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SMALL GROUPS AND CULTURE CREATION: THE IDIOCULTURE OF LITTLE LEAGUE BASEBALL TEAMS*

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Following interactionist theory, this study argues that cultural creation and usage can be examined by conceptualizing cultural forms as originating in a small-group context. Those cultural elements which characterize an interacting group are termed the *idioculture* of the group. This approach focuses on the content of small-group interaction, and suggests that the meanings of cultural items in a small group must be considered in order to comprehend their continued existence as communication. Five characteristics of cultural items affect which items will become part of a group culture. Cultural forms may be created and continue to be utilized in situations if they are *known* to members of the interacting group, *usable* in the course of group interaction, *functional* in supporting group goals and individual needs, *appropriate* in supporting the status hierarchy of the group, and *triggered* by events which occur in group interaction. These elements have impact only through the interpretations of group members of their situations. Support for this approach is drawn from a participant observation study of Little League baseball teams.

The concept of culture generally has not proven useful as a significant variable in sociology because of difficulties associated with specifying its content and the population serving as its referent. One speaks glibly of the culture of a particular group with the expectation that one's audience will have a common-sense understanding of what is meant. Because of the difficulties and ambiguities involved in the use of the term *culture* (Geertz, 1973:89), it virtually has been disregarded in recent sociological writing as a major theoretical variable.

The term refers to a central feature of human societies, and because of its sociological relevance, a reconceptualization of the culture concept is desirable. However, in order to avoid treating culture as an amorphous, indescribable mist which swirls around society members, it is

necessary to ground the term in interaction. Such specification can avoid the lack of common meaning often involved in studies of national cultures or subcultures. Blumer (1969) has argued that meaning derives from interaction, and culture, a set of shared understandings, is clearly implicated in Blumer's premise. While culture is defined, created, and transmitted through interaction, it is not interaction itself, but the content, meanings, and topics of interaction. In Herskovits's (1948:625) definition:

though a culture may be treated by the student as capable of objective description, in the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think.

Sociologists and anthropologists who have examined culture have found specifying the cultural patterns of an entire society to be an insurmountable task. While the attempts have been noble, the size of the undertaking has produced disappointing results for the goal of understanding the dynamics of cultural creation and tradition. If we take Blumer's premise seriously, it may be more suitable to begin our examination with interaction, and therefore to consider culture creation as an outcome of this interaction (e.g., Hare

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et al., 1965:v). The prototype of these interacting units is the small group, and the prevalence of groups in society suggests that it may be useful to conceive of culture as being part of the communication system of these interacting units (Spector, 1973). Despite the focus on the group, we recognize that this does not imply that shared understandings which transcend interactive networks do not exist; however, models are necessary to indicate how information diffuses from the originating group (see Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Although cultural elements can transcend the boundaries of interacting groups, it frequently occurs that cultural elements are experienced within the context of the small group. Thus, one may argue that most culture elements are experienced as part of a communication system of a small group even though they may be known widely.¹ The experience of knowing and using culture is inevitably tied to situational contexts of group life. To understand the dynamics of cultural creation and cultural change, we must analyze this knowledge within the context of its mode of transmission.

In focusing on the interacting unit, I argue that every group has to some extent a culture of its own, which I shall term its *idioculture*.² Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences in common and these

experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and further can be employed to construct a social reality. The term, stressing the localized nature of culture, implies that it need not be part of a demographically distinct subgroup, but rather that it is a particularistic development of any group in the society.

While the implications of conceiving of small groups as having cultures have not been considered adequately, some researchers have indicated the usefulness of this construct. Hollingshead (1939:816) in his discussion of behavior systems maintained that:

Persons in more or less continuous association evolve behavior traits and cultural mechanisms which are unique to the group and differ in some way from those of other groups and from the larger socio-cultural complex. That is, every continuing social group develops a variant culture and a body of social relations peculiar and common to its members.

Lee (1954) and Gordon (1964) both suggest that the concept of a group culture fills a void in sociological conceptions of culture. Despite anthropological and folkloristic ethnographies (Leemon, 1972; Adams, 1971; Dundes and Fallasi, 1975) and experimental manipulations of laboratory groups (Rose and Felton, 1955; Jacobs and Campbell, 1961; Weick and Gilfillan, 1971; MacNeil and Sherif, 1976), little attention has been given to the usefulness of this concept, and how social constraints influence the creation and continued usage of cultural items in small groups.

