Abstract

When writing, ethnographers are faced with the hermeneutic task of interweaving their dialogues with scholars and their dialogues with their interlocutors in the field. This article is a critique of a long-standing tendency in anthropology to conflate social analysis in texts with social analysis on the ground. I am taking issue with a tendency to compare social theorists such as Heidegger or Bakhtin with the social analysts met during fieldwork. In this intellectual thought exercise, I compare structural functionalists with Samoan migrants to explore some of the differences between writing and practicing social analysis.

Keywords

- ethnographic writing
- reflexivity
- role fetishism
- Samoan migrants
- social analysis
- structural functionalism

No doubt because they know and recognize no other thought than the thought of the ‘thinker’, and cannot grant human dignity without granting what seems to be constitutive of that dignity, anthropologists have never known how to rescue the people they were studying from the barbarism of pre-logic except by identifying them with the most prestigious of their colleagues – logicians or philosophers. (Bourdieu, 1990: 37)

Ethnographers have a long-standing tradition of suggesting that the people they meet while doing fieldwork parse the world in the same way as a famous philosopher or social theorist. Ruth Benedict (1934) saw cultures in Nietzschean terms, as having Apollonian or Dionysian tendencies, and anthropologists today still make comparable moves (see Harkin, 2000; Herzfeld, 1989; Jackson, 2002; Weiner, 2001). Maurice Bloch1 has discussed groups who structure their social memories either as Plato or Aristotle recommends, writing: ‘One could say of the Filipinos, then, that they are Aristotelians to the Yemenis’ Platonists’ (Bloch, 1998: 76). Every time I read a claim like this, I wonder: what happens to social theory when a person lives it? I am not asking about living the precepts of social theory when these precepts are explicit ideological intrusions into people’s lives. I am not concerned with what happened to Marxism and what happened to the Chinese when Mao governed according to his version of Marxist principles, for example. I ask a different sort of question, dealing with the distinctions between social theory and social practice. I suspect that practicing social theory reveals paradoxes and complexities that writing social theory conceals. At stake is a question of reflexivity: how does the medium for exploring relationships to social orders, be it written or performed, affect the social strategies and maps that people develop? To begin exploring this
question, I turn to my own interlocutors during my fieldwork, Samoan migrants in New Zealand and California. Other anthropologists recently have compared their interlocutors in the field to Heidegger, Bakhtin or Agamben. Alas, ethnographers can not always find people who ventriloquize the most contemporaneous or popular of theorists. In my fieldwork, I encountered people who saw the world through the currently unfashionable idiom of British structural functionalism.2

This thought exercise examines, through gentle parody, what is a commonplace dilemma for all ethnographers – how to intertwine the dialogues fieldworkers have with their interlocutors in the field with the dialogues ethnographers have with their interlocutors on the page. I am not seriously suggesting that anyone wishing to do fieldwork with Samoans must read Radcliffe-Brown or other British structural functionalists first. I am however interested in investigating in concrete detail what has become, after Bourdieu, a widely held distinction between what one can know through theoretical knowledge and what one can know through practical knowledge.

Bourdieu frames this distinction between knowledges largely in terms of the differing degrees of explicitness required by theoretical as opposed to practical knowledge. As a corollary, he also attends to the consequences for ethnographers when addressing the forms of reification produced by these different levels of explicitness. He argues that ethnographers most often encounter others’ practices as representations, which encourages analyses primarily of what can be formulated explicitly. Consequently, ethnographers are prone to overlook the multiple and complex relationships to social rules that people who practice or express these rules often have. As an example of this distortion, Bourdieu discusses at length the varied decisions that might lead to a parallel-cousin marriage among Kabyles in the following passage:

In short, the apparent incoherence of informants’ accounts in fact draws our attention to the functional ambiguity of a genealogically (i.e. ideologically) unequivocal marriage, and thereby to the manipulations of the objective meaning of practice and its product which this combination of ambiguity and clarity allows and encourages. Perhaps the only victim of these manipulations is the anthropologist: by putting into the same class all patrilateral parallel-cousin marriages (and assimilated cases) whatever their functions for the individuals and groups involved, he assimilates practices which may differ in all the respects left out of account by the genealogical model. (Bourdieu, 1977: 46, emphasis in original)

In the ethnographic act of translating practical knowledge into theoretical knowledge, and thus ad Turing a rule of patrilateral parallel-cousin marriages for the Kabyle, the different relationships people have to social rules and social structures are obscured. People who possess only theoretical knowledge of a culture are prone to treat rules solely as prescriptive. In contrast, people with practical knowledge will often engage with social rules as discursive resources for convincing others to adopt particular strategies.
In addition, Bourdieu claims that much of what guides the ways that people implement practical knowledge is entirely implicit. It is conversation with the anthropologist that shifts this knowledge into what he terms a ‘semi-theoretical disposition’ (emphasis in original, Bourdieu, 1977: 18). To emphasize how implicit most practical knowledge is, he writes:

The relationship between informant and anthropologist is somewhat analogous to a pedagogical relationship, in which the master must bring to the state of explicitness, for the purposes of transmission, the unconscious schemes of his practice. Just as the teaching of tennis, the violin, chess, dancing, or boxing breaks down into individual positions, steps, or moves, practices which integrate all these artificially isolated elementary units of behavior into the unity of an organized activity, so the informant’s discourse, in which he strives to give himself the appearances of symbolic mastery of his practice, tends to draw attention to the most remarkable ‘moves’, i.e. those most esteemed or reprehended, in the different social games . . . rather than to the principle from which these moves and all equally possible moves can be generated and which, belonging to the universe of the undisputed, most often remain in their implicit state. (1977: 18–19)

Thus, for Bourdieu, to move between practical knowledge and a knowledge accessible to an anthropologist is an act of inadequate translation in which the informant is re-framing what one does into what one says. The act of making explicit distorts the actual practice, whose very logic depends on its implicitness.

In this article, I suggest it is important to distinguish between social analysis done on the page and social analysis done on the ground, rather than viewing the problem in terms of Bourdieu’s argument regarding the dichotomous relationship between explicit and implicit knowledge. Shifting to a focus on the medium of social analysis entails treating anthropologists’ interlocutors in the field as social analysts in their own right, a stance Bourdieu was reluctant to take. When one regards all of an ethnographer’s interlocutors as social analysts, it becomes apparent that it is not the implicitness or explicitness of knowledge that differentiates understanding. Rather, what is most crucial is the medium through which social analysis takes place and the social relationships formed through such analysis. As I will demonstrate through this thought exercise, the medium and the reacting audience are what matter, shaping the ways in which social relationships unfold through constitutive interactions between social analysis and practices (including the practice of writing and reading other analysts).

