

We Built This Culture (so We Can Change It): Seven Principles for Intentional Culture Change

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Calls for culture change abound. Headlines regularly feature calls to change the “broken” or “toxic” cultures of institutions and organizations, and people debate which norms and practices across society are now defunct. As people blame current societal problems on culture, the proposed fix is “culture change.” But what is culture change? How does it work? Can it be effective? This article presents a novel social psychological framework for *intentional culture change*—actively and deliberately modifying the mutually reinforcing features of a culture. Synthesizing insights from research and application, it proposes an integrated, evidence-based perspective centered around *seven core principles for intentional culture change*: *Principle 1*: People are culturally shaped shapers, so they can be culture changers; *Principle 2*: Identifying, mapping, and evaluating the key levels of culture helps locate where to target change; *Principle 3*: Culture change happens in both top-down and bottom-up ways and is more effective when the levels are in alignment; *Principle 4*: Culture change can be easier when it leverages existing core values and harder when it challenges deep-seated defaults and biases; *Principle 5*: Culture change typically involves power struggles and identity threats; *Principle 6*: Cultures interact with one another and change can cause backlash, resistance, and clashes; and *Principle 7*: Timing and readiness matter. While these principles may be broadly used, here they are applied to the issue of social inequality in the United States. Even though culture change feels particularly daunting in this problem area, it can also be empowering—especially when people leverage evidence-based insights and tools to reimagine and rebuild their cultures.

Public Significance Statement

Calls for culture change abound. Headlines regularly feature calls to change the “broken” or “toxic” cultures of the police, the workplace, U.S. politics, and more, and norms and practices across society are hotly debated. The proposed fix is “culture change.” But what is culture change? How does it work? And can it be effective? This article presents an emerging social psychological framework for *intentional culture change*, with a focus on behavioral change and addressing societal disparities in the United States.

Keywords: culture change, social change, inequality

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Tyre Nichols case revives calls for change in police culture.

—Associated Press headline, 2023

CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] announces sweeping reorganization, aimed at changing the agency's culture and restoring public trust.

—CNN headline, 2022

Gen Z calls for change to workplace culture.

—MSNBC headline, 2021

NY Times says it needs culture change, better inclusion.

—ABC News headline, 2021

Calls for culture change are reverberating across the United States. In today's climate of upheaval and uncertainty, a widespread sentiment is that the status quo is no longer preferable or even acceptable in many domains of life (Epstein, 2022; Jones, 2022; Rainie et al., 2019; Wike et al., 2021). Nearly every day, news headlines feature calls to change the cultures of institutions and organizations, including government agencies, police departments, media companies, schools, and workplaces. Increasingly, people blame societal problems on culture—specifically, outmoded, “broken,” and/or “toxic” cultures. Law enforcement culture, for instance, has been diagnosed as dysfunctionally militaristic and inherently racist, workplace culture as toxically masculine and dangerously exploitative, and American culture as irredeemably gun-centered and hopelessly divided (Berdahl et al., 2018; Griffith, 2019; Klein, 2020; Waxman, 2022). Typically, the proposed fix is culture change. But what is culture change? How does it work? And can it be effective?

This article proposes an emerging social psychological framework for *intentional culture change*: actively and deliberately modifying the mutually reinforcing features of a culture. These features include collective narratives,

representations, policies, practices, norms, products, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. As people work to change cultures across society, many everyday norms, practices, and policies are under scrutiny or in flux. From social protests over critical policy issues like access to abortion or voting rights; to shifting norms on sharing gender pronouns during personal introductions to speaking openly about mental health challenges in schools and workplaces; to changes to daily practices such as using reusable water bottles or commuting with an e-bike instead of a car, the spirit of culture change is all around. Here the authors synthesize insights from psychological and behavioral science research and application to propose an integrated perspective on what intentional culture change entails and how people can be better equipped to understand and enact it.

The authors derive this framework from their own and others' research on identifying and remedying societal disparities and fostering social and behavioral change across domains (e.g., Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Cohen, 2022; Eberhardt, 2019; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Stephens et al., 2021; Tankard & Paluck, 2016; Walton & Crum, 2021; T. Wilson, 2011). Their aim is to advance culture change in a particular direction: from societal, institutional, and organizational cultures that are less open, equal, democratic, and inclusive toward those that are more so for all their participants.¹ While they situate the intentional culture change framework around the goals of identifying and remedying social disparities in the United States, the principles proposed here may be applied to other problem areas.

What Is Culture and Why Is It Important?

Culture is famously everywhere all the time yet difficult to grasp and define. Merriam-Webster recently recognized culture as the “word of the year” because it had the largest increase in lookups in its online dictionary. They claimed that culture “conveys a kind of academic attention to systematic behavior” and that “the use of the word *culture* ... has moved from the classroom syllabus to the conversation at large, appearing in headlines and analyses across a wide swath of topics” (Merriam-Webster, 2014, para. 1 and para. 2). Historian Joshua Rothman (2014, para. 4 and para. 8) mused, “more people looked up ‘culture’ this year because it’s become an unsettling word ... if words are tools for thinking, then this year ‘culture’ has been used to think about the parts of our society that function poorly.” This trend was prescient.

Turning from popular to scholarly notions, *culture* can be broadly defined as a socially meaningful system of shared ideas, histories, policies, practices, norms, and products that structure and organize behavior (A. P. Fiske et al., 1998;

¹ Although precisely what this entails will be debated as stakeholders work toward these aspirations in culturally specific ways.



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Heine, 2020; Kashima, 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Morris et al., 2015). Cultures give form and meaning to social environments, providing answers to what is good, moral, valuable, true, and effective. Culture coordinates people's identities and interactions across institutions, organizations, and groups through policies, practices, and norms, serving as an existential rubric. Culture also helps spackle over the many cracks or inconsistencies in societies by providing coherent and compelling narratives or stories about why things are the way they are or ought to be.

When people call for culture change, they seem to be signaling that something widespread yet difficult to pinpoint is amiss in society or within society's institutions or organizations. While the concept of culture itself is value-neutral, psychological science can be used to investigate whether persistent inequalities or systematic disparities are being fostered and maintained by particular cultures (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; Brady et al., 2018; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Eberhardt, 2019; Salter et al., 2018).

Culture Change Is in the Air

Why are calls for culture change so prevalent these days? Recent societal trends provide telling clues. First, major global crises like the coronavirus pandemic and the increasingly visible impacts of climate change have exposed people's undeniable interdependence along with the unsustainability of many aspects of modern life (Hoffman, 2019; Nelson, 2022). Business as usual is no longer possible and future threats are not so distant. Second, the rise of social movements like Occupy Wall Street, Me Too, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) has forced a reckoning with legacies of inequality that are deeply baked into society and continue to shape both social systems and people's life

outcomes today (Jackson et al., 2020; Power, 2020). Third, deep distrust in institutions such as the government and industries like big tech is at an all-time high, fueling widespread skepticism about the status quo and whom society is designed to serve (Jones, 2022; Rainie et al., 2019). Fourth, shifting social norms around gender and sexuality, mental health, the workplace, and more have shown how dramatic changes can cascade across society fairly quickly once a critical tipping point is reached (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019; Sunstein, 2019). Many implicit norms, defaults, and assumptions are suddenly in the spotlight and evidence of rapid and dramatic change is all around. Last, technological advances have brought into sharp relief the power of the social world and the influence people can have to shape it. From the ubiquity of artificial intelligence to the dominance of social media, the awareness that bigger forces are guiding or manipulating what people think, feel, and do is more apparent than ever (Haidt, 2022; R. Reich et al., 2021).