My goal in this paper is simple. After briefly suggesting several theoretical rationales for the idioculture construct, I shall examine several perceived characteristics of cultural items which affect their creation and usage, and, thus, the development of idiocultures within a set of small groups. Hopefully this analysis, having grounded the cultural creation process in interaction, eventually will allow for a specification of the dynamics involved in the social construction of cultural elements in larger groupings and societies.

¹ Cultural elements disseminated by the mass media (television, radio) or in crowd settings (rock concerts, rallies, sports events) are exceptions. However, even in these isolated or mass settings Fine (1977) suggests that audiences are not composed of discrete individuals, but of a collection of small groups. These small groups help to structure the meaning of the event for individuals in attendance. Printed matter generally is notable for the noninteractional acquisition of cultural knowledge—although even here the material is often discussed with others.

² *Idio* derives from *idios*, the Greek root for *own* (not *ideo*). It was felt necessary to coin a new term because the most logical phrase, that of *group culture*, has been used previously with several quite different meanings (Thelan, 1954; Rossel, 1976; McFeat, 1974).

LITTLE LEAGUE IDIOCULTURES

In order to explicate how an idioculture develops, it is necessary to base the discussion on empirical observations. While the examination of any set of continuing small groups could provide the material for this analysis, the data discussed in this paper derive from three years of participant observation research conducted with Little League³ baseball teams in five communities in New England and Minnesota. Little League baseball teams were chosen for observation because they combine the two major elements of group life: task orientation (winning games) and socioemotional orientation (peer friendship).⁴ In addition, because Little League is seasonal, the creation, development, and dissolution of the team culture could be observed. While some traditions continue from year to year, as approximately one-half a team's personnel returns, each year essentially represents the creation of a new idioculture.

The teams examined consisted of 12 to 15 preadolescents, coached by one to three adults. Over the course of a three-month season, teams play 14 to 21 games and, including practice time, spend about ten hours a week together. During the seasons the author (and, in one league, a research assistant) interacted with players

and coaches (Fine and Glassner, 1979), although the observer had no formal role, such as coach or umpire. Within each league two teams were observed in detail, and during practices and games the observer remained with the team in the dug-out or on the field. The five leagues examined were: (1) Beanville,⁵ an upper middle-class professional suburb of Boston, Massachusetts; (2) Hopewell, an exurban township outside the Providence, Rhode Island metropolitan area—consisting of small towns, beach-front land, farms and a campus of the state university; (3) Bolton Park, an upper middle-class professional suburb of Saint Paul, Minnesota, similar to Beanville except for geographical location; (4) Sanford Heights, a middle- to lower middle-class suburb of Minneapolis, consisting primarily of developers' tract homes; and (5) Maple Bluff, an upper middle-class neighborhood within the city limits of Saint Paul, Minnesota. The latter teams were examined by a research assistant. In Beanville participant observation was conducted during two seasons, while in the other sites observation was confined to a single season.

RATIONALE FOR THE IDIOCULTURE
CONSTRUCT

Because discussions of culture have not been grounded in observation of interaction or conceived of in terms of behavioral dynamics and needs of groups, culture has not been represented adequately. By recognizing that groups develop a culture of their own, some of the sterility of much current small-group research can be avoided. Five arguments are proposed here for the utility of the construct of idioculture in sociological research.

1. Specificity of Cultures

Since small groups are observable and are capable of being questioned, culture need not remain the amorphous phenomenon which it tends to be in social an-

³ The Little League organization was established in 1939 for the purpose of allowing boys to play organized baseball under the supervision of qualified adults. The organization has grown enormously since then to the point where it now has over 600,000 players between the ages of nine and 12, and about 5,000 leagues. As a result of court suits from equal rights groups, the League changed its policy in 1974 to admit both boys and girls into its programs. However, the ten teams examined in-depth in this project consisted only of boys.

⁴ While the decision to use Little League baseball teams to exemplify cultural production may appear somewhat frivolous, such groups are as important to their participants as most adult groups. For the months that the Little League season is in progress, baseball becomes a central preoccupation of these boys (Stone, 1978). Further it is the problem that one studies which determines the significance of the work, not the "substantive" concern, in this case Little League baseball. If these groups are comparable to other groups in their process of cultural production (as I claim), they are a legitimate subject for study. I am attempting to generalize to all groups, not simply preadolescent congeries.

