Since the study of complex societies is as old as the social sciences themselves, the use of the term ‘cultural complexity’ to denote a particular kind of situation requires some initial elaboration.

To begin with, it may be useful to distinguish between social and cultural complexity. The former may well refer to differentiation along the lines of class and occupation, but cultural diversity is not necessarily a cause or consequence of this. Cultural complexity, by contrast, refers to variations in cognitive and symbolic phenomena such as world-views, notions of personhood, domestic practices, religious beliefs and other aspects of ways of life.

As this book shows, it has long been recognised that societies are often diverse at the level of symbolic meaning and subjective world-structures, as well as being socially differentiated. Yet culture still tends to be conceptualised in terms of sharing, rather than in terms of communication. Although this perspective has produced genuine insights into the diversity of humanity, it always had its limitations, and has, in an era of accelerated globalisation, become theoretically obsolete. Clifford Geertz (1973), arguably the most influential theorist of culture in the latter decades of the twentieth century, initially compared the integration of culture to a fugue by Bach – a highly symmetrical, stringently integrated kind of composition – but later conceded that a more appropriate metaphor might be that of an octopus, a literally many-stranded organism with a weak central command system (Geertz cited in Shweder 1984). However, he still saw culture as something that could be pluralised and which was bounded. Ulf Hannerz (1992), in a major work entitled Cultural Complexity, refrains from defining the central concept of the book, but notes at the outset that the term ‘complex’ is ‘about as attractive as the concept ”messy”’ (ibid.: 6). Like Anthony Wallace (1970) before him, Hannerz proposes to study culture as the organization of diversity rather than the replication of uniformity. In Hannerz’s analyses of cultural flows in the contemporary world, which he often describes as cultural creolisation, symbolic processes of diverse origins may melt together or react through mutual repulsion or confrontation, but they never result in a permanent, uniform cultural form.

The concept of cultural complexity adds a necessary dimension to the intellectual toolbox needed for a full appreciation of human diversity in today’s world. Rather than seeing society as composed either of a particular cultural group or of a finite number of such groups, cultural complexity takes the flows of meaning and their expressions in particular fields or
situations as the main point of departure. This chapter first discusses the concept itself and its ramifications, before describing some empirical fields where it is needed, returning to the concept at the end.

**Complex flows**

Wallace’s conceptualisation of diversity rests on a psychodynamic perspective where a relatively uniform social system gives rise to a wide range of individual world-views in societies with no ethnic variation (his ethnographic field was Native Americans). By contrast, most anthropologists working in this field approach complexity with the assumption that it resides not chiefly in the individual mind, but rather in the jungle of meanings and significant symbols in the socio-cultural domain itself. Complexity, thus, is a property of the public sphere.

Cultural complexity, as it is conceptualised here, is related to several of the other perspectives discussed in this book. It departs from the recognition that contemporary societies are far from uniform and seamlessly integrated, and characterised by variation along many lines. It may also be pointed out that the kind of variation characterising many if not most societies today is of a different order to that typified in historical cities and empires (see Grillo 1998). Although many anthropologists have written about culturally complex societies (see Banton 1966 for some early contributions), few have defined or operationalised complexity beyond the commonplace that it entails the coexistence of several culturally distinctive groups or categories within a shared social or political space. One interesting, largely ignored attempt to conceptualise social complexity was Fredrik Barth’s (1972) typology of social forms, based on the distribution of statuses and allocation of tasks, ranging from the relatively undifferentiated band via caste societies to modern individualistic societies, where the number of statuses is almost unlimited. Regarding cultural as opposed to social complexity, an early, influential contribution was Lee Drummond’s (1980) study from Guyana where he identified a ‘cultural continuum’ within which individuals were differently positioned, thereby showing empirically the inadequacies of approaches to multiethnic societies which presupposed cultural boundaries and similarity within each ethnic group.

The concept of super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) and its empirical foundation in research on early twenty-first-century London indicates the need for a view of cultural streams as highly mobile, shifting and partly overlapping, as does Rogers Brubaker’s (2004) notion of ethnicity without groups. In both cases, the very idea of relatively bounded, stable ethnic groups becomes an obstacle to studying the facts on the ground, which turn out to be less tidy than census data may suggest.