Due to these converging trends, U.S. Americans are increasingly dissatisfied with the status quo and their place in it (Epstein, 2022; Packer, 2021; R. B. Reich, 2020). Irrespective of increasing polarization, many across the political spectrum believe that society is not working for most people and needs to be disrupted (Epstein, 2022; Packer, 2021; Rainie et al., 2019; Wike et al., 2021). This widespread skepticism stems from the concern that the foundations of many of society's institutions—from the government, to law enforcement, to finance, to health care, to education—are constructed on faulty ground, so they cannot easily be reformed to address deep-seated problems. While there can be significant tensions among prospective culture changers around how quickly, dramatically, and/or thoroughly culture change can take place, today's clarion call is for change that involves a significant overhaul—a meaningful reimagining and redesign of these cultures. People are calling for *intentional culture change* (see Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Eberhardt, 2019; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Plaut, 2014; Stephens et al., 2021; D. S. Wilson et al., 2014, for related discussions). Intentional culture change, as discussed here, is a shift that is purposefully set into motion by those who want to modify, alter, or improve a culture.

The article proposes a novel social psychological framework for *intentional culture change*. The framework is grounded in the authors' expertise in the social psychology of culture, bias, and inequality and their work applying evidence-based insights to inform and assess organizational, institutional, and societal change efforts in real-world settings. For over a decade, they have studied these change processes systematically in collaboration with researchers and private and public sector leaders in criminal justice (e.g., Camp et al., 2021, 2023; Hethey, 2020; Rho et al., 2023; Voigt et al., 2017), economic mobility (e.g., Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Lyons-Padilla et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2020, 2023), education (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2023;



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Okonofua et al., 2016; Stephens et al., 2019), health (e.g., Hook & Markus, 2020; Howe et al., 2022; Louis et al., 2022), media (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2023; Reddan et al., 2023), and technology (e.g., Zhao et al., 2023). The framework is centered around the behavioral change aspects of intentional culture change.²

This emerging framework is also informed by a broad synthesis of research on behavioral change, organizational change, societal change, and cultural dynamics. By bringing these diverse literatures together, the authors aim to encourage psychologists, behavioral scientists, and practitioners interested in intentional culture change to utilize cross-cutting insights and think more broadly about what meaningful behavior change entails. Social psychologists, behavioral economists, and other social scientists have made significant advances in the science of behavioral change, investigating the most effective strategies to foster it at individual, group, and population levels (e.g., Cialdini, 2021; Cohen, 2022; Milkman, 2021; Miller & Prentice, 2016; Sunstein, 2019; Tankard & Paluck, 2016; Walton & Crum, 2021; T. Wilson, 2011). There is growing recognition that attending to institutions, systems, or contexts—that is, *culture*—is necessary to do so successfully and sustainably (e.g., Chater & Loewenstein, 2022; Walton & Yeager, 2020). Cultural psychologists have been increasingly studying cultural change from the perspective of cultural dynamics, analyzing how shifts in natural and human-made environments both shape and reflect patterns in psychological processes and behavior (e.g., Kashima, 2019; Kashima et al., 2019; Varnum & Grossmann, 2017, 2021). Psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have long been investigating how societal changes are influenced by conflicts, social movements, and collective action around the world (e.g., Becker, 2012; Craig et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Stroebe et al., 2015). And a main focus of organizational

scholarship has been on how cultures can be leveraged to foster productivity, efficiency, and/or performance (e.g., Kotter, 2012; Schein, 2010).

The goals of this article are (a) to propose, through seven evidence-based principles, that intentional culture change is indeed possible and (b) to discuss the opportunities and challenges involved in the often daunting process of intentional culture change. Using a wide-angle lens to weave together insights that no single study, research program, or body of work makes on its own, the current article integrates theory, empirical findings, application, and illustrative examples to provide a comprehensive, accessible, and useful approach to intentional culture change. In this time of widespread societal and global crises, the purpose is to marshal the available evidence to respond to an urgent call from the public. Public scholarship has high value and impact and also trade-offs. As such, asking informed questions, offering timely, evidence-based insights, and proceeding with humility to meet the problems where they are rather than proclaiming to have all of the answers from the perch of the ivory tower is essential (Berkman & Wilson, 2021; Eaton et al., 2021; Grzanka & Cole, 2021). The framework is intended as an initial step and guide for future research, tools, and application.

Seven Principles for Intentional Culture Change

Principle 1: People are culturally shaped shapers, so they can be culture changers.

- Since people and their cultures make each other up: (a) culture change involves changing both people and their social environments and (b) cultures are not neutral because they have human-made assumptions built into their designs.

The first principle is both conceptually and procedurally the “first principle” of intentional culture change. It is important to recognize that the cultures, institutions, and organizations that structure society are not abstractions or superordinate entities that exist out there in the world on their own. They are made up by people, for people. So, people can change them. People are *culturally shaped shapers*: They both shape and are shaped by the cultural contexts they inhabit through an ongoing process called

² By using the term “intentional” culture change, the authors aim to highlight the role people can play in initiating and sustaining cultural change that is undertaken for a purpose (i.e., combating social inequality in the United States). The goal is to encourage psychologists, behavioral scientists, and practitioners to think in a contextual, holistic way as they seek to make meaningful culture change. While the term “intentional” culture change has also been used in other research areas like cultural evolution, there it underscores instead how evolutionary processes, which are typically thought of as unintentional, can also be influenced by intentional processes like human actions (Mesoudi, 2019; D. S. Wilson, 2016; D. S. Wilson et al., 2014).



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“mutual constitution” (Adams & Markus, 2004; A. P. Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Hamedani, 2019; Shweder, 1991). People and their cultures make each other up. Humans are not only *Homo sapiens*, those who make sense or meaning, but also *Homo faber*, those who make or create.

One of social psychology’s key concepts is that the mind and the social context—the person and the situation—depend upon and coconstruct one another (Cohen, 2022; Lewin, 1946/1951; Ross & Nisbett, 1991/2011). Since the person is *always* in context, changing how people think and what they do requires changing the world around them; through the interactions they have; the practices, norms, and policies they follow; and the narratives they use to make sense of their experiences. People and their cultures are necessarily and interdependently linked (A. P. Fiske et al., 1998; Gelfand & Kashima, 2016; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Sewell, 1992; Shweder, 1991). While cultural psychology has long advocated for this perspective, an appreciation is growing in social psychology, particularly among those concerned with the impact of history, institutions, and organizations on people’s beliefs, biases, and behaviors (e.g., Bonam et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2018; Trawalter et al., 2022).

The *culture cycle* is a simplified conceptual model that illustrates this interdependence between people and cultures (Figure 1). It depicts four key, equally important aspects of culture—*ideas*, *institutions*, *interactions*, and *individuals* (the four “Is”)—in an ongoing, dynamic, interactive system (e.g., A. P. Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Conner, 2014; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). It is a particularly useful tool for intentional culture change. (*Principle 2* will review these levels in detail.)