Most ethnographers who find famous social theorists in their field sites find an individual theorist transfigured into a group’s epistemological sensibility. This tends to render invisible one of anthropology’s historical dilemmas – how to locate apparent epistemological or behavioral commonalities. Turning to British structural functionalists as a group focuses attention on this question of commonality in ways similar to Mary Bouquet’s analysis in Reclaiming English Kinship (1993). In her book, Bouquet explores
the degree to which cultural commonalities can shape analytical perspectives. This is an unresolved question throughout her book which she uses effectively to unsettle readers. Similarly, by comparing a group of social theorists with a group of social practitioners, I hope to remind the reader continually that this thought exercise lies in an uneasy relationship to essentializing. Neither structural functionalists nor Samoans are a homogeneous group. Readers more familiar with the diversity of structural functionalism are aware that from the moment structural functionalism formed as a school, there were many intricate debates about various premises. Not everyone who has been labeled as a structural functionalist agreed with all of the precepts scholars now attribute to this theoretical school. Hopefully this unsettling recognition will also encourage readers to be as skeptical of my broad generalizations regarding Samoans. Just as there was variety of positions among British structural functionalists, there is a diversity of opinions among people engaged in being Samoan as to precisely what it means to act as a Samoan – not everyone behaves in the same way, even when they are actively committed to being Samoan. In this piece, I am not focusing on the heterogeneity present in either project – of being Samoan or of being a structural functionalist, this is a tacit disenchantment I trust that my readers will bring to this text.

Mary Bouquet also explores the ways in which British structural functionalists were British in their analyses, in particular of kinship. She argues that tacit cultural assumptions about how people are related shaped both their methodological preferences and their theoretical arguments. While this article is also engaged with the larger project of questioning how anthropologists intertwine theory and cultural practice, my task is an inversion of Bouquet’s. While she reveals the culture behind the theoretical practices, I am asking about the implications of treating one’s interlocutors in the field as theorists, of dealing with the theory behind the culture as theory.

Analyzing intentions

When ethnographers depict their interlocutors during fieldwork as social analysts in their own right, they skirt two related methodological questions – at what moments do people enact these perspectives that anthropologists believe resemble those of other theorists? And, as salient, at what moments in people’s daily lives do they make explicit their epistemological assumptions about sociality? These are more than practical questions – the answers speak to how theory changes when enacted on the ground instead of on paper. Following Other Intentions (Rosen, 1995), I consider how my interlocutors discussed other people’s social strategies and motivations as key moments in which their assumptions about social relationships are made accessible. In these instances, my interlocutors would articulate their views
on Samoan and non-Samoan social strategies and their varying efficacies, revealing perspectives which parallel structural functionalist views.

By turning to accounts of others’ intentions, I am examining how people reflexively understand others’ relationships to social orders, and asking how this understanding recursively shapes their own actions and social strategies. Focusing on accounts of intentionality can lead to the Eurocentric assumption that people elsewhere attribute meaning to utterances and actions in the same ways that Euro-Americans do. Yet, as various ethnographers have pointed out, not everyone attributes intentionality to others (see Duranti, 1985, 1993; Munn, 1992; Rosen, 1995; Schiefflin and Ochs, 1995). To avoid such Eurocentric assumptions, I rely upon Roy Wagner’s intervention (1995). He claims that groups of people share certain expectations about how intentions and social orders are interwoven. Social interactions can only be made intelligible if those involved share an intentional field – that is, if they share assumptions about what kinds of actions should be interpreted as spontaneous or as reactive to social orders. These shared assumptions are necessary to overcome the fact that one can never know unequivocally what another thinks.

If the end result of any intentionality I may discern in others is a disposition of my own intentionality, but that disposition may not be known directly or apart from my determining others’ intentions, then the spontaneous and the reactive must interpenetrate in a kind of general field. (Wagner, 1995: 164)

Wagner is suggesting that any group of people interact with each other based on commonly held assumptions about what will count as spontaneous expressions and what is already prescribed by the context. In familiar settings, strategic actors maneuver with a finely tuned awareness of this boundary between what is understood as spontaneous and what is compulsory behavior. Wagner is describing how people in their everyday life address a tension familiar to anthropologists – the tension between structure and agency.

Both Samoans and structural functionalists understand others’ relationships to social orders as spontaneous or reactive along similar axes. For those engaged in the project of being Samoan or of structural functionalism, the ways in which people inhabit and interpret social roles form a crucial aspect of social analysis. They hold that the salient dichotomy with which to evaluate others is to understand the relationships between the roles they occupy and how these roles are interwoven into a larger totality. From the perspective of the analyst, the stakes lie in how society emerges as an entity. The dilemmas do not center around how one best conceptualizes society. Instead, when one begins with these assumptions, the dilemmas revolve around how best to predict or understand other people’s motivations. Many of the dilemmas I discuss emerge from the paradoxes created when one interprets others’ motivations in terms of the social roles they occupy.
I became interested in the resonances between Samoan social analysis and structural functionalist analysis while investigating how Samoans in New Zealand and the United States resolve a common dilemma of migration. Migrants often must respond to gaps between parents and children produced by changes both in available social strategies and in how children are taught to be social beings. While this is a dilemma that faces most migrants (Appiah, 1994), migrant communities hold different epistemological assumptions about how people possess cultural knowledge, assumptions which affect their responses to such dilemmas. Samoan parents’ understandings of how roles function shape their responses when their children do not behave in expected Samoan ways.5 My research assistant, who was raised in New Zealand, wrote a journal entry which outlines this dynamic as she experienced it.

I am remembering back to when I was a child and how difficult it was to understand when [sic] my mother wanted me to do something she wouldn’t say anything instead she would look at me as if I automatically knew what she wanted. An example of this would probably be when I was in primary school we had visitors arrive and I continued to watch television. She glared at me as if I had done something wrong, because I didn’t click she said aloud in front of the visitors, ‘this is the problem with children born in New Zealand they don’t know how to do any “feau” [chores]. They can only watch television and play outside.’ I stared at her stunned and highly embarrassed, she growled me to get up and fix something for the visitors. I wanted to drop dead at any minute from the humiliation I had just endured. When the visitors had left she complained that I was lazy and very rude, I told her that she only needed to teach me what she expected and I wouldn’t make a fool of myself. At that moment she slapped me across the face and said how cheeky I was to her, answering back being disrespectful. While growing up I quickly learned that instead of asking her what I should do it was more beneficial to observe and then copy how she served and completed chores.

The anger my research assistant’s mother felt had its roots in how she understood others’ motivations, that is, in her social analysis. She understood social roles in terms so resonant with structural functionalism that certain aspects of socialization are not readily understood, as Richards pointed out (1970) was characteristic of structural functionalists. While many migrant groups face similar obstacles as a result of dislocations, it is their forms of social analysis that determine their responses and how families in migration will transform.

Which role dominates?

