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What is culture? Systems of people, places, and practices

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ABSTRACT

Culture is a fuzzy concept without fixed boundaries, meaning different things according to situations. To address this issue, I introduce a *p-model* to understand culture as a system of people, places, and practices, for a purpose such as enacting, justifying, or resisting power. *People* refers to population dynamics, social relations, and culture in groups. *Places* refers to ecological dynamics, institutional influences, and culture in contexts. *Practices* refers to participatory dynamics, community engagement, and culture in action. Power refers to forcing others into compliance (power-over people), controlling access to spaces (power in places), and behaving as desired (power-to practice). I use racism to illustrate the *p*-model and suggest applications in theory, research, and practice in developmental sciences.

Should we abandon the concept of culture? The answer is yes, according to several scholars who see it as an obstacle for scientific progress. Culture has been compared to protoplasm, a black box with vague qualities posing as explanations (Tooby, 2015), equated to a seven-letter word that stands for god (Betzig, 2015), and denounced as a convenient term to designate all sorts of things we feel need to be grouped together (Boyer, 2015). Indeed, culture is a fuzzy concept, a term without fixed boundaries, meaning different things according to situations (Gjerde, 2004; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). Unlike crisp concepts that have a relatively fixed meaning, set properties, and stable boundaries; fuzzy concepts have many layers of significance, changing its meaning according to situations (Haack, 1996).

This fuzziness is a main reason why it is so difficult to define culture. In fact, there is a long tradition of reviewing definitions of culture (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Lonner & Malpass, 1994) and denouncing confusion in the conceptualization of culture as a major problem in psychology (Cooper & Denner, 1998) and in other social sciences (Durham, 1991). Scientific progress is possible without consensus in a definition of culture, but specifying its main characteristics can help advance the field even more (Betancourt & López, 1993).

Better definitions of culture can help avoid questionable research practices, such as treating culture as a proxy, a fixed variable impervious to change, and a confound in statistical analyses (Quintana et al., 2006); using culture to bolster deficit models that portray some groups as inherently inferior and at risk (García Coll et al., 1996); assuming that groups have large cultural differences without any theoretical justification (Gjerde, 2004); and underestimating the multifaceted and normative role of cultural processes on development (Rogoff, 2003). For these reasons, improving definitions of culture is imperative to avoid misconceptions and biases that shape theory, research, and practice in applied developmental science.

To promote better science, I introduce a *p*-model in which culture is defined as a system of people, places, and practices, for a purpose such as enacting, justifying, or challenging power. *People* refers to population dynamics, social relations, and culture in groups. *Places* refers to ecological dynamics, institutional influences, and culture in contexts. *Practices* refers to participatory dynamics, community engagement, and culture in action. Power refers to forcing others into compliance (power-over people), controlling access to spaces (power in places), and behaving as desired (power-to practice).

Next, I use racism to illustrate the *p*-model and propose applications in theory, research, and practice in developmental sciences. In this article, I incorporate insights from relational epistemology (Overton, 2010, 2015), developmental psychopathology (Cicchetti,
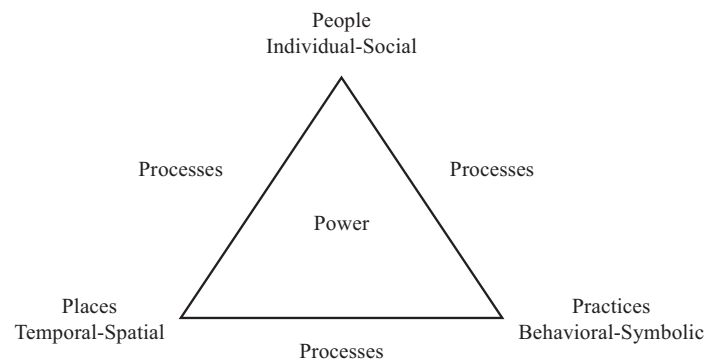
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Figure 1. Culture as system of people, places, and practices connected by dimensions and processes, for a purpose such as justifying or resisting power.
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1984), the integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children (García Coll et al., 1996), several traditions of cultural research in psychology (Shweder, 2000), critical race theory (Bonilla-Silva, 2010), and dynamic relational theory of power (Roscigno, 2011). I ground this paper on theory and research in the United States of America. I use the term model because what I present here is the start to a more comprehensive conceptualization of culture.