⁵ All names included in the report of the Little League research are pseudonyms.

thropology and macrosociology. The relatively limited extent of the particularistic aspects of small-group culture lends itself to examination by the participant observer, and thus idiocultures can be specified by the researcher to a much greater extent than is true for either societal cultures or subcultures. Within our Little League study it is possible to compose a relatively complete description of the culture of a team, although the depiction of a culture of a small group of small boys is a rather extensive undertaking (Fine, n.d.). Such a compilation will include the particular team rules developed by the group of boys and their coaches, the regular joking topics, nicknames, and modes of appropriate behavior adopted by the boys. A comprehensive attempt to compile preadolescent culture is an impossible task, although several useful partial collections have been published (e.g., Opie and Opie, 1959).

2. *Comparative Analysis of Groups*

The concept of idioculture allows for the development of a cultural anthropology of small groups (McFeat, 1974). Social scientists typically have little understanding of how closely related groups differ from each other. These groups may appear to have common goals (winning baseball games), comparable memberships (chosen by means of a player draft in which all adult coaches take turns selecting players), and similar environments (playing and practicing in the same locations), yet groups develop unique cultures and different styles of behavior. Here, again, the examination of differences among groups requires considerable space, more than is possible in this article. However, it is clear that the cultures that teams develop are a result of social and environmental contingencies, combined with the social definitions which emerge in group interaction. Once the idioculture is developed (a process occurring from the beginning moments of the group), it shapes future actions and collective meanings. By comparing groups in terms of their experiences and shared meanings

as influencing their culture, one is able to explicate the process of cultural differentiation—a process Fischer (1968) has termed *microethnography*. In our Little League research early victory or defeat (a social contingency) and the definition of that outcome have a considerable effect on structuring the team culture. Teams that perceive themselves as successful typically develop a more robust culture of baseball-related items than the culture of early losers.

3. *Cultural Creation and Diffusion in Societies and Subsocieties*

Understanding the dynamics of the creation of an idioculture may have significant implications for understanding cultural creation in larger social units. In observing a small group one can pinpoint precisely and with confidence the circumstances under which an item of culture was created. This cultural creation process may be similar to that for cultural products which reach a wider audience. Many cultural products are created in group situations (e.g., scriptwriters' conferences, theatre ensembles or scientific research groups) (Fine, 1977). Informal cultural products, such as jokes, slang, or superstitions, can develop in the course of natural interaction in a group, and subsequently may "catch on," spread beyond the boundaries of the group to which it originally belonged, and become part of a culture or subculture (Fine and Kleinman, 1979). Such mass diffusion does not occur very frequently, and our research does not allow us to cite any example in which a cultural object created by one of the observed teams entered into the national preadolescent subculture, but on several occasions cultural traditions crossed team lines. One team in Bolton Park, for example, started standing on the dugout bench and cheering. This practice subsequently was adopted by two of the other six teams, through acceptance by the high status players on those teams, and the diffusion rapidly spread to their teammates. Such examples of diffusion suggest general processes of cultural transmission (e.g., the two-step flow of

communication) (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955).

4. *Groups As Cultural Units*

The idioculture construct indicates that groups do not exist in a content-free context, but are continuously engaged in the construction of a social reality, a history (McBride, 1975), and a sense of meaning (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Small-group research typically portrays groups as data points, and examines group dynamics divorced from the content of talk or action. Following interactionist theory, we assume that cultural content derives its shared social meaning through interaction, rather than through an *a priori* assignment of meaning. Groups negotiate meanings, and this ongoing negotiation structures the culture of groups. The content of talk and behavior is thus central to the comprehension of group dynamics, and this understanding can occur only through a contextual examination of culture. The nicknames of Little Leaguers—Big Rides, Shrimppo, Thunderfoot, Train, or Maniac—imply that shared meanings of players exist and the replacement of nicknames over time suggests that these meanings are not necessarily static. Without a consideration of meaning, behavior is “meaningless”—a point experimental examinations of small groups ignore or downplay.

5. *Culture As Mediation between Environment and Action*

Idioculture is proposed as a mediating element between constraints external to the group and the behavior of the group in dealing with these constraints. It is the process by which collective decisions are selected, and thus permits an understanding of how a group increases its sense of “groupness,” cohesion, and commitment. Further, as Berger and Luckmann (1967:87) suggest, sub-universes of meaning (idiocultures) provide for the differentiation of group members from outsiders. Differences in behavioral response to social stimuli and

social integration have been shown convincingly to relate to the cultural values of small communities (Vogt and O’Dea, 1953; Rogers and Gardner, 1969; DuWors, 1952). The culture of a group provides a set of behavioral options for the group to choose after the meaning of an external event has been determined. Thus, in this Little League research, teams responded idiosyncratically to potential victory (by special cheers) and defeat (by personalized insults). The team achieves consensus on whether the game is close, is being lost or won; then members choose from the group’s repertoire of cultural options available given a situational definition.

