural lag and its consequences appear to be neglected areas of sociological study and publication.

When the Editorial Board of *Sociology between the Gaps* chose the theme of cultural lag and suggested topics of potential interest for **SBG3**, we had hoped that this theme would produce many submissions and spur lively discourse on them. We had also hoped that some of the submissions would suggest answers to the problems and conflicts that cultural lags produce in contemporary social institutions and speculate on how problems and conflicts resulting from cultural lag might be prevented or solved.

In the description for this volume, we included a list of possible topics about which potential contributors could write. These topics included ways to prepare human beings to accept transformative innovations more smoothly and, thus, reduce the disruptive experience of cultural lag; using robots not only to do factory work but also in offices and as caretakers to the elderly and infirm; exploring the advent, likely use, and consequences of autonomous (self-driving) cars; analyses of the effects of e-books and digital learning tools for reading and education; exploring how individuals who are not conversant in the digital technologies available today navigate and live in an increasingly digital world; and analyses of whether and how the spread of digital communication, including social media, enhances or diminishes the quality of people's lives. We listed only some of the possibilities.

**SBG4** and future volumes will offer contributors the opportunity to continue to send in submissions on the theme of cultural lag as well as on one of the other themes addressed in **SBG1** (on adoption) and **SBG2** (on livable communities). Potential contributors interested in cultural lag may choose to write about one of the topical areas listed in the description for **SBG3** or another topic related to cultural lag. The Editorial Board of **SBG** remains interested in receiving submissions on other topics viewed by the author(s) as neglected and/or forgotten in mainstream sociology journals.

The success and longevity of any journal depends largely on the reach of its social network as well as on the number and quality of submissions it receives and accepts for publication. My challenge to readers is to be part of **SBG's** future success by sending in a submission to **SBG4** and to spread the word to others about authoring submissions to **SBG**.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Odum, Howard W. (1951). *American Sociology: The Story of Sociology in the United States through 1950*. London: Greenwood Press: pages 147-152.

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