What is culture? Introducing the *p*-model

Culture is a system, a dynamic whole that creates and is created by people, places, and practices (Figure 1). The system and its components are inseparable and engaged in mutual determination: the whole organizes the parts and the parts organize the whole (Overton, 2010). People create culture through shared practices in places, and culture shapes how people engage in practices and build places. The *p*-model is consistent with a rich tradition of defining culture as systems (Triandis, 2007). For example, Tylor (1871) defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 1). Geertz (1973) defined religion as a cultural system of symbols that informs actions, social order, and world views. Understanding how culture functions as a system requires discussing its components.

People are the first essential component of culture as a system: there is no culture without people and no people without culture. People refers to population dynamics, social relations, and culture in groups, including families, communities, and nations. Many definitions of culture underline this component of the

system (Cooper & Denner, 1998). For instance, Snowdon (2018) defined culture as behavior patterns that have some continuity across generations *among specific groups or populations*, varying across different people, but remaining somewhat consistent within each one (Snowdon, 2018). Anthropologists have described culture as systems of beliefs, ideals, behavior, and traditions related to specific populations (Rogoff, 2003; Shweder, 2000).

Research on culture often centers on issues related to people, including variation across human populations (cultural diversity) and differences between groups (cultural differences). According to Shweder (2000), the study of culture in psychology can be classified into subfields with different strategies to understand people, either by focusing on culture as a source of diversity (cultural psychology), the unique cultural experience of specific groups (indigenous psychology), or the commonalities across human populations despite culture (cross-cultural psychology). A fourth subfield is centered on racial/ethnic minorities (ethnic minority psychology; Sue, 2009).

Places are the second essential component of culture as a system: there is no culture without places and no places without culture. Places refers to ecological dynamics, institutional influences, and culture in contexts, including homes, neighborhoods, schools, and cities. Many definitions of culture underline this component of the system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). There is a long tradition of emphasizing culture as places in anthropology, for instance, framing culture as environmental settings for learning and thinking (Cole et al., 1971). Super and Harkness (1986) highlighted the importance of the developmental niche as unique context for individual development.

Research on culture often focuses on issues related to places, including ecological influences on child

development, formal and informal educational settings that shape behavior and cognition, and situations that facilitate adaptive or maladaptive adjustment. In psychology, a main approach to culture-as-place is Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework, epitomized on the notion that "it all depends" on the context (Cole, 1979). The word "context" can take a variety of meanings, including social, cultural, or environmental settings. Here, context refers to ecological, physical, organizational, institutional, and virtual settings.

Practices are the third essential component of culture as a system: there is no culture without practices and no practices without culture. Practices refers to participatory dynamics, community engagement, and culture in action, including teaching, learning, and participating in everyday activities, traditions, and rituals. Many conceptualizations of culture underline this component of the system, especially those informed by the work of Vygotsky (Rogoff, 2003). There is a rich legacy of emphasizing culture as practices in anthropology, through extensive ethnographic research on children's involvement in routine activities and how they shape development (Alcalá et al., 2014).

Research on culture often focuses on issues related to practices, including how parents teach their children about social roles and values (cultural socialization), how they educate them about group membership (ethnic socialization), and what they say or remain silent regarding the construction of race and racism (racial socialization). These practices can facilitate risk, protection, and promotion of health and wellbeing. For instance, positive parenting, community engagement, and bicultural socialization among Latinos in the United States have been associated with wellbeing (Fuller & García Coll, 2010).

In sum, culture is a fuzzy concept, which makes it difficult to define. The *p*-model approaches culture as a system emerging from components, and components creating a system. I believe this approach can help make culture a crisper and less fuzzy concept.

How does culture work? Connecting the *p*-model

What is the glue that binds people-places-practices together into a system? I argue that processes and dimensions connect these components into a unified whole (Figure 1). They play a central role in continuity and change in cultural systems.