Each of these five explanations deserves a full explication and, although this article only attempts to provide for an understanding of factors influencing the social production of idiocultural elements, a return to the above arguments in future reports is necessary.

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF IDIOCULTURE

At the inception of any group, an idioculture does not exist; however, the formation of a culture may occur from the opening moments of group interaction. When individuals meet, they begin to construct a culture by asking for names and other biographical points which can be referred to subsequently (Davis, 1973). Eventually idioculture becomes self-generating, and direct solicitation and reciprocal inquisition are no longer necessary for social solidarity. Over time, rules are established, opinions expressed, information exchanged, and members experience events together. Sherif and Sherif (1953:236–7) suggest that:

When individuals having no established relationships are brought together in a group situation to interact in group activities with common goals, they produce a group structure. . . . This group structure implies positive in-group identifications and common attitudes and tends, in time, to generate by-products or norms peculiar to the groups, such as nicknames, catchwords, ways of doing things, etc.

To be sure, not every element of a group's conversation or behavior will be part of the idioculture. Idioculture is augmented if an experience occurs or a piece of information is transmitted *within* the group (i.e., in the presence of more than one group member) and is perceived as an event or statement which can be referenced legitimately and meaningfully (see Garfinkel, 1967:38-41)—i.e., the occurrence is worthy of retrospective notice. Thus, in Little League, a routine hit or catch, being "taken for granted," usually will not make an impact on the group's idioculture, but may become notable if the situational constraints give the event a significance beyond its expected lack of impact (e.g., a catch by a poor outfielder at a crucial point in a game—an event which did produce a nickname in one Little League scenario).

The specific elements of an idioculture are not generated randomly through chance statements and events, but are accessible to sociological analysis. However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the cultural elements of a group are inevitably produced by external determinants over which members have no control. Members construct meanings given a set of social constraints which are perceived as affecting the boundaries of permissible behavior. While the content of cultural elements needs to satisfy five analytical criteria to become incorporated into an idioculture, these five criteria are not external stimuli which inevitably shape the behavior of individuals or groups. Rather, these are components of the sense-making systems of individuals; the specific implications of these criteria are negotiated in group interaction. These processes essentially operate as filters (Siman, 1977), which constrain cultural options. They provide strictures within which freedom of selection operates.

The five filtering elements are proposed to explain the selection and continued salience of any given item in a group's idioculture—that the item be perceived as Known, Usable, Functional, and Appropriate in terms of the group's status system, and Triggered by some experienced event. These factors can be schematized

roughly in an ordered relationship by a Venn diagram according to the number of *potential* items which meet each criteria: $K > U > F > A > T$. The manner in which each of these filters will be interpreted is a situational achievement for members, and although I shall take for granted their operation in this discussion, I recognize that the interpretation of each of them is grounded in their own set of situational negotiations.

Known culture. The first constraint on whether a potential culture element will become part of the group idioculture is that the item or components of the item be known previously by at least one member of the group. This pool of background information I shall term the *known culture* of the group.

This perspective is congruent with Becker and Geer's (1960) argument that the manifest culture of a group will be derived from the latent cultures of members. While the culture content emerges from group interaction, latent culture or the recall of prior knowledge will affect the form of these culture elements, although not the specific content. Culture content is synthesized from remembrances of past experiences. Since members have access to other idiocultures (or latent cultures) through previous or concurrent memberships, the range of potentially known information may be extensive.

Among Sanford Heights teams, a ball which was hit foul over the backstop was known as a "Polish Home Run." Such a cultural item would have been meaningless had it not been for latent cultural items—what a home run is, and the symbolic opposition of hitting a ball straight over the outfield fence and hitting it backward over the backstop. In other words, hitting the ball over either *end* of the field was a home run (and this was not said of balls which curved outside a foul line). The existence of the item also required a knowledge of social stereotypes—that "Polish" is an ethnic slur—implying backwardness or incompetence. Without this cultural knowledge such an identification of this type of foul ball would not have become a part of the culture of these preadolescents. Likewise,

referring to other players on the basis of their uniform color as a "green bean" or "Chiquita," as was done in Hopewell, suggests that cultural elements are dependent upon prior knowledge derived from external sources.

