Reconstructing Culture in Educational Research

Ray McDermott
Stanford University

Hervé Varenne
Teachers College, Columbia University

Ray McDermott is a cultural anthropologist and a Professor in the School of Education, Stanford University. He has been doing research on theories of political economy and their relation to theories of mind, literacy, learning, ability, disability, and genius. From years of close work at the level of the classroom, his overall take is that American schooling is the unfortunate handmaiden of the divisive social forces that lead a duplicitous life in all the cultural materials available to participants. Recent work includes "A Century of Margaret Mead" and "Estranged Labor Learning" (with Jean Lave).

Hervé Varenne is a cultural anthropologist and a Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he is chair of the Department of International and Transcultural Studies. He is the author of many books and articles on aspects of everyday life and education in the United States and Ireland, including Americans Together (1977), American School Language (1983), and Ambiguous Harmony: Family Talk in America (1992). Most recently, he and Ray McDermott published Successful Failure (1998).

We concluded our recent book on Successful Failure with an unusual call. To improve the fate of children at risk of any labeled failure, "the first and perhaps only step is to turn away from them" (Varenne & McDermott, 1998, p. 217). Counter-intuitive, yes, and surprisingly constructive and respectful to
all children. If the only tools available for helping children in trouble are the diagnostic and remedial preoccupations of American education, it might be best to forget individual children and focus instead on how we have created contexts that make some children—about half of them—so problematic. If schools are for all children to flourish, then the individual child can be our unit of concern, but not our unit of analysis or reorganization. Why should kids be the focus of change when it is the rest of us—the culture that is acquiring them—that arranges their trouble? This conclusion was the systematic product of a cultural analysis applied to the most pressing issue in American schooling: the attribution of success/failure. In this chapter, we restate our conclusion in order, first, to discuss why culture—and neither the individual nor socializing group—is the crucial analytic unit for educational research and, second, to sketch how a cultural analysis leads to a new articulation of major policy issues, in particular, the failure of students and its complex relation to kinds of person by gender and race.¹

When we studied children having bad days at school, home, or after-school clubs, we often saw adults rushing to help, but unsure of what to do. Comfort them, protect them, tutor them; these were short-lived possibilities. Helping individual children takes time, and their problems, even at an early age, can seem so deep. Problems continue, and adults run out of time, patience, and how-how. Then, in a fateful shorthand that lasts and lasts, the adults diagnose "the child's problem." Thirty years of researching children with other children, teachers, and parents have led us to doubt any special help that first requires a personal identification or diagnosis and then proceeds with a treatment of the person. To care for the children in trouble, the best action is not to diagnose them, but to reorganize the processes that make adults focus on the children and their received problems rather than on adults themselves. As researchers and policy-makers, and as teachers and parents interested in the best for every individual child, we should not allow isolation, diagnosis, and remediation to be our only recourse. Suppose we focus instead on the institutions that foreground each child's problem, including the institutions that place some of us seemingly in a position to help. Where do these institutions come from historically? What are the grounds of their authority? How are they maintained? How can they be played with, tampered with, and otherwise transformed in unpredictable directions?

Educational institutions must be faced as historical, arbitrary, and artificial, that is, as cultural in the best sense of the term. The concept of "culture"

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ment, gender, or race. Third, we note further the consequences of a cultural approach for systematic investigation or research.

**CULTURE: FROM PAST CAUSE TO CURRENT CHALLENGE**

Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers.

—William James (1868)

The application of the concept of culture to educational issues has been both remarkable and disappointing: remarkable in initially moving theory away from a myopic concern with the properties of individuals, and disappointing when conceptualized as a variable explaining individual behavior. Informed readers of educational research might be confused. Did not anthropologists urge educational researchers to use culture as a key category in the study of individual learning? Yes, as stated, but not much as taken. The initial purpose was to encourage educational researchers to expand the list of things considered in any theory of learning (or any apparent lack of learning), but the deeper purpose, only slowly realized in response to how culture came be popularized in educational writing, was to substitute culture for the individual child as the unit of analysis. Methodologically, anthropologists have always proceeded this way. They have always tried to study what they foolishly called whole cultures—foolishly because they necessarily studied only parts of cultures, parts often borrowed from still other cultures—but behind the rush to wholeness was a sound instinct: the theoretical prize always went to fieldworkers who unpacked the largest and most inclusive forms of constraint on the behavior of individuals. The unit of analysis was the tribe, the region, the economy, the language, the kinship system, and so on, often analyzed in action, fully contested, argued over, worried about, died for, and sometimes rearranged. Individuals and their psychological make-up—good term, make-up, for individuals are always made up—were crucial, of course, but never independent of the worlds with which they were in never-relenting interaction.

Consider only the following:

[The culture concept] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perceive, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. (Geertz, 1966, p. 89)

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or that:

The term culture [refers to] what is learned, ... the things one needs to know in order to meet the standards of others. ... If culture is learned, its ultimate locus must be in individuals rather than in groups. (Goodenough, 1971, pp. 19–20)

Both these statements can be, and often are, interpreted to mean that the communicating and learning individual is a privileged unit in cultural analysis. A methodological individualism is more apparent in Goodenough than in Geertz (see the critique by Geertz, 1973, p. 11, of Goodenough for "holding that 'culture is located in the minds and hearts of men'"). The differences between them are small once we compare the methods and results of their fieldwork and miniscule if we compare their anthropological approaches to the work of American educational researchers who assume that, if school is not going well, we should try to fix the kids, sometimes their teachers or parents, occasionally the school system, but never those of us who are watching, documenting, diagnosing, researching, and prognosticating. Both Geertz and Goodenough became important anthropologists because they carefully watched people in interaction and listened endlessly not only to interpretations of those interactions but to interpretations of the interpretations, each level being a thread in a knitted portrait eventually brought home in a report (see Geertz, 1960, 1973; Goodenough, 1951). Individuals were their friends, but analytically, we repeat, analytically, they always looked at those persons with a consideration of everyone else in the interpretive networks called Java, Bali, or Truk. Cultural analysis, like school reform, requires we take persons seriously while analytically looking through them—as much as possible in their own terms—to the world with which they are struggling. It is not easy, but it is the best way to see them in their full complexity; anything less delivers a thin portrait of their engagements and leaves them vulnerable to being labeled, classified, diagnosed, blamed, charged, and found lacking without any consideration of how they had been arranged, misheard, unappreciated, set up, and denied by others.