First, theory and research on culture as people reflects the tension between the person and the group

(Overton & Müller, 2012). Many conceptualizations of culture emphasize its collective nature, composed of social meanings and behaviors (Kitayama & Uskul, 2011). Thus, culture is not simply a personality trait characteristic of one person, but has a supraindividual nature. Culture is created, shared, and updated by groups (Causadias, 2013). In sum, culture is social.

At the same time, culture is personal. Society shapes and is shaped by individuals, reflecting a cycle of mutual construction (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Gjerde (2004) made a case for the study of culture that recognizes agency and individuality, and warned against essentialism: assuming that groups are cohesive, coherent, and have a core nature or essence. Essentialism leads to the neglect of individual differences and to viewing people as "carbon copies" (Gjerde, 2004). In the United States, this is illustrated by the tendency to see racial/ethnic minorities as group members whose behavior is primarily shaped by culture and less influenced by individual characteristics, such as personality, compared to Whites (Causadias et al., 2018b).

The individual-social dimension of culture reconciles this tension, by moving beyond the notion that the individual and the social are dual opposites at different ends of a spectrum (Cole & Wertsch, 1996), to see them as intertwined, inseparable, and engaged in constant feedback and mutual determination (Overton, 2010). This is consistent with conceptualization of the person as a developing individual acting in relation to others in cultural practices, a systems approach that can help overcome questionable practices in contemporary psychology such as fragmenting, objectifying, and aggregating people's data (Raeff, 2017).

Dimensions like the individual-social operate at multiple levels of metatheory, from a specific domain of inquiry to a more general epistemological level (Overton, 2010). Therefore, the individual-social dimension refers to relational dynamics between a person and a group, but also to concepts of individuality and sociality in cultural theories that are in tension with each other. These dimensions are not presented as dual categories typical of Cartesian paradigms, but as points of views (Latour, 1993), continuous dimensions (Raeff, 2011), or levels of analysis (Overton, 2010). These cultural dimensions are articulated by cultural processes.

Systems are a relational web of processes in which the whole determines the nature of the processes and the processes determine the nature of the whole (Overton, 2015). For instance, in the individual-social

dimension, the person and the group are not seen as exclusive contradictions, but as unique but equivalent polarities of an integrated relationship, engaged in a feedback loop of mutual codetermination (Overton, 2010). Cultural processes are shared and contested beliefs, values, and guides for action that are reflected in what people do, and in the cultural tools or means that make this action possible (Wertsch, 1998). Cultural processes connect people, places, and practices. They encompass the symbolic means of communication as action (e.g., language), economic and political dynamics, the organizing of power and authority (Raeff, 2017), and the institutional spaces for cultural practices (Raeff, 2011).

Cultural processes in the individual-social dimension create and are created by cultural systems over time. That is the case of ethnic-racial identity development. Racial/ethnic minority parents socialize their children through discussions of what it means to belong to a group, which can protect their youth from the effects of racial stress and discrimination (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). In contrast, parental socialization among White families often relies on avoiding discussing or even acknowledging race (Pahlke et al., 2012). This socialization facilitates the development of ethnic-racial identity, the values and attitudes related to the importance and meaning of one's ethnicity and race (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Cultural processes develop over time, not simply by changing, but by following sequences of progressive differentiation and integration in relation to developmental goals (Raeff, 2011).

Second, theory and research on culture as places reflects the tension between time and space. Ecological theories describe contexts changing over time to shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005). The physical nature of culture is emphasized in contextualist research on the developmental implications of low income parents struggling to procure toys, books, and other didactic materials for their children at home, access quality child care and school setting, and/or live in safe neighborhoods (Duncan et al., 2017). Consistent with this view, the person and the environment are inseparable and intimately connected (Wapner & Demick, 1998).

But culture is also rooted in time, as different generations are exposed to unique influences that shape the values they support and the practices they engage (Gentile et al., 2014). Evidence suggests important generational differences due to exposure to times of economic scarcity at different stages of development. Compared to their older siblings who transitioned out of high school before the recession of 2007, youth who graduated during this time were less likely to pursue higher education (Pérez-Brena, Wheeler, Rodríguez De Jesús, Updegraff, & Umaña-Taylor, 2017). There is change, but also continuity, within time and space.

