

Until recently, the dominant perspective in the social sciences has been that culture is shared by members of society and is a constraining force. More and more, however, scholars are recognizing that cultural elements are not shared, but are contested and negotiated by individuals and social groups. All cultures, it turns out, contain a diversity of conflicting stories, symbols, and meanings, which culture-users interpret in a variety of ways. Everywhere, the cultural beliefs that any person knows vary. Even the shared knowledge of cultural components, moreover, may not lead to similar actions.¹

As Peter Stromberg (1981: 545) points out, the rejection of the idea of culture as shared has proved difficult to reconcile with the idea that culture “exert[s] some regular influence on the behavior of group members.” If culture is negotiated and contested, how does it constrain people and shape social life? The problem of recognizing both human agency and cultural constraint is one that is increasingly occupying the attention of social theorists (Giddens 1984; Archer 1988; Brubaker 1985; Schudson 1989). In this book, I offer one approach to recognizing culture’s powerful causal significance while also accepting that individuals are not “cultural dopes” (Swidler 1986: 277), but are actively involved in negotiating and contesting cultural norms and meanings.

I emphasize that individuals manipulate the available cultural repertoire for their own purposes, to invest meaning in their own diverse actions. Some of the men I interviewed marry for love, separate from their parents’ households, and reject customary limitations on interactions with their wives. But I suggest that the culturally constructed understandings of motivation that I focus on nevertheless constrain even individuals who act unconventionally. Such frameworks for understanding action constrain individuals, and shape psyche and social life.

I went to India in November 1986 to uncover and analyze how one group of Indian men used their gender culture in diverse ways. Because I was interested in variations in the cultural ideas within a particular social group, I focused on men of common caste and class, interviewing 49 upper-middle-class, upper-caste men living in Bānaras, North India, over the course of the next year. I hoped to analyze how men share cultural ideas about gender, why they embrace these ideas, and how they use their common culture to pursue diverse goals.

THE PLACE

Banāras² is an important pilgrimage city of about one million people (Government of India 1985: 109). So sacred to Hindus that it is visited by millions of pilgrims each year (Eck 1983), Banāras bustles with business on its narrow streets and lanes. Even away from the city center, overcrowded buildings cluster tightly together separated only by narrow lanes.³ The downtown streets are sometimes so crowded with bicycles, scooters, cycle rickshaws, autorickshaws, pedestrians, livestock, and the occasional bus that it is physically impossible to move even on foot (see also Lutgendorf 1987: 71).

Few will fail to be struck by the beauty of the city or its religious significance. The views along the great river Gangā (or Ganges) are magnificent and etched into the consciousness of many Indians. Bathing in the river is an important religious act, which Hindus come from all over India to perform. Recitations of religious texts broadcast over loud speakers in many of the city's temples pierce the morning calm, and Banāras's many great festivals and fairs give the city a special air (Eck 1983; Kumar 1988; Lutgendorf 1990).

Seventy-five percent of Banāras's residents are Hindus and nearly 25% are Muslims (Government of India 1971a: 16-17). Occasionally, as happened on a couple of occasions during my stay there, relations are tense between the two religious groups.⁴ Thirteen percent of the population is made up of the scheduled (or untouchable) castes (Government of India 1971a: 16-17)—a percentage a bit lower than that of India as a whole (Mahar 1972: xxix).

As in many other parts of North India (Miller 1981), men outnumber women. In Banāras, there are only 84 women for every 100 men (Government of India 1985: 109). While the percentage of Banāras residents who are literate is increasing, literacy is still fairly low—32% overall, and women's literacy in Banāras is still one-third that of men (Government of India 1971b: 2-3).

THE PEOPLE

CLASS

The men I interviewed are upper-middle-class. Most of their families own such prized consumer items as televisions and motor scooters, and a few have telephone connections. Some of them give as much as

200,000 rupees dowry (about \$15,000 in 1987) when their daughters marry. None of them, however, is upper-class. None owns an automobile or has been abroad.