Most anthropologists have emphasized that culture is, above all, about "activities" in relation to a people's "natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself and of each individual to himself" (Boas, 1911/1938, p. 149). Recently, the same intuition has been recaptured in various theories of "practice" "situated" in "distributed" settings, thereby pointing researchers toward both historical conditions and personal activity (Cole, 1996; Hollond et al., 1998; Lave & McDermott, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ortner, 1984).
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When William James (1868) remarked that “every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers” (yes, and sisters, of course), he offered a self that is analytically and experientially available only in relation to others, the others actively making something for the self to work with and reorganize. To locate even the most private self, we must focus on its coordination with what has been made by dead and living relatives and neighbors. As John Dewey put it later (1920, p. 200), social institutions are “not a means for obtaining something for individuals, not even happiness. They are the means of creating individuals.” Culture is not a consequence of adding up individuals, but of people dealing with each other under both perduring and emergent circumstances. Take a fact from our biographies. Varenne cannot deny he is “French,” because all who matter to him know he was born and raised in France. Nor can McDermott deny he is “Irish American” of a kind easily found in New York City. Analytically, we want to resist these commonsensical attributions, because they mask both the processes that make France and America and the activities of all those who must make their life there. To say Varenne is French and just French is to miss how France has been and continues to be a pressing concern for those born in France, Algeria, Canada, and so on. To say McDermott is just Irish American is to miss how definitions of ethnicity, race, social class, religion, and so on, have been a problem, not only for him or those born in the United States, but for the billions of people touched by everything “made in America.”

Culture is not a past cause to a current self. Culture is the current challenge to possible future selves. Specifically, in the context of the United States, America is not what makes Americans. America is the current challenge to the future of all those who cannot escape being caught by the institutions of its State in their many incarnations, wherever, and dare we say whenever, they build their lives.

A focus on culture brings accounts of what has been made for us and what we are now making. Dead and living brothers and sisters have made and continue to make facts for us. Every “fact” is only, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it (1850/1995), “but some rumor of the fact.” Rumors are always open to manipulation, and they are hard to ignore. This child is a success! That child is a failure! “Just the test scores, ma’am.” America will have its successes and failures for all to see. It is the American way, the way school is done by often reluctant agents. Anything we do or say makes facts for others to accept, reject, and build anew. They do the same for us. Rumors told and retold make the world of today remarkably like the world of yesterday. They reconstitute us. Reconstituted rumors can become small facts in the midst of our families or large facts on a world scale; they can become medium-sized facts on the scale of what we write as anthropologists in Schools of Education, who get read and possibly appropriated for political purposes far beyond us. As social scientists intimately concerned with education, we believe these facts must be faced and culture is the most powerful concept available to catch the action in its full complexity.

WHY CULTURE?

And in this staggering disproportion between man and no-man, there is no place for purely human boasts of grandeur, or for forgetting that men build their cultures by huddling together, nervously loquacious, at the edge of an abyss.

—Kenneth Burke (1935)

Desperately Seeking Units

Let us start with an evocative contrast of disciplinary units of analysis in educational research:

For a psychological inquiry, only one subject is necessary; the minimal unit of analysis is the individual person making a move; and the fundamental cause of the move can be found far in the person’s past.

For a social inquiry, two individuals are necessary; the minimal unit of analysis is established in their interaction, and the fundamental cause for either person’s move can be found in what the other person did.

The word agent here is a challenging word to all those who consider the kind of analysis we present as not paying enough attention to the “agency” of individuals. If paying attention leads back to a concern with the socialized properties of selves, we do not deny agency. If paying attention includes a deliberate search for aspects of a person’s conditions that the person actually engages, that is, if we approach the person as having become—if only for a moment, or perhaps for a lifetime—the agent “of” the institution that authorizes the performance of specific acts in given contexts, then we are precisely interested in agency. For example, all persons who find themselves in the position of “school teacher” are necessarily, and however reluctantly, “agents of the School.”
For a cultural inquiry, three or more people are necessary; the minimal unit of analysis is established by two of them interacting and the third one interpreting their behavior; and the issue of cause fades into the background as one is led to focus on the consequences of action-as-interpreted (adapted from Arensberg, 1982).

This contrast set is helpful as long as we do not take it literally. It is particularly telling at the level of examples and conclusions where the contrasting evocation of psychological, social, and cultural analyses covers how the disciplines are popularly identified. However psychologists operate on their data, their examples and conclusions are reported as involving individual persons making up their minds. Similarly, social analysts claim to account for the influence of one person (or group) on others. In contrast, cultural analysts should focus on how a wider group of people together act, interpret, and make consequential. Through a cultural analytic lens, people work together, they retell what they just did, and then act again on the basis of what was said to have happened. Cultural analysts are interested in individuals and their interactions, of course, but they are driven to focus, first, on the collective constructions all actors must deal with—whether they personally accept, understand, or even know much about these constructions—and, second, on what others will do, in the future, with what the original actors did.