Nothing is better than counting relatives . . . besides a good kung-fu movie. (Figiel, 1996: 26)

The reflexive analytical perspective that structural functionalism required of its practitioners depends on an understanding of how social roles
interweave into a social whole, and this resembles Samoan assumptions about how social roles work. Both structural-functionalists and Samoans view roles as maps for understanding how social relationships will be practiced. Radcliffe-Brown, in his discussion of how one studies social structure, remarked:

I include under social structure the differentiation of individuals and of classes by their social role. The differential social positions of men and women, of chiefs and commoners, of employers and employees, are just as much determinants of social relations as belonging to different clans or different nations. In the study of social structure the concrete reality with which we are concerned is the set of actually existing relations, at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings. (1952: 191–2)

Radcliffe-Brown believed that understanding the roles people inhabit is the path towards understanding the relations linking people together. From his perspective, roles are the building blocks of society, each role’s obligations and privileges interweave into a unified society.

The ethnographer’s task thus becomes to determine the contours of every role, and trace the roles’ interdependencies. Marilyn Strathern (1991) details how this particular ethnographic task produces a specific part–whole relationship vis-à-vis the society of the analyst’s descriptive choosing. The ethnographer has both a one-to-one relationship with every possible role, as well as simultaneously understanding how all these roles function in relationship to each other to create a social whole. The ethnographer should be able to describe the rules and expectations inherent in inhabiting every possible social role within a given bounded society. A structural functionalist should be able to understand how these roles function so that the roles, by interacting, form a functioning society.

The single scholar did not replicate the diverse experiences of another single person, then, but encompassed within her or his person what went on between diverse people – their interrelations – as an object of reflection (their society/culture). S/he could imagine this object as connections between persons otherwise like the scholar except in being able to envision the connections as such. (Strathern, 1991: 9, emphasis in original)

This perspective requires both that society be treated as a totality, and a totality comprised of generalizable roles. Here I am asking what happens when people on the ground also envision roles and societies along parallel lines – how does social analysis change when practiced?

While the analyst may view interwoven roles as the ground plan for a society, for the practitioner, roles are the maps towards understanding a person’s likely behavior in a given public context. Samoans would often discuss their social imaginations with me in ways that resonate well with the perspectives of Radcliffe-Brown and other structural-functionalists. In any given social context, the question for both groups is always what roles are
at stake, and how different people will inhabit them. For Samoans and structural functionalists, knowing one’s society entails knowing the roles that people can occupy. In social contexts, the question for Samoans is: what roles are the other people inhabiting, and what are the requirements of those roles? Many public social contexts come with expectations about how one should behave. As I discuss later, understanding someone’s behavior stems from understanding the role they occupy, not their personality or their possible motivations. Or put another way, to understand the roles someone chooses to occupy is supposed to be sufficient for understanding their behavior in a public context.

Successfully negotiating a given situation often entails encouraging others to adopt the role that one might find most profitable for that particular encounter. This is always a risky business, as one woman told me in her account of shopping for vegetables in the open air market in Apia in (independent) Samoa. She came across a friend of hers, who was chatting with a vendor of fruits and vegetables. She asked for his assistance in choosing the best vegetables, and thought that their friendship was strong enough to offer some guarantee in her purchase. She was quite upset once she returned home to discover that, in fact, she had been duped into buying rotten vegetables. She had not managed to maneuver him into acknowledging his obligation as a friend. She complained that his commitment to his kin, the seller, superseded. In as much as Samoan roles serve as a bundle of guidelines for the types of obligations and respect two people owe each other, it is important for people to be able to predict how a context will be interpreted to ensure that others adopt the most circumstantially useful role.

The fluidity of social roles is contextually determined rather than determined by set attributes. People act like respectful and subservient daughters-in-law because of the context, not because those qualities are part of their internal personality (Shore, 1982). One woman told me with glee that she liked visiting her family far more when they went back home to Samoa, since she was able to be loud and demanding, while her husband had to be patient and subservient. She tried to ensure that they spent little time with his family during these visits since she did not like being a daughter-in-law. In general, one does not choose one’s role, although one can have some control over which roles are thrust upon oneself – partially by choosing the context, as this woman tried to do. The most sophisticated cultural expertise comes from understanding the rules and interconnections so well that one can elicit the desired relationships and actions from others. For example, a Samoan lawyer explained to me this level of expertise when discussing how Samoans recite each others’ genealogies at the beginning of any political meeting. He gave me a hypothetical situation – imagine that one village is visiting another in order to gain support for their political candidate. The visiting village’s orator will
judiciously tweak the truth and present the host village as connected to Malietoa, the head of state. The host village will be flattered, and unwilling to debunk this connection. In addition, they will feel magnanimous towards the visiting village for this assertion. This careful use of genealogy enables the orator to define his hosts’ roles for that visit. It is at this level of interchange that the relationship between one’s identity by birth and one’s identity by social context is elaborated and manipulated in the service of political strategies. This skill is based upon a socially produced map whose main function is to predict people’s (public) behavior. The assumption is that if one understands how a person’s historically grounded identity intersects with their context-specific social role, then one can anticipate their actions.

When putting this perspective into practice, what happens is that people are evaluating each other solely in terms of the roles that they are occupying. In essence, people can predict each other’s Samoan behavior because they have a sophisticated mental map of what everyone’s Samoan role should be, given their particular genealogy, village, and religion among other factors. And people’s intentions are interpreted in terms of role expectations, not in terms of cohesive and continuous selves. One of the consequences of this is that the most sophisticated cultural expertise comes from understanding the rules and interconnections so well that you can elicit the desired relationships and actions from others. Samoans who are skilled at managing social interactions are the ones who can maneuver others to inhabit the role that is most beneficial for them.

**Multiple roles**

‘I’ does not exist.
I am not.
My self belongs not to me because ‘I’ does not exist.
‘I’ is always ‘we’,
is a part of the ‘aiga,
a part of the Au a teine
a part of the Aufaipese,
a part of the Aoga a le Faifeau,
a part of the Aoga Aso Sa,
a part of the Church,
a part of the nu’u
a part of Samoa

(Figiel, 1996: 135)

After structural functionalists determined that the social whole was formed by interlocking roles, they then had to distinguish between the types of roles. Not all roles intersected with each other, after all. Different frames were necessary to understand how to group social roles. The frames that analysts
developed continue to be institutionally reproduced in courses on social anthropology – kinship, politics, economics and religion. Intriguingly, analysts responded – through their ethnographies’ organizational structures and pedagogically – to these divisions by seeing people as inhabiting roles that were not mutually constructive. When doing an analysis of kinship relations, it was irrelevant whether the father was also the village’s shaman. The roles being mapped out did not need to be understood contiguously, it was sufficient if the analyst was able to map out kinship structures as a distinct realm. Indeed, part of the work of structural functional analysis involves sifting through field notes to impose these distinctions onto social practices that are not easily divided into such social categories.7

