Dualities of Culture and Structure

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Just three decades ago, Peter Blau declared that "social structure is not culture."
Moreover, Blau averred, the study of the quantitative dimensions of social structure,
which constitute its core and "distinguish it from culture," had long been neglected,
"two exceptions being Harrison C. White and Bruce H. Mayhew" (Blau 1977, p. 245).
Indeed, the oft-proclaimed "breakthrough" in the 1970s that "firmly established"
network analysis as a method of structural analysis (Scott 2000, pp. 33-37) defined
itself in opposition to culture. White, Boorman, and Breiger (1976) seemed to take
pride in announcing that "the cultural and social-psychological meanings of actual
ties are largely bypassed…. We focus instead on interpreting the patterns among
types of tie" (p. 734).

Some sort of explanation is therefore required to understand how and why,
today, social network researchers can say that social networks and "all social
structures are inherently cultural in that they are based on meaning" (Fuhse 2007),
how it could be that Harrison White and Frédéric Godart write now (2007) that "the
complexity and dynamics of culture are intertwined with the dynamics and
complexity of structure, as reflected in forms of discourse."

I would like to provide an explanation for this important cultural turn in
structural analysis, but I'm not sure I can. My reading of Fuchs (2008) suggests that
a reductionist stance toward cultures "below"—or the fabrication of a culture
positing that culture doesn't matter—could have been a posture, or a projective
effort to seize a high-status position for social-network analysis.[1] Pachucki and
Breiger (in preparation) put forward a half-dozen candidate reasons as to why the
boundary[2] between structure and culture began to be spanned, among which are

- Critiques by cultural sociologists pointing to what network analysis was missing
  (e.g., Fine and Kleinman 1983, Brint 1992, and most influentially, Emirbayer and
  Goodwin, 1994);
- Anomalies arising within network analysis forcing investigators to consider
  cognition within networks (see the "reverse small world problem" reviewed in
  Marsden, 2005; studies of recall, Brewer 2000; Carley's 1986 "constructuralist"
  model and subsequent developments);

[1] There is an interesting comparison to be made here between the culture-denying
structuralism of Chomsky and the event-ful structuralism of Jakobson (e.g., Waugh
and Monville-Burston, 1990).

[2] In this context the ideas of Athanasios Karafillidis (2008) are indispensible: there
is a duality between networks and boundaries.

- Harrison White's rethinking of network theory in *Identity and Control* (1992; second ed., 2008), White now writing of agency as "the dynamic face of networks," that "stories describe the ties in networks," and that "a social network is a network of meanings" (1992, pp. 65, 67, 245, 315), and the synergy of White's theorizing with that of others (e.g., Somers, 1994, 1998; Fuchs, 2001; Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2002, Martin, 2003; Collins, 2003, 2004).
- Realization that the most iconic settings within which social network data is collected (e.g., self-reports on who one's friends are) are essentially discursive and, hence, in essence cultural products that should be analyzed with reference to constructions of meaning (Mische, 2003, 2007). In particular, disputes have careers that entangle actors within simultaneously emergent logics of identity (Muetzel, 2002, esp. pp. 270-74).

But these candidate reasons to explain a shift toward culture themselves seem largely descriptive.  And in any case, White and Godart (2007) reject conceiving of the relation between structure and culture as "interdependent yet autonomous," preferring instead to view both "structure" and "culture," "social networks" and "discursive forms," as second-order processes which need to be accounted for by the dynamics of identity and control among network domains (pp. 2, 17). In my reading (which might differ from the intention of the authors), the concept of duality[3] is central to White and Godart's portrayal of this dynamic. For example, it allows them to  say (p. 9) that a plot decouples events in one role frame from events in other frames, even as events serve to decouple plots.

Abbott (1992) is adept at seeing the usual varieties of multiple regression analysis in sociology as forms of culture; for example, "it is when a variable 'does something' narratively that the authors think themselves to be speaking most directly of causality" (p. 57). A focus on a network of variables, as in multiple regression analysis, detaches relationships from their concrete embedding in social structure (White and Breiger, 1975). Abbott envisions relational sociology as "transcending general linear reality" (Abbott 1988). I argue, in contrast, that there is a fascinating, yet-to-be explored relational sociology that is, strictly speaking, dual to this multiple-regression analysis and implied by it (see also Breiger, 2009, for similar issues pursued via a different set of methods applied to problems in the analysis of small-N comparisons).

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[3] I think duality is a central concept appearing and evolving in White's work (see Breiger 2005, p. 885).

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