OCCUPATION

Because I was interested in discovering variations within a particular group, I focused on a few occupations. I started by interviewing merchants, but expanded my net by interviewing some men who work in banks and post offices. Six of the 49 men I interviewed work in white-collar service, but nearly 40% had worked in white-collar service at some time, or had close relatives (fathers, sons, brothers) who did so.

WIVES' WORK

According to the census, only 3% of Banāras women are employed outside the home (compared with the 46% employment rate for men) (Government of India 1985: 742-743). While the census undercounts women who work in the informal economy as maids, vegetable vendors, and agricultural laborers (Standing 1991: 44), most upper-middle-class men probably do not allow their wives to work outside the home unless they are well-educated and can get jobs that pay well.⁵ Since employed women are usually from families at the highest as well as at the lowest income levels (Standing 1991:29), it is not too surprising that none of the wives of the men I interviewed work outside the home. Still, a handful of the men I interviewed have *bhābhīs* [older brothers' wives] who work outside the home, and a few more say that they will allow their wives to work when their responsibilities for raising children diminish.

EDUCATION

The men I interviewed are literate and well-educated. Slightly more than half of those younger than 45 years of age have at least some college education, and roughly a quarter of those under 45 have completed high school. While none of the men over 45 attended college, more than a third are high school-educated.

CASTE

The men I interviewed are privileged by the caste system. All are caste Hindus, and all but four are of the twice-born castes.⁶ Twenty are Brāhmins, who are at the pinnacle of the caste system. Seventeen are

Vaishyas and eight are Kshatriyas, the other two twice-born *varṇa*. I also interviewed four Shūdras, all of whom are *ahīrs*, an upwardly mobile sanskritizing caste.⁷ (*Ahīrs* are not untouchables.)

The Brāhmaṇs, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas I interviewed are of various *jātīs*.⁸ In order to identify each respondent's caste, I have given each member of each *varṇa* caste grouping a shared surname. Some, but not a majority, of the respondents actually had this surname. I have given all Brāhmaṇ respondents the surname Mishra, all Vaishya respondents the surname Gupta, all Kshatriya respondents the surname Singh, and all *ahīr* respondents the surname Yadav.

MEN'S POSITIONS IN JOINT FAMILIES

Most of the men I interviewed live in joint families. Eighty percent live in households with more than one married couple and about half live in households with three or more married couples. While joint-family living is more typical in the Banāras region than in other places in India (Kolenda 1987: 243), most Indians spend much of their lives in families with more than one married couple (Kolenda 1967: 386; Kakar 1981: 114; Rao and Rao 1982: 130-134). As I will describe in chapter 3, most men see joint-family living as providing emotional satisfaction and economic security.

The men I interviewed range from 20 to 75 years of age,⁹ and represent various positions in joint and nuclear families. I interviewed 10 unmarried men, 21 men who live with their wives as junior members of joint families, 6 married men who head nuclear families, and 12 men who head joint families.¹⁰ All 6 of the men who head nuclear families are over 35, and all had lived with their wives in joint families for much of their early married life. This range represents the cycle of a typical joint family. After spending the first years of married life in joint households, most men separate from their parents or brothers to spend some years in a nuclear family as their children grow. These men's families become joint once again when their own sons marry, bringing daughters-in-law into a household.

THE INTERVIEWS

I usually approached men at their place of business during the period of "rest" of early afternoon. Men's small shops are often gathering places for friends to share tea, *pān* [a betel leaf, spice, and lime-paste preparation], conversations, and laughter, especially during regular lulls of

business, like early afternoon. These conversations were only occasionally interrupted when a shopkeeper needed to see to a customer.