This is a dilemma that chapters can disguise, but daily life cannot – in any context, there are often multiple roles that people can embody. Samoans have multiple hierarchies that coexist, providing people with several different ways for understanding their relationships to each other, depending on the context. Samoans are constantly juggling their different hierarchical roles and, in lived experience, the differing hierarchies are contradictory demands to be negotiated. And often the context, or the active definition of the context, will determine which roles will be foregrounded and which roles will be backgrounded, occasionally providing offense. For example, one older Samoan woman told me about her son’s new girlfriend and how rude she was. After church was over, her son decided to bring over his girlfriend to meet his parents, when a friend of hers started chatting to her. The mother fumed at me about how she waited for five whole minutes for the two to stop chatting, before leaving. What made her angry was how disrespectful the girl was – she was not acknowledging properly the beginnings of a relationship with her prospective mother-in-law. Instead, she was privileging her connections to her friend over her connections to her boyfriend and his family. Samoans are constantly experimenting with the moments when one role among a multiplicity dominates, and they are quite concerned with arranging for certain roles to dominate to their advantage. And conversely, when others around them privilege roles or other unities to their disadvantage, they are offended. In short, the pleasure, and potential dismay, is to see how people perform different levels of group unity, roles acting as the iconic vehicles for representing and experiencing these unities.

The possibility of multiple roles in a context provides captivating quandaries for Samoans, although not for structural functionalists. From an analytical perspective, context is a given, while – from a lived perspective – context is invariably what must be actively produced.8 The work of a social strategist in a Samoan register is to fix as stable the most beneficial context. By contrast, the work of a structural functionalist is to understand the roles everyone inhabits based upon the context – an inversion of the labor performed in a Samoan register.
Role fetishism

Know your damn role – and shut your mouth. (The Rock, 2000)

While Samoans and structural functionalists differ on whether context is a given or must be produced, the same is not true of roles. Roles for both are a given. In the case of structural functionalists, this meant questions concerning socialization were often overlooked by Radcliffe-Brown and those he inspired (see Richards, 1970). How society becomes internalized is a question far more pressing for Malinowski and his students than Radcliffe-Brown and his.9 Socialization focuses on the intersection between psychological selves and social selves that Radcliffe-Brown (1952: 194) early on declared irrelevant for social anthropologists. For such a social analyst, a focus on society and social roles renders how one learns to inhabit a role to be a question of minor concern. For Samoans, a similar focus on social roles ensures that the labor of learning is rendered invisible in the moments of performance.

In responding to people in terms of their social roles rather than their personalities, my Samoan interlocutors also tended to practice what I have termed ‘role fetishism’ (Gershon, 2000). I use the term ‘role fetishism’ to describe the techniques by which Samoans respond to people in particular contexts as though they are their roles. At the very moment that someone performs a role, their audience ignores the effort of learning as well as the possible distance between role and performer, in short, the person animating the role. Role fetishism parallels commodity fetishism in the forms of ignorance that these fetishisms require of their practitioners. In the moment of commodity fetishism, one forgets the labor that goes into producing the commodity object. So too, in role fetishism,10 one ignores the labor that goes into producing the social role.11 As Žižek (1989: 31) as well as Adorno and Horkheimer (1979: 230) have pointed out, a salient feature of such fetishisms is a conflation that is simultaneously a forgetting.

Role fetishism does not mean that people engaged in the project of being Samoan do not understand that learning must take place. What I am suggesting instead is that, just as in commodity fetishism, where in order to buy or sell commodities people must efface the labor that goes into producing and distributing the commodity, so too with roles. Samoans overlook the learning that has occurred for these roles to be enacted, as I was told time and time again in various moments. One typical incident occurred at the Office of Samoan Affairs, which housed a community school designed for Samoan youths who almost dropped out of the US public school system. A top administrator from the city schools was planning to visit, and the coordinator of the Samoan school, Alofa, was discussing with me her plans to welcome this administrator properly. She wanted the students to present a Samoan dance routine to entertain and impress the administrator with the students’ cultural knowledge. I pointed out that the administrator...
would be coming in less than a week, and the students would not have time to rehearse. She reassured me that the students did not need time to rehearse – they were Samoan and would quickly learn any dance. This did not in fact turn out to be the case, and Alofa decided to have a handful of the students testify to the supervisor how important the school was to them. Three boys spoke, one after the other, in front of a long narrow table, describing how much they appreciated the school. Alofa had substituted oratory for dance at the last minute. In general, Alofa’s expectations of skills in cultural performance were commonly voiced, and, in my ethnographic work, tended to have more rhetorical than practical validity. I am suggesting that the labor of learning is ignored in the very moment the role is enacted. People’s performances are not evaluated from the standpoint of how well they have succeeded in mastering a role. They are instead judged as though a seamlessness between themselves and the role is an expected starting point. In short, role fetishism entails occluding the labor inherent in socially constructing an identity.

One of the major consequences of this is that failing to behave properly is invariably understood as intentional. The intention is often read as an insult to those hierarchically superior, to the family, to the village, in short, to the group respected or represented by performing the role. It is my interlocutors’ anxieties and discomforts provoked by others’ misreadings of their performance failures that have led me to understand the ways in which Samoans practice role fetishism. Time and time again my interlocutors would tell me about instances where they did not know what the proper behavior would be, and invariably their failures were read as purposeful insults. Role fetishism ensures that failure is interpreted as purposeful – the notion that people are trying and failing publicly makes no sense from a Samoan perspective, whether migrants or not.

One woman who befriended me told me an apt example of the new tensions in interpretations of intentions that migrating allows. At the time, she was in her early 30s, and had interrupted her father while he was sitting in a *fono* (formal meeting) in the garage with the older men of his family, discussing how they were going to handle an upcoming funeral. She wanted to tell him that she had returned, and would now be available to drive him anywhere he might need to go. Interrupting is a clear violation of protocol, but the father just said: ‘That’s fine dear, now just go inside.’ She went inside, only to be criticized by the young women who were preparing the food in the kitchen. They had watched the encounter from the kitchen window both amused and aghast, and explained to her how rude she had just been to her father. Confused, she asked how she could remedy the situation. The young women in the kitchen decided that she should return, carrying Samoan cocoa and wearing a lavalava, and kneel politely by her father. When this happened, her father was absolutely furious, and told her sharply to leave immediately and stay in the house. She was thoroughly confused, trying to rectify her former error only seemed to
make the situation worse. She told me this story in a small group of women, and as we discussed the case, we came to the conclusion that her father was angry about her inconsistency. By attempting to remedy the situation, she demonstrated that she did know better, and that the insult inherent in her initial interruption could be interpreted as quite intentional. She had been inconsistent in her public performance of her role, and it was this inconsistency that was so disruptive and ultimately disrespectful.

