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Putting Culture Back in Context:
A Context Dependent Model of How Cultural Inputs,
Toolkits, and Meanings Influence Action

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In this article I outline a new framework for the sociological study of culture that relates three fundamental facets of human culture (inputs, toolkits, and meanings) to each other and suggests the contingencies under which each can influence action. Sociological theories of culture typically pitch these facets as opposing perspectives of "what culture is." I argue that while each perspective answers a necessary part of the theoretical puzzle linking culture and action, existing models are not sufficient as standalone answers. Even the more theoretically nuanced attempts at integrating multiple elements of culture tend to argue that one particular aspect of culture provides the most powerful link to action a priori. The empirical inadequacies of each perspective as a stand-alone theory of "how culture affects action" are accounted for by the failure of theorists from each perspective to fully recognize and integrate the other elements of culture, as well as the concrete contingencies that give them analytic power, into their models. I argue that inputs, toolkits, and meanings are fundamental, complementary, and necessarily intertwined elements of culture. Further, which of these elements has the strongest influence on action is a function of social context. I use examples from both my own research on health behaviors and the empirical works of other scholars to propose a context dependent model of how and under what conditions each element of culture can affect both action and outcomes. Specifically, I show how varying levels of social stability, inequality, codification, and institutional involvement affect the relative influence of each aspect of culture.

Introduction

"There is no way out of the game of culture…" Pierre Bourdieu

During the last half-century, competing understandings of culture and how it affects individual and collective action have rapidly risen and withered in modern social science disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and political science (Ortner 1984, Sewell 1999). The concept of culture as the totality of human productive and creative output, like the folk understanding of culture as artistic production, has ceased to be a major fixture in contemporary inquiry and practice (Sewell 1999). Three understandings of culture, however, are still frequently recognized, measured, examined, and heatedly debated in contemporary social science: culture as a set of inputs (socially produced motivations or values), culture as toolkits (repertoires of deployable skills and justifications), and culture as shared meanings (collectively available categories and understandings). Sociological theories linking culture to human action typically pitch these facets as opposing perspectives of "what culture is." Even the more nuanced attempts to integrate multiple elements of culture into holistic models generally argue that one particular aspect of culture provides the most powerful link to action a priori (e.g. Swidler 2000, Vaisey 2009). I argue that inputs, toolkits, and meanings are fundamental, complementary, and necessarily intertwined elements of culture. Further, which of these elements has the strongest influence on action is a function of social context. The empirical inadequacies of each as a standalone theory of "how culture affects action" are accounted for by the failure of theorists from each perspective to fully recognize and integrate the other elements of culture, and the concrete contingencies that give them analytic power, into their theories. Instead of arguing that one element of culture rules over others a priori and provides the definitive link to action in all circumstances, I use prior empirical works to propose a model of how

and under what circumstances each element of culture can affect both action and outcomes. Specifically, I show how levels of social stability, inequality, codification, and institutional involvement, affect the relative power of each element of culture.

This is not an article that argues for the power of culture, relative to structure or agency, as an explanatory concept in social science. Along with other theorists, I hold that "structure" (the humanly produced social contexts and configurations that enable and constrain action), "culture" (inputs, toolkits, and meanings), and "agency" (meaningful and volitional human action) are mutually constitutive (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Giddens 1984, Sewell 1992). Each one is dependent on the others, and together they form fundamental and inexorably intertwined elements of the social world. I proceed under the assumption that these three elements of the social world form the scaffolding on which all history and societies are built, even though their content, forms, coherence, and relative influence on action vary by social and historical context. The goal of this article is much more modest than attempting to solve the Gordian knot of modeling the relationship between these conceptual behemoths. In it, I aim only to relate various elements of culture to one another, show that they are complementary rather than in competition, and suggest the contingencies under which each element is most likely to influence action in concrete social contexts.

To this end, I proceed as follows: In section I, I briefly discuss three competing models of culture as well as a few of the best previous attempts to reconcile them. In section II, I outline a context dependent theory of culture in action. I use empirical examples, from both my own work and that of other scholars, to construct a set of formal hypotheses and propositions that suggest when and how each element of culture is likely to affect action and influence outcomes. Finally, in section III I provide a brief conclusion summarizing and reaffirming the value of a context dependent model of culture in action for research and praxis.

I. Competing Models of Culture

Culture as Inputs: Socially Produced Motivations, Orientations, and Values

One common sociological model conceptualizes culture as a socially produced set of inputs that direct action towards particular ends. In this frame, culture affects action by providing people with *motivations* (Vaisey 2009), *orientations* towards the world (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Geertz [1977] 2000), or *values* (Weber 1946). Culture affects action by providing the ends people value and pursue. I use the term *input* to refer to all three of these concepts. Although the corresponding models vary in non-trivial ways, in each case culture provides an attribution of what is worth pursuing and worth noticing in the world, of what is right and what is wrong. These attributions affect or determine how individuals act.[1] In these models, cultural attributions provide the starting point or input for all chains of human action. Diagram 1 (below) provides a brief schematic:

Diagram 1: Culture as Inputs

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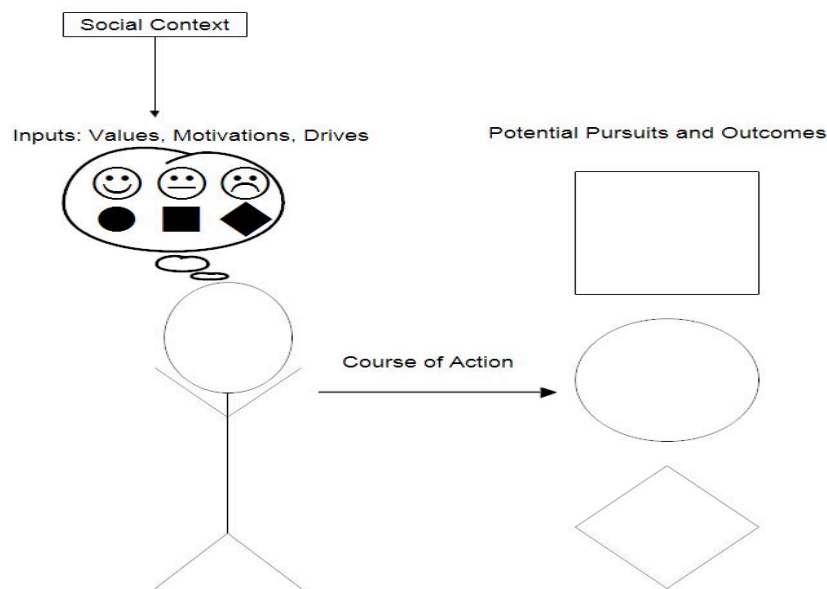
[1] In section II, I will discuss the different mechanisms and nuances by which motivations, orientations, and values influence action. The point here is simply to indicate that all three influence behavior by providing a system of attributions.

