Production of Culture

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Abstract

The production of culture (POC) perspective emerged as a way to understand the external conditions that influence symbolic components of culture. Moving beyond a simple "reflection" theory of cultural production, this perspective directed attention to the processes by which culture is made. POC scholars have demonstrated how factors such as technology, law and regulation, organizational form, industry structure, careers, and markets influence the production, distribution, and reception of cultural products. First, we review foundational research that addresses the "six facets" associated with the POC perspective as well as related work on cultural industry and classification systems. Next, we address cutting-edge work that offers new insights and methodological savvy to classic POC concerns with innovation and diversity, gatekeeping processes, and the consequences of categories in symbolic production. Finally, we discuss opportunities for future work that has the potential to move POC scholarship forward while addressing fundamental sociological questions about fields, networks, and processes of classification, valuation, and evaluation. The increasing conceptual and methodological diversity that characterizes production of culture research promises to keep it a vibrant area of inquiry for years to come.

INTRODUCTION

The production of culture (POC) perspective was an emerging trend in 1970s sociology when Richard ("Pete") Peterson (1976)—a principal advocate and articulator of the perspective throughout his career—edited a volume bearing the name. At the time, it represented a nascent focus among sociologists on the ways in which symbolic components of culture are influenced by the systems of production, distribution, and reception in which they are embedded. As such, the POC perspective countered the previously common view that expressive cultural symbols and society simply reflect one another in a relatively straightforward manner. By contrast, POC scholars demonstrated that cultural objects are shaped by the external conditions—including the technological, legal, organizational, industrial, occupational, and market structures—in which they are fabricated, circulated, and evaluated (for

a detailed discussion of this "six-facet model," see Peterson & Anand, 2004). As such, the POC approach typically focuses more on how cultural objects are made than on what they mean.

Today, this approach is so widely accepted among sociologists that it often remains tacit in empirical research on symbolic culture. Among the assumptions of this approach is that cultural products can be studied much like any other kinds of human products, which meant that the theoretical ideas and methodological techniques associated with the study of organizations, occupations, and work were readily incorporated in POC scholarship. Yet while organizational and economic sociologists continue to invigorate the perspective, scholars from many substantive areas have enlivened POC as it has been applied to wide-ranging contexts and to cultural symbols of great variety. As a practical necessity, however, we limit the focus of this article to research on the products of the "creative" or "culture" industries (e.g., music, film, fashion, literature), by first addressing foundational exemplars of the perspective, then discussing more recent work in the area, and concluding with issues for future research.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

BEYOND "REFLECTION"

One of the significant shifts ushered in by POC scholarship was a move away from a "reflection" theory of society and culture to one that attended to specific factors that influence cultural content. For example, Wendy Griswold (1981) famously countered the reflection argument, which explained the divergent literary themes in American and European novels as simply mirroring differences in national character, by suggesting that scholars should consider the systems of production, characteristics of authors, and other factors that shape literary content. To put it succinctly, prevailing reflection theories suggested that the thematic elements of British novels—which focused on issues of marriage, money, and manners—mirrored the European social order, while the American novelist's deviant focus on "man-fleeing-society" (or other uniquely American themes) was a reflection of a distinctive national character.

Contrary to the reflection view, Griswold used a systematic analysis of novels to show that the content of American and European novels was not as different as previous commentators typically suggested. Moreover, she showed that American literary content was greatly influenced by copyright law. Before the Platt-Simmons Act of 1891, American publishers could legally print and sell the work of foreign authors without providing remuneration. Because this provided publishers with a vast library of free

content, American authors had an incentive to distinguish themselves from European authors in order to attract the attention of American publishers. After 1891, when American publishers were legally required to compensate foreign authors for their work, the differences in literary content between American and European novels nearly disappeared. In addition to national character, Griswold argued that literature is shaped by imperatives of the genre, the literary market, author characteristics, and copyright law. Since Griswold's foundational work, copyright law and other regulatory policies have been shown to influence a variety of cultural products, from music to magazines and from television to fine art.

As mentioned, the role of law and regulation is only one of the "six facets" associated with the POC perspective (Peterson & Anand, 2004). In his explanation of why rock and roll music emerged in 1955, Peterson (1990) draws on all six components of the POC model to dispel the prevailing view that rock's ascendance was simply a reflection of uniquely creative individuals on the supply side (e.g., Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry) or of changing preferences on the demand side (e.g., the growing number of young "baby-boomer" consumers). Rather, technological changes (e.g., advent of television, transistor radios, vinyl 45s); new developments in patent law and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulation; concomitant changes in the organizational (e.g., independent radio stations and decentralized music production), occupational (e.g., the rise of the disc jockey and record producers), and industry structures (e.g., declining concentration) of both radio broadcasting and music recording; and shifts away from homogeneous conceptions of the music market all provided conditions favorable to the emergence of rock music.