Role fetishism creates a social conundrum when those observed do not know how to perform a role properly. This type of failure is common and quite puzzling for Samoan migrant parents, who are often faced with children who do not know how to respond properly (especially in public Samoan contexts). Role fetishism makes the failure to perform properly seem paradoxical. This type of failure has become a crucial issue for Samoans raised outside of Samoa, who lack certain cultural knowledge as a result of the impact of migration on Samoan families’ knowledge transmission practices.

Cultural intentions/personal intentions

Sometimes a girl would be loner. Like Makaoleafi – eye of the fire – who not only was the goodest girl in the whole of Malaefou, but also the meanest and the strongest. . . . Afí was the epitome of a Malaefou young lady. And because of this she was safe . . . safe to do anything . . . safe to be a bad girl at nights and no one suspected. (Figiel, 1996: 2)

I am suggesting that Samoans as well as structural functionalists use roles as an interpretative schema to determine both the texture of a social order and the nuanced possibilities of others’ social strategies. Samoans engage with roles on the ground as blueprints of social orders and their strategies, not as paths towards understanding others’ personalities. This too is in line with structural functionalism – Radcliffe-Brown argues that the humans psychologists study are distinct from the humans an anthropologist studies. He writes:

Every human being living in society is two things: he is an individual and also a person. . . . Human beings as individuals are objects of study for physiologists and psychologists. The human being as a person is a complex of social relationships. He is a citizen of England, a husband and a father, a bricklayer, a member of a particular Methodist congregation, a voter in a certain constituency, a member of his trade union, an adherent of the Labour Party, and so on. Note that each of these descriptions refers to a social relationship, or to a place in a social structure. (1952: 194)

What is irrelevant for a structural functionalist is a captivating social paradox from a Samoan perspective. How should one interpret behavior that lies outside of the guidelines social roles provide? What Radcliffe-Brown can relegate to the domain of psychologists is not so easily bracketed on the
ground. From a Samoan perspective, the moments that occur outside of the social gaze can be moments of disorderly and even socially hazardous freedom – moments, in short, to gossip about.

Samoans do not always use the language of roles to interpret each other’s behavior. In fact, my interlocutors tend to understand cultural behavior and intentional behavior as two separate lenses for understanding why other people act. People engaged in being Samoan make certain epistemological assumptions in which explanations that invoke culture and those that invoke intention belong to two distinct, and often oppositional, discourses for understanding people’s behavior. Implicitly I am claiming, along with Roy Wagner (1995), that the common Euro-American presupposition that culture and intentionality are mutually constructive is precisely that, a presupposition that others, with their own perspectives on what having a culture means, do not share.

In claiming that Samoans attribute intentionality to each other outside of public arenas, I am offering a slightly different account than Alessandro Duranti does in his article ‘Intentions, Self, and Responsibility: An Essay in Samoan Ethnopragmatics’ (1992). The argument I am presenting builds upon and expands Duranti’s analysis by discussing how Samoans approach intentionality in arenas other than in a *fono* – Duranti’s ethnographic focus. Duranti argues that, in general, Samoans tend not to attribute intentionality to other people, with the marked exception of politically charged moments when chiefs maneuver within a *fono*. Duranti believes this is the case for Samoans because, for them, individual subjective reality is not the fount of meaning. From a Samoan perspective, how the listeners understand words will determine the meaning.

In my own fieldwork, I heard far more attributions of intentionality than Duranti did, for various reasons. First, Duranti was focusing on public speech, which accords with my argument that Samoans interpret public behavior using cultural explanations, and that this precludes discussions of motivations. Motivations only become an issue in these contexts when people fail to behave appropriately, with the exception of chiefs. Second, I was doing fieldwork among Samoan migrants while Duranti was researching Samoan chiefly discourse in (independent) Samoa. Attributing intentions has become more complicated after migration because familiar channels of knowledge transmission have been disrupted in these non-Samoan contexts. New Zealand raised Samoan migrants now repeatedly claim that they are well intentioned but ignorant – a paradox from a Samoan-raised perspective. Third, most of the attributions of intentionality I overheard were in the context of gossip or less formal conversations. Gossip is the site in which people explore the various tensions that result from keeping cultural explanations separate from intentional ones. In a sense, attributions of intentionality are also markers of whether a conversation is or is not public, formal or widely known. To a certain degree, this split between cultural and intentional explanations...
of behavior can be seen as what divides the motivations that underlie from unseen behavior.

Samoans rarely describe each other’s action through the lens of individualism, unless the motivation is against Samoan cultural expectations. For the most part, they are concerned with how the particular social role that a person inhabits furthers a level of group unity – for instance, how the person stands for their village, their church group or their family. For Samoans the puzzles of human behavior that occur when society is not made visible through others’ gazes is of a different order than the social conundrums of strategy and motivation to be deciphered when others gaze. In this sense, the public/unseen divide\(^1\) takes on a different character – public events are the moments when one’s social role is manifest – when others’ gazes stand in for society’s gaze upon oneself (see Mageo, 1998; Shore, 1982).

While the interplay between being spontaneous and being reactive is still quite crucial for Samoans, the two behaviors belong to separate genres instead of being entangled. From a Samoan perspective, behaving culturally is behaving without intentions – to act not according to what one chooses, but to act according to what one is. When Samoans behave in a culturally appropriate way – contributing money to a family function or saying ‘tulou’ while walking between two people oriented towards each other – they are not viewed as choosing to behave this way. They are being reactive – it is in their nature to act this way, not in their intention. I have alluded earlier to some implications of this assumption – for instance, discussing how Samoans raised outside of Samoa pose a conceptual problem to people analyzing from a Samoan perspective because their failure to know how to behave properly violates basic Samoan assumptions about what forms an identity.

In general, I am referring to a common question in Samoan studies – how to resolve apparent inconsistencies in Samoan behavior, that Samoans will say one thing in public and do quite the opposite when unobserved? Ethnographers of Samoa often argue that Samoans see morality as socio-centric, and human nature is supposed to be instinctual and often socially destructive. Both Bradd Shore and Jeanette Mageo have written about how Samoans posit a concept of culture against human nature in a way reminiscent of a Hobbesian social contract (see Mageo, 1991: 409; Shore, 1982: 156–7). Bradd Shore writes: ‘Perhaps most significantly, village law and authority are understood to protect people from themselves – from passions and desires that, uncontained by culture and customary authority, would lead to moral and social chaos’ (1982: 118). While Shore here speaks specifically of law and authority, in general culture is described as the force that reins in people’s chaotic desires.

