

Structure, Culture, and Meaning in American Slave Narratives*

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Abstract

From the 18th to the mid-20th century, over 6,000 African Americans described their experiences of slavery. The compilation of these narratives constitutes the largest and richest collective description of humans living as the property of others. These descriptions have yet to be systematically incorporated into a broader sociological understanding of race and culture. Indeed, such accounts offer the opportunity for a deeper sociological understanding of the experiences of race, culture, and stratification with implications and lessons regarding even contemporary manifestations of inequality. In this dissertation project, I contribute to the broad literature on inequality and power by investigating the everyday lives of slaves in their own words. My analyses shed important empirical light on the relationship between the powerful and the powerless by asking how former slaves interpreted, dealt with, and resisted the everyday conditions of enslavement. I also explore specific variations in the slave experience by key status distinctions (i.e. gender) and context (i.e. regional variations).

Data are drawn from over 600 American slave narratives from two comparative historical collections: a set of 19th century narratives written largely under the auspices of abolitionism and a set of 20th century narratives compiled in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). I extend and develop novel techniques developed within the fields of social networks and computational linguistics to analyze the narrators' actions and interpretations. Across the social sciences, scholars are attempting to develop methods to incorporate textual data, widely proliferated on the Internet, into social scientific analysis. This dissertation contributes methodologically to this effort, while also providing the first formal comparison of these unique sets of narratives. Results demonstrate important variations in slaves' daily experiences and interpretations – variations often surrounding gender and region of enslavement. Moreover, the narratives reveal patterns of resistance most often characterized by the unauthorized visiting of relatives, loafing at work, and general disobedience. By focusing on power and inequality as interpreted, dealt with and resisted in the everyday life of slaves, I extend our general understanding of American slavery while also offering insights regarding broader sociological processes of inequality and power.

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