Indeed, people come into the world wired for culture—babies are born ready to plug into and learn from the society

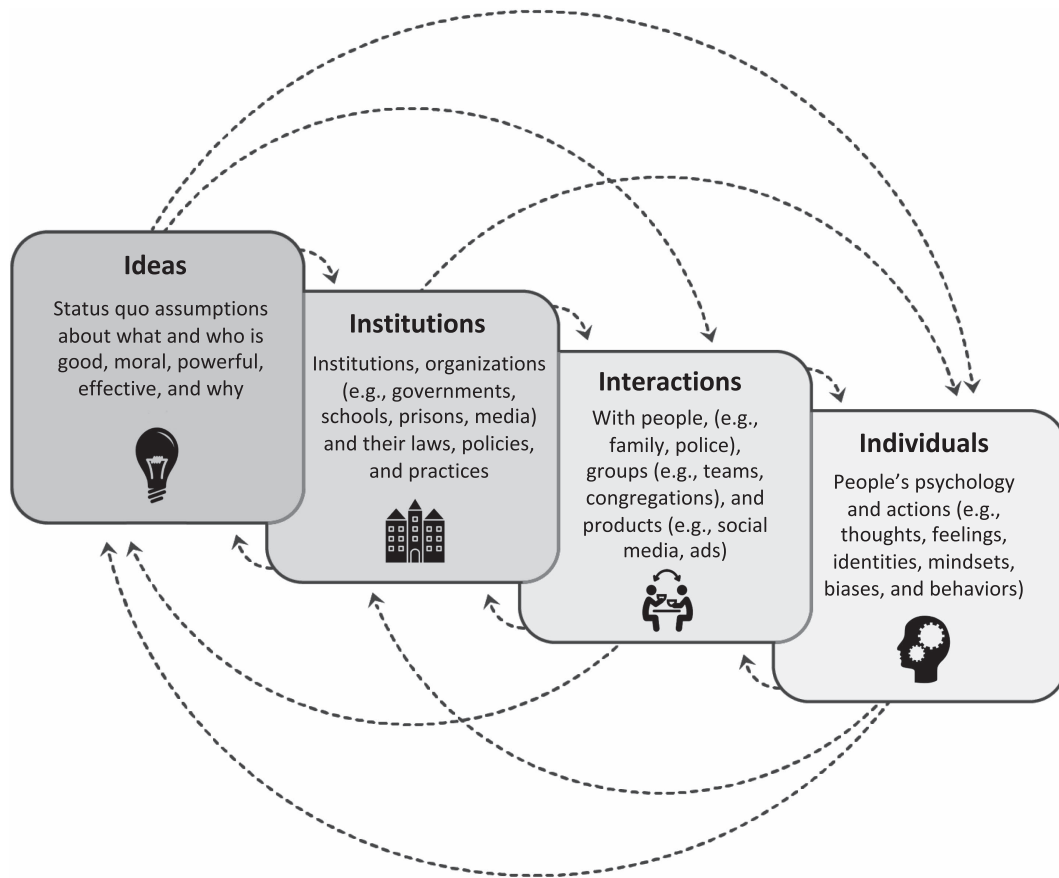
that precedes them (Bruner, 1990; Henrich, 2015; Shore, 1996; Tomasello, 2011). For example, a child born in the United States today will become an American because the people, products, norms, organizations, and institutions they interact with—e.g., their family and friends, the media, educational and legal systems—will see them as an American, teach them how to be an American, and treat them like what they understand an American to be. This does not mean, however, that cultures shape all people alike (e.g., Kitayama et al., 2009; Ma et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2015). People participate in cultures simultaneously as both *social constructions* and *social constructors* of experience (Markus et al., 1996). While they may embody, uphold, and perpetuate some aspects of culture, they may simultaneously ignore, resist, or reject others. Both processes are parts of culture.³ While differences in any one person’s power, resources, and status can affect how much influence they exert, people collectively can either perpetuate cultures or resist them. The key lesson here is that *since people are culturally shaped shapers, they can also be culture changers*.

Take the U.S. American child above. As they grow up in the United States, they will be exposed to a variety of narratives about American identity and diversity through the people, products, organizations, and institutions with whom they interact, some more mainstream and others idiosyncratic. As such, the child’s version of what it means to be American will be influenced by their race or ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, education, social class, religion, and more. They may largely embrace the version of what it means to be American to which they were exposed, or they may be critical of it and seek to contest or reject elements of it. They may become a politician, nurse, barista, engineer, musician, or construction worker, and in any of these roles, fight to uphold, reform, or challenge the societal narratives, policies, norms, and practices of American culture that come into play in their life. They could be a survivor or lawyer fighting for gun control versus gun rights policies or a parent or teacher advocating for school choice versus equitable funding for public schools. Cultural critics are always working to nudge, influence, or even transform their cultures (in culturally tuned ways).

Just as individuals can work to change or resist their cultures, so too can groups or collectives. From everyday forms of activism to large-scale protests to historic revolutions, people around the world band together through solidarity and collective action (e.g., Becker, 2012; Craig

³ Mutual constitution is a well-established theory of sociocultural diversity in models of self and agency (e.g., A. P. Fiske et al., 1998; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Shweder, 1991). Since the intentional culture change framework is based on this theory, it is not grounded in a particular model of self or agency. As noted, the starting point for the framework is research about identifying and remedying social disparities in the United States. While that is the scope covered here, future work can and should investigate other societal issues and cultural contexts (e.g., Bain et al., 2015; Gelfand, 2018).

Figure 1
The Culture Cycle: Mapping Culture's Key Parts



Note. The *culture cycle* is a simplified conceptual model that can be used to map a culture. This depiction is designed to emphasize four key aspects of culture that are particularly useful for understanding how people and their cultures are linked and can be used as a tool for intentional culture change. In the model, (a) culture is multilevel (as indicated by the nested boxes); (b) all levels influence one another (as indicated by the cycling arrows) and are equally important (all boxes are the same size); (c) change can proceed from the left-hand side, which is top-down, or the right-hand side, which is bottom-up; and (d) while the box representing each level contains some examples, those examples are not meant to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive. For instance, when referring to “the media” as an institution or to a specific media organization (e.g., Disney), media can be represented at the *institutions* level. However, when referring to a particular media product (e.g., TV show, film) or tool (e.g., tablet, app), those can be represented at the *interactions* level. Likewise, “norms” could be represented at all levels depending on whether their origins (*ideas*), formal (*institutions*) versus informal (*interactions*) influences or incentives, or psychological processes (*individuals*) are being examined. See A. P. Fiske et al. (1998), Markus and Kitayama (2010), and Markus and Conner (2014) for explanations of the culture cycle and Hamedani and Markus (2019), Cheryan and Markus (2020), and Hook and Markus (2020) for examples of how to apply the culture cycle as a tool for intentional culture change.

et al., 2020; Power, 2020; Stroebe et al., 2015). For example, in the wake of Me Too, more women felt emboldened to call out men’s behaviors that undermined women’s agency. Terms like “mansplaining” and “manspreading” became part of the lexicon, and confronting behaviors like these in everyday interactions became more normative (Sunstein, 2019). Because those with less power, status, or resources are usually disadvantaged by the status quo, they can be important catalysts for change (see Principle 5).

Another important idea is that *cultures are not neutral systems or processes* that function independently of time

and space. Just as computational algorithms can transmit and perpetuate the biases of their data inputs or human creators, so too can cultures (e.g., Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; Salter et al., 2018; Zou & Schiebinger, 2018). They are laden with human meanings and have powerful assumptions, defaults, and biases built into their designs (see Principles 2 and 4). The more people participate in and uphold a culture, the more its assumptions, defaults, and biases are reinforced, replicated, and spread. This feature of culture is particularly important when working to identify and remedy societal disparities, as is the focus here.

To combat disparities, people need to both actively alter their individual behaviors and work to debias and change institutional and organizational practices and policies accordingly (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Eberhardt, 2019; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Plaut, 2014; Stephens et al., 2021). For example, in workplace training sessions, managers can learn to appreciate employees' different emotional and communicative styles and how they can be strengths. They can then redesign performance assessment and review processes to recognize and reward these diverse styles accordingly. These changes can shift an organization's culture toward greater inclusion and away from what are often White and male defaults for success (Bencharit et al., 2019; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Muradoglu et al., 2023). Acting confidently, assertively, and dominantly in the workplace is not the only way to be a smart, effective, and high-performing employee or leader (Berdahl et al., 2018; Vial et al., 2022).

The key idea is that people and the organizations or institutions they are a part of cannot simply opt out, go with the flow, or remain neutral because the societal systems they are participating in are not neutral if they systematically advantage or privilege higher status groups (e.g., White people, men) while disadvantaging lower status groups (e.g., Black people, women). While what people individually say and do matters, so does the status quo upheld by the broader institutional and organizational environments they are a part of. Culture change involves both—changing people and changing their environments.