The temporal-spatial dimension of culture reconciles this tension, by moving beyond the notion that time and space are dual opposites at different ends of a spectrum, to see them as intertwined, inseparable, and engaged in constant feedback and mutual determination. Temporal-spatial processes create and are created by cultural systems. That is the case of ecological dissonance between generations, resulting from differential exposure, access, and engagement in contexts of learning at different times and spaces. This can lead to generational tension among all people, majorities and minorities, migrants and natives.

Acculturation gap distress theory posits a generational mismatch between immigrant-origin parents and their children in the way they embrace mainstream and heritage culture (Telzer, 2010). It argues that children acculturate more rapidly and extensively than their parents (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993), as youth are better at mastering a new language than their parents because they often engage in learning practices in educational *spaces* in the new country, during developmental *times* in which they are more prone to learn and identify with a new culture (Gonzales et al., 2018).

The temporal-spatial dimension of culture is consistent with a systems perspective that frames time and space as interrelated constituents that shape each other and lack meaning on their own (Overton, 2010). Time and space are inseparable and central for a developmental approach to culture: "rather than appeal to the abstract, generalizable forms action assumes, contextualism grounds itself in the now, in the moment, in the real-time activities of organisms in specific settings and contexts" (Witherington, 2007, p. 131).

Third, theory and research on culture as practices reflects the tension between behaviors and symbols. Many conceptualizations of culture underscore the behavioral nature of culture. Participation in everyday community practices is a key aspect of culture (Raeff, 2006, 2017). For instance, mothers sharing books at home with their young children and engaging in story-telling can foster vocabulary development and narrative skills (Luo & Tamis-LeMonda, 2017).

However, practices are also symbolic, including ideologies that are passed from one generation to the

next and can have a considerable impact on human agency and social interactions (Kendal, 2011). Symbols account for an array of knowledge encoded in books, photos, videos, and electronic records, and these symbolic structures are embodied in laws, norms, conventions, and institutions (Odling-Smee & Laland, 2011). For instance, moral meta-narratives function as symbolic cultural frameworks that provide meaning and motivate behavior and action (Causadias et al., 2018a).

The behavioral-symbolic dimension of culture reconciles this tension, by moving beyond the notion that behaviors and symbols are dual opposites at different ends of a spectrum, to see them as intertwined, inseparable, and engaged in constant feedback and mutual determination. Behavioral-symbolic processes create and are created by cultural systems. That is the case with rites of passage: rituals that mark and celebrate important developmental transitions of individuals within their communities (Rogoff, 2003). Participation in these rituals has developmental implications for health and adaptation. For example, dyads of mothers and daughters of Mexican ancestry show more joint decision making and frank communication after celebrating La Quinceañera rite of passage at age 15 (Romo et al., 2014).

Action is central to understanding cultural processes such as this rite of passage, not as something that a person or group have, but something they enact (Raeff, 2017). La Quinceañera is a practice of a people in a place that is created by and creates a form of culture. It embodies the behavior-symbolic dimension by enacting psychological meaning through intentional embodied actions (Müller & Newman, 2008). This is consistent with conceptualizations of culture that frame human behavior as symbolic (Geertz, 1973).

In sum, considering cultural dimensions and process in the definition of culture can help make this concept crisper and less fuzzy: culture is a system, a dynamic organization that articulates people, places, and practices into a coherent whole through individual-social, temporal-spatial, and behavioral-symbolic dimensions and processes.

Why is there culture? Understanding the *p*-model

Culture is systems of people, places, and practices that are sustained through dimensions and processes. But, for what purpose? I argue that power is one core feature of culture as a system, useful in understanding why it exists and persists, and why it is enacted,

justified, or resisted (Figure 1). The purpose of culture has long been debated. Culture, as a central aspect of human evolution, is more than a simple functional operation in the service of adaptation (see Gould & Lewontin, 1979). It is not clear why some cultural systems persist over time, even when they can be taxing or even harmful to individuals and groups, and why other practices are abandoned, despite being beneficial.