In these accounts, the cultural context determines how Samoans will behave, not an internally cohesive intentionality. Shore argues that the Samoans believe that motivation is only partially linked to the actor’s
internal qualities or decisions. He writes: ‘Samoans commonly talk about actions and feelings as if the body were a decentralized agglomeration of discrete parts, each imbued with its own will’ (1982: 173). The social context determines which part of the conglomerate Samoan self will be made explicit.\(^{15}\) Thus people in public might appear to behave in ways which dramatically contradict their unobserved behavior.

A corollary to this ethnographic claim is that Samoans hold licit selves to be public, and illicit selves to be unseen. Shore describes this as the Samoan link between knowledge and responsibility. He argues that for Samoans, a misdeed is not a misdeed until the person is publicly held responsible: ‘private or purely personal knowledge of one’s own actions is not sufficient grounds for responsibility for them. Knowledge of one’s actions must be public to some extent for one to be responsible’ (1982: 175). An action is neither good nor bad until it has been judged so by others. In this sense, Shore argues along similar lines to Duranti (1994) – that meaning, or in Shore’s case morality, must be co-produced. There is no such thing as a private morality – morality exists only when one is judged by others.\(^{16}\)

From this perspective, the problem for Samoans becomes determining the catalyst for slips between a cultural self to a desiring and willful self\(^{17}\) (see Mageo, 1989, 1991, 1995, 1998, for a nuanced discussion of a willful self). Being a cultural self is linked entirely to the context – one is cultural as long as knowledge of your actions could potentially circulate. Thus gossip, or the threat of gossip, becomes the means for controlling Samoans’ behavior.\(^{18}\) People will not act on their desires if there is a possibility that others will gossip about them. The desiring and willful self will invariably be acted upon without an audience. Being alone is tantamount to being immoral.

For Samoans, the work of individuation behind motivations occurs at the level of cultural discourse, not at the level of discourses about intentions. By this I mean that people are expected to behave differently depending on the specific cultural role they are inhabiting in a given context. The role creates the different motivations, not the desires or personality of the person. People’s intentions within the framework of intentional discourse are all quite similar – everyone is easily interpreted as being lustful and greedy for power or money. It is the cultural discourse that differentiates the ways in which these impulses are expressed, and often curtails them completely.\(^{19}\) Yet the actual content of the intentions is quite homogeneous – everyone is understood to act, or potentially act, against cultural restrictions for the same small set of motivations. Conversely, behaving culturally is to behave with cultural motivations appropriate for a particular context, and hence to have complex and differentiated motivations in a particular setting. To be political in a culturally appropriate way is to behave distinctively – there are many possible complex strategies and motivations underlying certain cultural actions.
In this sense, what one must figure out about others’ behavior is different in a cultural discourse and in an intentional discourse. In a cultural discourse, one must decipher the multiple motivations underlying a particular action, and try to ascertain all the many social relationships which the actor has addressed in a particular political strategy. The pleasurable work of analyzing a culturally determined situation from a Samoan perspective lies in understanding the interwoven histories behind all the social roles at play, and understanding how each actor chooses to embody a role, and why. The pleasurable work of analyzing an intentionally determined situation lies mainly in deciphering the necessary information to determine how people are acting out their desires. When analyzing intentional behavior, people are generally understood to act because of a not-so-surprising limited set of reasons – desire for wealth, status or people. These are explanations of intentionality that ethnographers of Samoans would discuss as culturally specific, despite a Samoan perspective that these are not cultural. To analyze the Samoan way means privileging how one is supposed to behave in public as the correct and proper map for predicting people’s actions. From this perspective, gossip’s focus on what people desire is providing narratives for behavior that cannot be understood within the rubric of cultural performance.

Boundary creation

When Miss Cunningham was cross she started speaking Samoan to us. The effect this had on us was the complete opposite of what Miss Cunningham had in mind. Instead of everyone returning to their place quietly, loud laughter broke out . . . everyone was laughing themselves into tears . . . We didn’t disrespect Miss Cunningham. We didn’t dislike her either. We only thought it funny to hear a pisikoa [Peace Corps] speak Samoan. After all, no palagi [white person] spoke Samoan. It was the same as if Ciliamu, the fool of Apia, had spoken English. We would all break out in laughter if we heard him try . . . we always did. (Figiel, 1996: 166)

As I have been pointing out, living as a structural functionalist can lead to some complications. The specific dilemma I turn to now will be familiar to readers acquainted with various standard critiques of structural functionalism. Structural functionalism faced analytical conundrums in constructing the boundaries of a society. Meyer Fortes laid out the dilemmas eloquently in his opening discussion in The Web of Kinship Among the Tallensi (1949), in which he points out that it is often difficult to ascertain precisely who is a Tallensi. ‘They have no fixed territorial boundaries, nor are they precisely marked off from neighbouring “tribes” by cultural or linguistic usages’ (Fortes, 1949: 1). For a structural functionalist, committed to viewing societies as bounded, the work of ethnography was not only determining the roles people enacted but also determining when one society ends and another begins. Similarly, Samoan migrants currently face quite pressing
dilemmas in trying to determine the boundaries of what constitutes Samoanness.

Samoan anxieties about boundaries were visible in my interlocutors’ discussions about how people embody roles. These anxieties took two forms: people were upset when others mixed roles or attitudes considered to be culturally distinct, or when people failed to perform roles properly. It may not surprise readers to learn that Samoans relish gossiping about people in positions of power in Samoan communities – ministers, chiefs and community organizers. Leaders’ errors are discussed in great detail, as well as how various community members have responded. One of the genres this gossip takes is a recounting of what is wrong with Samoans as a whole, with a frequent variation being discussion about how these leaders abuse fa’asamoa (literally the Samoan way, here ritual exchange obligations). These stories are illustrative for a number of reasons, but here I want to point to a common theme. All these rumors are concerned with inappropriate conflations – with tulafale (talking chiefs) who act out of supposedly capitalist motivations, ministers who embezzle and their congregations who respond (again supposedly) to the role of minister and not their failures to behave properly.

In Samoan ritual exchanges – weddings, funerals and so on – there is a moment in which tulafale are expected to orate (see Duranti, 1983, 1994). These speeches are supposed to be made by the tulafale of the related families, and through these speeches, by reciting genealogies, the tulafale weaves together an account of the families as bounded unities, as exchanging wholes. After they speak, tulafale are given money (and occasionally food) by the families involved. Time and time again I would hear stories about tulafale who would travel from fa’alavelave (ritual exchange) to fa’alavelave, regardless of their actual connections to the families. They would hear about these events on the Pacific island radio station, or by word of mouth and come prepared to speak. Once they began to orate, the only way to silence them (and continue with the ritual) would be to give them money. One New Zealand raised man I interviewed told me:

But there’s a lot of people in Samoan society at the moment, they keep titles and they go to funerals and weddings because they know they can make something out of it, they can get something back for it. That’s really common now. It makes me sick. Sometimes when I go to pick up my mum from church, I go in and watch the proceedings. They divvy up this and that. And you see people who have never ever come to that church, they come from the other side of Auckland to be there, and they’ve got a title and they know they’re going to get something. They’re going to leave with something.

