

Why is Culture
Theory, and
Demography Not?



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Why is Culture Theory, and Demography Not?
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The prompt for this panel that Jordanna Matlon and Dan Hirschman provided read, in part:

"We would like to use the after-panel to initiate a conversation as to why some areas are considered 'theory' while others stand at the discipline's margins, and similarly why some empirical work seem to be considered 'more theoretical' than other work."

As any self-respecting demographer would, I began by searching for data. In particular, I sought out to identify which areas or subfields are considered "more theoretical" within sociology. I identified four separate sources of data, two collected in 2004 and two that I collected myself in preparation for this panel. To foreshadow my results, I found a surprising amount of consensus concerning which subfields emerge as the most centrally "theoretical."

I started with an essay written by Michele Lamont and published in the newsletter of the American Sociological Association's theory section 10 years ago, while she was serving as section chair. [1] Lamont began by collecting data from the American Sociological Association on which sections had the highest overlap in membership with the theory section. At the time, the three sections that rose to the top in this count were: culture, followed by comparative historical sociology, and then political sociology. [2] The essay also presents the results of an email survey of the top ten most highly ranked sociology departments at the time, in which Lamont asked faculty currently teaching theory in each department to identify which professors had taught any theory courses in recent years. Results of this survey reveal that the prime subfield-identity of theory teachers in these

top departments were – again – cultural sociologists, then comparative historical sociologists, then political sociologists.

In an attempt to update and expand these findings, now a decade old, I turned to two additional sources. First, I looked at articles published in the journal *Sociological Theory* in the past year (August 2013-August 2014) and, second, examined presentations in the main panels of the Junior Theorists Symposium during the past three years (2012-2014). For each source, I looked at each author's research interests on their websites and cvs, and attempted to identify the sociological subfields that best corresponded to these stated research interests. My findings closely corroborate those of Lamont 10 years ago: sociology of culture was by far the most well-represented of the subfields, followed by comparative historical sociology and political sociology.

Why are these results so consistent? Indeed, what leads some fields to be considered “more theoretical” than others?

I come to this topic as a junior scholar trained in two subfields that lie at opposite ends of this spectrum – culture, the preeminent “theory satellite,” and demography, which has a reputation of being decidedly *atheoretical*. While culture was far ahead of other subfields in all four data points I just described, I realized with some dismay that not a single theory teacher at a top ten university, contributor to the *Sociological Theory* last year, or recent participant in the JTS claims the intellectual identity of demographer. Below, I speculate on why culture is at the center of sociological theory, while demography lies at – or beyond – theory's margins.

Perhaps culture is considered more theoretical because of the methods that scholars use to study it. Do different methods require a different type of engagement with sociological theory? Of course. The sociology of culture contains more methodological diversity than many other subfields that are not considered as central to sociological theory. While outsiders might not know it, demography also boasts considerable methodological pluralism – many of the most famous and influential demographic studies used archival sources, interviews, and ethnography, and scholars continue to draw on qualitative methods and mixed methods approaches in research published in the top journals in demography. [3] Returning to the three “theory satellite” subfields described above, there is more methodological differentiation than overlap in terms of typical methods used in culture, comparative historical sociology, and political sociology. So it doesn’t seem likely that there is something inherent in the methods used that would produce the striking consistency of results produced above.

Another possible explanation is that culture deals with bigger, more complex or somehow more fundamental ideas, thicker concepts that rest on multiple underlying theoretical claims. Surely culture deals with big and important ideas: identity, symbolic boundaries, moral frameworks, taste. Yet this explanation seems somehow tautological. And certainly demography engages with core theoretical issues as well. *Can actions be meaningfully understood as the result of individuals’ conscious intentions and plans?* This question is central to the study of fertility intentions, particularly in the work of Caroline Bledsoe, Phil Morgan, and Jennifer Johnson-Hanks. *How do the different ways that time impacts experiences*

and behaviors intersect with each other? This quandary, often referred to as the age period cohort problem, has long been fundamental to demographic theorizing and has recently begun to be recognized as important in shaping other social processes. Scholars who have written about this issue in theoretically generative ways include Glenn Elder, Norman Ryder, and Jane Menken. *Are there social phenomena that can only be understood in the aggregate, and thus should not be approached through collections of individual accounts?* Again, this question is central to demographic analysis, beginning with the work of Quetelet and continuing in the research of Ron Lee, John Knodel, and Etienne van de Walle, and has myriad implications for other social processes.