Early proponents of this strand of cultural theorizing, such as Max Weber (1946) and Talcott Parsons (1937), argued that culture should be seen as coherent systems of values. More recent theorists have argued that culture should be understood in part as looser amalgams of socially inculcated moods, motivations, dispositions, or cognitive orientations that point people towards particular ends (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Geertz [1977] 2000, Vaisey 2009). Any reasonable theory of culture's influence on action requires some system of socially influenced attributions in order to understand why individuals favor some paths rather than others. This is particularly true when we seek to understand the divergent choices individuals make in similar circumstances, with similar resources, as well as in decisions that are understood to reside in the realm of "tastes." Theories that conceptualize culture as a set of *inputs* provide the necessary material for a system of attributions necessary to make this link to action.

Still, understandings of culture as a set of *inputs* are deeply problematic as standalone models of culture's influence on action. In its worst forms, early notions of culture as a set of *values* not only points people towards notions of what is worth pursuing, but also places socially available values as an immutable driving force, describes people as cultural dupes who internalize and act out scripts, and casts behavior as pre-determined rather than agentic (Swidler 1986). Further, scholars have correctly suggested that explanations using culture as a set of values cannot explain many of the outcomes they purport to, since what people want cannot always adequately explain how they act (Valentine 1967, Swidler 1986). Later models of culture as a set of inputs, many of which focus on dispositions and orientations (i.e. Bourdieu's understanding of habitus), are often so tightly wound up with pre-existing social structures that they lose any causal power and function only as a mechanism through which the existing structures, and the social systems they form, reproduce themselves (Sewell 1992). The role of objective agency is elusive. These shortcomings of *input* based models of culture can be remedied by
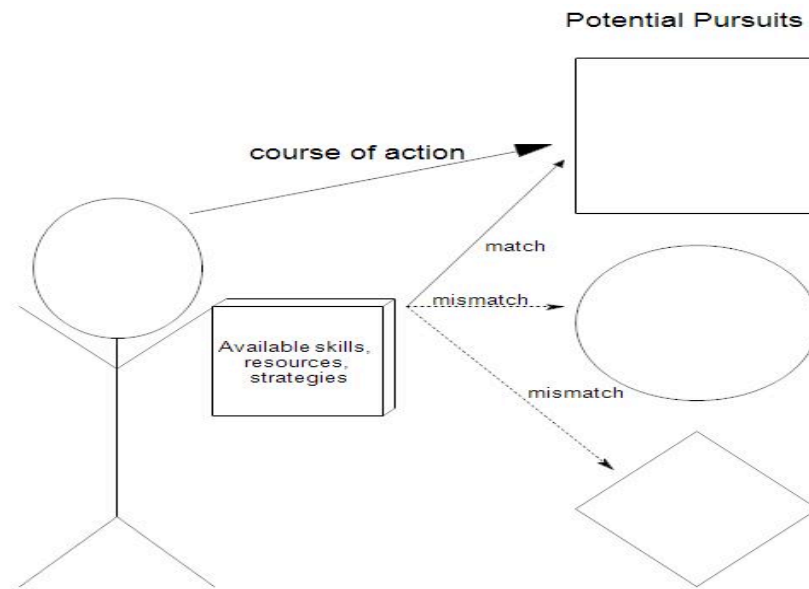
adequately re-integrating key elements of those theories that recognize culture as collectively available tools and systems of meanings.

Culture as a Toolkit: Skills and Justifications

There is a second model of culture that has become increasingly popular during the past three decades. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that culture should not just be seen as the attitudes, beliefs, or values "in people's heads," but rather a set of collectively available skills and justifications that human beings deploy in their daily lives (Swidler 1986, 2000). The manner in which they do so depends on their socially patterned capacities to pursue particular "strategies of action," or general ways of connecting actions together over time. In this viewpoint, culture "has an independent causal role because it shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed," (Swidler 1986: 277) rather than providing orienting motivations (Geertz [1977] 2000) or values (Parsons 1951). Culture can be understood as a repertoire or resource, which like other forms of wealth and privilege, is distributed unequally across different populations in stratified societies (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Swidler 2000). In this model, *culture affects action primarily by determining which lines of action are plausible*. Lacking access to the appropriate cultural tools to achieve particular ends influences potential behaviors and outcomes irrespective of what people want or notice in the world. Diagram 2 (below) provides a brief schematic.

Diagram 2: Culture as a Toolkit

Potential Pursuits

course of action

match

mismatch

mismatch

Available skills, resources, strategies

This model makes several key advances in linking culture to action: (1) It shows how cultural meanings and actions can be strategically deployed by people, even if they do not believe in them.[2] (2) It places cultural knowledge and adeptness as an individual variable that is socially distributed along the lines of systems of stratification. (3) This perspective also suggests how people can use organizing cultural principles to construct specific strategies of action they pursue in response to the institutional dilemmas they face in daily life. (4) Finally, it shows that cultural coherence can result from consistencies in the dilemmas people face, rather than a formal underlying logic. While related notions of culture as practices, tools, and capacities have assumed an almost hegemonic position in disciplines such as sociology, education, and anthropology (Alexander and Smith 1993, Gans 1992, Ortner 1984), the resulting models still have significant shortcoming in their ability to link culture and action.

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[2] My point here is not to de-problematize the concept of strategy, instrumental rationality, or maximization, which as Weber (2001) reminds us, ultimately rely upon and reflect particular cultural-historical contexts. Rather, the key contribution in this line of theorizing is that culture can be seen as a resource rather than a driving force that motivates action.