The rumors surrounding this invariably contained my interlocutors’ outrage at this violation of the tulafale’s role. Tulafale were speaking not to display families’ cohesive intricacies but to make money. They were described as taking advantage of their audiences’ commitment to upholding Samoan traditions.
I also heard many rumors of ministers who embezzled from their congregation until they were kicked out. They left for Samoa, began a church there, and when they were kicked out for embezzling in Samoa, they started a church again in New Zealand. They were always able to start churches anew. When people told me these rumors, they expressed disbelief and frustration at how willing Samoans were to accept and respect ministers, regardless of previous failings.

In short, my interlocutors were ambivalent about two aspects of how leaders embody roles. First, they were concerned when people behaved as self-interested actors, bringing a capitalist reflexive stance towards Samoan roles. Their complaints all centered around people mixing two ways of behaving that they felt should be kept separate. They were not opposed to self-interested behavior in its proper capitalist arena, it was the mixing that they objected to. Second, they were opposed to how other Samoans responded to these performed mixtures – they objected to the very role fetishism with which others received these leaders. Rather than turning to people’s historical betrayals of their roles, the others in the Samoan congregations or audience were accepting the wrongdoers at face, or rather, role value. My interlocutors were objecting to the ways in which people who did not maintain pure Samoan roles still benefited from these roles.

When someone behaves publicly in ways that contradict Samoan expectations, they flummox Samoan social analysts on a practical level, a confusion that for structural functionalists operates on a theoretical level. When faced with similar dilemmas, both attempted to re-inscribe the expected boundaries, Fortes by labeling the Tallensi, and Samoans by often insisting that others behave according to their public roles.20

**Conclusion**

What you have been reading is not an ethnography of Samoans. If it is an ethnography of anyone, it is an ethnography of a theory. In comparing structural functionalists and Samoan social analysis, I am not suggesting that Samoans inhabit their social contexts as though they are perpetual analysts, nor am I claiming that they occupy this analytical distance in their daily experiences. Precisely the opposite – I have been addressing what happens to social theory and to praxis when people have quite similar accounts of roles and individual/society tensions, and yet have radically different reflexive positions vis-a-vis these principles. For example, structural functionalists’ overarching question is to understand how society functions as a structural whole. Radcliffe-Brown presented this strongly, writing: ‘if functionalism means anything at all it does mean the attempt to see the social life of a people as a whole, as a functional unity’ (1952: 185). The analytical position Radcliffe-Brown advocated was to see society organically first and foremost. I am not claiming that Samoans aim for this
as well. Samoans do not insist on relating to Samoan society from a constant analytical distance, in which they ask at every turn – how does this social interaction sustain society? This is an analytical distance one would not have when one lives as a structural functionalist. While Samoans and structural functionals might share assumptions that society is fundamentally a totality, there are different consequences for each.

I recognize that those deploying the analytical repertoire that structural functionalism provides would shrink from this particular exploration. For many, being an ethnographer created an important analytical distance from those they studied. This analytical distance was itself essential for fashioning the accounts they sought. Jaap Van Velsen, while discussing methodology, wrote:

> After all, one cannot expect untrained informants, be they Bemba headmen or white-collar workers in London, to present the anthropologist with sociological analyses of behaviour observed in their respective communities. To do so would be to assume, as many laymen do, that to be a member of a community is to understand it sociologically. (1967: 134)

Structural functionalists in general understood the analytical perspective to be a quite distinct perspective on society than was held by those who live in the society. As Radcliffe-Brown aptly pointed out, structural functionalists aimed to depict society as a totality, an account that would be ill served when inhabiting a subject position from within the given society. Structural functionalism was not intended to be lived. It provided guidelines for transforming the principles governing other people’s everyday lives into maps of social totalities.

Because I conducted my research among Samoan migrants, the people I met inhabited contexts where being Samoan also involved facing alternatives, contrasts that easily led to thinking about societies or cultures as totalities (see Hall, 1990; Lowe, 1996). For my interlocutors, being a migrant was always potentially being other – Samoanness was ever present as a critique of their quotidian contexts. As a result, fa’asamoa – the Samoan way or culture – had a nostalgic ring to it. Samoanness proper was achievable only in Samoa itself, and still possible there. This is a nostalgic attribution of totality similar to, but not the same as that encountered by ethnographers of Samoa. Drozdow-St Christian explains that people living in Samoa view fa’asamoa as a totality as well, but an idealized totality, conceivable but not actualized.

> While Fa’a Samoa is spoken of as a totalizing code, it is a code which is sought after or pursued, rather than adhered to or obeyed. It is, as one informant put it to me, ‘a Samoan’s dream of what Samoa should be’, a process of desire, rather than a fixed standard of regulation. (1997: 33)

Unlike Drozdow-St Christian’s interlocutors, my migrant interlocutors would not describe fa’asamoa as a possible achievement, but as one that is continually practiced elsewhere – either in Samoa as a whole or in a village untouched by electricity in Savai’i, imagined as the remotest of Samoan
islands. My interlocutors were likely to discuss being Samoan as being part of a totality because of their own often unsettling experiences of migration.

I have been asking whether reflexivity plays the same role in social theory that it might in social praxis. Are the reflexive positions created by social analysis – by deploying analytical concepts when interpreting data – the same as the reflexive positions created by social action – by enacting certain distinctions when strategizing how to navigate a social context? In this article, I argue that the analysis written and the analysis acted upon not only have different consequences, they also reveal different puzzles that compel imaginative resolutions. In short, social theory and social practice produce different forms of reflexivity, and different social understandings. This in turn affects how social relationships unfold, shaped by these different social understandings. Concretely, structural functionalists could choose to overlook practices which their view of social roles might define as spontaneous. Samoans do not have that luxury. Finding structural functionalists in the wild, so to speak, is to discover the ways in which theory does not travel.

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Notes

1 Bloch admits that this stance can be a problematic one:

   However, in stressing this resemblance between the works of philosophers and the thought of ordinary people as studied by anthropologists one should not also forget that there are great differences. In particular ordinary people’s knowledge is a complex mixture of implicit and explicit knowledge which is very different from the totally explicit theories of such philosophers as Plato and Aristotle. (1998: 71)

   In this article, I explore the degree to which people’s mixture of implicit and explicit knowledge affects their social analysis.

2 Other ethnographers have described Samoans as though they are channeling Goffman (see Mageo, 1998). However, this would require a theory of performativity, which, I argue later in this article, the Samoans I met tend not to deploy. Because for both Samoans and British structural functionalists, the individual self is irrelevant to the social role, I find the comparison between the two more apt.
3 In emphasizing writing as crucial for understanding scholarly dialogues, I am focusing on only one of the perspectives ethnographic labor produces (see Strathern, 1999: 1–2). It is, however, the central site for understanding how anthropologists navigate their dialogues with both their sets of interlocutors – other authors as well as the social analysts they encounter in the field.