Creativity poses no particular problems for this perspective since created items are not developed *de novo*; rather, they are novel combinations of previously familiar elements (e.g., Hebb, 1974). These combinations may be given meanings different from that of any constitutive element by the members of the group. Thus, players on the Maple Bluff White Sox developed a dress code which was loosely modeled on observation of major leaguers, although not identical to it. Before one practice in Sanford Heights several players were hanging on the backstop at the practice field while one of their teammates shook the fence as hard as possible, an activity he termed the *Chinese pain shake*, a term apparently created spontaneously. While the term may never have been uttered before, its antecedents exist in that speaker's latent culture: notably the association of Chinese with torture (e.g., the Chinese water torture), and the earthquakes which had affected China during this period and to which this activity was similar. Thus, the creation of this cultural item, although seemingly an idiosyncratic construction, can be interpreted in terms of previous knowledge. The term for that behavior "makes sense" in terms of the web of meanings accessible to those individuals.

The larger the percentage of boys who share a latent cultural element (e.g., the behavior of certain professional baseball players in wearing their hats or socks in a particular style), the more likely will this knowledge or some transformation of it come to characterize the group. This unstated shared knowledge allows newly "created" cultural items to be more readily meaningful for the group.

Usable culture. The second criterion for inclusion in a group's idioculture is that a potential item be perceived as part of the members' *usable culture*—that is, mentionable in the context of group interaction. Some elements of the latent or

known culture, although shared by members of a group, may not be shared publicly because of sacred or taboo implications.

The usability of a cultural element is not a result of absolute criteria, but of the social meanings supplied by the group members. Members' personalities, religion, political ideology, or morality may influence the situational viability for a cultural item. Thus, in Bolton Park one star player objected strongly to another player's reference to the "fucking umps"; another player on that team chastised a teammate for uttering the epithet "Jesus Christ" and taking the Lord's name in vain. On other teams, however, such usage was legitimate and was not sanctioned. Observation suggests that teams do have different moral standards for propriety; this is due to their adult and child personnel, and the extent to which these personnel are willing to express their beliefs to shape public behavior.

In Beanville, one of the two teams examined placed a heavier emphasis on religion than did the other, although both teams were largely Catholic. Possibly because of the players or as a reification of the team name, the Angels indicated a greater interest in religion than did the Rangers. Members of the Angels inquired of each other why they missed church. The Rangers never publicly mentioned church, but on several occasions players did joke about abortions. While only a weak inference exists that similar jokes could not have occurred among the Angels, the presence of such jokes seems unlikely and inappropriate. "Dirty" or sexual jokes were only spread among groups of Rangers (outside the earshot of their coach), and not in my observation among the Angels.

Similarly, on one team in Hopewell, racial epithets were common; one player made reference to blacks as "jungle bunnies," while another commented "all the people who live around me are niggers," and a third termed a Puerto Rican adolescent "half nigger and half white." While many of the boys in the League were undoubtedly aware of these terms, only on this one team were they spoken with any

regularity, and as part of the normative order of the team. It is difficult to pinpoint why these comments were usable here and not elsewhere, but two years previously this team had a black manager who apparently was not well-liked, and this may have accounted for the public expression of racial resentment after he left. This is compounded by the situation that the two adults who coached this team did not appear to be greatly upset when this language was used. For example, we find this disquieting colloquy:

(A black boy pitching for the opposing team has just hit one of their batters)
 Justin: "Come on, you nigger."
 Coach: "Don't be stupid."
 Justin: "That's what he is."
 Assistant Coach: "You'll get thrown out of the game."
 Justin: "I don't mind if he calls me whitey."
 (Field notes)

The issue here is the reaction of the coaches in establishing a definition of usability. In this situation, and others, these adults see racial abuse as a *strategic* problem. Boys should not use these terms because other adults will sanction them, or because (on other occasions) it was said the targets may attack the speaker. The reactions of the adults, while not encouraging these comments, do not make them unusable, and they remained a central part of the team's culture throughout the summer.