I usually approached men when they were alone during times like early afternoon when business is slow.¹¹ I initially chatted with them about their family situations and about arranged marriages. We sometimes discussed the changing status of women, which is often debated in modern India. During these talks, men often had a child bring tea to share with me, and offered me *pān*. Men typically commented on the rarity of meeting a foreigner who was interested enough in Hindu culture to have learned Hindi, which they often insisted (exaggerating, I think) that I spoke very well. Eventually, I explained my position as a scholar and suggested that I would be interested in interviewing them to learn about their own ideas about joint-family living, arranged marriages, interactions with family members inside the home, and issues concerning women's position in India.

I conducted interviews in Hindi (the language spoken in Banāras) in men's shops, in their homes, and in my own home. The rate of refusals was extremely low (less than 15%), and with only a few exceptions, the people I interviewed enjoyed the experience.¹² Few men showed any reluctance to having the interview taped, and the presence of a research assistant did not seem inhibiting.¹³

One of my first dozen interviews was with Gopal Mishra. Gopal, 29, runs his family's small print shop, which is located in the crowded center of Banāras. His business prints business cards, wedding invitations, and the like. Gopal is an eldest son and lives nearby with his parents, wife, young child, and unmarried brothers and sisters. Like most, Gopal says that living in a joint family provides "happiness [*sukh*]" and financial security.

Gopal's shop is reminiscent of the print-shop described in R.K. Narayan's (1962) *Maneater of Malgudi*. In a tiny room in the front of the dark print shop is a large, wooden sitting platform on one wall, and several chairs against the facing wall. Friends, relatives, and customers often fill these sitting places. Gopal's father visits the shop regularly as do relatives who come to Banāras from surrounding villages. Tea and *pān* are often shared among friends. As is the case in nearly all of the business houses in which I conducted interviews, the room is decorated with a variety of pictures brought from the bazaar. Gopal's shop displays pictures of Shiva, Hanuman, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga, as well as a black and white photograph of Mahatma Gandhi.

I spoke with Gopal several times before I formally interviewed him. On the cold January afternoon in 1987 on which I conducted the interview, Gopal was wearing a blue *dhotī*, a shirt and sweater, and had

wrapped a scarf around his head. Gopal has a lively face, and his laughter is engaging. Gopal sent for sugary milk tea from a nearby shop to warm us up several times during this initial interview. My research assistant sat on the wooden sitting platform near the door, smoking *bīḍīs* and gradually was forgotten for most of the interview, although he did ask a number of perceptive questions near the end.

As in each interview, I began by telling Gopal that I was interested in his own ideas, not those of society and not the common ideas. I base my conclusions on taped interviews with 49 respondents like Gopal. In the structured, but still open-ended interview, Gopal told me about the advantages and disadvantages he found in joint-family living, and about his attitude toward arranged marriages and love marriages. He told me what he thought about women going outside the home, and about his own relationships with his wife and other family members within a joint family. Wherever possible, I asked Gopal to tell me about his own experiences with marriage, with joint-family living, and with a wife and sisters who sometimes moved about outside the home.¹⁴

Gopal spoke with enthusiasm, and sometimes with passion. He usually spoke with conviction, although he was also unsure of himself when discussing some topics. Like many, he commented that he tried to answer all of my questions and to open up his heart. The interview lasted for an hour, but we talked for another two hours after the interview, as I answered Gopal's questions about America. On another day, I interviewed Gopal's father, Lakanlal Mishra, and I returned 5 months later during the hot season to interview Gopal about wedding ceremonies, honor, and the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*—follow-up interviews I conducted with each of my married *Brāhmaṇ* respondents who lived with their parents as junior members of a joint family.

FINDING VARIATION

Interviews with 49 men of different ages and living in different situations in joint and nuclear families reveal variations in their ideas about women, families, and marriages. Consideration of these variations is an important part of this book. Which men are more likely to reject dominant cultural ideas? What culture work are they forced to do when they reject these ideas? Why is there more consensus about some ideas than about others?