The advent of rock music represents a classic concern in POC scholarship with the role of external conditions in promoting or hampering innovation and diversity in cultural fields. In their foundational work on this matter, Peterson and Berger (1975) showed that when the music industry is characterized by high market concentration (i.e., a small number of firms maintain oligopolistic control over production) it produces less diverse and innovative music. Extending their work, Paul Lopes (1992) demonstrated that the negative impact of market concentration is partly contingent on the system of production and conception of the market employed by record companies. As a result, the music industry was able to produce innovative output in the 1980s despite high concentration because it used an "open" system of production and targeted a segmented—rather than mass—market. Building on these competing accounts, Tim Dowd (2004) produced convincing evidence that a shift to decentralized production among major recording firms (e.g., widening their rosters of performers, creating alliances with independent

labels) mitigated the negative impact of market concentration. Decentralized production allowed for new performing acts and new recording firms to emerge even when market concentration was high. Taken together, this influential strand of POC scholarship forcefully illustrates the role of industry structure, organizational logics, and market conceptions in shaping cultural products.

CULTURAL INDUSTRY SYSTEMS

Closely associated with the emergence of the POC perspective is the model of cultural industry systems put forward by Paul Hirsch (1972), which emphasizes the relationships between culture-producing organizations and the role they play as intermediaries between producers and consumers. Hirsch (1972) introduced the idea of a cultural industry system to call attention to the role of myriad individual and organizational actors in producing a cultural product for an audience. Rather than isolated cultural producers (e.g., artists, actors, musicians, writers) creating and delivering their work directly to an audience, the cultural industry system is a complex apparatus that selects relatively few creative works from a large pool of possibilities for distribution to an audience. From this view, the organizations that discover, produce, distribute, and evaluate cultural offerings act as "filters" or "gatekeepers" that together shape the form and substance of the cultural output that eventually reaches consumers. The abundant oversupply of potential artists (e.g., writers, actors, musicians) comprise the "technical subsystem," while the first filter, or "managerial subsystem," includes the organizations (e.g., publishing houses, movie studios, and record companies) that discover and produce books, films, and recorded music for an audience. The second filter, or "institutional subsystem," is comprised of a vast array of media actors (e.g., book or film critics, disc jockeys) who evaluate cultural offerings. In studies of the individual and organizational actors that constitute the institutional subsystem, they are variously referred to as "surrogate consumers" (Hirsch, 1972), cultural intermediaries, reputational entrepreneurs, tastemakers, and so on. The system also includes feedback loops from the institutional subsystem and the audience, which influences the actions of artists and producing organizations. This expansive network of interrelated actors is akin to what others call an organizational field.

  Because of the vast oversupply of potential creative works to choose from and the relative rarity of commercial success, the producing organizations face a great deal of uncertainty. To deal with this problem, Hirsch (1972) suggested that such organizations engage in three strategies. First, they employ boundary-spanning agents (e.g., talent scouts, promoters, public relations personnel) who work upstream to identify creative talent and downstream

to influence media gatekeepers and retailers. Second, they intentionally overproduce in the hope that commercial failures are offset by big hits. Finally, they attempt to co-opt members of the institutional subsystem to secure favorable evaluation and exposure in media outlets. Much POC scholarship focuses on one or more aspects of the cultural industry system, such as how firms deal with uncertainty, the effects of gatekeeping processes on artistic content, the role of institutional regulators, and so on. Considering the interconnected and interdependent system in which cultural offerings are discovered, produced, disseminated, and assessed is a central activity of the POC perspective and reflects a sociological focus on the many forces external to individual cultural creators that shape their creative work.

CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

Another feature of the systems in which creative content is produced deals with the possible categories into which such products are placed. Perhaps the most familiar type of cultural category is a genre, which Paul DiMaggio (1987, p. 441) defines as "sets of artworks classified together on the basis of perceived similarities." Genre categories act as important sense-making devices for both cultural producers and consumers. Classic studies in the POC tradition demonstrate the central role of genres in the decision-making processes of cultural producers. For example, Bielby and Bielby (1994) found that television programmers at the major networks employed various rhetorical strategies to legitimate their precarious decisions about which shows to produce for primetime from a plentitude of pilots. Among these strategies, programmers would frequently rely on familiar genre categories (e.g., situational comedy, drama, reality) to frame their decisions. As a result, television pilots that deviated from conventional genre categories were much less likely to be selected for primetime production.