Tied to usability is situational appropriateness. Norms for prescribed and proscribed behavior tend to be contextually bounded. An item of culture may be appropriate only in certain circumstances, such as when the coach is absent. Typically, when group members are in the presence of outsiders the expressible elements of the team's idioculture are curtailed. This is evident in regard to preadolescents who refrain from telling "dirty" jokes in the presence of adults or strangers. Jokes comparing aborted babies to ripe, red tomatoes among the Beanville Rangers were limited to situations in which adults, other than the author, were not present. Likewise, one boy on the Sanford Heights Dodgers was

called "Mousey" by his affectionate mother. This nickname was used by peers in his absence, since he was a high status team member and it was a nickname he particularly disliked. This dislike only made the nickname more precious for his teammates.

Functional culture. A third factor influencing the likelihood of an item being incorporated into a group's idioculture is its perceived congruence with the goals and needs of some or all group members, and whether it is defined as facilitating the survival and successful operation of the group as a unit (Pellegrin, 1953). Items which are consistent with these ends are termed the *functional culture* of the group. Thus, potential cultural elements which are known and usable by members may not become part of the group's idioculture if not recognized as supportive of the needs of the group or its members. In some cases of cultural innovation, especially in regard to competing cultural elements related to task goals, a cultural process metaphorically akin to natural selection may operate.

Some interactionists argue that culture develops as a response to shared problems (Becker and Geer, 1960; Hughes et al., 1968; Spector, 1973); they claim that group culture is functional, and that much of culture production is directly related to group problem solving. This proposition is supported by an examination of group culture in a laboratory setting which indicates that problem-solving strategies that continue across time are those which have been most effective (Weick and Gilfillan, 1971).

Among Little League baseball teams, the rules and restrictions which team members enforce indicate the functional properties of group culture. The Beanville Rangers originated and enforced an operating procedure that the team would take batting practice (a desirable activity for the players) in the order that players arrived. This procedure encouraged promptness and, on occasion, the entire Ranger team arrived at the field before any members of the opposing team. The Rangers particularly were characterized by team spirit and friendships, as players knew each other informally through this

pregame activity; it served as a mechanism for minimizing arguments about the batting practice order. The preadolescents, rather than the coaches, structured the team's behavior, and the procedure strengthened the position of the team's preadolescent leader who lived a block from the field and always arrived early. Prior to the establishment of this procedure, batting order was determined haphazardly—mostly by whomever was most insistent at the moment, rather than by a systematic ordering procedure by the coach. It was because the ordering of batting practice had been problematic for the Rangers that such a rule was functional as a problem-solving mechanism.

A Hopewell team prohibited chewing gum on the playing field because one of their players had almost choked on a piece of gum after he ran into another outfielder when attempting to catch an unexpected fly ball. Other teams in the league did not have a similar rule, because the issue was never salient. For an item of culture to be overtly functional to a group, the group must define itself, either implicitly or explicitly, as having a problem, and then the cultural item may be proposed as a solution to the problem.

Some cultural items do not directly address problems in a group, but still may be said to be functional in that they achieve group goals such as entertainment or social solidarity. While they may not be proposed in response to interactional difficulties, these idiocultural items facilitate group functioning. The creation of cultural prescriptions and proscriptions is tied directly to their functional character. The origins of nonovertly functional culture items may not be related directly to the needs of the group, but their continued usage is.

Appropriate culture. Some potential elements of a group's culture, while functional for satisfying group goals or personal needs, do not occur or continue because they undermine the group's social structure in not supporting the interpersonal network and power relations in the group. Those potential cultural elements which are consistent with the patterns of interaction of the group are the *appropriate culture* of the group. A cultural item

which expresses hostility toward a well-liked or legitimately powerful individual may be known, usable, and even functional (in that hostility may need to be expressed), yet may be inappropriate unless the group structure is altered (see Hollander, 1958).

This becomes clear in the case of nicknames. Many nicknames are evaluative in content, and a nickname must fit the target's defined status in the group. During the first year of observation of the Beanville Rangers, one team member, Tom, acquired the nickname "Maniac," based upon a linguistic play on his last name, and on his physical awkwardness on the baseball diamond. That year he was an eleven-year-old substitute outfielder. When the team members were asked to name their three best friends on the team during the middle of the season, Tom was named only by one of the 12 other boys answering the sociometric questionnaire (with 15 players on the team). According to sociometric ranking and formal status, Tom is a low-status team member. The question formulated that season was: What would happen the following year when he was 12 years of age, and presumably would be one of the better players on the team? The following year, Tom started most of the Rangers' games at third base, was one of the best batters on the team, and was located in the middle of the team's status hierarchy. In sociometric ratings both at the beginning and the end of the season, Tom was named by four of the 14 other players as one of their three best friends on the team. His previous nickname, "Maniac," was no longer in circulation, although Tom and other team members recalled its presence during the previous year. Tom's new nickname was "Main Eye," again a play on the boy's last name, though with dramatically different symbolic connotations.