4 See Goodman (2003) for a historical critique of Bourdieu’s insistence that people on the ground are not themselves social analysts.

5 This particular dilemma Samoan parents and children experience in migration is also sparked by how skills are typically taught to children in a Samoan context (see Ochs, 1988). Ochs points out that, in Samoan contexts, the explanations my research assistant desired typically come from age-mates, not parents. After migration, often the pedagogical experiences age-mates might have no longer occur as frequently. For a more detailed ethnographic discussion of how some Samoan practices of knowledge circulation change after migration, see Gershon (2001).

6 I want to point a historical coincidence in the context of this article. Radcliffe-Brown lived in Tonga, the islands next door to Samoa so to speak, from 1916 to 1919 (Kuper, 1983: 46).

7 In a 1974 interview, Audrey Richards described Malinowski’s mechanical suggestion for generating such divisions in one’s fieldnotes – colored pencils. He recommended using brown for economics, red for politics and blue for ritual. My thanks to Melissa Demian for bringing this interview to my attention.

8 See Helmreich (2005) for a discussion of how analysts, in his case marine biologists, conceal the labor of producing context so it appears as given.

9 To briefly summarize a classic debate: Malinowski (1944) was principally concerned with the ways in which societies satisfied individual biological and psychological needs – one studied function to understand why individuals desired society. From this perspective, social unity was an achievement possible only in as much as individuals were willing to engage in a version of a social contract. Malinowski’s stance focused on individuals in a way that Radcliffe-Brown found wrong-headed. Instead, Radcliffe-Brown felt that individual desires were irrelevant, that what one must take into account was how structural roles contributed to social cohesion. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the individual with their internal drives is not the central focus, but the extraneous that lies beyond the purview of the social scientist.

10 I mean ‘fetishism’ in a Marxian sense, and wish to invoke Marx’s own ‘theoretically serious and polemically satirical’ usage (Pietz, 1993: 130).

11 Previously, I described this not knowing as structural ignorance, comparable to the not knowing required by commodity fetishism (Gershon, 2000). While my interlocutors would discuss the labor of learning in other contexts, in the moment of analyzing someone else’s role performance, they ignored this labor. Just as one must ignore the labor relations congealed in a commodity to buy the object, so too my interlocutors in the field had to ignore the labor congealed in social rules to participate in a Samoan public context.

12 There are other possible interpretations as to why her father was so furious. He could have been angry that she did not obey his orders to stay inside. Or perhaps her efforts to remedy the situation were out of keeping with the degree of offense, and he was displeased with the mismatch. Regardless, what is relevant in the context of this article is how the women telling me the story interpreted his anger, providing insight into their social analysis.

13 When I discussed my analysis with my New Zealand raised Samoan research assistant, she agreed. She said that she was not a full Samoan yet, but she was...
working on it. She assumed that with enough effort, in a few years she would be a full Samoan. Later, she wrote in a journal entry:

I have always been proud of being Samoan but because of my lack of knowledge in faa Samoa and the language I struggled with feelings of being incomplete as a person... I believe the real test is when you are either at another home visiting or visitors come to your home. My mother now gives feedback on how well/not so well your performance was toward the visitors. This is a great change compared to the days of my mother publicly shaming me.

14 Strathern points out that structural functionalists had a parallel divide, albeit between the politico-jural and the domestic. In her reading of Fortes, the self defined by politico-jural domains, or society, is fundamentally distinct from the self formed by the domestic domain. She writes:

What made a person a member of society by virtue of his or her politico-jural relations was not what made him or her a member of the domestic group that supplied ‘the new recruit’. In short, what gave the part (‘the individual’) distinctiveness as a whole person was not what made the person a part of the whole society. (1992: 81)

15 Another dilemma this schema for analyzing social behavior posits is consistent behavior. Ethnographers of Samoa such as Shore and Mageo have agreed that the social context determines which part of the conglomerate Samoan self will be made explicit. The question is why context and cultural roles seem to dominate Samoan behavior to such a degree that Samoans do not appear to have a consistent self? The dilemma for Shore and Mageo is to understand how Samoans are intentional and strategic selves when there does not appear to be a cohesive self making decisions and claiming responsibility for actions. This is not a dilemma for Samoans, however. What was perplexing for Samoans was a different phenomenon – consistency. Occasionally my interlocutors might meet people who appear to behave in exactly the same manner and register, regardless of who they are interacting with. They could be talking to their boss or their sister, but they still seem to be exactly the same, making the same conversational turns. These people, who are consistent in the ways they present themselves and treat people regardless of the context, are genuine puzzles for Samoans. Their very consistency makes no sense, undermining the ways in which Samoans expect each other to behave.

The problem is not that Samoans think like Goffman on steroids, but that they think like structural functionalists. After all, structural functionalists never required that people have consistent personalities across contexts. Personalities were never the puzzle or the solution, instead the dominant question was: how do social performances contribute to a functioning society?

16 Jeanette Mageo (1995, 1998) offers a similar argument to Bradd Shore’s, claiming that Samoans are moving from one discursive genre to another when they switch roles. According to Mageo, Samoans are not enacting a tension between narratives of self-fashioning and cultural obligations. Rather, the discursive genre presented by a specific context defines who they are. Mageo argues that these discursive genres are not in themselves adequate venues for predicting Samoan behavior. She allows room for Samoans to be strategic within the context of these genres, and to act in ways that are considered culturally destructive. Mageo also argues that Samoans posit an a-cultural desire in contrast with cultural expectations. These desires are seen by Samoans as
inherently destructive to social order (Mageo, 1989: 194), and need to be controlled. In short, Mageo claims the Samoan self is a conglomeration of roles, in which the context defines which role is performed, and these roles are counterpoised by Samoans with potentially destructive and asocial desires.  

Mageo (1991) argues that Samoans see loto or willfulness as the passion inside of all humans that can be directed towards good or ill. It is a question of whether someone chooses to channel their willfulness towards or away from social unities that determines whether one is expressing good or bad loto.  

For a more detailed ethnographic discussion of Samoan gossip in the context of broader anthropological literature on gossip, see Gershon (2001).  

Read in a certain light, this can seem paradoxical. Intentions are the anti-social gestures – the motivations that keep people from acting according to cultural expectations.  

I have discussed elsewhere (Gershon, 2001) how ‘NZ-born Samoan’, as a term, is often used to explain certain failures to behave appropriately.

References


**Ilana Gershon** is an assistant professor in Communication and Culture at Indiana University, Department of Communication and Culture. [email: igershon@indiana.edu]