One explanation for continuity in practices that have no clear adaptive function is that they serve a symbolic purpose and provide cohesion to the group (Northover & Cohen, 2018). Culture can serve to organize communities to solve shared problems, like developing agricultural practices for survival. When some groups gain control of resources and land, over time, power can become the purpose of culture. In Western democracies, especially those that derive from settler colonialism, the purposes of culture can go beyond in-group cohesion and serve to exercise power-over other groups (Belich, 2009).

But, what is power? Like culture, power can also be considered a fuzzy concept, often invoked by social scientists but rarely defined with precise boundaries (Roscigno, 2011). There is a rich tradition of research on power in the social sciences, including psychology (Kraus & Torrez, 2020) and sociology (Roscigno, 2011). In sociology, power is best understood as inequality or asymmetrical relations in stratified systems imbued in culture and history (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Power provides a purpose, meaning, and structure to cultural systems (Roscigno, 2011). Surprisingly, power has also been defined in terms of people, places, and practices.

One key tradition of defining power focuses on people: getting others to do what you want them to do, that is, as an exercise of *power-over* people (Allen, 2016; Foucault, 1983). Power is social, as it emerges from the unequal, interactive, and bilateral relations between people (Roscigno, 2011). The individual-social dimension can illustrate the role of power in culture. Individuals with considerable power can employ discretionary tools to enforce the dominant position of their group and to legitimize unfair treatment of the out-group by appealing to policies and procedures (Roscigno, 2011), for instance, by enforcing "law and order" (Flamm, 2007). Conversely, individuals experiencing abuses of power can join or mobilize their groups to challenge inequality through collective action and identity affirmation, which is another form of power (Neville et al., 2015).

A second approach conceptualizes power in terms of places: controlling access to physical environments, organizations, or institutions. That is, *power in* places. This entails the use of force to keep people in or out of certain spaces at particular times, including neighborhoods, schools, prisons, companies, or any other institution (García Coll et al., 1996). The temporal-spatial dimension can illustrate the role of power in culture. Despite apparent change in practices, organizations can remain robust places for the exercise of power that guarantees hierarchies stay the same (Roscigno, 2011). Institutions can invoke norms and regulations to reinforce inequality, and at the same time, legitimize the establishment (Gramsci, 1971; Weber, 1978). But organizations can also create and be created as places of resistance, committed to their mission to promote equity and justice across space and time, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP; Sullivan, 2009).

A third approach sees power in terms of practices: an ability or a capacity to act and behave as desired, that is, as a *power-to* practice (Allen, 2016). This approach is consistent with Weber's (1978) classic definition of power: "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance ... " (p. 53). The concept of power is linked to the ability to act: the Latin *potere* and the French *pouvoir* (Allen, 2016). The behavioral-symbolic dimension can illustrate the role of power in culture. Power is both absolute and relative and both real and perceived (Roscigno, 2011). For this reason, focusing on social inequality as evidence of power imbalance is important but insufficient. It neglects situations where the mere potential or sign of power is sufficient to recreate hierarchy (Roscigno, 2011). However, symbols can also be used to protest and resist the abuse of power, galvanizing attention, and facilitating cultural change, such as the 1968 Olympics Black Power salute (Carlos & Zirin, 2011), or the 2016 kneeling during the National Anthem by Colin Kaepernick and other football players to protest police brutality and racism.

Considering the role of power in the definition of culture can help make this concept crisper and less fuzzy: culture is a system, a dynamic organization that articulates people, places, and practices into a coherent whole through individual-social, temporal-spatial, and behavioral-symbolic dimensions and processes, with a purpose such as enacting, justifying, or resisting power-over people, power in places, and power-to practice.

Why power matters? Situating the *p*-model

Acknowledging the role of power in cultural systems is a challenge for applied developmental sciences. There is growing recognition that issues of power play a key role in the development of minority and majority individuals, and of the importance of equity and justice in the face of discrimination and social exclusion (Brown et al., 2019; Killen et al., 2016). In the United States, these efforts are part of a tradition of conceptualizations that attempt to make developmental science more in touch with reality. For instance, García Coll and colleagues (García Coll et al., 1996)'s integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children placed issues of power at the core of our understanding of child development (Causadias & Umaña-Taylor, 2018). This is necessary because many frameworks have neglected the role of social stratification, racism, oppression, and segregation (García Coll et al., 1996).