When applied to schooling, a cultural analysis is less about who is going to succeed, and more about how institutions are built in which so many children can be declared failures. What is it about America that people keep asking of their own children what each child cannot do? How are opportunities organized that so many parents feel relieved when they hear about children from other families doing badly in school? When applied to categories for naming kinds of people, a cultural analysis is less about how people in the different groups can be expected to behave, and more about how people in ever shifting circumstances develop categories for consistently assigning behavioral traits to make up kinds of persons (Frake, 1980, 1998; Michalchik, 2000; Pollock, chapter 4, this volume; Raley, chapter 5, this volume; Rosaldo & Flores, 1997; Seyer-Ochi, 2002, chapter 6, this volume).

In brief, given how units are defined in a study of cultural processes:

A minimal cultural analysis asks: What are the resources available to people in a given situation, how and when are they applied, to whom, and with what consequences? Who else is concerned with the people a given situation, and what are the mechanisms that allow them to limit or amplify what is done?

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A minimal cultural analysis in educational research asks: How can we specify both the promise and the limitations of the resources available to the educating professions? Who else is involved in limiting and expanding what these professions propose, and what are the resources at their disposal?

A minimal policy analysis based on a cultural analysis then asks: How can we reorganize resources to construct a world that more closely approximates democratic ideals? Where should we focus our action?

To give all children equivalent chances, we should spend less time evaluating them, ranking them, and then compensating for the problems said to account for their failure. The problem facing American education is not that we have so many failing children. It is rather that we have so many scales ready to show children failing, a problem made more intractable given the many adults invested in identification and remediation.

The Goal of a Cultural Analysis

One had... to come into contact with an alien culture in order to understand that a culture was not a community basket weaving project, nor yet an act of God; was something neither desirable nor undesirable in itself, being inevitable, being nothing more or less than the recorded and visible effects on a body of people of the vicissitudes with which they had been forced to deal.

—James Baldwin (1955)

The following account of culture at work begins, as every story about culture must, in a single place, in what is commonly known as "a culture" or, in this illustrative case, "three" cultures. The story expands quickly across continents and decades as the specifics of the local are grasped in their connections with a wider world. Along the way, an object of concern gets transformed from an unworkable solution to a newly defined problem. This is the way life is, and a cultural analysis should mirror the process.

The adventure begins in 1915 in Tuscany. Three archaeologists reported excavating ancient Etruscan warriors (Culture I) exactly like what experts had imagined. Ancient Etruscans were a high style mystery at the time, and modern Western literati (Culture II) were anxious to locate European origins in the non-Asian and non-Semitic world of Northern Italy. Despite questions about the archaeologists, the warriors were accepted as genuine, and an Etruscan hall was built at the Metropolitan in 1933. Almost 40 years after their discovery, a curator (Culture III) walked through the hall and suddenly
saw a 19th-century work. A faker figured out how to forge a 19th-century version of an ancient Etruscan horse, but not a 20th-century version. By 1953, the 19th century had become apparent, and the forgery was discovered (the details are in von Bothmer & Noble, 1961). Literary critic Hugh Kenner (1985) offers a nice description:

The faker had worked into [the warriors] every Etruscan mannerism he knew about, and every nineteenth century mannerism he didn't. The style of your own time, it seems, is always invisible. Then time passed, until one fine day an expert registered "nineteenth century!" The stylistic marks of the time in which it was made had, so to speak, worked their way up to visibility; in a few more, presumably, they will have quite overwhelmed all the detail that once looked Etruscan.

One culture, that is, a particular configuration of institutions, political groups and their alliances, people distributed in various positions, discourse styles, and so on, defined a problem: What can we find out about our glorious past, and can we find an ancient Etruscan warrior to fill in the picture? Reason and sentiment produced the need for facts, and a faker in turn produced the artifacts. A culture defined a problem, and a self-conscious member, unfortunately a faker, methodically figured out an acceptable solution and served it up for a handsome profit. Another culture, well, the same culture by 40 years, recognized the solution as a new and different problem and the Etruscan forgeries were removed.

Many educational professionals, researchers included, have the same status as the museum curators: They are given the authority to place something made up and given to them ("facts" and "data"—both rumors, but precisely organized for the purpose) in a particular place of honor or shame constructed by a complex political world that defines problems and suggests where convincing solutions might be found. Educational researchers often answer to the problems posed by the culture and, worse, they do so both in terms suggested by the culture and without consideration of how the problems and suggested answers came to be so well defined. Educational researchers rarely consider how unlikely it is that a culture formulating a problem of type X could also produce a solution that would not recreate the circumstances that originally brought the problem to attention. In America, generations have given authority to such statements as: "Yes, we continually record unequal school performance across racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines. This is because there is something wrong with either the kids or their schools." Generations have also agreed about the questions to ask: "What is wrong with kids who fail, or what is wrong with their schools?" They point at likely causes: "It must have to do with a lack of genetic intelligence, bad social conditions, irresponsible parents, wrong habits of speech, misunderstanding teachers, incompetent administrators, etc." Any statement by a researcher, critic, or political activist who follows this line of argument will be entertained, discussed, contested, and likely turned into a policy.

We suggest it is the very play of argumentation that may be at fault for producing the particular path people in education continue to suffer. A cultural analysis inquires into the play of argumentation for signs suggesting how it is anchored in a particular time and place among a people with a shared history. A cultural analysis is not about giving solutions to acknowledged and likely false problems, but about sketching and confronting the conditions that tied problems and apparent solutions together. A cultural analysis should produce more inclusive questions and more comprehensive answers. This is not an easy quest, for cultural analysts are no less embedded in current circumstances than the rest of educational research. It is not easy to do alone and not worth doing haphazardly. In the next section, we offer a procedure—logical and in that sense partial and not uniformly useful, but a procedure nonetheless—for accomplishing the contrarian goal of a cultural analysis.

The Logic of a Cultural Analysis
(Beyond Individual/Social)

... individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation.