While "cultural tools" and persistent "strategies of action" clearly furnish ways of negotiating social settings beset with institutional dilemmas and inequalities, it is unclear where people's wants, desires, and motivations come to matter. In Swidler's (2000) work for instance, practical activity is said to affect the desires and goals of actors but it is unclear what roles these desires play in behavioral patterns. In the end, people ultimately tend to pursue the strategies for which they are best equipped. People have choices and are clearly agents rather than automatons following pre-ordained cultural scripts, but without a theory of positive and negative attributions, what orients them towards one choice rather than another remains under-theorized or ends up being reduced to an improbable behavioralist story (people simply choose what they are conditioned to choose). Even the implementation of a "rational choice" model does not solve this shortcoming, since the idea that actors are maximizing utility is meaningless unless that utility has some social or biological content. This shortcoming can be remedied by bringing a system of attributions back into the toolkit model of culture.

Culture as a Shared Symbolic World: The Meanings that Enable and Constrain Social Life

A third understanding of culture is often employed by the scholars that champion the *input* and *toolkit* perspectives, but it is also occasionally treated as a model in its own right. According to this perspective, culture is framed as a shared symbolic world, a system of inter-subjective meanings that makes social and physical realities intelligible, allows groups to cohere, and provides the raw symbolic materials that enable meaningful social action and the construction of institutions and social structures that are able to persevere over time (Cohen 1974, Durkheim [1893] 1984, Searle 1995, Sewell 1992, Taylor 1985). These "non-contractual" elements of social life, shared understandings and schemas, provide the essential background for communication, meaningful human action, as well as the overlapping and persistent social structures built upon such action (Durkheim [1893] 1984, Sewell 1992,

Taylor 1985). They are the raw material for the social inputs, toolkits, and institutions that influence

potential courses of individual and collective action.

Diagram 3: The Shared Symbolic World
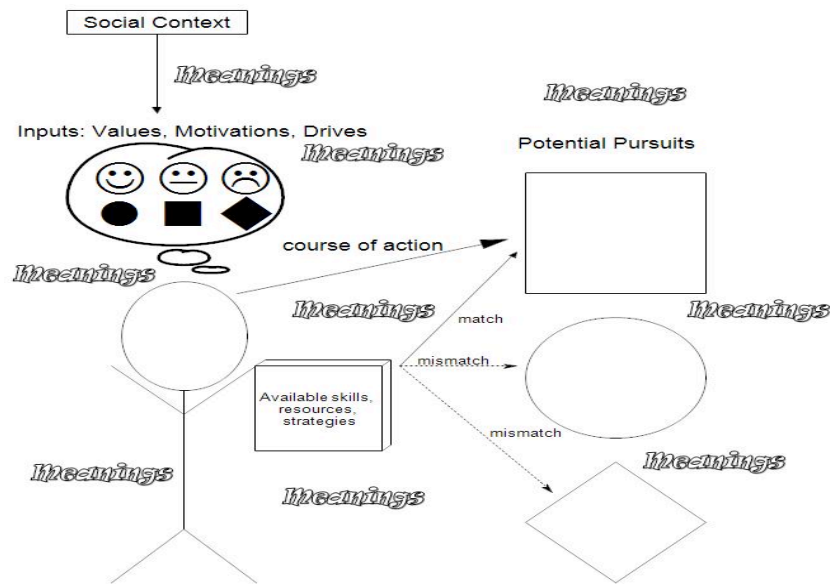
Although it is essential to understand these shared meanings and symbols in order to grasp

culture's impact on social life, a shared meanings perspective falls short as a standalone model linking

culture to action. While collective meanings enable and constrain action in very general and abstract

ways (such as determining the realm of the conceivable), theories of culture's influence on action need

other theoretical elements (such as inputs or toolkits) to explain specific behaviors and outcomes.

Culture's relationship to structure (in the sociological sense) needs to be fleshed out.[3] As I will show in

section II, a necessary part of this process involves classifying shared meanings by levels of codification

and coherence, in order to understand the various ways they influence action. Finally, except in highly

codified cases that integrate other elements of culture (e.g. the operation of institutionally backed laws),

the causal power of meanings remains unclear. These shortcomings can be addressed by incorporating

cultural *inputs* and *toolkits*, along with *meanings*, into a context dependent model of culture in action.

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[3] See Sewell (1992, 1996) for a good attempt.

Multifaceted Models of Culture

Among those who have tried to integrate multiple elements of culture (e.g. Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Geertz [1977] 2000, Laitin 1986, Swidler 2000, Vaisey 2009) the focus has still been on arguing which element of culture (i.e. *inputs, toolkits, meanings*) provides the strongest link to action across contexts. For instance, Swidler (2000) argues that *inputs*, such as values, "come into play as important guides to action," but in the link between culture and action they are causally dwarfed by capacities and repertoires that affect which strategies of action people can ultimately pursue in response to the everyday structural dilemmas they face. The available cultural equipment people have determines how they can act. Motivations are present, but become epiphenomenal in explaining outcomes. Vaisey (2009), on the other hand, argues that the primary link between culture and action resides in the "practical consciousness," which furnishes unarticulated subconscious motivations. Toolkits and repertoires matter, but are reduced to the justifications people can use to pitch their actions. The constraining power of culture, as unequally distributed resources that delimit potential lines of action, is downplayed in favor of recognizing the inputs that motivate and direct action.

While such theories significantly advance stale debates by trying to integrate multiple understandings of culture, *proponents often overlook the myriad ways cultural inputs, toolkits, and meanings are not only related, but can each have a causal influence on action under different sets of structural circumstances*. Which element of culture is operating in a particular set of circumstances is ultimately an empirical question, and the available evidence suggests that *inputs, toolkits*, and *meanings* can all influence action and outcomes under specific conditions. This is why scholars have fruitfully used cultural inputs (Sánchez-Jankowski 2008, Vaisey 2009), cultural repertoires and toolkits (Dohan 2003, Lareau 2003, Swidler 2000), and cultural systems of meaning (Derné 1994, Laitin 1986) to explain divergent human actions in real world settings. The context dependent model of culture in action

that I present in this article suggests how and under which circumstances each element of culture is most likely to influence action. As I show in the next section, *levels of social stability, inequality, codification, and institutional involvement are four key parameters of social context that influence which aspect of culture is likely to have the strongest link to action*.