What is distinctive about the present approach to complexity is that it is not based on an assumption about the existence of discrete groups based on cultural sharing. Cultural meaning varies along many lines, of which the ethnic is but one. Cultural complexity can, thus, be compared by analogy to the findings of Cavalli-Sforza and Cavalli-Sforza (1995) regarding the genetic landscape in Europe. Studying the frequencies and distributions of a significant number of genes, they draw a genetic map where the variation along different genes follows different lines. The explanation is that migrations into and within the continent have taken different courses (ibid.: 144–59). As a result, a German may share some genes with Bulgarians that he does not share with the French and vice versa, and, if one were to draw genetic boundaries between groups or categories, it would be necessary to specify the criteria. Similarly, in research on cultural worlds where complexity is part of the analytical apparatus, assumptions about cultural sharing or sameness have to be specific and precise, since the existence of relatively homogeneous groups sharing ‘the same culture’ cannot be taken for granted.
Cultural complexity

Complexity as a way of seeing

To a certain degree, scientific findings depend not only on empirical delineations and problem formulations, but also on the chosen concepts. If complexity is assumed from the outset, complex descriptions necessarily follow, rather than monocausal explanations or simplistic generalisations. This applies, in principle, to any cultural phenomenon, but the necessity of a complex gaze is most urgent in societies characterised by the partly overlapping confluence of several streams. Female circumcision, or genital mutilation, may be an example.

Highly politicised and almost universally seen as objectionable in Western societies, female circumcision is widespread in some parts of Africa, including Somalia. A common interpretation of the practice sees it as an expression of male control over female sexuality, and many Somali and Ethiopian men and women in diasporas support this view. It is nevertheless a fact that women tend to be responsible for the operation and ritual context surrounding it, and that many circumcised women claim that they would have been less ‘whole’ and less ‘pure’ if they had not been circumcised (Talle 2010). At least four approaches to female circumcision in the diaspora are necessary for a complex account to be possible: (a) within a context where virtually everybody is circumcised, it appears as necessary and natural; (b) within a diasporic context, uncertainty and disagreement around the practice emerge since migrant women are surrounded by native women as well as other minority women who are uncircumcised; (c) from a standard majority point of view, in the same diasporic context, genital cutting is seen as barbaric, and it is banned by the authorities; (d) in the frontier area between (b) and (c), a fourth perspective emerges, where negotiations take place regarding the possibility of removing the practice without violating the autonomy of the people concerned. All four perspectives (and doubtless others) need to be investigated for a complex analysis to be possible.

Edgar Morin, a major theorist of complexity, similarly exemplifies his position through a discussion of sacrifice (Morin 2001: 37ff.; see also Eriksen 2007). Although elegant Darwinist, structuralist, structural-functionalist and culturalist accounts of ‘the true nature of sacrifice’ abound, Morin distinguishes between no less than seven distinctive aspects of sacrifice that cannot be reduced to one another, ranging from the magical exploitation of the power of death to reciprocity between groups, a safe channelling of violent impulses and the strengthening of societal integration.

Drawing extensively on a different source of inspiration, namely the natural science literature on complexity, the sociologist David Byrne (1998) arrives at a mode of analysis, looking at phenomena such as the spread of tuberculosis, education and urban planning in England, with an applied social-engineering orientation. His main argument is that a complex analytical gaze leading to complex descriptions are to be preferred because of their naturalism, which makes policies more effective.

This point seemed to be confirmed as I was contacted, just as I had finished writing the preceding paragraph, by a journalist who wanted an account of the riots in Stockholm in May 2013. I explained that monocausal explanations were ultimately unhelpful, and that at least five interwoven stories were necessary to understand what had happened: the crisis in Europe leading to insecurity and loss of trust; the growth in youth unemployment in Sweden; the rise of anti-Western Islamic groups; the feeling of ethnic discrimination and exclusion experienced by many minority youths; and, finally, the warm weather, which had made the Swedish public spaces more inviting than usual for informal interaction. At the end of my monologue, the journalist meekly asked if aggression might have something to do with it. I agreed, but pointed out that aggression has to come from somewhere and be directed somewhere; in this case, both origin and destination were complex.
Concerning the kind of complexity primarily dealt with here, suffice it to say at this point that what matters is to view culture not in terms of sharing or sameness, but in terms of communication and diversity, not only at the level of the group or category, but also at the level of the individual and the situation. This approach presents a far less tidy picture of the social world than the notions of ethnic diversity associated with place which have been common in studies of contemporary ethnicity.

Finally, cultural complexity may well, and often does, coexist with ethnic boundedness. Ethnic diversity in itself says little about cultural variation since the former is about social organisation and networks, while the latter is about symbolic meaning. Culture varies in a continuous or analogue way, while identities are, at least in theory, discontinuous and digital (bounded). We now move from the conceptual and methodological work to considering some empirical areas where the concept of complexity has proved to be especially fruitful.