A similar example occurred the following year in Sanford Heights. One of the eleven year olds on the Giants was known as a particularly poor baseball player, having gone hitless in his previous year in the league. As a function of his weak baseball skills and his somewhat isolated position on the team, he was called

"Smell-ton," again a play on a surname. During the first week of the season, much to everyone's surprise—his own included—he hit a Grand Slam home run. His nickname "Smell-ton" was forgotten and, for the rest of the season, his teammates called him Jim. Status can be usefully conceived of as constraining the creation of nicknames, although the labeling effect of nicknames and other culturally identifying information on group position cannot be denied. Nicknames are not the only cultural items subject to status considerations; pranks and practical jokes may only be performed on low status members, and rules may be constructed so that they support the prerogatives of the older players—such as determining who should coach on the bases (high status boys) or who should go to the refreshment stand for water (isolates).

In addition to being affected by status inappropriateness, acceptance of a cultural item may be contingent on the nature of sponsorship. Potential cultural items are more likely to be accepted into a group's idioculture when proposed by a high status member (Sherif and Sherif, 1953:252). This clearly applies when the coach proposes some cultural element; while these are not invariably accepted by his preadolescent charges, they do stand a comparatively greater likelihood of acceptance. Thus, in Hopewell, one set of coaches suggested that before a game their team should form a circle, that team members place their hands in the middle of the circle and, when the coach said "Let's go," that players should buoyantly raise their arms in unison. This ritual characterized the team throughout the season. Another coach in Maple Bluff ritually asked his team what three things they needed to win, and they vigorously responded, "Hustle, pride and class;" a third coach in Beanville would refer to a weak hit as something which his grandmother could hit better than, and so the comic image of this middle-aged man's grandmother entered the team's culture.

High status players, like coaches, find their personal status accorded the traditions they wish to establish. Several members of the Beanville Rangers got

wiffles (short haircuts) after Wiley, the second most popular boy on the team, got one and was proud of it. This fad continued (with one or two boys newly shaved each day) until Rich, the most popular boy on the team, publicly claimed that he thought the haircut looked stupid, although he deliberately excluded Wiley from this evaluation, saying that he looked good. After Rich's announcement, only one low status boy had his hair cut in that fashion, and the team, highly critical of his tonsorial style, said it looked horrible and, further, it was not a *real* wiffle. Similar sociometric processes affected clothing conformity, such as wearing wristbands or sneakers at games, and wearing shorts or removing one's shirt at practice.

Triggering event. The range of potential cultural items which qualify as known, usable, functional, and appropriate is extensive, and some interactional mechanism (or filter) is necessary to account for which items enter the group's cultural repertoire. The concept of a *triggering event* is postulated as an explanatory device to determine selection. Some bit of interaction will provide a "spark" which produces the specific content of the idioculture. This event can consist of any action or statement which produces a response in the group, similar to Smelser's (1962) concept of a precipitating factor for collective behavior. A member's new haircut may be sufficient to spawn a new nickname ("Kojak," "Buzz Conroy," "Peach Fuzz"). A miscue may provide the impetus for a joking sequence that remains part of group lore. A threat to the group may produce a legend, new norm, or a prescription for group action.

While any triggering event may theoretically produce idioculture, some events recur and, in those cases, items of idioculture are particularly likely to be produced and, once produced, will more likely be relevant to the group as they are repeatedly functional and appropriate. Thus, the superior batting of one Beanville youngster led to him being called "Superstar," and the opposite talent of a boy in Bolton Park produced his nickname: "Strike Out King." These nicknames are sociometrically appropri-

ate, as well as being frequently triggered, because of the differential athletic achievements of these two youngsters.