II. Integrating Inputs, Toolkits, and Meanings in Social Contexts

In this section, I return to the original task of this article: to interconnect the three facets of culture (inputs, toolkits, and shared meanings) in a fruitful way and suggest how and under which conditions each is most likely to have the strongest influence on action. First, I offer a theoretical synthesis that links each element of culture and situates them within wider social contexts. Next, I examine the sublevels of each facet of culture and describe their role in a context dependent model of culture in action. Finally, I offer a set of formal hypotheses and propositions regarding the way *social stability, inequality, codification, and institutional involvement* affect the relative influence each aspect of culture exerts over action in various social circumstances. To this end, I offer empirical support using both findings from my own research, and that of other scholars, to suggest how each element of culture operates when it is influencing action in various contexts.

Synthesizing Culture: Linking Meanings, Inputs, and Toolkits in Social Contexts

Culture has three elements: inputs, toolkits, and meanings. The three are intertwined and complementary and need to be understood as essential components of larger social systems that consist of mutually constitutive cultural elements (culture), persistent social and institutional relations (structures), and meaningful human action (agency). Although the three elements of culture (inputs, toolkits, and meanings) are all operative in any given set of social interactions, which element of culture

is most likely to have the strongest influence on action in a given context is still an empirical question. Elements of context, including but not limited to levels of social stability, inequality, codification, and institutional involvement, affect when particular cultural elements are more likely to influence action than others (these are summarized in Table 1 below). The function and relationship between cultural elements, context, and action can be stated as follows:

Shared inter-subjective meanings provide the underlying foundation for other elements of culture. These meanings have three levels. The first level encompasses the basic categories, semantic, and semiotic systems, which make communication and meaningful human action possible. The second level encompasses publicly available discourses, tropes, and frames. People sometimes draw on these to understand their lives, secure outcomes, or justify behavior. In some circumstances, when particular frameworks are deeply resonant with lived experience, they can become internalized as a type of conscious input (a discursive input). The third level encompasses specific discourses and categories that are strongly codified and often institutionally backed. These limit the possible actions that people can pursue. They do this by providing the privileged frameworks through which actions are interpreted by others and the sanctions attached by institutions that reward or punish particular lines of action. Shared meanings have the strongest influence on action when they are highly codified and institutionally backed, as well as in unsettled times or other situations where semiotics and representation assume heightened importance.

Cultural inputs are held by individuals, although the distribution of these inputs is in part a function of the arrangement of social structures, contexts, and inequalities. Inputs provide positive and negative attributions about aspects of the world. These attributions include things such as notions of what is good or bad and what is worth pursuing or not. They direct peoples' attention to particular points of interest in the world and to preferred ends. Like meanings, inputs operate on various levels.

First are basic biological drives, although these are not determinative and can be tempered or morphed by social factors. Next are largely subconscious social-psychological inputs such as motivations or orientations. These point people towards pursuing or noticing particular goals or courses of action without much reflection. Finally there is a smaller set of discursive inputs. These are consciously available, but still deeply internalized notions of what is worth pursuing. While they can be more easily reflected on and examined by the individuals who hold them, their use is often un-reflective. In general, inputs have the strongest influence on action when differences in structural position and cultural resources between people or institutions are minor, in issues of taste, when ideologies are widely shared, and in cases of moral dilemmas that do not allow much time for conscious reflection.

Although inputs point people towards particular ends and points of interest in the world, their toolkits influence if and how they get there. The cultural tools people possess consist of deployable practices, justificatory frames, and longitudinal strategies for linking actions together. People can draw on and deploy frames, even those they do not believe in, to make sense of a situation, communicate, or justify action. They typically do so in response to shared structural dilemmas (persistent and concrete social problems requiring choices to be made by actors). The fact that these problems extend beyond any given individual, as do the publicly available patterned responses, accounts for some of the coherence in shared meanings (particularly frames, discourses, and tropes). The cultural tools people have at their disposal also affect which persistent strategies of action they can pursue in response to the structural circumstances and dilemmas that define their social context. Their cultural capacities, chosen strategies, and skills (like other resources deployed in interaction), affect the likelihood of securing a desired outcome from people or institutions. Toolkits have the greatest influence over action when resources are unequally distributed and inequality is high, and in institutional settings that differentially validate particular tools and strategies.

Institutions, by definition, embody certain sets of meanings and validate particular forms of cultural skills. The skills validated by institutions, as well as the framings which the institutions codify and support, can limit the potential actions and longitudinal strategies of people. This is often the case when the skills and tools of a group of people do not line up with those of the institutions with which they are interacting. Which actions are ultimately successful, and whether or not ends are reached, depends on the interaction between people and structures. This interaction is mediated by resources, including cultural ones.

Persistent social structures, and their corresponding systems of micro and macro level stratification, have a large effect on both the inputs and the cultural tools available to particular individuals and groups. Cultural resources, like economic ones, are unequally distributed among subgroups in most societies. Likewise, different meanings are available and legitimated by subgroups and their local institutions. Cultural practices, which may cohere to greater or lesser extents around these groupings, can affect social psychological factors and meanings, leading to new inputs at a later time. In the end though, social structures can never be totalizing since they are ultimately produced and reproduced by the actions of individuals and groups (even though not all actions are equal). Despite the myriad constraints that limit their choices, humans are agents. While often durable, since social structures are the result of human actions, they are always to some degree malleable and at risk.

Below, I discuss the operations of each sublevel of inputs, toolkits, and meanings; describe how they influence action; and explain how they come to change over time.

The Influence of Cultural Inputs on Human Action

Any adequate theory of culture's influence on action needs to include a system of socially available inputs that orient people towards what is worth noticing and pursuing in the world. Although preferred ends need not be determinative, coherent, or easily articulated in the way the early theorists of

values suggested, theories of culture need to account for which ends are seen as worthy pursuits, even after accounting for which ends people are culturally better equipped or positioned to pursue. It is possible that these inputs form moral intuitions that are subconscious and difficult to articulate (Vaisey 2009), but influence behavior by orienting people towards some actions rather than others. Failure to account for inputs in some form results in a rational choice story with an undefined utility function, or behavioralist determinism. In the first case, people are rational actors, who strategically pursue what they feel is the best course of action available given their resources. The goal they are pursuing, however, remains undefined or lies totally divorced from the world they experience. In the second case, peoples' social position and tools determine the lines of action for which they are equipped, which they uncritically follow. Preferences and desires are epiphenomenal and objective agency is absent. Both are empirically and philosophically inadequate models of culture's influence on human behavior. Attention to the way inputs function can counteract these issues.