Variations in ideas about what constitutes proper husband-wife relationships proved fairly common. While most men believe, like Gopal, that "too many contacts" between husband and wife are "very harmful

for the joint family," many others insist, instead, that any limitation on contacts between husband and wife would be "unfathomable," to use the words of one married 47-year-old. Men are more likely to share ideas about the desirability of joint-family living, women remaining inside the home, and arranged marriages. Gopal, for instance, takes the stance that a love marriage could never succeed "because everyone will see it as a love marriage." Yet, an occasional man expressed his disagreement with these cultural norms as well. One married 25-year-old says, for instance, that arranged marriages only cause a "big mental heat in the heart of men."

SHARED MEANINGS

In addition to learning about these variations, and about the culture work men do to bolster and to reject dominant cultural ideas, I slowly recognized a largely shared vocabulary centering on a concern with honor. Gopal Mishra hints at this concern with honor when he comments that a love marriage faces difficulty because "everyone will see it as a love marriage." This concern with honor, with how others see action, is a manifestation of an understanding of human motivation and social control, which is different from the dominant understanding of middle-class American men, and which I only learned about gradually. The shared vocabulary focusing on honor and tradition suggests men's implicit distrust of individual actions which are not controlled by larger social groups.

One way I came to recognize the importance of this collectivist framework for understanding action was through my own interactions in the neighborhood I shared with slightly more than half of the men I interviewed. Instances that were originally bewildering alerted me to the existence of such an understanding shared by my respondents but not by me. I was surprised when a near-stranger approached me on the street to complain about the behavior of the blind musician who unlocked the front gate of the building where I lived. It seemed to me that the person should approach the blind man directly. It also seemed strange to me when neighbors warned me of the improper dishonoring behavior of other neighbors, insisting, for instance, that I should not speak with a young man who had been thrown out of his parents' house for fighting with his wife. But I gradually learned that this sort of gossip reflects a particular understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, an understanding which holds that the individual must be everywhere

controlled by larger social groups. It is this distinctive understanding that I came to focus on as an important element of culture that constrains individuals.

STUDYING CULTURE

Culture is the machinery which individuals use, as Clifford Geertz ([1966] 1973b: 363) puts it, “to orient themselves in a world otherwise opaque,” to make sense of actions they see around them. As C. Wright Mills ([1959] 1963) argues, culture is the “lens” through which people see the world.

CULTURAL COMPONENTS

Culture is an apparatus for understanding, which includes two important elements. First, culture includes the cultural components of what Ann Swidler (1986) calls a tool kit. These cultural components include values, tales, and key symbols. They include the meanings found in cultural products like movies, religious performances, and works of literature.

Individuals often know cultural components without embracing them; they regard some as authoritative guides to action and others as meaningless entertainment; and they may interpret existing values or stories in diverse ways.¹⁵ They know, moreover, that even their most cherished practices are culturally constructed. For instance, the men I interviewed hold firmly to the belief that marriages should be arranged by the parents of the bride and groom, but they also believe that among certain groups in India love marriages are common. They know that in the United States, marriages are not arranged by the parents of the bride and groom. While they insist that it is right and proper for marriages to be arranged, they know that the practice of arranging marriages is not part of the natural world, but is a distinctive part of Hindu culture.

Most critiques of the conception of culture as shared and constraining have focused on cultural components like values, norms, symbols, and cautionary stories. My focus is instead on commonsense, but nonetheless, cultural understandings of human motivation.

COMMONSENSE CULTURAL UNDERSTANDINGS

A second aspect of culture consists of people’s implicit, commonsense understandings about what determines individual actions, what consti-

tutes individuals, and what controls individuals' anti-social impulses. People attach meanings to events not merely through the tool kit of cultural components but through these implicit commonsense understandings of the world.¹⁶ Such understandings are what Mary Douglas (1982b:1) calls the "perceptual controls" through which "anything whatsoever that is perceived at all must pass."