I want to suggest an alternative explanation, which has less to do with the subject matter and more to do with the styles of scholarly production. Simply put, I want to propose that all subfields lie on a spectrum from “conceptual crystallization” to “analytic contestation,” and that their position along this spectrum is partially a product of historical developments and current configurations of the intellectual social field. [4]

What do I mean by these terms, conceptual crystallization versus analytic contestation? As for crystallization, new and influential contributions might refine the methods used, develop a more precise strategy of identification, or collect better or more current data, but the basic fact construction system – the what, where, and how – are generally less debated within the empirical center of the subfield.

On the contested end, nothing is agreed upon by scholars. At the most extreme end of this spectrum,

there may be a general mistrust of attempts to collect empirical data to analyze social phenomena. Can we believe people's accounts of their own social world? Is there any generalizable truth to be gleaned?

Sociology of culture lies somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. As a relatively new subfield, developed in the 1980s, culture is still engaged in the project of defining its primary object of study. Any graduate course in culture will likely spend the first few sessions engaged with these fundamental questions: what do we mean by culture? How should it be measured? Where should scholars turn to study culture? These questions are openly debated within the subfield of the sociology of culture.

As a result of this "unsettled" nature, sociologists of culture must articulate explicit theoretical arguments not only at the moment of interpreting their research findings and discussing the implications of their results, but also in defense of their case, their question, and their analytic tools. Why might one turn to art auctions or beauty pageants to investigate culture? Why focus on people's descriptions of whom they see as similar or different from them, or on people's accounts of their marriage, as a way of understanding cultural meanings? Why might one choose to use the concept of cultural repertoires and not moral vocabularies?

These types of questions undergird all empirical research in sociology and yet they are more contested from within, and thus explicitly discussed, in the sociology of culture relative to more crystallized fields. What is important here is that because the sociology of culture is less crystallized, most empirical contributions must also

stake theoretical claims, must state their positions vis-à-vis debates in the field. This process of contestation, of debate and disagreement over what to study, where, and how, thus yields theorizing.

On the other hand, the what, how, and why of demographic analysis are considerably more broadly agreed upon by scholars in demography. This is not to say that there is not still considerable theoretical debate and innovation within demography – but rather that there is a theoretical architecture that is generally accepted by most scholars as sufficient for guiding empirical investigations, and thus most empirical papers do not enter into these theoretical debates.

Again, the intellectual history and current configuration of the field helps to explain this conceptual crystallization of demography. Demographic analysis was carried out by academic researchers long before the formation of sociology and other social science disciplines in the late 19th century. As a result, today demographers are distributed widely across the social sciences. The theoretical innovation within demography thus most often takes place in separate spaces and communities from most empirical investigations. Specifically, theoretical debates are primarily centered in anthropological demography and formal demography, and so often take place in academic disciplines far from sociology.

The data I summarized at the beginning reveal a short list of sociological subfields that consistently rise to the top of discussions in mainstream sociological theory – sociology of culture is the loudest voice, followed by comparative historical sociology and political sociology. Yet I think we can agree that many subfields which,

like demography, are located more at the margins of sociological theory today - including stratification and the sociology of education - do engage in theoretically thick and important conceptual phenomena.

I have argued that what makes sociology of culture more central to mainstream sociological theory is this process of analytic contestation. If these claims are true, then one way to move other subfields towards the center of sociological theory might be to more openly consider the theoretical assumptions and claims that undergird research endeavors, to make empirical research more theoretically transparent, and to reconsider whether theories that have become crystallized should be reassessed.

[1] Lamont's 2004 piece in *Perspectives* was called "The Theory Section and Theory Satellites".

[2] Note that these numbers reflect differences in the size of various sections as well as substantive overlap with sociology of theory.

[3] For example, see Caroline Bledsoe and Fatoumatta Banja's *Contingent Lives: Fertility, Time, and Aging in West Africa*; John Hajnal's "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective"; Eugene Hammel and Peter Laslett's "Comparing Household Structure Over Time and Between Cultures"; Arland Thornton's *Reading History Sideways: The Fallacy and Enduring Impact of the Developmental Paradigm on Family Life*; and Susan Cotts Watkins, "From Local to National Communities: The Transformation of Demographic Regimes in Western Europe, 1870-1960".

[4] My argument about crystallization versus contestation of intellectual fields is inspired by Elizabeth Armstrong's concept of crystallization versus struggle in social movement fields in "From Struggle to Settlement", though my use of the term contestation refers less to external ruptures and political conflict, as in Armstrong's case, and more to internal intellectual debates and contests for legitimacy.

*This essay is drawn from remarks delivered at
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