Inputs differ from meanings and tools in that they are necessarily directional. That is to say they operate less by delimiting possible action trajectories, and more by pointing people towards ends. Inputs can be understood in order of three levels of coherence. At the most basic level are drives, some of which are likely biological. Human animals have certain predispositions to secure their survival, find food and shelter, and engage in social activity (Marx [1932] 1978). These drives are in no way determinative, and can and often are subservient to other social factors. Still they provide bio-social inputs that influence action, even when these inputs are not gratified or are ultimately directed to other ends (Freud [1930] 1989).

Moving up a level in coherence are social-psychological phenomena such as moral intuitions. Although often difficult to articulate, moral orientations toward "autonomy," "community," or "divinity" may point actors to pursue certain behaviors rather than others (Vaisey 2009). Likewise the

durable dispositions of the *habitus*, which are difficult for actors to articulate, can point people towards what is good or bad in art or food, as well as life generally (Bourdieu [1979] 1984).

Conscious inputs tend to be more coherent. Cultural orientations and models for the world (Geertz [1977] 2000) can be, and often are, believed and internalized. Even Swidler (2000), who is one of the foremost critics of viewing culture as inputs, recognizes that some individuals use ideological frames as a central part of their decision making process. In this case, coherent ideologies should be seen as conscious but comparatively unreflective inputs that orient people towards one course of action rather than another. They are conscious because the actor is aware of their presence and content. They are unreflective because they are seen as uniquely true given the individual's experiences in the world (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, Geertz [1977] 2000). This category can include religious beliefs, but other metaphysical visions such as a godless world inhabited by self-interested rational calculating individuals, can take this place as well. Although the populations that hold these worldviews may vary (e.g. Christians fundamentalists versus market fundamentalists), in both cases ideology forms an un-reflective commonsense worldview that seems uniquely true. This ideology points them to pursue some actions rather than others. While operative these become deeply felt motivations to action, unlike the various discourses that can be invoked ambivalently.[4]

Each level of cultural inputs can change over time. The fundamental biological inputs conceivably change as the biological needs of the species change. This is out of the purview of most sociology, so I will not discuss it here except to say that these inputs are likely to change the least and to do so most slowly. Social psychological inputs, on the other hand, are more likely to change over shorter periods of time. As the practical activities and contexts people participate in change, it is likely the content of their perceptions and motivations will change. Rather than dispositions simply determining

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[4] These ideologies often function to obfuscate the material inequalities and class based interests on which stratified societies are based (Gramsci [1971] 2005).

actions, patterns of daily life can inculcate and change dispositions (Bourdieu [1979] 1984). Likewise, the combination of new patterns of life with the introduction and transposition of new cultural frameworks that may fit those patterns better can lead un-reflexive commonsense ideologies to be questioned, modified, or abandoned. While new ideologies are most likely to be deployed uncertainly at first, those that resonate with experience may eventually come to be seen as objectively true and subjectively meaningful (Geertz [1977] 2000), and thus may become internalized. While the creative use of cultural elements by people can change structures (Sewell 1992, 1996), in each of these cases structural changes can also affect the function and context of culture as well.

The question of when culture as inputs can have the greatest influence on action is tricky, since inputs, like meanings and toolkits, are always operating on some level. Still, in many cases their operations may be epiphenomenal. Although people may be motivated to pursue certain ends, such as becoming rich or famous, their structural location may make this impossible.[5] In this situation unevenly distributed resources, including cultural ones, become key factors that influence action. Cultural inputs, while still operating, lack power in explaining the distribution of outcomes. Likewise, the orientation towards "individuality" or "community," may not matter if the only real choices available are determined by a repressive social context which only permits one course of action in a given setting.

The Influence of Cultural Toolkits, Repertoires, and Strategies on Human Action

Any theory of culture needs to account for the importance of cultural toolkits, repertoires, and strategies. *While inputs point people towards particular ends, toolkits, repertoires, and strategies determine how they get there*. As I mentioned earlier, this aspect of culture adds several important things to our understanding of the relationship between culture and action—particularly in its ability to show

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[5] As in Robert Merton's notion of anomie: a situation in which socially produced goals and the available means do not line up (Merton 1938).

how people can use culture rather than be directed by it. Culture in this sense typically "has an enduring effect on those who hold it, not by shaping the ends they pursue, but by providing the characteristic repertoire from which they build lines of action" (Swidler 1986, 284). People have differential access to various cultural skills, meanings, and justifications that form their toolkit or repertoire. They can deploy these in their pursuit of a variety of goals such as attempting to comprehend their lives, explain and justify a course of action they have taken (perhaps as the consequences of their motivations), or try to secure a desired institutional outcome (e.g. seeing a doctor quickly in an emergency room or getting a job). Culture as a toolkit affects actions by providing the basic material with which actions are constructed, organized, and chained together.

The Influence of Shared Meanings on Human Action: The Functions of Contractual and Non-Contractual Elements of Social Life

Shared meanings provide the raw background for both inputs and toolkits. Meanings are key to a context dependent model of culture in action, and need to be understood in terms of three levels of coherence.

On the most basic level, shared meanings matter in that they provide a public semantic and semiotic system that makes meaningful communication and action possible (Geertz [1977] 2000, Taylor 1985). People need a system of signification (i.e. language) to communicate and understand each other and in order to form the complex social institutions that are simultaneously based in both ideas and collaborative action (Searle 1995). It is impossible to have contracts, markets, marriages, or rituals without a set of shared understandings that are known to and acknowledged by the social groups involved (Durkheim [1893] 1984). Further, shared meanings provide the background material for models through which individuals can comprehend the social and physical world (Geertz [1977] 2000). This is true even if these models are not used uniformly by all members of a society (Swidler 2000).