In addition, triggers which are notable or unusual are especially likely to produce idioculture.⁶ Support for this assertion is provided by Gmelch (1971) in an examination of baseball superstitions in the professional leagues; he discovered that rituals emanated from particularly good performances, while behavioral taboos resulted from notably poor performances. One Bolton Park coach's old Impala was called a "Cadillac" after a foul ball nearly hit it in practice and he jokingly told them not to hit his Cadillac. The term caught on, and the rusty car was called a "Cadillac" from that point on—the notable event of a wayward foul ball structured the culture creation of the team. As Gmelch notes, notable events also effect taboos. One Hopewell coach brought his team red, white, and blue wristbands on opening day, in order to give the team some sense of unity and specialness. However, the team, which was expected to win the championship that year, lost its first game by the embarrassing score of 12–3. After the game, the players decided that the wristbands were unlucky and from that day no member of the team wore a wristband, and the team eventually won the league championship.

Triggering events and their effects are difficult to predict in advance in natural settings, as they are emergent from social interaction. However, in an experimental setting, triggering events can be systematically arranged by the researcher and their effects upon the content of group culture examined. This constitutes a valuable direction for research in this area.

Summary. Five elements—the known culture, the usable culture, the functional culture, the appropriate culture, and the triggering event—influence the specific

content of a group's idioculture. Different configurations of these five factors suggest how groups come to differ in their culture, and why specific forms appear and remain in particular groups. To this point, cultural forms have been analyzed using a single characteristic; in order to indicate the combined impact of all five we shall examine the creation and usage of one particular cultural item considering all factors.

During the middle of the season, the Beanville Rangers created and enforced a rule that no player could eat ice cream while sitting on the bench during a game. This rule was triggered by a combination of circumstances: it occurred in the context of a game in which the Rangers, by that time accustomed to victory, were being beaten. On the bench, one of the nonplaying low status players was eating an ice cream cone. This situation triggered the decision by the high status, older⁷ players (not the coach) that ice cream could not be eaten on the bench (although gum could be chewed). The rule was known in that it was compatible with the policy and perspectives of professional sports teams. It was usable in that it did not deal with any tabooed or threatening areas of children's culture, and it is comparable to the rules that children frequently make in interaction with each other (Piaget, 1932; Cooley, 1902). The rule was functional in relieving the frustration that the older players felt during that game, and in tending to get the attention of the younger members on the team. Further, the presence of a set of rules or rituals may create a sense of group cohesion (Cartwright and Zander, 1953) and satisfaction (Borgatta and Bales, 1953). Finally, it was appropriate in that it was propounded by the high status members to control the low status members. Later in the season an older, high status player did eat ice cream on the bench, and was not

⁶ Kelly (1967) has noted that distinctiveness or uniqueness tends to create attributions focusing on the characteristics or properties of the distinctive other. In the case of persons, these attributions generally refer to dispositions. Kelly also notes that consistency of behavior over time or modality (as in the case of recurring triggering events) produces attributions based on the characteristics of the other.

⁷ Age (in years) and the percentage of the total number of sociometric choices received (with the opportunity for each boy to name three team members as friends) correlated $+.48$ ($p < .05$) at the beginning of this season, $+.59$ ($p < .02$) in the middle of the season, and $+.61$ ($p = .01$) at the end of the season.

criticized by other team members, although the rules remained for other team members.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists have had considerable difficulty in analyzing the position of culture in society because of a general unwillingness to examine culture in its behavioral context. Culture, like all aspects of social life, is situationally grounded and, thus, sociologists should bracket grand theorizing about culture in favor of examining it in situ. For both theoretical and methodological reasons, an examination on the level of the small group seems desirable. Small groups can be examined adequately, and they represent locations where much culture, subsequently spread to larger social units, has its origin. This procedure, in addition to increasing understanding about the social role of culture itself, also has the potential for bettering knowledge about small groups. Groups should not be conceived, as they sometimes have been in the experimental small-groups literature, as content-free collections of individuals. A content-oriented approach to small groups allows for a systematic analysis of group differences.

In this article, I have been concerned with exemplifying five perceived features of culture content which affect the content of group cultures. It is important to emphasize that these five components produce effects through the interactional negotiation of members, and this negotiation is based upon the shared meanings that these topics of communication have for members. Indeed, each of these five components is itself grounded in situational meanings. Culture is a construction based upon the consensual meaning system of members; it comprises the interactional products that result from a verbal and behavioral representation of that meaning system.

All groups, as they share experience, will develop a particularistic culture. Each of these cultures provides a task for the humanist as well as the social scientist. While we have emphasized the value of

understanding these systems for the comprehension of the dynamics of groups and cultural usage, we have deliberately overlooked the fact that these are also aesthetic systems, and are a product of "artful" communication. At this point we must share our goal of understanding human behavior with the folklorist, the critic, and the poet.

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