Principle 2: Identifying, mapping, and evaluating the key levels of culture helps locate where to target change.

- The culture cycle is a useful tool for mapping a culture's key parts and spotting levers for change.

After recognizing these important insights about how people and their cultures are linked, the next step in intentional culture change is learning to identify a culture's key parts and how they operate. Returning to the *culture cycle*, it is a useful tool for mapping cultures and locating where to target change (e.g., Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Hook & Markus, 2020; Figure 1). The culture cycle can be applied to any kind of culture, from relatively broad cultures like national or professional cultures that cut across institutions or organizations (e.g., the media industry) to more bounded cultures that reside within particular institutions or organizations (e.g., Meta).

Starting from the left-hand side of the culture cycle, the *ideas level* includes pervasive, historically derived, and collectively held narratives, ideologies, representations, values, beliefs, and status quo assumptions about what and who is good, right, moral, natural, powerful, and effective in a culture (Markus & Conner, 2014). These ideas, in turn, ground and inform institutions, interactions, and individuals.

Because of ideas, cultures often appear to have overarching themes or patterns that are coherent or persistent across time. For example, in the United States, the narrative of individual freedom is a powerful cultural story that was both central to the nation's founding and continues to be a major theme in political and social life today (Hook & Markus, 2020; Markus, 2017). Given the legacy of slavery and denial of rights to women and other groups in society, however, how individual freedom has been defined and practiced has shifted over time (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Jones, 1997). Cultures can have exceptions and contradictions to their ideals and values. Yet, they can also contain general patterns that can be detected and traced throughout time. Cultural ideas can be mobilized to help or hinder change, depending on whether they are leveraged to upend or uphold the status quo (see *Principle 4*). Since cultural ideas commonly function as status quo assumptions about how things should be and why, they are so ubiquitous that they are difficult to perceive. Surfacing them requires making the invisible visible.

Next is the *institutions level* of culture, which is where ideas are operationalized and used to organize society through institutions; organizations; and their laws, policies, and practices (Markus & Conner, 2014). Institutions serve the purpose of spelling out and formalizing the rules for society and include governmental, legal, economic, educational, scientific, religious, and media organizations. People may be unaware of all the institutions, laws, and policies at play in their cultures, yet they nevertheless exert a formidable force by providing incentives that foster certain ways of being and doing things while inhibiting or preventing others. For example, for centuries, legal definitions of marriage as a union between "one man and one woman" served to enshrine heterosexual couples as the standard for state-recognized family units, to the exclusion of other forms of relationships. Institutionalizing whose relationships were legally recognized, and whose were not, signaled to society that certain kinds of families were valued and deserving of rights and recognition while others were not (Fingerhut et al., 2011). As definitions have shifted over time, other institutions like the media have played a powerful role in cultural change, both shaping and reflecting public debate and policy (Happer & Philo, 2013).

Next in the culture cycle is the *interactions level*. Interactions include people interacting with other people (e.g., family members, friends, teachers, and supervisors), groups (e.g., clubs, teams, congregations, unions), and with products in society (e.g., social media, TV, film, and advertisements; Markus & Conner, 2014). Culture manifests in everyday situations that follow often unspoken norms about the "right" ways to behave at home, school, work, worship, and play. This is the level of culture that often feels most tangible and is an important site where norms are transmitted and impact people's lived experiences. For instance, the recent rise of people interacting

through social media has shaped how families, friends, and colleagues connect and stay updated. In the process, it has also created a new ecosystem through which people obtain their news and information and through which ideas can spread rapidly through hashtags, memes, and other shorthand forms (e.g., hashtag Black Lives Matter or “#BLM”; Leach & Allen, 2017). For a variety of reasons, some intentional and some incidental to these products, the more people interact through social media networks, the more they are siloed from different points of view and exposed to material that often reinforces their existing beliefs and values, creating what has become a polarized “echo chamber” of information (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Finally, at the right-hand side of the culture cycle, the *individuals level* includes people’s identities, self-concepts, thoughts, feelings, motives, mindsets, biases, and behaviors—that is, their psychology and their actions (Markus & Conner, 2014). While individuals are shaped by their cultures, they also, in turn, shape those cultures by participating in some aspects of them or resisting others, feeding back into the cycle (as in *Principle 1*).⁴

Once prospective culture changers identify and map the key parts of culture using the culture cycle, it can then be used as a tool to evaluate the culture and locate where to target intentional culture change. Take, for example, changing workplace cultures to combat gender bias. Cheryan and Markus (2020) describe how companies can use the culture cycle to identify “masculine defaults”—characteristics and behaviors typically associated with the male gender role (e.g., assertiveness, dominance) that are valued; rewarded; and regarded as standard, normal, neutral, and necessary aspects of a culture. Starting at the ideas level, company mission statements and mottos can be reviewed for normalizing and elevating values like disruption (e.g., “move fast and break things”). At the institutions level, hiring, review, and promotion policies will likely advantage employees that exhibit confidence and competitiveness and disadvantage those who do not. At the interactions level, meetings and presentations may commonly have a combative, confrontational style that empowers some employees and excludes others. And at the individuals level, employees will likely endorse the idea that success at the company comes from standing out and crushing the competition. Once these defaults are identified, the culture cycle can be used to map out cultural change efforts at each level to create, reinforce, and sustain a more gender-balanced, versus gender-biased, workplace culture. In doing so, one might find that some levels promote defaults more than others or require greater intervention.

Principle 3: Culture change happens in both top-down and bottom-up ways and is more effective when the levels are in alignment.

- The source and direction of culture change matters. There can be areas of conflict or misalignment.

The culture cycle can also be used, like a blueprint, to trace how intentional culture change is set into motion and whether there are any signs of conflict or misalignment among the key parts of culture (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Kelly & Perkins, 2012; Nilsen & Birken, 2020). Since all of the levels continuously influence one another, a change at any one level can produce changes in others. Ideally, intentional culture change will be most effective and lasting when there is systematic change at each level of the culture cycle and these changes work together in concert, reinforcing one another (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Eberhardt, 2019; Hamedani & Markus, 2019; Howarth et al., 2013; Stephens et al., 2021; D. S. Wilson et al., 2014). While multilevel, aligned efforts make intentional culture change likelier to succeed, it can be challenging to achieve, especially early on in the process. It can also be difficult to negotiate because of the power dynamics that are inherent in top-down and bottom-up approaches (Howarth et al., 2013).

When intentional culture change is *top-down*, it is often ignited by people who hold power or leadership positions in society’s organizations or institutions. For example, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder on May 25, 2020, leaders in institutions and organizations across society began a new practice of releasing solidarity statements, detailing public stances on and commitments to racial justice. Leaders at more than 1,100 organizations, for instance, pledged a total of \$200 billion to racial justice initiatives between the end of May 2020 and 1 year later (Fitzhugh et al., 2020). When intentional culture change is *bottom-up*, it is set into motion by people who hold relatively less power or status in society’s organizations and institutions and are often marginalized or disadvantaged by existing systems. For example, nationwide BLM protests following Floyd’s murder were driven by member-led networks of community organizers, activists, and faith leaders. The social movement, which BLM activists termed “leaderful” instead of “leaderless,” shifted public discourse and attention around issues of racial justice, inequality, and police brutality (Dunivin et al., 2022).