Second, in its more coherent and articulated forms shared meanings encompass publicly available tropes, discourses, and framings available to members of various social groups. People draw on these collectively available understandings both to make sense of their world and to justify their actions to others (Derné 1994, Collier 1997, Swidler 2000). Individuals vary in how they do this, often along pre-existing axes of social distinction (Swidler 2000). These understandings can affect individuals without being believed or internalized, since they form the cultural-tools which people can deploy in a variety of settings to obtain a variety of ends (Swidler 2000). Adeptly deploying the appropriate frame or discourse for a given setting (Swidler 2000), offering the privileged understanding of an art object (Bourdieu [1979] 1984), or invoking the valued presentation of self in an interaction (Goffman 1959), are all cultural skills that can affect outcomes without demanding belief. Still, when particular frames or ideologies resonate as uniquely true and meaningful, they can and do come to function as inputs that direct action towards particular ends (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, Geertz [1977] 2000).

Finally, in their strongest codified forms, shared understandings may provide normative codes or categories through which action is understood and interpreted (Collier 1997, Derné 1994, Foucault 1980 Swidler 2000). Although only a small subset of available discourses and frames are strongly codified, deviation from these codes (in behavior or framing) may carry a wide range of institutional sanctions. They influence action by providing the dominant and normative understandings of an act or acts, which will determine how an individual's behavior will be interpreted (and perhaps responded to) by others. This phenomenon operates regardless of that individual's intent (Collier 1997, Derné 1994, Foucault 1988, Swidler 2000). Action will likely be interpreted within the dominant framework for the setting and must be justified accordingly. In instances of breaches, actors often face institutional sanctions ranging from a cold stare to incarceration (Derné 1994).

Discourses which are shared, codified, and backed by institutional sanction, whether internalized or not, can directly affect the plausibility of certain types of action. The notion that modern people's actions reflect their desires (Collier 1997), that men who have sex with men constitute a category called "homosexuals" (Foucault 1980), or that people should put the family before their own amorous wants (Derné 1994), all operate as dominant models or codes through which people interpret the actions of others. Whether internalized by the acting person or not, both deviation from expected patterns and failure to frame actions in particular frameworks (Derné 1994), can lead to serious consequences. *Under these circumstances, shared understandings can take on a coercive force and are likely to have a strong influence on action.*

Culture in all its facets is dynamic and changes over time, since it both influences and depends upon the actions of people.[6] Shared meanings change over time, but their change is rarely simultaneous with the changes in structures. Each level changes at different rates. Basic semantic systems and foundational meanings change slowly, but evolve with use and disuse. This is seen in the comparatively slow, but noticeable, evolution of languages. The available discourses, tropes and framings in a given arena change faster than the general semantic system. "New" framings can be introduced into novel settings as people transpose existing meanings from one sphere of life into another (Sewell 1992, 1996), often in response to contemporary structural dilemmas (Swidler 2000). This can be seen in the way the logics underlying rationality (Weber [1930] 2001) or market based models of behavior (Hochschild 2003) creep into myriad spheres of daily life. The power of codified frames and discourses, however, can change even more quickly. What is institutionally sanctioned as legitimate can change over night with the passage of a law. On average though, the loose amalgam of shared meanings, ideas, discourses, and framings tends to stick around longer than the structures to which they are initially tied. When the

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[6] This cultural dualism mirrors Giddens' (1984) notions about the duality of structure.

social structures to which meanings, tropes, and codes are bound wither away, their cultural foundations tend to atrophy (Durkheim [1895] 1982).

Hypotheses and Propositions for a Contingency Based Theory of Culture in Action

From the syntheses and discussions above we can distill the following hypotheses and propositions regarding the general mechanisms through which cultural *inputs*, *toolkits*, and *meanings* influence action in varying social contexts.

HYPOTHESIS 1

Cultural inputs are most likely to have a strong causal influence on action when differences in structural position and cultural resources are minor, in issues of "taste," when ideologies are widely shared and internalized, and in cases of sudden moral dilemmas.

PROPOSITION 1.A

Cultural inputs can lead otherwise demographically similar individuals occupying similar social contexts to pursue alternative courses of action. This pattern has revealed itself repeatedly to me during a decade of research examining the health behaviors of the elderly. Even within a social grouping, such as middle-class white males, differences in outlook can affect when and how people seek care and provide help to others. Those with orientations towards "independence at all costs" are less likely to ask for help, offer help, or defer to the medical institutions with which they interact, whereas those who operate under principles of "concerned interdependence" are more likely to be closely involved with institutions, ask for feedback from others in the community, and offer help to others even when it is not requested.

Likewise, the impact of underlying motivations on Vaisey's sample of teenagers, provides a powerful example of the effect of divergent inputs (Vaisey 2009). Those with "community-oriented" motivations exhibited different behaviors with regard to issues such as drug use, than those with "individualist-oriented" motivations even when controlling for race, gender, age, and class differences. Sánchez-Jankowski (2008) finds that "value-orientations" have a profound effect on the actions of otherwise demographically similar individuals living in poor areas. Even within the same family, differences in value orientations that pointed individuals towards "maximizing security" or "maximizing excitement" produced substantial behavioral differences in institutional settings ranging from interactions at the school to membership in gangs.[7] In each of these cases, the influence of inputs on action is amplified because structural position and consequently cultural repertoires are already accounted for.

PROPOSITION 1.B

Cultural inputs are also more likely to affect action when choices are understood as matters of "taste" by the social groups in question. The deployment of "taste" can be a strategic attempt to fortify boundaries (Bourdieu [1979] 1984). This has historically been the case in movements of "moral entrepreneurship," in which elites sought to classify what qualified as "high art" or "literature" in order to reinforce distinctions and protect their privileged class positions (DiMaggio 1982, Beisel 1992). Still, when taste functions as an input, it is often used much less reflexively. The choice between a similarly priced Rothko ("high art") and Scarface ("popular media") posters by an undergraduate student is more likely to be conditioned by an un-reflexive aesthetic than strategic concerns and moral entrepreneurship (perhaps art history students being an exception). The appraisal of the object in question by others, and

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[7] Sánchez-Jankkowski (2008) also found that cultural toolkits had an effect on action as well, but this impact is more likely to be pronounced when the cultural resources between individuals vary. This work demonstrates a key contention of this paper, that both cultural toolkits and inputs can affect action, but the context in which each has causal influence varies.

the corresponding consequences for social-stratification, are likewise conditioned and reinforced through practical activity and institutional validation (Bourdieu [1979] 1984). People often un-reflexively pursue what they like, but social institutions such as museums, hospitals, and schools privilege and validate certain types of objects over others. Consequently, the appraisal of an individual's tastes can influences the way others treat him or her. In my work on health behaviors, people's patterned preferences for particular types of food, drinks, or drugs often influence what they consume on a daily basis. However, when these individuals interact with hospitals, these choices come to signify elements of morality to the institutional representative. The selection of particular food, drinks, or drugs (often associated with tastes developed from a life lived in a subordinate social position) are seen as markers reflecting a lack of willpower, lack of concern over physical health, or other negative moral attributes. Consequently, representatives of the institution are less likely to provide help for those "unwilling to help themselves."