   In his much-cited theory of artistic classification systems, Paul DiMaggio (1987) draws on POC insights to generate formal propositions regarding the structural features of classification systems themselves. DiMaggio suggests four dimensions along which such systems differ at the societal level as well as several social structural factors (e.g., social heterogeneity, level of inequality) that influence each dimension. For one, artistic classification systems can vary in their *differentiation*, or the degree to which genres are institutionally bounded. Systems that are highly segmented with many identifiable genres are highly differentiated. Second, artistic classification systems can vary in the degree to which genres are ranked by prestige, which is an indicator of *hierarchy*. In more hierarchical systems, genres diverge widely in prestige and receive unequal resources. A third dimension of variation is *universality*, or the degree to which there is agreement among members of

a society in the ways they recognize and classify genres. Finally, artistic classification systems can vary in their *boundary strength*, or the degree to which genre boundaries are highly ritualized and difficult to transgress. Furthermore, ritual classifications are mediated by *commercial* categories (whereby profit-seeking entities seek to differentiate cultural products); *professional* categories (based on the competitive process by which artists divide works into types); and *administrative* categories (created by the state). Characteristics of classification systems can have profound consequences for the types of cultural products that are available and how they are assessed (e.g., Zhao, 2008 on the production and valuation of Californian vs French wine).

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Recent research in the POC tradition shares concerns similar to the foundational scholarship, but continues to enliven the perspective through detailed investigations of cultural industries, novel methodological approaches, and by exploring intersections between cultural production and other domains of sociological inquiry. Where Hirsch (1972) opens his classic article with observations of a fashion house in Paris, for example, Ashley Mears (2011) offers a detailed look at the inner workings of the fashion industry that touches on POC concerns with innovation and diversity, gatekeeping processes, and the consequences of cultural categories. Providing keen insights into the work lives of fashion models, the brokering efforts of bookers (i.e., modeling agents) and the decision-making processes of their clients, Mears details the uncertain environment in which these gatekeepers of fashion operate. In the face of this uncertainty, bookers and clients in the fashion industry rely on established work practices, familiar categories (i.e., commercial vs editorial fashion), and a narrow conception of consumer preferences to produce fashion images that are strikingly homogeneous in terms of race and body type. While bookers and clients blame each other as well as fashion consumers for this lack of diversity, shared conventions, work routines, and the organization of the industry reveal a great deal about how beauty is valorized by cultural producers in the fashion world. As such, Mears' work shows how the production of fashion intersects with racial and gender hierarchies to reproduce inequalities. It also provides a model for how ethnographic work can shed light on a wide range of typical POC concerns.

Gabriel Rossman (2012) also addresses POC concerns with innovation, gatekeeping processes, and classification in his book, *Climbing the charts*, which focuses on radio airplay in popular music. Using a novel methodological approach, Rossman draws on diffusion of innovations theory to model the patterns of radio airplay for successful pop songs (for a detailed

discussion of multilevel diffusion curves, see Rossman, Chiu, & Mol, 2008). Among other things, the diffusion curves provide evidence that exogenous, centrally coordinated influences lead to widespread airplay for a relatively small number of hits. Thus, rather than diffusing through an endogenous contagion process or as the result of influential radio DJs playing a record, chart-toppers appear to more often result from the music industry co-opting the gatekeepers of radio airplay (e.g., by using some form of payola). Yet this is not the entire story. Radio programmers exert their influence through their choice of radio format—a classificatory scheme in radio that defines the core identity and strategy of a radio station. Such categories structure radio airplay as well-established formats allow for more rapid diffusion of hits while new formats and their associated genres follow less predictable diffusion patterns. In addition, Rossman (2012) offers compelling evidence that the precipitous decline in the Dixie Chicks' airplay following Natalie Maines' controversial comments about President Bush had little to do with market concentration in radio and much to do with the market as radio listeners—especially of country music stations—voiced their displeasure.