When culture change is *top-down*, or originating from the ideas or institutions levels of the culture cycle, it can be

⁴ A few notes on the culture cycle. First, cultures are always dynamic systems. Second, the culture cycle includes and incorporates organizational and institutional structures and dynamics. The concepts of “culture” (e.g., collective beliefs, practices, and products) and “structure” (e.g., societal institutions and organizations) are integrated rather than separated. Third, culture cycles are embedded in broader historical, ecological, and evolutionary systems that interact with and exert influence on a given culture, both in the past and present (e.g., Jones, 1997; Mesoudi, 2019; Sng et al., 2018). Fourth, different cultures also interact with and influence one another, both in expected and unexpected ways, sometimes causing clashes or divides (see *Principle 6*). Fifth, while there are other models that represent culture as a multilevel system that have various aims and distinctions, they often share the goal of delineating the key features of culture in a simplified, usable form (e.g., Cox, 1994; Schein, 2010).

perceived as in the interest of the powerful or as a way to protect and maintain the status quo. For instance, a number of the organizational solidarity statements and funding commitments were critiqued for a lack of transparency and connection to ongoing community-based efforts. When it is *bottom-up*, or originating from the interactions or individuals levels of the culture cycle, it often involves a contestation of power or challenge to the status quo, as in the BLM protests and movement. Intentional culture change requires navigating the “politics of change” (Howarth et al., 2013). As discussed in *Principle 5*, culture change is often sparked by those with less power or status in society precisely because they tend to be disadvantaged by the status quo (Craig et al., 2020). Yet, to make widespread and lasting changes in organizations and institutions across society, culture change often also needs to be top-down, incorporated into laws and policies and endorsed by powerful leaders. One approach that can help with negotiating these top-down/bottom-up tensions is to engage a key changemaker or form a strategic coalition that can work as trusted and influential “bridge builders” among stakeholders in a community or organization (e.g., Eggers & Kettl, 2023; Giridharadas, 2022; Kotter, 2012).

The culture cycle can also be used as a tool to identify whether the levels are working together to support or buttress one another, or whether they are *misaligned*, clashing or working against one another (Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Hamedani & Markus, 2019). For example, organizations can claim in their missions, visions, or values statements that they prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, upon closer examination of their internal policies and practices around recruitment, hiring, onboarding, mentorship, professional development, and promotion, they might do little beyond “virtue signaling” to actually implement, sustain, or remain accountable to those values (Dobbin & Kalev, 2022). Likewise, law enforcement agencies can claim in their organizational mission statements that they care about the communities they serve and center them in their work and day-to-day decisions. Yet, if their organizational reward structures (e.g., performance metrics) are built solely around crime reduction (e.g., number of arrests) with no consideration for community building, then those values are not being operationalized and reinforced at other levels in the culture, making culture change unlikely (Hethey, 2020).

The popular saying “culture eats policy for lunch” captures this idea of tension or misalignment among levels in a culture. Policies are of course part of culture (i.e., the institutions level of the culture cycle). But if a new policy is out of alignment with long-standing norms, values, or practices (i.e., ideas and interactions levels), then the existing culture will tend to override it. For example, investment fund managers who control large amounts of capital might say they value mitigating racial bias in their decision-making processes and procedures. In practice, however, when it comes down to making investment decisions, they may still rely on what is

less risky and more familiar—opting to invest in White-led (as opposed to Black-led) ventures, claiming better “culture fit”—even when their leadership teams are equally highly qualified (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2019; Wages et al., 2022). Because the finance industry is very relationship-driven with extremely closed and homogeneous networks, there may be conflicts at multiple levels of the culture cycle as leaders work to implement change (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2019).

Principle 4: Culture change can be easier when it leverages existing core values and harder when it challenges deep-seated defaults and biases.

- Leveraging a culture’s core values is affirming and can foster buy-in and engagement.
- Combating a culture’s biases requires questioning the status quo and default assumptions.

Cultures by nature have a host of meanings and assumptions built into them. Sometimes they are expressed through a culture’s *core values*, which operate through shared ideologies, narratives, and norms about what is good, right, important, and true (e.g., cultures with “tight” social norms prize order; Gelfand, 2018; Markus & Conner, 2014; Morris et al., 2015). These values can unite people, fostering a common identity and collectively shared beliefs. At other times, these meanings and assumptions are expressed through a culture’s *biases*, which uphold some people or ways of being as smarter, stronger, more successful, or more moral than others. Often through the veneer of seeming “natural,” “inherent,” or “inevitable,” these biases perpetuate disparities and inequality, privileging some people or groups while excluding or disadvantaging others, separating and dividing people (e.g., the Black–crime association; Eberhardt, 2019; Jones, 1997; Payne, 2018). Learning to excavate and identify a culture’s core values and biases is critical to intentional culture change. While core values are often represented at the ideas level of the culture cycle and biases at the individuals level, both can be traced through, operationalized, and reinforced at all levels (Eberhardt, 2019; Hamedani & Markus, 2019). An important link between values and biases is often a culture’s *defaults*: Pervasive features of a culture cycle that enshrine as normal and neutral characteristics and behaviors that maintain or uphold the status quo (e.g., racial bias as individual vs. systemic; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Eberhardt, 2019; Salter et al., 2018). It is in this way that cultural defaults, while not overtly biases themselves, tend to advantage or privilege higher status or dominant groups and lead to bias and disparities for others (Ridgeway & Markus, 2022).

Invoking a culture’s core values in the service of intentional culture change can be a useful strategy to the extent that it gives people something meaningful and steady to hold onto during the uncertainty that inevitably comes with change. Indeed, research in social, cultural, and

political psychology shows that cueing and affirming people's shared values and identities can be a powerful motivational and persuasive force (Cohen, 2022; Cohen & Sherman, 2014; Feinberg & Willer, 2019; Markus, 2017; Steele, 2010). For instance, framing universal basic income (i.e., a periodic cash allowance that is given to all citizens, like the COVID-19 stimulus) in terms of "financial freedom" can mitigate both opposition to the social safety net policy and negative stereotyping of recipients (Thomas et al., 2023). Since the narrative of individual freedom is potent in U.S. American culture, particularly among conservatives, leveraging "freedom" as a core value in communications about the policy can help soften ideological resistance and increase bipartisan support. Similarly, guiding people to view exercise and healthy eating as fun and indulgent, instead of as boring and depriving, can help motivate them to adopt beneficial lifestyle changes (e.g., Boles et al., 2021; Turnwald et al., 2019). Meeting people where they are is a useful social psychological strategy to leverage for intentional culture change, akin to flowing with the cultural current rather than paddling against the tide.

While it is normal for cultures to shift and evolve over time, they can also unintentionally drift from their core values, which is another way cultures can become misaligned. In professional cultures that are particularly prone to burnout, for example, such as health care, education, and law enforcement, employees can over time begin acting in ways that are counter to why they joined the profession (i.e., to help others; McCarty et al., 2019; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019; Santoro, 2018). To address this kind of "cultural drift," cultures may need periodic tune-ups across the culture cycle to bolster well-being and engagement and help people remain connected to core values and motives (Cohen & Sherman, 2014).

Combating a culture's biases is also an important and necessary part of intentional culture change, particularly when addressing inequality. Biases (e.g., the Black-crime association) and defaults (e.g., racial bias as individual vs. systemic) often work hand in hand to perpetuate disparities in a culture, conferring status and power on some people, groups, or ways of doing things over others (Eberhardt, 2019; Markus & Moya, 2010; Rucker & Richeson, 2021). Biases can be relatively implicit or hard to perceive because they can appear, on the surface, to be natural, normal, or rational (Adams & Estrada-Villalta, 2017; Brady et al., 2018; Eberhardt, 2019; S. T. Fiske, 2011; Markus & Moya, 2010; Pratto et al., 2006; Salter et al., 2018). They can be firmly rooted in history (e.g., slavery, Jim Crow, redlining), with their legacies deeply baked into institutional and organizational policies and practices (e.g., sentencing, lending, health care) and built environments (e.g., Confederate monuments) that people in the present are often unaware of (Eberhardt, 2019; Henderson et al., 2021; Jones, 1997). Usually, the

older, more entrenched, and/or far-reaching those biases and defaults are, the harder a culture will be to change.