PROPOSITION 1.C

Cultural inputs have a powerful effect on action or non-action when a conscious ideology is widely shared. Often this functions in ways that reproduce existing social structures. When members of subordinate groups internalize the interests of the dominant group as their own, social systems are more likely to be reproduced (Gramsci [1971] 2005, Laitin 1986). The widespread belief in meritocracy and unfettered mobility in America obscures the persistent structured inequalities that define its social context (Fischer et al. 1996). On the other hand, when a group of people share an ideology that runs counter to particular structures and enjoys the support and resources to affect action, ideology can provide a unifying input for groups that allows social movements to cohere and pursue a shared goal. In this vein, Armstrong (2002) shows how the institutional adoption of a generalized "gay identity" was key to the emergence of homosexuals as a political force.

PROPOSITION 1.D

Inputs influence action in cases of immediate moral dilemmas, or other situations when there is little time for reflection. Choices such as whether a soldier covers a hand grenade with his body to protect his squad and whether or not a parent runs into a burning building to save his or her child, are likely governed by ingrained inputs and "practical consciousness" rather than reasoning, strategy, and discourse. To be certain, training and practical activity matter in both the production of tools and the inculcation of inputs. However, when life, limb, or personhood are at stake, and there is little time for calculative reflection, cultural inputs exert a strong influence over action.

HYPOTHESIS 2

Cultural toolkits, repertoires, and strategies are most likely to have a strong causal influence on action in contexts where resources are most unevenly distributed and in institutional settings that differentially validate particular tools and strategies. Toolkits and cultural skills affect what people do because they affect the resources available to pursue particular lines of action. Institutional factors affect the legitimacy and selection of the tools, strategies, and frameworks that people can deploy in their attempts to achieve particular ends.

PROPOSITION 2.A

Cultural toolkits and strategies have a powerful impact on action when cultural resources between groups vary, even if the groups desire the same ends or value the same things. For instance, in his comparative ethnographic study of Mexican Immigrants and Chicano Americans living in poverty, Daniel Dohan (2003) looks at how various forms of cultural tools and strategies affect the way different people interact with the labor markets. Both groups reside in a milieu of material scarcity and have the same desired ends: to secure money (even if that money will be put to different uses). Still, there are

marked differences in the cultural resources available to the two groups including available strategies of self-presentation and language. These resources, combined with other forms of human capital (e.g. access to different types of bounded community networks), determine which markets people can connect with and the particular strategies of action that they can pursue to accumulate income within them (i.e. overwork for low pay as a day laborer, hustling, or selling drugs) (Dohan 2003).

PROPOSITION 2.B

Cultural skills and toolkits generally have a powerful effect on action, regardless of the cultural inputs, when dealing with institutional settings. Institutions such as schools, business enterprises, hospitals, and government bureaucracies, privilege particular cultural capacities, orientations, skills, framings, and communication styles over others. The form and content of the cultural tools that are privileged are typically those possessed by the dominant groups. The ability to deploy these tools and repertoires functions as a form of "cultural capital," which increases the chance of successfully interacting with these institutions (Bourdieu [1979] 1984).[8] Cultural capital often legitimates existing structural inequalities, as cultural skills such as test taking become codified and read as an objective criterion of distinction between people (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Fischer et al. 1996). Often, the class-based criteria are pitched and understood by members of the institution and the public as measures of ability that reinforce the illusion of meritocracy (see Fischer et al. 1996).

The culture deployed by a person in a given institutional setting can have a powerful effect on the outcomes. In my ongoing work examining the way seniors from different race and class groupings manage the health dilemmas of the aging body, I find that even when elders desire the same things (e.g. getting conventional treatment for an illness; preventing institutionalization), the repertoire of cultural

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[8] Success here includes both securing outcomes such as getting a degree at a top tier university as well as expanding the cultural toolkit for later use. "Cultural capital" facilitates this second task by allowing those who possess greater amounts of the cultural skills that line up with the institution (i.e. study skills, facility in abstracting from texts), to pick up and add more new material to their repertoire.

skills that mediate their ability to navigate different types of institutional settings affects their chosen

lines of actions. Issues such as limited language capacity and trouble dealing with paperwork often lead

poor seniors to delay seeking care or going to an emergency room, even if they would be eligible for

seeing a primary care physician under Medicare. Middle class seniors tend to be adept at navigating

these institutions and are more likely to secure the desired outcome by strategically framing ailments

and consciously navigating bureaucratic structures.

Likewise, Annette Lareau's (2003) work strongly shows that within U.S. schools the cultural

mismatch between poor and working class families, and the reigning ethos embodied in these state

institutions configured around middle class cultural constellations, provides middle class children with a

marked advantage in negotiating schools and securing outcomes such as grades. Since their cultural

capital allows them to get more out of their education as well, their cultural advantage will likely

increase over the life course.

HYPOTHESIS 3

Shared meanings are most likely to have a strong influence on action when they are highly codified and

backed by institutional sanctions, or in unsettled times of social upheaval.

PROPOSITION 3.A

When meanings are highly codified and backed by institutional sanction, they have a powerful effect on

how individual actions are perceived (e.g. criminal/heroic), and on the consequential institutional or

group reaction to said actions (e.g. incarceration/accolade). Codified meanings influence action by

affecting people's assessment of the probable results of their actions, and consequently the types of

action people are willing to pursue. This is not to say codes are determinative, as people can choose not

to abide by them, but they do so at a cost. These costs, and the evaluation a person makes of them given the available choices, influence how that person acts.