Denying the central role of power in culture is consistent with power evasion, a central feature of color-blind ideologies that reject the existence of structural problems such as racism by emphasizing equal opportunities (Neville et al., 2013). According to this approach, Americans live in a post-racial society, inequalities can be explained by lack of individual effort and merit, and we should not be focusing on race but on hard work and overcoming adversities (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Translated to developmental sciences, a model that places power as one of the purposes of culture can be accused of lacking scientific objectivity and being driven by a radical political agenda. But this position is, in itself, an exercise of power by developmental theorists, as they decide what is considered science and what is not. That is, "one aspect of power is the ability to determine what counts as knowledge and to make knowledge appear 'natural' rather than a human construction" (Gjerde, 2004, p. 145).

The notion that power is one central feature of culture in America is supported by scientific evidence. In the United States, hiring discrimination against racial/ethnic minorities with the same education as White applicants has continued over the last decades with little improvement (Quillian et al., 2017). Compared to their White peers, African Americans, American Indians, and Latino men face higher lifetime risk of being killed by the police (Edwards et al., 2019). For young minority men between 25 and 35 years, police killings are among the leading causes of death (Edwards et al., 2019). These findings illustrate the

existence and persistence of racism, a system that shows the centrality of power in culture.

What is racism? Illustrating the *p*-model

Up to this point, the *p*-model remains an abstract conceptualization. To illustrate its utility for applied developmental science, I apply it to understanding racism. Framing racism as a cultural system is consistent with a rich body of theory and research (DiAngelo, 2018). Racism is "the racial ideology of a racialized social system" (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 218). In the United States, White supremacy is the dominant strain of racism in which people of European descent claim the right to subordinate those of African, Asian, Latin, and/or Native American descent (Feagin, 2013). Racism as a cultural system requires special attention by developmental scientists given its impact on all children, youth, and families (Seaton et al., 2018).

The *p*-model can be used to show how practices play a central role in maintaining a cultural system like racism. Racism in the United States relies on the *practice* of putting *people* into *places* with the *purpose* of enacting *power*. This practice shows surprising continuity in space and time in the forced confinement of Native Americans on reservations, the bondage of African Americans on slave plantations, the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in internment camps, the mass incarceration of Latino and African American men in jails and prisons, the cruel treatment of Central American refugees in detention centers, and the prohibition of people from many Middle Eastern and North African countries from entering the United States. This tradition enacts racist ideas into practices (Kendi, 2017).

The *p*-model can be used to approach racism as a cultural system embedded in *practices* and *behavior-symbols*. Cox (2003) examined the role of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894, in the preservation of confederate culture in America. Cox (2003) documented how they effectively shaped the perceptions and behaviors of generations of southerners by promoting the *Lost Cause* meta-narrative, the untrue story of how the just and heroic Confederacy defended state rights and the gallant Southern way of life against the Northern aggressors, minimizing the central role of slavery in the American Civil War (1861–1865). The Daughters enabled the cultural continuity of this myth through practices, including teaching this narrative through revisionist textbooks in schools (Cox, 2003).

The *p*-model can be used to approach racism as a cultural system embedded in *places* that have continuity and change in *time-spaces*. The Daughters materialized the myth of the Lost Cause meta-narrative by transforming the American landscape with monuments celebrating Confederate war criminals as heroes (Cox, 2003). If the Confederacy was defeated in the Civil War, the Daughters accomplished a cultural and ecological victory in the preservation and redemption of White supremacy in America (Cox, 2003).

The *p*-model can be used to approach racism as a cultural system affecting *people* and damaging *individual-groups*. The cultural and ecological legacy from the Daughters is far from a historic curiosity. It reverberates to this day, shaping the lives of present generations long after the Daughters passed away. Heather Heyer was murdered in a terrorist attack at the "Unite the Right" rally on August 12, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia. The expressed purpose of this demonstration of White supremacists was to protest against the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee, a commander of the Confederate States Army (Fausset & Feuer, 2017). Affirming this ecological legacy through violence is a process that maintains racism as a dominant cultural system in America.