—Charles Sanders Peirce (1868)

For heuristic purposes, we present the logic of a cultural analysis as a movement in three stages from American commonsense (focus on the individual), to the first versions of the reaction against a simplistic individualism (focus on social forces deterministic of individual behavior), to a transformation of individual and social by emphasizing the activities of persons working together with pre-existing resources that they reconstrue through their interaction. Taking educational problems through these three stages of analysis can deliver a different sense of what is wrong and what can be done.

Stage 1. In American public discourse, problems (school failure, gender or race inequalities) are defined often as the problems of individuals (society may be the cause, but it is the individual who is the site of the problem). Al-
though such formulations have intuitive pull, they are undermined by a weak account of the worlds in which individuals develop and/or display and/or get diagnosed as having problems. They also have a long history of blaming the victim. In short: "Those poor people have many problems. Someone should help them."

Stage II. In the name of being more inclusive, the same problems are often described as the product of overwhelming social forces. This formulation has the advantage of blaming the victim a little less, but leaves the problems intact and, worse, identifiable in the lives of the unfortunate. The problem stays far from those who diagnose and make policy. In short: "Those poor people sure get pushed around. Too bad we can’t help them directly."

Stage III. It takes a crowd of active and intelligent individuals to put together a problem. The person with the problem behavior is only the point of focus. It takes others to set the stage for a problem, to recognize it, document it, worry about it, explain it, remediate it, and still more people to observe, interpret, and comment on the whole process. By the time a school problem gets the attention of government policy, just about everyone has had or is about to have a say on the topic. It takes concerted effort for a person to put together a recognizable problem to acquire a next generation of children. In short: "Let’s change the world enough that these problems do not come up anymore."

Stage III has the advantage of taking into account everyone and their history as they continue to make it. By this way of thinking, problems are not just the result of old causes; rather, they are continually remade under new conditions, even by those who seek specifically to remediate them. This way of thinking seeks what is most powerful among the people observed in the institutional settings where they conduct their lives. What first calls attention to a potential problem, the symptom, so to speak, can often be shown to be linked to other facts even more powerful than the original fact itself. This makes both analysis and change difficult to do. This is most everyone’s experience. Education is difficult to make better.

Difficult, yes, but culture is not fate. Institutionalized practices—schools, admission boards, testing companies, and so forth—have been made and can be remade. All of them have taken shape after extensive controversy sensitive to, and symptomatic of, the conditions of the time and depend on constant contributions from each of us. Our common future is not completely determined. New educational researchers, like the museum curator at the Etruscan exhibit in the 1950s, can always notice how a major institution has

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been fooled; then we can use their authority to demote what others had promoted.

Do all kids have to fall into success and failure boxes once and for all? And why do these boxes overlap so thoroughly with the boxes that separate male from female (and least in math and science) and black from white? In the following discussion, we offer a redefinition of school failure in relation to gender and race. Each example develops the same three stages of analysis. Each one has its own story to tell, but cumulatively, despite their varying data sources, methods, and practical implications, they give a sense of coherence and progress of two kinds: first, a shift from talking about kinds of person (failures, women, and African Americans) to an analysis of the cultural world that conjures up such persons to be talked about and, second, an analytic move beyond the commonsense dichotomies (success/failure, male/female, white/black) that simplify the world without taking into account the principles that organize it.

CULTURE APPLIED

No people come into possession of a culture without having paid a heavy price for it.

—James Baldwin (1955)

Failure’s Failure (Beyond Success/Failure)

We start with the identified “problem” of school failure (however defined) and the temptation to look for causes and then solutions that would transform “failure” into “success.” We can only summarize the argument from Successful Failure in the hope of circumscribing the political and moral issues at stake in a call to understand research on school failure as part of the problem of school failure. Here we go, in three stages: first, an issue, school failure, that moves us; then the realization it is not what it appears to be, for the reason that we seem to be so relentlessly successful at producing, documenting, and consuming failure; and finally an inquiry into what makes it and us tick and how we might reorganize the “us” enough to see the “it” in a new way. In popular discourse, the preferred mode of conversation about school failure is focused on the individual child: the preferred alternative is focused on the school and its society; to these, we add a third stage by focusing on the culture we make available to each other.
Stage I. Isn't it obvious all children are born uniquely different and differentially special, and don't individual differences account for why some do better in schools than others? As it is always possible to display what people do not know, anyone claiming that many children fail in school because they lack skills and capacities certainly has a wealth of data to make the point. By such an account, if failing kids simply knew more or were at least better able to learn, school failure would go away. That not being the case, isn't it reasonable to assume some are better than others at certain tasks? Isn't it liberating and responsible to identify the fit between person and task as early as possible, for the good of both individual and community? Shouldn't people be treated specially if science has identified a handicap and developed the means of alleviating it? In short: "The able win; the rest lose. Someone should give the losers a hand."

There are good reasons to be unconvinced by research that identifies personal characteristics and particular skills as the driving cause of our institutional arrangements. It may be the other way around. Moving on to a more social analysis:

Stage II. Isn't it also obvious an inadequate social environment prevents children from achieving their unique potentials? It is always possible to excuse kids not knowing by blaming their circumstances. They might come from a different culture. Plus, things are set up against them in any competition against those better prepared. A quick ride through any American city shows there are few level playing fields. No matter what those on the bottom know or can learn, Americans will have their winners and losers. In short: "Some win, because others lose. Too bad there isn't room for everyone."

Yes, but . . . the scores still speak for themselves, not to mention that dozens of reforms meant to level the field by removing environmental impediments have not kept 50% of all children from the bottom half of any number of measured averages. The arguments can go on forever: individual vs. social, nature vs. nurture. The measurement enterprise can go on forever. Why is it taken so seriously? Why does learning have to report to psychometric tests that seem so irrelevant to what young adults need to work? Just how many people are involved in organizing this mess! And now let's bring everyone together:

Stage III. It takes a whole country of individuals and institutions to put together the school failure problem. Historically, most modern States have not produced a failure problem of this kind, and in the strangest way: by assuming that education is only for the few, and not always the elite few, they have taken the tease from the promise of equal opportunity. In the United States, where everyone has been promised equality, the person with any apparent lack of capacity is the only point of focus (Dumont, 1966/1980; Varenne & McDerment, 1998). Without people to notice, failure to achieve this or that would not make much of a difference.