In my research on health organizations, I have shown how a community based care center for dementia patients supplanted the goal of providing a dignified and challenging environment to elderly clients with the goal of providing respite for the elder's family members by warehousing seniors during the day (Abramson 2009). Although managers, staff, and family members knew and privately acknowledged the center was focused on respite, all official correspondence and public presentations were framed in terms of "improving seniors' lives," lest the center risk lose funding, permits, or community support. The lines of action the center's management could pursue when presenting their organization to family members and the public were ultimately constrained by powerful and codified normative frameworks regarding the appropriate treatment of seniors.

Likewise, Derné (1994) shows how the normative framework that places family before love limits the way that men living in India can justify their amorous behaviors. Even when Derné's subjects believed in western notions of love and courtship, their ability to explain their actions to elders and others with material power over them limited their potential action strategies with respect to dating and marriage. In such cases of high codification and institutional involvement, the inability to justify actions in accordance with the normative framework (Derné 1994, Vaisey 2009) would result in concrete sanctions.

PROPOSITION 3.B

The specific symbols people use in the way of speech, clothing, and art products function to place people into salient social categories. This effect is magnified in periods of social upheaval such as revolutions or other situations involving rapid social change. Since being in one category rather than another (e.g. revolutionary or loyalist) can make the difference between life and death, the shared meanings to which

people attach themselves through public signification can have a powerful effect on action (Sewell 1996, Swidler 2000). Wearing the colors of a losing faction during a time of social upheaval and rapid change can provide a swift trip to the guillotine (Sewell 1996).

This mechanism can operate in stable times as well, often in the evaluation of subgroup membership or other spots where defining moral boundaries influences potential courses of action. Here the social value of subgroups, subcultures, and their associated modes of signification and status (Bourdieu [1979] 1984, Hebdidge 1981, Thornton 1996) can affect the way individuals are treated, and the options available to them. There is a heightened level of instability, not in the sense of widespread upheaval, but rather in the social allocation of prestige. This mechanism operates irrespective of the specific meaning a given individual attaches to a symbol. Rather, the power comes from the way others read the symbol. The public display of symbols affects action by determining how actions are read and where membership is signified. In my fieldwork, "looking crippled," "being fat," and "smelling old" were generally seen to have negative effects on the prestige allocated to elders in various age-segregated settings. Likewise, having the signifying "body of a fighter" was positively associated with status-honor among cage-fighters, even when their skill level appeared comparable. In all these cases, the way signifying elements of the body are read influences the allocation of prestige and outcomes (e.g. whether an elder has a successful amorous encounter; how easily a fighter can secure a place on the main card of an event).

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between context and the influence of various cultural elements on action, as formalized in the hypotheses above. Rows indicate key aspects of social context such as levels of inequality, codification, stability, and institutional involvement. Columns indicate the three elements of culture (inputs, toolkits, and meanings). The symbol in each cell indicates the likelihood of a particular element of culture influencing action within social contexts of a particular type.

For instance, the middle-cell of the top row summarizes the prediction made in proposition 2.A above:

the relative influence of cultural toolkits on action increases in contexts of high inequality.

Table 1: Cultural Elements and Their Relationship to Action:
How Various Elements of Context Matter

+ = increased likelihood of affecting action in that context

- = decreased likelihood of affecting action in that context

0 = no net change in likelihood of affecting action in that context

Context	Inputs	Toolkits	Meanings
High Inequality	-	+	0
Low Inequality	+	0	0
High Codification	0	+	+
Low Codification	+	0	-
High Stability	0	0	-
Low Stability	+	0	+
High Institutional Involvement	0	+	+
Low Institutional Involvement	+	-	0

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that there are three constituent elements of culture: meanings, inputs, and toolkits. While previous scholars have typically framed these elements as opposing theories of "what culture is" and how it affects action, I have argued that they are intertwined. Each provides a necessary piece of the theoretical puzzle linking culture and action but is not sufficient as a standalone answer. Although all three elements are operating at a given time, which element of culture is likely to have the strongest effect on action in a given set of circumstances is a function of social context. The type of institutional involvement, the level of social stability, the type of dilemma faced, and the relative social position of the people and institutions involved are important factors in understanding when and how different elements of culture affect action. I provided three hypotheses to this end, each with several propositions grounded in prior empirical work. The context dependent view of culture I espouse in this article provides insight into why researchers in divergent social science disciplines have been able to find fruitful and convincing linkages between *inputs, toolkits, meanings, and action*. While previous theorists provide convincing linkages between elements of culture and action, they have failed to adequately theorize the relationship between those elements, and the contexts that give them analytical power.

Although un-parsimonious, such a context dependent model of culture in action has a number of significant advantages over existing theories. First, while it identifies a general set of relations between cultural elements, it posits that which element is affecting action should be understood as a function of circumstance. This function should be based upon, and re-evaluated in light of, empirically grounded evidence rather than a priori theoretical assumptions. This focus on contingency, emphasized by Max Weber in his work on world religions, is too often neglected as social scientists battle over which model

is dominant across contexts (Weber 1946, see also Swidler 2000). Second, this theoretical synthesis lends well to testable propositions, particularly in the hypothesized links between cultural elements, context, and action (see Table 1 above for a summary). While the hypotheses and propositions I offer are based on existing data, they should be rigorously examined to determine their validity and generalizability. Finally, this work attempts to overcome persistent theoretical dichotomies by taking some of the best previous attempts at modeling culture, then fusing them into an integrated whole.

In closing, I would like to note that while this article is abstract and theoretical by design, the goal of improving the tools social scientists use to investigate the world created by people, and perhaps improve it, is not. I offer the theoretical propositions above with the earnest hope of sharpening the social scientist's toolkit, or at the least producing constructive dialogue that will aid this goal. The ultimate purpose is to help advance empirical work that relates to the concerns of people, even (and perhaps especially) those who have no interest in theories of social action. As Emile Durkheim noted in the preface to the *Division of Labor in Society* ([1893] 1984), "If we distinguish carefully between theoretical and practical problems it is not in order to neglect the latter category. On the contrary, it is in order to put ourselves in a position where we can better resolve them" (xxvi).

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