Consider how individualism is not only a core value but also functions as a cultural default in the United States—arguably the most powerful default (Adams et al., 2019; Hook & Markus, 2020; Markus, 2017; Salter et al., 2018). Individualism shapes how Americans think about both social problems and solutions, ranging from health, to the economy, education, the environment, criminal justice, housing, and more. This pervasive focus on individual freedom and choice renders people personally responsible for their life outcomes and has been identified as a significant psychological barrier to progressive policy change. Because individualism sustains a default focus on people as individuals, rather than as members of groups, collectives, or social systems, U.S. culture tends to locate racism and racial inequality as problems that reside within people—that is, as a problem of prejudiced people or "bad apples" who hold racist attitudes that cause racist behaviors (Rucker & Richeson, 2021; Salter et al., 2018). This tendency may have shifted somewhat recently following George Floyd's murder, which ushered a greater focus on implicit bias and systemic racism into mainstream conversation (Dunivin et al., 2022). The cultural default of individualism, however, continues to shape understandings of racial disparities and the implementation of solutions in the United States (Rucker & Richeson, 2021).

For example, in an intervention to address racial disparities in police officer–driver interactions during routine traffic stops, one effective strategy is to disrupt this default by helping officers understand that their individual actions have broad impact beyond each discrete encounter (Camp et al., 2023). If an officer is intentional about communicating respectfully during a stop, a potentially tense interaction with a Black driver can proceed more constructively, with beneficial effects that ripple out to the community (Camp et al., 2021, 2023; Rho et al., 2023; Voigt et al., 2017). Helping officers change their frame—by highlighting their role as representatives of their agency and contextualizing the systemic impact of their actions—was an effective way to increase respect during those interactions.

When identifying and combating a culture's defaults and biases, it is important to be mindful of power and status—who is in the dominant group? Who is in charge? Who benefits from the current system? Likewise, who is being excluded from the current system, intentionally or unintentionally? Who is typically not in charge? These dynamics are often at the root of tensions or divides within a culture, resulting in conflicts over power and status (see *Principle 5*). Ultimately, it boils down to who is being advantaged by the culture as it is (i.e., by maintaining the status quo) and who is not (S. T. Fiske, 2011; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022). These questions can help prospective culture changers see the unseen—a culture's previously hidden assumptions can be revealed and, in turn, reexamined and reimaged.

Principle 5: Culture change typically involves power struggles and identity threats.

- Resistance is a normal and expected part of the culture change process.

When it comes to inequality, calls for culture change often originate from those with less power or status in society (i.e., bottom-up change from *Principle 3*) or those who have been systematically marginalized, excluded, or harmed in a culture (Craig et al., 2020). Looking at recent examples, with respect to climate action and gun reform, it was young people like Greta Thunberg and the students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School who took the lead and fought to break political stalemates that long stymied progress. Likewise, it was women who stepped into the spotlight to publicly share their stories of sexual violence and challenge prevailing narratives that blame victims for their own assault. Similarly, Black and other community leaders of color leveraged social media to raise the visibility of police violence, hate crimes, and other acts of intolerance that have plagued communities for far too long and did not receive the media and political attention needed to make real change.

These calls for change shine a light on significant and long-standing power imbalances. Intentional culture change often highlights who holds power or status in a culture (and why) and shifts the focus to where that power could lie instead. By challenging the status quo, intentional culture change can be destabilizing or threatening for those who are motivated to preserve the current culture, usually because they are advantaged by the existing system (Chater & Loewenstein, 2022; S. T. Fiske, 2011; Jost et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2019; Pratto et al., 2013; Ridgeway & Markus, 2022; Zárate et al., 2019). This threat can spur resistance, backlash, or even revolt among those who stand to lose their status, fueling the perception that culture change is a zero-sum game (Brown et al., 2022). For instance, increasing women's representation in male-dominated fields (e.g., in science, technology, engineering, and math) can be resisted by men in those settings because of the belief that gains for women will necessarily come at a cost to men, worries that gender diversity will lead to a professional identity crisis, and concerns that pro-diversity initiatives are unfair to White men (Danbold & Huo, 2017; Dover et al., 2015; Wilkins et al., 2015).

Consider also concerns over the post-COVID-19 workplace and Gen Z preferences for how they want to be treated as employees. Baby Boomer, Gen X, and even Millennial executives and managers are often bewildered by Gen Z employees' vocal demands that work not dominate their lives (Nishizaki & DellaNeve, 2022; Twenge, 2023). Gen Z's focus on flexibility, mental health, and personal boundaries can feel threatening to older workers who themselves may have had to compromise on work-life balance because, at

the time, alternatives did not seem feasible. Older workers who feel like they paid their dues and endured navigating unfair systems can feel threatened by, not to mention resentful of, younger employees' presumptions that they should not be subject to the same long-standing rules and norms. There are so many examples of how struggles over power and status accompany cultural change that it should be expected as an inevitable part of the process. From the changing racial demographics in the United States triggering less tolerant racial attitudes among White Americans; to the presence of diversity initiatives increasing perceptions of unfairness, threat, and exclusion among overrepresented groups; to the political backlash over teaching and discussing race, gender, and sexual orientation diversity in schools; the list goes on and on (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014; Dover et al., 2020; Howarth et al., 2013).

Since change brings with it a host of identity-based threats, both real and imagined, prospective culture changers should consider how to ready people for it and even motivate them for the challenge, focusing on the interactions and individuals levels of the culture cycle. In particular, culture changers can consider how to engage stakeholders from different vantage points and meet people where they are to help bring them along in the process (rather than stifle resistance). Culture changers will need to understand the shifting power and status dynamics at play and negotiate them (de la Sablonnière, 2017; Grant, 2021). For instance, to more effectively address resistance to policy changes to mitigate inequality by people with relative advantage, like White people or men resisting workplace diversity initiatives, it is important for changemakers to identify what kinds of resistance they may be experiencing and the type of threat that is driving that resistance (e.g., "denying" or downplaying disparities or bias when faced with status- or merit-based threat; Shuman et al., 2023). Making psychologically wise change requires buy-in and engagement, as well as cultivating humility, curiosity, and flexibility rather than threat, loss, and competition (Cohen, 2022; Grant, 2021; T. Wilson, 2011).

For example, one significant barrier to culture change in law enforcement is that many rank-and-file officers do not feel like they can personally take ownership or accountability for improving police-community relations because they themselves do not feel respected or listened to by their own agencies and leadership (Van Craen & Skogan, 2017). This undermines officers' sense of agency and leads to pessimism about change. Indeed, low morale in police departments across the United States is one of the main reasons officers are leaving the profession in large numbers (Police Executive Research Forum, 2021). One key step in reimagining the future of public safety is creating ways for law enforcement to turn the lens inward and face their own internal tensions and struggles—for example, through agency-based or internally focused procedural justice trainings (in addition

to community-oriented or externally focused procedural justice trainings; e.g., Carr & Maxwell, 2018; Van Craen & Skogan, 2017).

Research shows that people's subjective experiences of change matter. People, both individually and culturally, can have different mindsets about social change (e.g., "you can't stop progress" or "the more things change, the more they stay the same"), which will need to be addressed as part of the process (Bain et al., 2015; Kashima et al., 2019). Change is often uncertain and uncomfortable, which can be normalized as part of the change process (Woolley & Fishbach, 2022).

Principle 6: Cultures interact with one another and change can cause backlash, resistance, and clashes.

- Change is dynamic and iterative. Unintended consequences, backlash, or backsliding is normal.
- Change can also trigger or exacerbate cultural conflicts or divides.