What is the problem of school failure anyway, and why do we keep reproducing it? It is a big portion of the domestic outlay of funds. Who consumes it? How does it get away? What would happen if it were pulled from the market? What secret investments would be made visible by its threatened disappearance? The glory of human history, that is, the glory of culture, is the continued ability of societies to produce persons who can perform routinely with skills first developed with great difficulty by others in differing circumstances. Cognitive failure does not have to be a focus, but we have turned even the slightest hint of a cognitive lag into the very measure of a child's potential. From hill tribes reading and writing with difficult scripts to contemporary households using the Internet, from traditional peoples in New Guinea dropping stone axes for steel to uneducated revolutionaries manipulating the most complex weaponry, the fact is that most human beings can do just about anything other human beings can do. What is the cultural apparatus that has us so heavily invested in failure that even ways of finding everyone's potential—for a theory of individual differences should be—have been corrupted into another tool for creating inequalities? Every sign suggests we can do without a theory of individual differences. America cannot afford it. For organizing cultural and institutional reform: Individuals are not special; they are general.

Gender in the Distribution of Education (Beyond Male/Female)

[The salience of] a distinction between sex and gender . . . depends on a related system of meanings clustered around a family of binary pairs: nature/culture, nature/history, natural/human, resource/product. That interdependence . . . problematizes claims to the universal applicability of the concepts around sex and gender.

—Donna Haraway (1991)

"Long before psychometrics, Johann Wolfgang Goethe warned us that it was more dangerous to categorize people prematurely than to ignore their differences. "Maybe there are people who are by nature not up to this or that business; precipitation and prejudice are, however, dangerous demons, uniting the most capable person, blocking all effectiveness and paralyzing true progress. This applies to worldly affairs, particularly, too, to scholarship." (1999, this line is from 1821)."
If individual differences in aptitude and potential are hard to define, gender differences would appear to be the contrast case. Inter-rater reliability is high, but in a cultural analysis this is suspicious. There is an anthropological rule of thumb:

Whenever everyone agrees on a set of categories for describing their behavior, there are disagreements systematically obscured.¹

High certifiability points usually to something else missing and maybe hidden. Varenne is not just French, McDermott not just Irish American, and neither is just male. In cultural analysis, inter-rater reliability does not deliver results or conclusions, although it is a good way to define problems that should be studied. Faced with a complex visual field, how could everyone get organized to see the same thing, and maybe even the same and exactly wrong thing. Sure, male is male, and female is female, well, uh, usually, mostly, but how did that get arranged? How is gender defined and hammered home across enough situations that it can be so easily identified, even assumed, while at the same time played with, cross-dressed, operated on (that’s literally), protested, and used as a vantage point for critiquing the whole culture? Notice that the putatively obvious signs of gender identification are hidden, clothed over—the primal cover-up—leaving only cultural cues: dress, hairstyles, gestures, smells, neuroses, ad infinitum. What isn’t gendered? Boats? The sea? When asked to identify objects as either male or female, why do most Americans say chicken soup is female? Why then beef soup male? It is your call. Not exactly. The call was made long before we gave you the question. The answer is in the air, in the culture, and, just in case, if you did not know that beef soup is male, ask the question about chicken soup first. That will make beef soup male for sure. The air called American culture lives on, because we have just remade it.

In America, great work is performed to ensure that everyone is gendered in accord with the stereotypes of the moment. This propensity can be found in all other cultures, but with the significant caveat that the roles assigned and stereotypes enforced show great variety across cultures and eras of the same

¹ Consider Bhabha (1986): “White people in this country will have quite enough to do in learning how to accept and love themselves and each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the Negro problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed” (p. 22). Consider also its application to education: White people in this country will have quite enough to teach themselves and learn from each other, and when they have achieved this—which will not be tomorrow and may very well be never—the school failure problem will no longer exist, for it will no longer be needed.

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culture. The anthropologist David Schneider (1968/1980, 1984) has even argued that the package of concerns with sexuality is in fact so tightly specific to America that it has vitiated all research into family processes. The correlation between school failure and being female—no, make that being treated as female—can be total in some cultures (a nasty business, but a good example of cultural categories making more of individual differences than is fair). People inside such a culture can easily explain any female’s failure in school: “Because she is a female.” There has been progress in America on this front. Gender is no longer a publicly acceptable mode of explanation. Even natives see it as an interpretation, a cultural move, and often an inappropriate one. So what of the general absence of women in math, science, and technology fields? The numbers are changing slowly, but this one hasn’t gone away yet. So what would a cultural analysis of such a phenomenon look like, and how might it help us to reconstruct the problem?

Stage I. Time and again, we have reports of girls shying away from mathematics, science, and technology in classrooms. Many of the reports stick close to the gender facts and use assumed characteristics of girls to explain the lack of participation. In short: “Mars wins; Venus loses. Someone should give the girls a hand.” Enough said.

Moving on to a more social analysis:

Stage II. One of the things wrong with little girls is that they have to go through little boys to use computers. Techno-alpha males dominate the early grades, and computers are a perfect local environment for their strong-arm road to cognitive supremacy. Women who become physicians and engineers have to put up with a lifetime of bias; most girls opt out much earlier. In short: “Boys win, because girls lose. Too bad science, math, and technology are so much for the best, brightest, and most competitive that there isn’t room for everyone.”