The POC perspective has also benefited from work exploring intersections with other fields of sociological study. Shyon Baumann (2006, 2007), for example, has highlighted commonalities between social movements and the process by which cultural products (or entire cultural fields) are legitimated. Similar to social movements, fields of cultural production require opportunity space, resource mobilization, and a legitimating ideology to elevate the status of their offerings. Baumann (2007) showed how typical POC factors such as technology (e.g., advent of television) and changing organizational arrangements (e.g., shift from studio to project-based production) provided the necessary conditions and resources for Hollywood films to gain symbolic status. The most distinctive contribution of Baumann's work, however, is his focus on the legitimating ideology provided by film critics (i.e., part of Hirsch's "institutional subsystem") who provided an intellectualizing discourse that helped frame films as works of art. In a different way, Larry Isaac (2009, 2012) demonstrates how social movement fields can profoundly influence fields of cultural production. Specifically, he looks at how contention over the labor movement in the United States led to the emergence of a new fiction subgenre—the "labor problem" novel—where movement and countermovement conflicts were waged on the pages of literary fiction. In this way, he shows how social movement scholarship can enhance our understanding of cultural production as well as how collective action can produce cultural consequences.

Finally, considerable work has recently focused on a variety of issues related to classification processes in the POC. A prominent example is research that stems from the organizational ecology perspective to address

the impact of multiple category membership on various market outcomes (for a review, see Hannan, 2010). In the field of film, studies by Greta Hsu and colleagues (e.g., Hsu, Hannan, & Koçak, 2009; Hsu, Negro, & Peretti, 2012) have generally shown that spanning genre categories hampers critical and commercial success, although its negative effects may be mitigated by contextual factors. For instance, in fields where there is less contrast between categories (e.g., categories are in flux or less institutionalized), multiple category membership is less likely to inhibit the favorable reception of cultural offerings (Kovács & Hannan, 2010). Related research has considered how a single cultural category emerges and either becomes successfully institutionalized (e.g., Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010 on modern Indian art) or fails to do so (e.g., Boone, Declerck, Rao, & van den Buys, 2012 on modernistic music in Brussels). By contrast, Jennifer Lena (2012) documents the trajectories of dozens of music genres and reveals common patterns in the processes by which such categories emerge and change over time. Her work offers a theoretical lens for seeing the relationship between communities and cultural classifications that can be readily applied to other fields of symbolic production.

The foregoing examples are intended to give a brief snapshot of cutting-edge work and current directions in POC research rather than a comprehensive overview of all the innovative scholarship in this thriving field. It is worth noting, however, that many of the studies included here address common criticisms that have been leveled at the POC perspective over the years (see Peterson & Anand, 2004). In particular, POC has been accused of overlooking the influence of cultural consumers, but Rossman (2012) shows how influential fans can be in shaping radio airplay in the case of the Dixie Chicks controversy. Likewise, although POC scholarship is not generally aimed at inferring meaning (a criticism of the perspective), the work of Baumann (2006, 2007) and Isaac (2009, 2012) offers insight into the interpretation of meaning across space and time. Finally, the argument that the POC perspective downplays issues of power and inequality does not apply to Mears' (2011) account of how production processes in fashion reproduce racial and gender inequalities or to Lena's (2012) discussion of how genre classifications have concrete consequences in the distribution of power and resources.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research in the POC tradition continues to thrive and remaining issues promise to invigorate the POC agenda for the foreseeable future. While there are many ways in which scholarship on cultural production can continue to progress, POC-inspired work also has the opportunity to contribute

to fundamental sociological issues related to social fields, networks, the sociology of markets, and processes of classification, valuation, and evaluation. In this section, we offer suggestions for ongoing work inspired by POC questions and insights.

As has been noted elsewhere (e.g., Peterson & Anand, 2004), one opportunity for moving POC scholarship forward is to direct more attention to the broader social-structural context in which the "six facets" operate. Perhaps this oversight is partly due to a desire to establish distance from the reflection theories that prevailed before the POC perspective emerged, which assumed that structural factors determined cultural production. However, contemporary scholars generally see culture as more of a fragmented pastiche than a "seamless web" (DiMaggio, 1997) and envision a complex, context-dependent relationship between culture and social structure rather than a one-to-one correspondence. Thus, attention to the societal level has the potential to illuminate the contingent and interdependent relationships between structural factors, cultural industries, classification systems, and the six facets of the POC perspective. A more practical obstacle to such efforts is that most studies look at a single institutional setting and focus on one (or a few) POC variables. Indeed, Peterson's (1990) analysis of the advent of rock music, discussed earlier, is somewhat rare as an example of work that examines all six facets of the POC model in the same study (see also Bourdieu, 1993; Crane, 1992). While practical and methodological challenges confront efforts at societal-level analyses of the type needed, such work has the potential to not only contribute to scholarship on cultural production but more broadly to our understanding of social fields and their relationships to one another (see Fligstein & McAdam, 2012).