Cultures are not independent—they are dynamic, changing systems that interact with and influence one another (Morris et al., 2015). As such, intentional change in one culture (or culture cycle) can trigger changes, responses, or adaptations in others (e.g., Sunstein, 2019; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). For example, when Google responded to calls in 2014 to release diversity data, other tech companies followed suit despite initial resistance. While increases in diversity have been slow in tech, this practice marked a distinct shift in accountability and transparency in the industry (Chakravorti, 2020).

Intentional culture change may also have unintended consequences or be met with backlash (e.g., Brown et al., 2022; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; D. S. Wilson, 2016). For instance, the widespread use of smartphones for greater connection and convenience also normalized more screen time and less in-person interaction, which became negative contributors to youth mental health outcomes (Twenge, 2023). Following George Floyd's murder and subsequent BLM protests, Americans' support for local police spending decreased in a number of communities. Yet about a year later, as concerns about crime rose, public opinion shifted back to support more spending on law enforcement (K. Parker & Hurst, 2021).

While some may interpret backlash as evidence of culture change failure, research suggests it may in fact be part of the change process itself, especially when considered from the vantage point of a longer and more holistic time horizon (e.g., Piketty, 2022; Putnam & Garrett, 2021). Political scientists describe this kind of backlash and swings in public opinion with a "thermostatic" model (Soroka & Wlezien, 2009). They posit that in healthy democratic societies, policymakers and the public should exist within a dynamic feedback system in which the public's preferences inform policies and vice versa, with the public regulating

government like a thermostat regulates temperature. Ups and downs are normal.

Cultures can also slide back to how they were before intentional changes took place, particularly if the conditions for change are tough (e.g., they are occurring in a low-trust environment), there are deeply rooted biases and defaults involved that are difficult to change (see *Principle 4*), or culture change efforts are not in alignment across the levels of culture (see *Principle 3*; e.g., Chater & Loewenstein, 2022; Cheryan & Markus, 2020; Dobbin & Kalev, 2022; Eberhardt, 2019). After years of calls for culture change in tech regarding the industry's ongoing problems with diversity, sexism, and hypercompetitiveness, some critics, for example, have called out how its leaders seem to be reverting to the norms of "bro culture" and acting out in openly defiant and combative ways (Griffith, 2022). Likewise, some employees are pushing back against recent efforts to humanize the workplace, preferring instead to have strict boundaries between their work and private lives and not wanting to bring their "whole selves" to work (Paul, 2022).

Intentional culture change can also implicate or exacerbate conflicts between cultures or subcultures that are part of a shared (or superordinate) culture. For instance, clashes between older and younger generations about values-driven consumption, or among liberals and conservatives over transgender rights, can be seen as cultural divides in their own right or as cultural cleavages within broader U.S. American culture (Klein, 2020; Twenge, 2023). The culture cycle can be used to help uncover and map the sources of these conflicts and key tension points and suggest potential avenues for change. One effective strategy for reducing polarization about social issues is highlighting multiple perspectives and complexity, to disrupt the bias that just two sides exist with clearly defined and rigid opinions (Coleman, 2021; Grant, 2021). The culture cycle can help illustrate where these perspectives come from and how they clash, explore whether common ground exists, or reveal how a new path might be forged. For example, this could be achieved by seeding new narratives or stories that help generations build empathy for one another's struggles or using moral reframing strategies to align new policies with the values of those who may be predisposed to oppose them (Feinberg & Willer, 2019; Packer, 2021; Patel, 2022).

Culture change is a dynamic, iterative, ongoing process—it is never really "done" (O'Brien, 2022). When evaluating democratic societies' progress toward greater equality, there are often marked gains when viewed holistically and over the long-term, despite nearer term setbacks or losses (e.g., Piketty, 2022; Putnam & Garrett, 2021). Culture change is more of an ongoing activity than a defined project.

Principle 7: Timing and readiness matter.

- Timing can foster or impede conditions that support change.

- Readiness factors can also support successful change.

Cultures change, both incidentally (on their own, through evolutionary processes and fluctuations) and intentionally (due to human influence and intervention; [A. P. Fiske et al., 1998](#); [Morris et al., 2015](#); [D. S. Wilson et al., 2014](#)). Some of these changes happen gradually or over long periods of time, while others happen more rapidly or over shorter time spans. Research in cultural dynamics has documented how incidental changes to natural (e.g., climate, pathogens) and human-made (e.g., residential mobility, population density) environments can both shape and reflect people's shifting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors ([Kashima, 2019](#); [Kashima et al., 2019](#); [Varnum & Grossmann, 2017, 2021](#)). Recent societal events, conflicts, and crises—from COVID-19 to accelerating climate change—have sparked a surge in calls for change and cued the idea that many kinds of cultural transformation are not only possible but unavoidable.

Crises or threats, in particular, can force change at multiple levels of the culture cycle. Events like natural disasters, pandemics, or terrorist attacks can lead policymakers to reduce freedoms and increase security, which can spur people to have both adaptive and maladaptive psychological and behavioral responses ([Cheek et al., 2022](#)). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic led to much-debated mask mandates and lockdowns. The “we’re-all-in-this-togetherness” of these policies fostered a sense of social responsibility and interdependence. At the same time, reconfiguring work, school, and other aspects of life under these restrictions triggered widespread spikes in anxiety, depression, and social isolation. People had to adapt to remote work and school, reduced mobility and travel, and drastic changes to social life. It remains to be seen how these collective experiences will translate into longer term cultural and psychological changes, some incidental and others intentional. For instance, people who experienced personal hardship during the early stages of the pandemic were more likely to advocate for equality 1 year later ([Birnbbaum et al., 2023](#)).

The timing of societal events can also compel organizations and institutions to respond. In the last century, the Civil Rights Movement was sparked by Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, leading to historic changes in legislation to protect equal rights under the law. While time will tell the eventual outcomes, the racial reckoning following George Floyd's murder led to an increase in civic and political pressure on law enforcement agencies, forcing police and government officials to take a hard look at how law enforcement policies and practices can fuel racial disparities. Likewise, schools have increasingly had to grapple with how to talk and teach about race and inequality in a rapidly diversifying nation where color blindness is the cultural default ([Bonilla-Silva, 2021](#)). And businesses have expanded values-aligned branding or corporate social

responsibility initiatives to include actively supporting racial justice efforts, such as Google's \$50 million donation to historically Black colleges and universities to increase Black representation in tech ([M. Parker, 2021](#)).

One common action organizations took in response to the racial reckoning was to mandate bias and diversity trainings ([Carter et al., 2020](#)). While the evidence for the efficacy of these trainings is mixed, it was nonetheless an available action that could be implemented swiftly ([Devine & Ash, 2022](#); [Dobbin & Kalev, 2022](#)). Recently, Nextdoor, a neighborhood-based social networking platform used by nearly one in three U.S. households, received significant media attention about racial profiling and other forms of exclusion taking place on the platform. They wanted help examining these issues and intervention strategies to mitigate them. One intervention involved training volunteer community moderators to identify racial bias and exclusion in online interactions and providing them with strategies and tools to interrupt it. Moderators function as community influencers and play a crucial role in enforcing guidelines for civil and respectful interactions. The intervention showed promise for not only improving moderators' awareness and understanding of racial bias on the platform but also the actions they took to counter bias and foster inclusive communication among users over time ([Zhao et al., 2023](#)).