And now let’s bring everyone together:

Stage III. Gender is a complex arrangement, and it takes more than little boys to create troubles for computer use in schools. It takes a culture full of people to make such a mess. Yes, boys seem to dominate, but do they really? Are they just arranged to look that way? What is face-to-face domination anyway? Are the utilities and rewards of classroom interaction so well defined that it is easy to tell who is dominant, and how did it get aligned with males and math and not with females and literature? What a strange culture! Who is involved in arranging contexts for math, gender, technology, and domina-
tion to be aligned so consistently? In short: "Winning or losing on school tests does not have to be related to success in science, math, and technology. Perhaps we should figure out what this game costs and make attendant alterations."

For a project building computerized math materials for middle school classes, we videotaped children working with our first lessons. Analyses of the tapes enabled us to make informed changes in the curricular materials to fit and transform the demands of real classrooms (Greeno et al., 1999). The boys took more quickly to the materials than the girls and the pattern was resistant to direct intervention by way of, say, rules specifying that girls had to control the mouse. Karen Cole (1995) followed our struggle and reported that male dominance in mouse use is probably the best way for males to accept the directions of females who do not often seek mouse control. The plot thickened as more layers of behavior were considered. Consider the girl who, after expertly telling a mouse-master male what to do across a two-week lesson, reports to the class that she did not help do the work. The girl avoids leadership, takes leadership, then denies leadership. Why was avoidance, and not the guidance, initially described as gendered? When is gender anyway? On what grounds can any piece of behavior be called gendered, with whose help, by way of what interpretative categories, and in what contexts applied? The cultural question is not what do boys and girls do, but when are the categories male and female made relevant, in what circumstances, by virtue of what work? Gender is involved, of course, but it is not a reality unto itself. If gender is simply a word we use to notice, regulate, and even distort individual points of order in concerted activities involving millions of others, the cultural contexts in which the word is used are dangerous enough to require constant vigilance. Because "the value of an analytic category is not necessarily annulled by critical consciousness of its historical specificity and cultural limits" (Haraway, 1991, p. 130), gender can sometimes be a powerful analytic category and sometimes not, but never by fiat and only after an analysis of its role in the wider culture.

Race in the Distribution of Education
(Beyond White/Black)

Negroes in this country... and Negroes do not, strictly or legally speaking, exist in any other... 

James Baldwin (1963)

I. RECONSTRUCTING CULTURE

If it takes a culture full of people to build institutions that can consistently divide a population into categories like successful and unsuccessful, it is efficient perhaps for the same people to make male and female consequential across a wide range of activities, seemingly, and even legally, irrelevant to gender. We should not be surprised that the same people would find other "natural" ways to divide up the population to correlate with division by success and failure hierarchies. Enter race. Race is a fairly new idea which has developed over the past 250 years along with other defining features of modern industrial capitalism: the state, its record keeping and claims to rationality, science, individualism, and colonialism. Groups of people have always found ways to make each other different, but the peculiarity of modern racism—groups making each other not only different, but biologically different right down to individual character and mind, as acclaimed by evolutionary theory, all of which feeds on colonized populations accounted for and explained—all this is quite new and held together more by institutions that feed on it than by the biological facts of the matter (Dumont, 1966/1980; Hannerford, 1996; Smedley, 1992).

Yes, but, intellectual history aside, aren't people physically different, and haven't such differences always made a difference? Aren't natural differences the product of evolution, and isn't that why there is an overlap between physical history and one's performance in school? Let's use our three stages of cultural analysis to frame answers to these questions.

Stage I. Race is biologically real, and people of different races have different biological endowments that make them systematically strong or weak on certain intellectual tasks. This can be shown on various bell curves. In short: "There is a reason some win and others lose. Someone should give the losers a hand." Enough said.

Moving on to a more social analysis:

Stage II. Race may be biologically real, but racial differences do not extend to the potential to do intellectual work. Under certain economic and political conditions, people of different races get treated differently and consequently might develop negative traits that limit their potentials. Race matters only because we make it matter. Let's try not to do that. It is poverty and lack of opportunity that makes trouble in life. Because more African Americans are poor than Whites, race is prominent in the distribution of intelligence and success. We should forget about race when we make educational policy. Let's believe we can forget about race. In short: "Whites win, because
African Americans lose. Even though there isn't room for everyone at the top (or in the middle), race should not be the dividing line.”

And now let's bring everyone together:

**Stage III.** It takes a whole country of groups and institutions to put together a race problem. Race is a useless category in the biological classification of human diversity, although, by a series of arbitrary distinctions and attention to isolated traits, populations can maintain fairly stable definitions of racial groups. This takes work and requires constant attention to borders and possible moments of integration and access to resources. It is this work we must analyze and reorganize, not the individual black child failing in school. The cultural question is not what do Blacks and Whites do, but when are the categories black and white made relevant, in what circumstances, by virtue of what work? Many are involved. Almost 200 years ago, the Abbé Grégoire (1808/1996), in writing a defense of the downtrodden of his time, pointed to how the fault rested primarily with those who identify the failures of others:

Irishmen, Jews, and Negroes, your virtues and talents are your own; your vices are the work of nations who call themselves Christian. The more you are maligned, the more these nations are indicted for their guilt. (p. 39)

People struggling under the conditions of American racism end up often reproducing what they recognize as unfortunate but do not have the tools to reorganize. Racially speaking, how are they to proceed? In her decision to adopt, for the moment—given historical circumstances and present purposes—the descriptively inadequate category of Asian American, Sau-ling Wong made the right call: “Calibration is all” (1993, p. xx). In short: “Differential access to resources by Whites, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, may be arbitrary and unfortunate, but it is also well organized by the rest of us. We cannot forget about race until we stop producing and consuming situations that make it matter. We should calculate what this game costs and make attendant alterations.”