The empirical continuum

There is a very considerable academic literature on migration, diasporas and transnationalism, but one growing category of people seems to be largely neglected, namely those of mixed parentage. They rarely appear as separate statistical categories, and policies between countries vary as to their classification. In many schools in larger European cities, nevertheless, a significant proportion of the children have one native and one immigrant parent. Many of them seem to identify with the majority, but most have a complex social or ethnic identity. They are anomalies in societies based on the existence of unambiguous ethnic identities, but are neither more nor less anomalous than everybody else in a society where complexity is taken for granted. How people with mixed origins identify, and which cultural traditions they attach themselves to, is not only variable, but also unpredictable. In the coastal Sami areas of northern Norway, where cultural Norwegianisation has weakened Sami language, tradition and identity, and where intermarriage has led to the proliferation of ‘halfies’, intensified identity politics has encouraged especially the young to choose between a Sami or a Norwegian identity (Hovland 1996). Siblings may choose opposing identities, and there appears to be no simple causal explanation for why they do so, just as two Muslim sisters from Oslo’s East End may choose piousness and radical feminism, respectively.

No facile assumptions about such aspects of culture as religious persuasions, political views, home language, gender relations or even concepts of personhood, can be made in a setting of cultural complexity. A few examples may illustrate this.

As in other European countries, controversies around the continuum love marriage–arranged marriage–enforced marriage are common in Norway, with Asian immigrants being the main target. Significantly, all the major positions on these controversies are represented within the Pakistani Norwegian category of citizens: defenders of tradition, defenders of liberal individualism, critical voices problematising assumptions of free choice in the majority and dissenting voices claiming that all arranged marriages are de facto enforced marriages. In order for the full diversity in perspectives and values of society to be represented in the debate, in other words, no participation from anybody but Norwegian Pakistanis would have been necessary.

That migrants from the same areas should hold different political views and different perspectives on their cultural traditions, including religion, comes as no surprise. However, it needs to be pointed out that the complexity in question bifurcates right down to the level of the individual: each person expresses a complex blend of diverse influences, and no two are identical. Groups or cultural communities only exist in particular respects, not in absolute terms.
Cultural complexity

Complexity and simplification

Cultural complexity and its challenges are intensified in the global information society. The almost unlimited number of possible combinations of statuses indicating social complexity in modern settings is now increasingly matched by a growth in the possible number of social identities and of cultural flows. In a culturally complex setting, mixing is endemic and difficult to avoid; moreover, no two individuals represent exactly the same kind of cultural mélange.

During research in an ethnically mixed suburb of Oslo, we became acquainted with a young family of Vietnamese origin. Mapping out their allegiances and orientations, it quickly became apparent that they were particularly attached neither to the place (suburb, city or country) nor to the diasporic community of Vietnamese scattered across the city and country. Instead, their main social and cultural identity was religious: they belonged to a Protestant congregation and gravitated, in their spare time, towards its church, played its devotional music in their flat, read their publications and tried, in a modest way, to get their neighbours interested in this particular true faith.

Although a great number of Pakistani Norwegians celebrate the Pakistani national day, hosted by the Embassy every year on 23 March, those who gather for this occasion do not necessarily share more, in terms of world-view, values and way of life, than some of them do with their ethnic majority neighbours. At least this cannot be taken for granted.

Precisely because the forces leading to an unprecedented degree of cultural complexity are so strong, counter-reactions are growing in intensity and also visibility. It is important to understand ethnic nationalism, puritan religion and group-based attempts to withdraw wholly or partly from the cultural whirlwind of modernity in this context. In situations where social group boundaries remain intact, so that the primary identification of individuals is with bounded ethnic, national, religious or linguistic groups, attempts are often made to patrol the cultural boundaries in order to create congruence between the social group and its cultural content. This is far from easy, since group boundaries may be fixed, yet cultural flows continuously cross them and create new patterns and forms. When group boundaries are less clear cut because of a high incidence of people of mixed descent or other liminal or anomalous persons, the border work also entails the establishment of criteria for inclusion and exclusion from the group. This may be the case with some indigenous groups where intermarriage with outsiders has been common (however, in some groups mixed origins are a criterion for membership, such as the South African Griqua or the Canadian Métis), but the most publicised and consequential forms of boundary work along these lines concern citizenship and membership in national communities.

Attempts to purify, homogenise and standardise cultural content within a group follow the same general logic as the implementation of criteria for group membership, but should be distinguished from it. A clearly bounded group may yet be culturally diverse; conversely, sharing of cultural codes may well cut across group boundaries. The social and cultural processes of boundary-making nevertheless are not independent of each other. As Ernest Gellner (1983) showed in his Nations and Nationalism, a main aim of nationalism consists in creating a homogeneous culture within the territory of the nation, ideally encompassing all members of the nation. Gellner wrote chiefly of nineteenth-century nation-building in Europe. In today’s more fragmented world, the logic of nationalism continues to function, but in murkier waters: the target groups for attempts to standardise culture and reduce inherent complexity are often not territorially based, politically sovereign or even clearly delineated. When, for example, Salafi clerics explain why their conservative and puritan brand of Islam should be the norm for all
Muslims, they neither have the support of a state nor the privilege of speaking to audiences that can a priori be assumed to share their world-view.