Timing also affects intentional culture change to the extent that it fosters or impedes conditions that support it. For instance, most U.S. Americans report not trusting many institutions and organizations, so change efforts occurring today are likely taking place in low-trust environments ([Jones, 2022](#); [Rainie et al., 2019](#)). Additionally, societal change processes are not linear. Tensions between various countervailing forces—such as stability versus change, equality versus inequality, the resistance versus reproduction of power—create conditions under which change sometimes happens quickly and dramatically, and sometimes builds slowly and incrementally, as in the case of social tipping ([de la Sablonnière, 2017](#); [Ehret et al., 2022](#); [Howarth et al., 2013](#); [Power, 2020](#)). Because the pace of change can be hard to predict and even harder to control, prospective culture changers will benefit from being nimble and adaptable. Moreover, research shows that ongoing change can facilitate further change, through the use of dynamic social norms, norm cascades, and other strategies (e.g., [Pratto et al., 2013](#); [Sparkman & Walton, 2017](#); [Sunstein, 2019](#); [Zárate et al., 2019](#)).

While entering into intentional culture change may not always be a choice, when faced with the challenge, there are factors that can help it proceed more effectively. For instance, “change readiness”—an openness, commitment to, and/or positive attitude toward change—is important to assess and cultivate at multiple levels of the culture cycle (particularly at the individual and institutional levels; [Rafferty et al., 2013](#);

Stevens, 2013). Adding to the issues discussed in *Principles* 3–5, successful culture change also typically involves (a) a shared sense that change is needed (or at least is unavoidable) among key groups and stakeholders (or a critical mass of them); (b) an understanding that change will net positive outcomes; (c) the belief that change is possible and can be enacted effectively; (d) the identification of trusted and respected facilitators or leaders that can guide the process; and (e) having and communicating a clear vision for where the change is headed (Eggers & Kettl, 2023; Fullan, 2007; Giridharadas, 2022; Kotter, 2012; Schein, 2010). There are also benefits to (f) framing change in a positive versus negative direction (i.e., being *for* vs. *against* something); (g) not sacrificing diversity and complexity for unity and simplicity; (h) and not moving too fast too quickly or going too big too soon (Coleman, 2021; Grant, 2021; Patel, 2022). While these factors may manifest differently depending on the type of culture (e.g., an organization or a society) under consideration, they can be widely applied.

Conclusions and Considerations

These principles are an initial step toward a psychologically grounded, evidence-based, emerging framework for intentional culture change. The framework is centered around the social psychological and behavioral change aspects of culture change and people's efforts to try to change their cultures to address urgent societal problems like inequality. The starting point is that since people are culturally shaped shapers, they *can* change their cultures. Striving to do so is necessary to build a more open, equal, and inclusive democratic society. Although examples of wholly successful, large-scale intentional culture change are few and far between, the insights, evidence, and illustrations offered throughout suggest this complex and often daunting process can be mapped out, systematized, and, at least for a time, accomplished. These seven principles suggest that psychological science can offer valuable strategies and tools as people work through the challenges of intentional culture change to address systemic inequality in the United States. There is hope to be found in the science.

This article is intended as a starting point and as a call to action. The challenges of inequality, climate, and conflict that plague societies today are formidable. People are looking to culture as a necessary site for change. While more research is needed to bolster the empirical base, this is the beginning of a systematic framework for intentional culture change. More collaboration and partnership with practitioners working proximately to these issues, as well as collaboration with other scientists, is critical to advance the science in both meaningful and practical ways. There is much to be done.

Questions and Future Directions

As intentional culture change is explored in other settings, and in relation to other social problems, the initial principles and framework will evolve. As seen in recent calls for change throughout history and around the world today—for example, in England (to leave the European Union or “Brexit”), Iran (to end mandatory veiling for women), and Japan (to implement policy changes incentivizing more women to work)—intentional culture change happens in many places and will unfold in a variety of culturally specific ways (Krauss, 2022; Muller, 2020; Rich & Ueno, 2021). While the focus on inequality and tone of optimism and empowerment (as in this article's title) reflects a U.S. American orientation—as was the scope here—investigating cultural variability in intentional culture change is a key topic for future research and theoretical refinement (e.g., Bain et al., 2015; Gelfand, 2018).

Another focus to strengthen the empirical evidence base should be on developing and using metrics to better capture intentional culture change processes. The psychological science of intentional culture change requires theorizing, identifying, and capturing a complex set of dynamic, interacting, multilevel processes. An ongoing limitation, for psychologists and other social scientists, is that it is quite challenging to measure cultural change comprehensively, and most research does not capture all levels, processes, and time points within one study or article. While researchers have been making strides in developing metrics to assess other forms of cultural dynamics, these studies often examine incidental cultural changes or changes over longer timescales (e.g., Götz et al., 2021; Kusano & Kemmelmeier, 2021; Ma et al., 2023). Studying intentional culture change will also necessarily involve examining behavioral, organizational, and societal change processes in the field; using data or big data collected in real-world, naturalistic settings; and collaborating with organizations and communities to investigate timely, high-impact issues. Accordingly, much of the research base is not (and will not be) derived from highly controlled lab, online, or computer simulation-style studies. This work, then, involves a whole other set of complex challenges and concerns faced by those engaged in public scholarship and community-based research (e.g., Berkman & Wilson, 2021; Grzanka & Cole, 2021; Hallsworth, 2023).

Another issue is whether people's attempts to change culture ultimately matter. Societal and cultural changes are complex and multiply determined, and history is rife with the unintended consequences of human actions (see *Principles* 6 and 7). In fact, despite people's intentions, cultures operate and evolve on their own and in ways that people are unaware of. An alternative argument is that humans' role in cultural

change is mainly to adapt to it because they have little control (e.g., D. S. Wilson, 2016; D. S. Wilson et al., 2014). While people can try to shape their cultures, it remains to be seen if their actions will endure or result in some other set of changes that differed from what was intended (e.g., Seitz et al., 2020; D. S. Wilson, 2016). While cultural evolutionary and other social science perspectives on cultural change have, at times, been at odds, there are recent attempts to bring them together (e.g., Seitz et al., 2020; D. S. Wilson et al., 2023). Rather than viewing these perspectives as opposing, another future direction is to continue investigating how these approaches can coexist and inform one another (Mesoudi, 2019). People will keep trying to change their cultures, particularly in times of need. So, what can be learned?

Taking on Intentional Culture Change

In closing, here are three considerations that can help prospective culture changers take on the task. First, *change is an opportunity to strengthen cultures*. Cultures that can integrate positive orientations toward change, innovation, and novelty may have a leg up when change is needed or required because it is already valued within the culture. Since cultures are inevitably dynamic and changeable, developing mechanisms that allow for and harness change can be beneficial (Fullan, 2007). In any setting, there will, of course, be numerous implementation details to be worked out and tracked, and developing an ongoing, multilevel assessment practice is highly beneficial. Second, *change is an opportunity to cultivate imagination and speculation*. Helping people think outside the box, imagine alternative ways of being and doing things, and envision alternate futures is critical to culture change. Indeed, research shows that the role of envisioning and experiencing possible or alternative worlds has powerful implications for people's motivations and ideas about social change, from utopian thinking to speculative fiction (e.g., de Saint-Laurent et al., 2018; Kashima & Fernando, 2020). It can also help people imagine the future and pathways to get there if they can get concrete about it. Last, *change is an opportunity to build*. The ability to construct compelling, well-designed alternatives to society's norms, practices, policies, organizations, and institutions is just as important as critiquing the status quo and convincing others that change is necessary (Patel, 2022). There may, however, be more flexibility or room to build in some problem spaces than others—for instance, in domains where norms are newer or uncertain (e.g., tech) or when the need for change is especially timely and urgent (e.g., climate change).

While calls for culture change are frequently born from a place of deep dissatisfaction with the status quo, particularly in times of heightened conflict and crisis, the societal ruptures they can render also present extraordinary openings to rethink, remake, and rebuild society. Taking up this call

to action, can the psychological science of intentional culture change help people imagine new worlds and provide them with insights and tools needed to begin to build them? The motivating premise here is that people are perhaps more suited to the task than they realize. As culturally shaped shapers, since people built their cultures, they too have the power to change them.

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