People in America work hard making sure everyone is raced in accord with the stereotypes of the moment. Racism is American karma. Americans share this propensity with many other cultures, but with the significant caveat that the roles assigned and stereotypes enforced show a variety across cultures and eras of the same culture. School success and failure have become crucial to the articulation and recreation of racial borders and inequalities. If race is only a partial event inside a cultural system, then any correlation between race and measures of school performance can be seen as tautological, a cultural redundancy by which the same interpretive machinery that delivers arbitrary distinctions between kinds of persons also delivers arbitrary measures of learning and techniques for noticing and explaining their correlation. If culture can arrange for that much coherence, and if that coherence can cause us so much trouble, we need a constant cultural analysis to resist the constraints of the categorical coinage of our conversations.

## CULTURE INVESTIGATED

A strict cultural approach is necessarily reflexive. We have no choice but to study that which we also make. There is no privileged position from which to escape culture. This general principle holds perhaps more for the sciences of humanity than for the sciences of the physical world. The latter appear much further along in working with the principle that all we claim we know proceeds from particular positions or instruments. This need not lead to radical pessimism about the writing of new statements about the world. “Knowledge” is not disembodied from the texts that codify it, from those who author and authorize it, or from the audiences that support the activities that produce and establish it. But these activities, particularly the processes of “science” embodied in various modes of control, are still extremely useful and well worth continuing. Our goal here is to indicate how these controls are best designed so that we remain consistent within our approach.

For a cultural approach, the core activity involves a search for positions and instruments demonstrably “different” from those that have produced what, at any point in time, is acknowledged as truth. It must be possible to argue that the assumed position allows for the production of statements less directly anchored within the parameters of what would not be controversial. In the social sciences, anthropology may have been most systematic in insisting that those who bend themselves to its discipline must find the alternative vantage points that will make the familiar strange. Repeatedly, anthropologists have transformed settled knowledge into ignorance, and they have shown how further systematic investigation and analysis can transform the identified ignorance into new knowledge. In a process that continues to this day, anthropologists have also criticized each other for not having gone far enough, for not having noticed how the common sense of their time imprisoned them. Like the curators of liturcan antiquities mentioned earlier, those who bend themselves to a cultural approach (whether
in anthropology, sociology, or psychology) must search for that which was not available earlier, at the same time as they destroy the claims of earlier anthropologists by demonstrating how a group of experts can blind themselves to the obvious. This is all the more important that, in most cases, the danger is that of being taken by a forger. Those whom we observe rarely lie to us. But it is all too easy for an observer not to note that which, later, can be shown as essential for those observed and, reflexively, for the researchers and their own communities.

Methodologically, a fear of common sense, and a corresponding trust in the effectiveness of shifting position, has led anthropologists to seek people who most challenged the political and academic common sense. Initially, they most often traveled across the globe to places like Samoa or Bali. Then they visited systematically hidden neighborhoods in South Chicago or Harlem. More recently they began visiting groups in various centers of authority (classrooms, hospitals, supermarkets) where they used techniques developed in the distant settings to articulate what was so obvious that it went “without saying.” These techniques are variously known in the concerned fields as “ethnography,” “participant observation,” or “naturalistic inquiry,” but the labels must not be transformed into new rigidities. They index the continuing quest to find stances that allow for uncovering not only what we know we do not know, but also, and controversially, what until then we did not know.

We begin with research that starts and ends with obvious categories, proceed to research that attempts to formalize less obvious categories, and finally to research that seeks the processes that make some categories obvious and others hard to see.

Categories, Operations, and Correlations

There is no escaping academic achievement, gender, and race as matters of concern in America. They concern us too, but, for this very reason, we cannot take them as simple categories of the world. We are concerned, for example, when research into gender becomes research into “males” and “females”—whether operationalized on the basis of a box respondents check on a questionnaire, or on the basis of a full genetic analysis. Without a full justification as to why one would wish to relate academic achievement and gender, any demonstration of a correlation, or of no correlation, is unlikely to tell us much that we did not know.

New Categories

Much excellent work has been produced with an awareness that it is dangerous to proceed on the basis of received categories. One could even argue that the human sciences became the social sciences in the late 19th century precisely when people, from Marx to Durkheim, Weber, Freud, Vygotsky, and many others, started questioning in detail not only the most common sense categories of knowledge but the very grounds of the methods for gaining new knowledge about humanity. The difficulties arose when some were satisfied with making new common sense categories to be handled as the initial ones had been. Thus, most irritatingly for us, “culture” gets transformed into a variable and operationalized as the answer to a few questions about place of birth or home language. “Race” and “gender” have had a similar fate as they are brought forth, often under new interesting guises, made into distinct and independent categories that appear so easily identifiable in our observations that little further worrying appears necessary.

Cultural Investigations of Culture

One takes a cultural approach only to the extent one remains skeptical of what is publicly acknowledged. Perhaps the human world is not best understood in terms of gender, race, class, intelligence. Perhaps concern with these matters hide the very processes our investigations should reveal. This is easy to say, but first we must face the fundamental difficulty: A cultural approach must recognize its own grounding in institution and time. This is not only a call for self-analysis (a dubious task anyway), but a call to use the grounding against itself. New knowledge, or, better, new statements about the world, will not come from replication but from the struggle to demonstrate the relevance of the new research to the fields it addresses. New statements will not be produced from using the same instruments within well-controlled protocols. It will come from the discovery of new instruments that can be used from different positions and with different populations. Precisely because of the power of plausibility and common sense, a cultural approach requires that one move away from plausibility and common sense.