In contemporary identity politics, the tension between cultural complexity and simplification is a key feature. It is sometimes described as a conflict between modernity and tradition, where tradition is ‘unscalable’ and locally embedded (Tsing 2012) while modernity is standardised, but there is a paradox inherent in this view which is endemic in the ongoing debate about globalisation: does globalisation make people more similar or more different; does it chiefly lead to homogenisation or heterogenisation?

On the one hand, standardisation is a central aspect of globalisation (Eriksen 2013): the spread of a monetary economy, of English as the world’s second language, of Facebook accounts and fast-food outlets seem to reduce complexity in the sense that formerly discrete and distinctive societies become more similar at the level of cultural values, consumption and ways of life (Ritzer 2004).

However, these very processes of globalisation also lead to the proliferation of new cultural forms – mixing, hybridisation and creolisation (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996), migration resulting in unprecedented forms of diversity, diversification in ways of life, beliefs and world-views – precisely because so many more options are now available.

It is true that globalisation creates shared templates and a shared grammar, but they are often used to express difference and uniqueness at the level of the group or individual. The extent to which globalising processes affect local life-worlds should also not be exaggerated. It may sometimes appear more comprehensive than it actually is.

**Cultural complexity and individualism**

In a telling simile, Gellner (1983) compared the world before and after nationalism with the work of two painters. Oskar Kokoschka is known for his use of bright, often contrasting colours, sometimes depicted as overlapping, multicoloured dots – this was the world of a multitude of small identities before the advent of nationalism. The paintings of Amedeo Modigliani – often portraits of women – by contrast were characterised by large, single-colour surfaces which did not mingle; the world of nationalism. In a rejoinder to Gellner, Hannerz (1996) argues that contemporary cultural complexity seems to suggest ‘Kokoschka’s return’, where the multicoloured dots have again taken over from the monochromatic surfaces. Although Hannerz is obviously right, it needs to be emphasised that the kind of cultural complexity witnessed in the globalising information society is of a qualitatively different order to the diversity typical of the pre-modern world. It is not a product of limited contact and historical uniqueness, but on the contrary the result of intensified contact and full participation in contemporary world history. In order to come fully to grips with contemporary cultural complexity, it should be understood as a product of individualism, or perhaps more accurately the tension between individualism and non-individualistic conceptualisations of personhood.

Individualism is associated with rights and self-determination at the level of the individual. De facto citizenship in a state and participation in a monetary economy today are almost ubiquitous and contribute to individualisation in crucial ways. Only in a society where individualism is broadly embedded in practices and world-views is the kind of cultural complexity described here possible. In complex caste societies, such as those in traditional India, statuses come in packages in the sense that caste membership and religion determine a person’s place in society. In contemporary India, where the significance of both caste and religion is contested, a much broader palette of options and possible combinations of statuses is available.
Cultural complexity

The conflicts created by the tension between standardisation and complexity described here presuppose individualism: persons are asked to take a stance; the path they take is a result of personal decisions, not of obligations founded in tradition. Conflicts involving opposing views of personhood may appear to be of a different kind since they confront tradition and modernity openly. Individuals may be denounced as defectors if they take decisions deemed to be detrimental to group identity or tradition, for example by marrying outside of the group or declaring allegiance to values not associated with the group's traditions. The tension, in this case, is between views of personhood as being embedded in a cultural tradition or as being the product of free agency and personal decisions. However, resistance to modern individualism is also largely a result of individualism. In a post-traditional society, to use Giddens’ (1991) term, traditions continue to exist, but they have ceased to ‘go without saying’ and have to be chosen actively. Resistance to individualism and secularism may be interpreted as a defence of group-based multiculturalism (or monoculturalism, if the group is dominant) and a rejection of cultural complexity the way it is defined here.

Cultural complexity should be seen simultaneously as a property of the contemporary world and as an analytical approach to its conceptualisation. It does not deny the existence of bounded groups founded on assumptions of shared culture, but neither does it take them for granted; and the question of cultural similarity within a society is asked in the most open-ended way possible: there is no a priori answer to the question of ‘how much’ or ‘what’ people need to have in common, culturally speaking, in order to keep a society going together. The question is an empirical one. Finally, it should be kept in mind, as pointed out by Edgar Morin (1994: 10) in one of his latest statements on complexity, that: ‘Complexity is a problem word and not a solution word’.

References


