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

By

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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 that 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 postmodern 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**


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