The *p*-model can be used to approach racism as a system maintained by cultural *processes*. The cultural process of myth construction through the propagation of the Lost Cause meta-narrative was also a case of ecological transformation of cities and parks into shrines of heroes of the Confederacy. These cultural narratives change in time and space, but they continue to shape behaviors and symbols, hurting individuals and groups. In part, the Community Lost meta-narrative drives the rising tide of White nationalist movements, arguing that once upon a time traditional communities lived in harmony, but globalization, diversity, and immigration destroyed their culture (Causadias et al., 2018a). This narrative exacerbates the feeling of status threat among Whites in America that explains, in part, the rise of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016 (Mutz, 2018).

Finally, the *p*-model can be used to approach racism as a cultural system of *power* and *privilege*. These *practices* in *places* are enforced to exert *power* over some *people* (racial/ethnic minorities) to preserve the *privilege* of others (Whites). In relation to racism, power-over people translates into domination, the most extreme form of power (Blau, 1977). Domination is unrestrained and unfair power asymmetry to control others and their actions

(McCammon, 2018). *Imperium* (domination by the state) and *dominium* (domination by private parties) are different forms of domination that go back to Roman times and traditional Roman republicanism (Pettit, 1997, 2001). This distinction is useful in understanding contemporary forms of racial domination, such as the state-sponsored racism of the Trump administration (Causadias, 2019), as well as corporate-sponsored racism profiting from mass incarceration (Alexander, 2012).

In sum, the case of racism illustrates the *p*-model, which shows how people, places, and practices, expressed in dimensions and maintained through processes, create and are created by a system. A system becomes more than a people, a place, and a practice. Once established, racism develops into a stable organization that is more than its parts and cannot be easily reduced to just one part. Thus, cultural systems can also be considered irreducible units of analysis.

How is this useful? Implementing the *p*-model

The *p*-model can have useful applications for theory, research, and practice in developmental science. In theory, defining culture as a system highlights the dynamic nature of the interplay between people, places, and practices. Systems theories emphasize the importance of understanding dynamic connections between different components of a system (von Bertalanffy, 1976). This entails moving from conceptualizations that separate the causal effect of a single component (people, places, or practices), to embracing a new understanding of how systems operate as a dynamic whole (Diez Roux, 2011).

This insight has dramatic implications for developmental theories, as it transforms our approach to the development and health of individuals and groups, from isolated factors to manifestations of a system (Diez Roux, 2011). This can be challenging in the study of culture and individual development, where many systems are at play. For instance, racism and sexism are interlocking cultural systems that work synergistically to bolster each other, affecting the development and adaptation of Black women in distinctive ways, as they experience unique challenges that Black men and White women do not face (Allen, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991) .

In research, the *p*-model can be applied to study cultural systems by examining population, environmental, and participatory dynamics. This involves interrogating the system by looking at its components. In the case of racism, this means engaging population dynamics (people) by measuring individual, as well as collective, experiences of discrimination. For instance, population dynamics can be engaged by using subjective (perceived) and objective (audit studies) approaches to measure racial discrimination (Seaton et al., 2018). It also involves examining ecological dynamics (places) by assessing spatial, as well as temporal, contexts of discrimination. For example, examining ecological dynamics can involve using geographical (residential segregation) and historical (redlining policies) methods. It involves investigating participatory dynamics (practices) by evaluating behavioral, as well as symbolic, engagement in communities by using quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (ethnography) approaches.

The *p*-model can be applied to research by creating multitrait-multimethod matrices that assess different cultural dimensions and processes with different methods and measures (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). Moreover, a systems approach to research on culture requires overcoming the doctrine of methodological individualism in the social sciences, in which social issues are reduced to data about individuals (Diez-Roux, 1998). It is critical to pursue new ways of evaluating cultural systems, not only measuring individuals. For instance, Kleinman (1995) encouraged ethnographers to examine "collective (both local and societal) and individual (both public and intimate) levels of analysis" (p. 98).