As Douglas (1982b:1) recognizes, these perceptual controls are not "a private affair." Instead, the processes of perception by which only some things are admitted into consciousness are "largely cultural."¹⁷ Some, like anthropologist David Schneider (1976: 202-3), see such commonsense understandings as the most central part of culture: "Where norms tell the actor how to play the scene, culture tells the actor how the scene is set and what it all means."

Although both the cultural components of a tool kit and informal commonsense understandings are cultural constructions, people usually do not self-consciously recognize informal commonsense understandings of self and human motivation as social products. When individuals are aware of these commonsense understandings, they tend to regard them not as cultural constructions, but as simply the way things are, as something anyone in his or her right mind should know.¹⁸

Catherine Lutz (1988: 83) refers to the sorts of "cultural constructions of particular persons" and of "human nature" that I am discussing as "ethnopsychological knowledge systems." Anthropologists have developed a productive research tradition examining ethnopsychology—indigenous understandings of psychological functioning—while sociologists continue to study indigenous understandings of the individual's relationship to larger communities.¹⁹ My focus on commonsense conceptualizations of human motivation is part of these traditions of research. I bring the focus on ethnopsychology to bear on important causal questions in anthropology and sociology: Are commonsense understandings widely shared? How do they constrain individuals? How do they shape social life?

I focus attention on *social frameworks for understanding action*—commonsense understandings of why people act the way they do. Swidler (1986: 276) argues that in the Protestant West action is "assumed to depend on the choices of individual persons" (see also Bellah *et al.* 1985; Varenne 1977; chapter 7). Even "collective action," she says, is "understood to rest on the choices of individual actors." Most of the Hindu men I interviewed understand individual actions not as the result of individual choices but as a simple reflection of the group—family, caste, or religion—to which the individual belongs. They see action as driven by social pressures.

I argue that frameworks for understanding action are a particularly constraining element of culture, which limit the strategies individuals can use, even when they act unconventionally. The constraining power of social frameworks for understanding action is greater (although its dictates less precise) than the constraint of any cultural component.

METHODOLOGY: INTERVIEWING 49 MEN

A FOCUS ON MEN

My methodological choices have both important advantages and significant limitations. I decided not to systematically interview women in the families of the men I interviewed because of my theoretical focus and because I took seriously my respondents' statements that speaking with their wives would harm their families' honor.²⁰ In chapter 6, I examine women's responses to the gender culture that oppresses them by considering ethnographies done by female anthropologists and the journalism of Indian feminists. Since I did not interview women in the community I studied, however, my work remains limited by its focus on men. While I know, for instance, why men say that they restrict their wives' movements outside the home, I can't know for sure how upper-caste, upper-middle-class Banārasī women feel about these restrictions, Do they embrace them? Do they enforce them? Do they resent them? Do they buck them?

But my focus on men's perspective of gender issues has its own advantages, as well. Rather than examining variations between men and women, I focus on analyzing how men use a common culture in diverse ways. Moreover, as I show in the next chapter, my focus on men allowed me to see how men's perceptions of their own gender interests drive their interactions. Only by talking with men in a private setting could I expect to begin to understand men's conscious interests and desires.

RELIANCE ON INTERVIEWS

Second, I chose to base this book more on interviews than on participant observation. While I did observe interactions in several homes, my work is limited by its reliance on what men told me. Just as participant observation may not accurately reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of individuals, interviews may not accurately reveal how people act in their daily lives. Still, one reason for confidence in my findings is the

broad consistency between what men told me about family life and conclusions based on more ethnographic fieldwork. A more important problem is that focusing on interviews may obscure the larger context in which people live their lives. The men I interviewed may focus on restricting their wives to the home precisely because some women are challenging the restrictions that have been placed on them. My focus on individual men gives inadequate attention, then, to how men are responding to larger changes in India today.