Research at a macro-sociological level is also lacking from studies of classification in cultural fields. DiMaggio's (1987) widely cited theory of artistic classification systems, described earlier, contains many propositions regarding the relationship between key dimensions of such systems (i.e., their level of differentiation, hierarchy, universality, and boundary strength) and a variety of social structural factors (e.g., level of social heterogeneity and inequality, features of the educational system). Yet as DiMaggio (2009) himself has acknowledged, this set of propositions has not been formally tested. Again, such research has the potential to explain variation in classification systems as well as shed light on the relationship between fields of cultural production and other social fields. The theoretical propositions in the theory are largely built on DiMaggio's (1982) research on the institutionalization of high culture in the United States, but historical and cross-national research can assess the validity of the theory in other contexts and enhance POC scholarship (see Janssen & Peterson, 2005). While notable comparative work has been inspired by DiMaggio's (1987) theory of artistic classification systems—for

instance, cross-national research by Janssen, Kuipers, and Verboord (2008) on trends in the international orientation of arts journalism in elite newspapers of four countries from 1955 to 2005—it has not fully tested the societal-level propositions.

To the extent that newspaper coverage of culture and other text-based sources provide a promising and unobtrusive source of comparative measurement (Peterson, 2005), efforts to advance POC scholarship may well benefit from the "big data" movement in sociology and cognate fields. A growing number of sociologists are collaborating with computer scientists or borrowing from their methods for analyzing large text corpora, such as DiMaggio, Nag, and Blei (2013) who use topic modeling to examine the discursive frames regarding government funding of the arts in several American newspapers over time (see Mohr & Bogdanov, 2013 for additional examples). The approach provides insights into the shifting policy environment—a classic POC concern—for public arts funding in the United States, while also considering contextual factors that influence the use of contrasting frames. Many POC-related questions are not readily answerable through text analysis and such methods are not without their pitfalls (see Bail, 2014), but big data approaches are promising and proliferating.

Recent work in the sociology of markets highlights the fundamental role of classification and evaluation in shaping assessments of quality across diverse fields (Beckert & Musselin, 2013). The POC focus in creative industries on gatekeeping and legitimacy processes can offer many insights into how these mechanisms work to create ideas about symbolic value. Scholarship that addresses the role of a legitimating ideology (Baumann, 2006, 2007) for artistic products has inspired considerable work on critical discourse in cultural fields that is relevant to the construction of quality. In her review of related lines of inquiry, Lamont (2012) calls for a comparative sociology of valuation and evaluation to produce cumulative insights into processes of categorization and legitimation as well as valuation and evaluative practices. Many POC-inspired scholars are engaged in this agenda, which has broad sociological relevance.

Returning to the issue of classification, the burgeoning literature on the topic among POC scholars and organizational ecologists can benefit from more explicit dialogue between the two approaches. For example, what ecologists refer to as "categorical contrast" (Kovács & Hannan, 2010) is closely related to DiMaggio's (1987) dimensions of differentiation and boundary strength in artistic classification systems. Future research in this area could also address issues of universality and hierarchy to provide better explanations for variation in the impact of ambiguous classification. In his review of this literature, Hannan (2010) suggests that future work needs to account for how supply-side (i.e., producer) and demand-side (i.e.,

audience) systems of classification mutually shape one another rather than modeling them separately. Drawing on Hirsch's (1972) model of cultural industry systems, future research might push this agenda even further by considering how classification operates at each stage in the production process, from the creative personnel to the organizational producers to the institutional intermediaries to the audience.

The study of social networks has long been associated with work in the POC tradition given its close association to organizational and economic sociology. Much of this work has focused on the impact of such networks on the careers of creative workers (e.g., Rossman, Esparza, & Bonacich, 2010). Examining the social networks of gatekeepers holds promise for understanding their selection strategies in cultural markets. Foster, Borgatti, and Jones (2011) demonstrate how networks among nightclub talent buyers in Boston operate in different niches of the market based on divergent cultural, economic, and cognitive mechanisms. Drawing on relational and network governance theories, such work not only contributes to classic POC questions about organizational boundary spanners and how they deal with uncertain markets but also responds to Fligstein and McAdam's (2012) call to study the "internal governance units" in social fields that serve to maintain the existing structure of the field. POC scholars are well positioned to answer the call for this type of research. Fortunately, the conceptual and methodological diversity that characterizes POC research promises to keep it a vibrant area of inquiry for years to come.

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