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# Culture and choice: Toward integrating cultural sociology with the judgment and decision-making sciences

Stephen Vaisey, Lauren Valentino\*

Duke University, Department of Sociology, 417 Chapel Drive, Durham, NC 27708, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural sociologists frequently theorize about choices and decisions, although we tend to shy away from this language, and from concepts that are used by the judgment and decision-making (JDM) sciences. We show that cultural sociology and JDM are compatible and complementary fields by dispelling some common misunderstandings about JDM. We advocate for a strategic assimilation approach in which cultural sociologists are able to translate their work into key JDM terms like beliefs, preferences, and endowments. Learning to speak the JDM language will allow cultural sociologists to make important, and uniquely sociological, contributions to social scientific explanations of choices and decisions.

## 1. Introduction

James Duesenberry famously quipped that “economics is all about how people make choices [and] sociology is about why they don’t have any choices to make” (1960: 233). Though sociologists have emphasized constraint over choice and overdetermination over options, the idea that sociologists don’t think about choice is not wholly accurate. In a recent American Sociological Association annual meeting program, for example, the words *choice*, *choose*, *decide*, and *decision* appear dozens of times. For instance, one paper investigates “How Black Middle-Class Men Make Decisions about Casual Sexual Relationships” and another explores “How Work, Family, and Lifestyle Factors Shape Medical Trainees’ Career Decisions.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond these explicit uses of decision terms, many more sociological studies could easily be framed in such terms. For example, we hear little about the *choice* to volunteer, attend church, or go to college, although sociologists could conceivably discuss these topics in this way.

Equally revealing is the language that sociologists use to explain *each other’s* behavior. “Did you hear that sociologist X moved to university Y?” “It was because they offered her more money, or because she thought she would be more likely to get tenure there, or because it was a higher status place, or because her husband was unhappy in his job.” These sorts of explanations generally evoke beliefs, preferences, and opportunities, and seem to require very little of the apparatus of cultural sociology. We rarely hear our colleagues invoke concepts like *habitus*, *script*, *narrative*, or *logic* while gossiping. And given that cultural sociologists rarely use these concepts to explain their own behavior, perhaps it is no surprise that outsiders find little use for them. Those in government and industry rely much more heavily on concepts borrowed from the judgment and decision-making sciences (hereafter JDM)<sup>2</sup> to understand how people make choices.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [lauren.valentino@duke.edu](mailto:lauren.valentino@duke.edu) (L. Valentino).

<sup>1</sup> These examples are from the 2016 meetings.

<sup>2</sup> We borrow the term “judgment and decision-making sciences” from Bruch and Feinberg’s (2017) recent review of the field.

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We therefore find ourselves in the following situation<sup>3</sup>:

1. Many sociologists are theorizing about choices even if they sometimes shy away from choice or decision words. Though they are perhaps uncomfortable using such language professionally, they have no problem using it to explain their own (and their colleagues') behavior.
2. JDM scientists explicitly work on choices using a different set of concepts than sociologists.
3. The JDM community has a larger and far more appreciative external audience.

Of course, the fact that outsiders are listening to JDM scholars does not necessarily imply that their ideas are better. Perhaps outsiders appreciate these ideas for non-scientific reasons. Nor does the fact that sociologists ignore their own concepts to gossip mean they don't have value. Perhaps sociological analyses of behavior are much more powerful but the concepts are just really hard to work with. Or perhaps even sociologists revert back to the folk cost-benefit language that permeates our culture when they forget to put on their sociologist hats.

We argue, however, that there is actually enormous complementarity between work in cultural sociology and work in the judgment and decision-making sciences, and that the apparent incompatibilities are the result of an unnecessary language barrier. Consider an analogy:

*Once upon a time, scholars from around the world spoke many languages. Over time, one language—English—became the lingua franca and scholars around the world found it more useful to communicate with each other in this language. But one country's scholars—let's say the Finnish<sup>4</sup>—refuse to speak or write in English. They believe that only Finnish can capture the true nuances of their research. Over time, they become isolated and communicate only with each other. Few people on the outside can read their work nor can the Finnish scholars really follow the discussion in English anymore. But in their conferences and seminars they continually reassure each other about the barbarity of English and of the nuance and sophistication of their own language. They await the day that the world's scholars will realize that Finnish is superior and embrace it. In the meantime, they maintain a smug self-satisfaction that they at least are speaking the best language.*

We think contemporary sociology (and particularly contemporary *cultural* sociology) is a lot like this. Most scholars outside of sociology who are working to understand patterns of behavior rely on the *lingua franca* of JDM, using terms like beliefs, preferences, costs, payoffs, incentives, and so on. This language is grounded in economic ideas and has been strongly influenced by the behavioral scientists who criticized economics *in its own language* (e.g. Edwards, 1954; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Simont, 1959). This process has resulted in an interdisciplinary network of JDM researchers—and fellow travelers in neighboring disciplines—who speak the same language even though the content of that language has changed over time to include new concepts (e.g., bias, heuristic, satisficing). Scholars in this area disagree with each other about many things but they are at least communicating in a common language.

Sociologists tend to be wary of this decision-theoretic language because it smacks of economics and psychology, two disciplines that are supposedly individualist and reductionist and thus incompatible with sociology. We think this is a misconception and will explain why below. But for now we want to outline some possibilities for making sense of this situation:

1. The language of cultural sociology and the language of JDM are incompatible. In this case, translation and integration are neither desirable nor possible. Sociologists should simply attempt to persuade scholars in other fields to do what we do and to persuade policy experts and decision makers to listen only to explanations that are sufficiently "sociological."<sup>5</sup>
2. The languages of cultural sociology and JDM are compatible. Therefore, cultural sociologists should do one of the following:
  - a. Borrow concepts from JDM to improve cultural sociology; or
  - b. Borrow concepts from JDM to improve cultural sociology; or
  - c. Try to integrate the fields by encouraging judgment and decision scientists to adopt a sociological vocabulary; or
  - d. Try to integrate the fields by adopting JDM language wherever possible.

We begin by considering whether cultural sociology is compatible with JDM.

## 2. Is cultural sociology incompatible with judgment and decision-making sciences?

The first question is whether there is an inherent incompatibility between the theoretical vocabularies of JDM and cultural sociology. Addressing this question means having a grasp of the vocabularies themselves. To do this fully, one would need to fully outline "judgment and decision science" and "cultural sociology," which is not the objective of this paper. Let us instead begin with a simplified sketch of judgment and decision research and see if it fits with cultural sociology.

The fundamental building blocks of JDM are *beliefs* and *preferences*, along with a situation in which these come into play. In some simple situations, beliefs or preferences are not even really necessary. Imagine a situation where someone has a choice to bet \$1 each

<sup>3</sup> Our diagnosis stems from our experience as sociologists working in the United States. We recognize that our perspective may not generalize to cultural sociology elsewhere. We welcome thoughts from sociologists outside North America on whether the issues we point out here are occurring elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> No offense intended to non-metaphorical Finns.

<sup>5</sup> We will here ignore the possibility that they are incompatible and sociology has nothing to offer, though that is logically possible.

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