Private, personal interviews are nonetheless a useful methodology for studying the commonsense understandings, emotions, and subtle rebellions that I focus on. First, much of my work analyzes men's unselfconscious use of emotion words and their taken-for-granted understandings of human motivation. This analysis focuses not on men's overt points about marriage, family, and gender, but rather on the assumptions they make in talking about emotions and why people act the way they do. While it would be desirable to study men's naturalistic talk in their day-to-day lives to confirm my findings, the implicit assumptions about human motivation and emotions that I analyze are probably equally apparent in interview situations.

Second, private interviews may be the only way to reveal some of the critical stances men take toward dominant cultural norms—especially in a context where honor demands outward conformity. For instance, some of the men I interviewed say that, while they have to try to maintain the appearance of acting according to established norms, they are actually working to subvert social rules. While people's public actions and statements in their day-to-day life may be driven by the need to cultivate public approval, then, private interviews allow people to talk about hidden motives and strategies for attaining their goals.

Third, interviewing people is a particularly useful way of understanding people's motives. Only by using private interviews could I gain access to men's conscious reasons for restricting women to the home. The fact that I am a male outsider may have encouraged men to be particularly frank about their sometimes sexist motives. Because I am an outsider, men didn't need to concern themselves with maintaining their honorable place within their community by offering acceptable explanations of their motivations.²¹ While they talked about honor, they also talked of the self-interested reasons they have for restricting women. Furthermore, my insider status as a man may have encouraged men to discuss their sexist views openly. Nita Kumar (1992) reports that to interview male informants in Banāras, she had to present herself as a sister, public worker, or writer. While this was not a disadvantage for Kumar's (1988) study of popular culture, men would probably hes-

itate to discuss their interest in subjugating women to a woman whom they saw in these roles. In-depth interviews with a male outsider, then, may be one of the best ways to reveal men's self-interested motivations.²²

QUESTIONS OF REPRESENTATIVENESS

How representative are the men I interviewed? The ethnopsychology and gender culture of the men I interviewed are likely to be common among upper-middle-class, upper-caste male Hindu merchants living in North Indian cities in the Hindi-speaking region. It is possible, moreover, that the ideas of the men I studied are fairly widespread. As I show in chapters 2 and 3, the ethnopsychology and gender culture I describe are broadly consistent with the descriptions of others who have investigated these topics among urban and rural men in other parts of India. While the ideas of the men I interviewed may be broadly similar to other upper-caste, upper-middle-class Hindu men in India, these ideas should not be attributed to women, lower-caste Hindus, Muslims, poor Indians, South Indians, or villagers. Indeed, there is good evidence that women and lower-caste Hindus may have quite different orientations (see chapter 3).

OUTLINE

In the next chapter I suggest how cultural ideas may be a tool of the powerful by examining how the men I interviewed construct gender culture to bolster male dominance. In chapter 3, I explore men's "first language," which holds that individuals are driven by social pressures. In chapter 4, I examine how this framework for understanding action affects Hindu men's psyche, including their emotions.

While the collectivist framework for understanding action is important, it is not the only understanding which Hindu men can access. In chapter 5, I examine Hindu men's "second languages" which emphasize the individual. In chapter 6, I consider the range of stances women and men take to the reality of social pressure. While many men and some women are true believers who think they should be guided by social pressures, many others try to escape the consequences of dishonor. In chapter 7, I focus on the culture work that men do when they buck social pressure by marrying for love, separating from their families, or becoming close to their wives. My discussion of men's and women's dissatisfactions with and rebellions against gender culture suggests that

the emphasis on social guidance is often challenged by Indians themselves. In chapter 8, I consider why some men break social norms, while others conform.

In chapter 9, I examine how joint-family living, the collectivist framework for understanding action, and men's emotion culture mutually constitute each other. In chapter 10, I consider how the collectivist framework for understanding action shapes social movements and social institutions, and draw general conclusions about how a focus on frameworks for understanding action improves our understanding of cultural constraint.