In practice, the *p*-model can be applied in developmental science by informing education, policies, and interventions. For instance, it can be applied by recognizing the role of power as one purpose of cultural systems, especially by approaching educators, policymakers, and practitioners as powerful actors. In education, this involves acknowledging how tenured professors benefit from their dominating position in educational systems, holding considerable power-over students. In policies, it includes appreciating the privileged role of policymakers in determining who gets access to services and how, holding considerable power in institutions. In interventions, it means recognizing how those designing and carrying out these programs get to choose what behaviors are framed as normal or abnormal, needing modification and treatment, choosing some groups as the standard of health and criterion for comparison (Sroufe, 1970). They hold considerable power-to intervene.

Making a cultural system more equitable requires sharing power and decision making with students in education, with citizens in policy-making, and with community members in interventions. Educators, policymakers, and practitioners can also use their power-to

challenge and resist cultural systems. For instance, by moving away from deficit models of racial/ethnic minorities to promoting positive youth development (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018) and leveraging the healing potential of racial socialization (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Furthermore, a systems approach to power as one purpose of culture demands awareness that it cannot be restricted to single issues to address through education, policies, and interventions. That is, "power cannot be theoretically reduced to a singular attribute, position or a simple equation of tangible costs, benefits and balance/imbalance" (Roscigno, 2011, p. 353). Fair practices should aim at changing the system as a whole.

Limitations and future directions

Culture is a fuzzy concept, making it challenging to define it. In this article, I introduced a *p*-model to make culture a crisper and less fuzzy concept: a system of people, places, and practices, for a purpose such of enacting, justifying, or resisting power. However, there are several limitations to this model that demand more attention and refinement, and many important issues I neglected.

First, it is unlikely that this model can overcome the difficult task of defining culture and reaching an agreement on a definition. Ultimately, the problem "is that no one is quite sure what culture is … it is fugitive, unsteady, encyclopedic, and normatively charged … [some people] think it vacuous altogether, or even dangerous, and would ban it from the serious discourse of serious persons" (Geertz, 2000, p. 11).

Second, there are many more relevant components of culture that I did not discuss in detail that deserve more attention in the future, including cultural products and tools (Gibson et al., 1994). Despite this limited scope, attention to people, places, and practices can help researchers clarify what they mean when they use the term culture in theory, research, and interventions. In addition, I ground this model in theory and research in the United States of America, despite its well-documented drawbacks (Arnett, 2008). More attention is needed to understand to what degree this model is applicable to other countries.

Third, there are many more important dimensions and processes I did not discuss in detail that deserve more attention in the future, including the internal-external, proximal-distal, relative-universal, and objective-subjective dimensions of culture. Despite this limited scope, attention to the individual-social, temporal-spatial, and behavioral-symbolic dimensions and processes can inform how we think about culture, not only how we measure it. For example, the individual-social dimension goes beyond measuring both domains. Besides focusing on one (individual *or* social) or both (individual *and* social), a system perspective can inform how they construct each other: how the individual *is* social and the social *is* individual. The same is true for the temporal-spatial and the behavioral-symbolic dimensions.

Fourth, framing culture as a system with a purpose of sustaining power-over people, power in places, and power-to practice can provide an incomplete picture. This perspective can neglect cases in which power is not the central purpose of culture. For instance, culture can provide meaning, as illustrated in the development of integrative, resilient, and articulated purpose in life among adolescents who experience marginalization (Sumner et al., 2018). Moreover, power is not necessarily oppressive, but can have a normative and beneficial role, and can even be liberating. There are central features of culture, such as language, that can be emancipatory rather than unfair (Vygotsky, 1997).

Conclusion

I believe approaching culture as systems can help improve applied work in developmental sciences. Studies, measures, policies, and interventions focused on specific people, place, and practice are crucial. They help create preliminary connections among components of broader networks, gradually improving our understanding of the whole system (Kendler, 2005). At the same time, we should keep in mind that these efforts are only addressing parts of a larger system and do not provide a full account of culture. The pursuit of cultural change that is necessary to overcome racism demands tackling the system as a whole, as well as its parts. If we are not up to the task, we risk continuing to be a science of "excitement and pink lemonade" (Cronbach, 1957, p. 671). If that is the case, fuzzy concepts would be the least of our problems.

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