The trick that makes a cultural approach plausible as a practice is the postulate that human beings do display in their everyday life that which is most important to them—even when they appear, particularly to a professional observer from a different planet, unaware of these very constraints. In many
ways, our argument has been that people in culture can be made systematically inarticulate about the fundamentals of this culture. In its simplest form this recapitulates a central tenet of American social theorizing at least since the 1920s. It is also a central tenet of much Marxist theorizing, particularly among those interested in hegemony. Our sense is that any statement about apparent unawareness is extremely misleading methodologically if it casts the observer in the role of the magical outsider revealing truths to ignorant participants about themselves. To the extent that all social scientists must claim that their findings were produced by the observation of persons (whatever technique was used, from questionnaires to video analyses), a position that starts with people who are fully unaware actually destroys the very possibility of the enterprise.

Those who wish to take a cultural perspective must take the alternative position: people necessarily reveal the conditions we are interested in, but precisely not in the vocabularies or rhetorical forms of observers. But the ignorance or, better, inarticulateness must be laid with the observers as they struggle to articulate what may in fact not have to be said in the routine of the people's lives. Learning from human beings is akin to reading an alien language: one must assume that what may sound like gibberish is in fact a language, and a translatable one at that. The task of translation, we all know, is not easy, nor by any means, precisely because what is most worth translating cannot fit into any of the words (categories, etc.) that initially appeared available. To make the case even more difficult, remember that human culture is not really a text to translate. It is a set of joint practices, a dance or opera, much of which is not available in discursive form. Thus the analytic task remains even more difficult than usual forms of translation and transformation, because it involves moving the non-textual (that which our informants perform for each other) into the textual (the publications through which we conduct the core of our professional lives).

There are two core problems. The first has been addressed in many interesting ways. The latter is more complex. First, we must find new positions. From the travels of early anthropologists across the globe, to the experiments ethnographers conduct to induce participants to articulate their common sense, many techniques have been developed that do indeed allow for bringing to our professional awareness that which had remained hidden. Second, we must find new ways of saying what we have seen that will both grab the attention of our intended audiences and actually move them away from one common sense to another sense that can be used for further action. Such writing has been difficult to produce, but there is no reason it cannot be produced more effectively than it has so far.

1. RECONSTRUCTING CULTURE

ONWARD

History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be envirled, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.

—Maya Angelou (1993)

George Herbert Mead long ago argued that in a democracy, there should be little place for experts like educational researchers to stand apart from the problems they are trying to solve. Every attempt to direct conduct by fixed categories like kinds of person tied to measures of school performance should not only fail, but fail perniciously. For Mead (1899), expert knowledge is better seen as a "working hypothesis" that must enter a community of practice and jostle apparent knowledge until it takes root in a reorganization of what people can do with each other: "Reflective consciousness does not then carry us on to the world that is to be, but puts our own thought and endeavor into the very process of evolution" (p. 371).

Mead's call for knowledge as emergent and subject to circumstance is at the heart of the American pragmatism we have been claiming—with all the trepidation that its own formulation in fact encourages—with quotations from Emerson, Peirce, James, and Dewey (with Kenneth Burke only a little to the side).6 We have not attempted to stand outside America in these pages, but rather to reveal it to ourselves enough to say something that might make a difference. Cultural analyses that highlight the weight of tradition and structure and only belatedly emphasize change can leave us with either angry desires for revolution or hopeless pangs of social impotence. Both feelings can produce a withdrawal educators cannot countenance. We are working with a different theory of culture. We assume persons are always active and potentially reconstructing received conditions, even when the conditions are overwhelming. The "system" is not set in concrete. It "need not be lived at all." The trick is to become most engaged where hostile conditions are fragile and open to breakthrough, as well as where more benign conditions are fragile and must be secured.

Thirty years into studying and confronting school failure, we still have no expert place to stand, no surefire immediate solutions. We get paid to worry about kids who will likely never get paid as well as those who worry about them. We are not in a position to tell everyone how to fix educational problems. What we have is only a renewed place to enter the fray, namely, in the

6See the nice discussion in Manicas (1998).
middle of things, with an insistence that educational researchers must confront first how their work with the materials of American culture constructs the very problems we think must be solved. This chapter is part of that insistence. In cleaning out our own conceptual house, we have learned to insist on three specific guidelines:

Never accept a problem as stated:
Be particularly wary of problems defined in terms of individuals;
Resist vigorously all problems identified by received categories of kinds of person.

Gender, race, and social class disparities in school performance are lamentable, but need not be made worse by our blaming them on either their victims and their environments independent of, uh oh. us. We are the environments for kinds of kids to be in trouble. So what can we do? Start first by reorganizing the contexts for the problems.

We have worked in, on, and even run educational programs that make a difference to their participants. Each program has offered an existence proof for how everyone can learn; further, if we were careful enough to listen, in the most local conditions, with ourselves, with those around us, at the borders that keep us in and others out. Do not ask us for a solution. Ask us to help. Ask others to help. Bring down the borders, and everyone will learn to help everyone else, even you, even us. The problem of American education is not that we have people divided into too many cultures; the problem is that we have a single culture full of people all too resourceful in dividing its people. Culture is not a past cause to current divisions. Culture—your culture, our culture, American culture—is the current challenge to any future unity.

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fronting a core institution in American education. Perhaps the biggest problem facing American education is that we foolishly await a solution, as if some change in the system, some new tool in a fresh bag of tricks, will result in a more egalitarian distribution of school success among kinds of people. Stop it. Now. If we are right, if the problem is not with the kinds of people, but with the rest of us who define, measure, and make policy for their problem, the last thing we want to do is to make recommendations. We cannot begin to make change out there until we have made change in here, under the most local conditions, with ourselves, with those around us, at the borders that keep us in and others out. Do not ask us for a solution. Ask us to help. Ask others to help. Bring down the borders, and everyone will learn to help everyone else, even you, even us. The problem of American education is not that we have people divided into too many cultures; the problem is that we have a single culture full of people all too resourceful in dividing its people. Culture is not a past cause to current divisions. Culture—your culture, our culture, American culture—is the current challenge to any future unity.

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