

TRYING TO GET CULTURE!

Ross, R (2004) **Culture and cognition: Implications for theory and method.** Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage.

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Norbert Ross proposes a “new ethnography and an enhanced cognitive science” (p172) in response to his concern with the connection between culture and cognition. Ross’s focus is partly on methodology, but it is also on the subject matter of both psychology and anthropology. Ross uses his position of familiarity with these two disciplines to argue that anthropologists should return to a study of human thinking and behaviour with respect to culture; whilst on the other hand, psychology does not sufficiently understand, or account for, the impact of culture.

To address these two problems, Ross draws on conceptual content from anthropology, and methodological practices from psychology. I have two concerns with his approach. Firstly, perhaps because of the dominance of anthropological theory in his position, he does not seem to recognize, or explore, contemporary psychological concerns about how culture is reflected within cognitive studies (for example, Luria, 1976; Vygotsky, 1978; Cole, 1996; Greenfield, 1997). Secondly, Ross rather uncritically (and unfashionably), positions the empirical positivist approach as “better than” the interpretive, ethnographic approaches within anthropology.

Ross’s main disciplinary roots are anthropological and he spends some time in the book discussing anthropological theory, schema theory in particular. He argues that anthropology is limited in dealing with culture and cognition because its method is incompatible with the traditional, and what he considers to be the “more powerful” empirical and experimental methods applied in other fields in the cognitive sciences. His primary concern is with the intuitive nature of anthropological interpretations and he questions how one should make sense of data and interpret findings.

Ross offers, firstly, a methodological solution to the problem. Anthropology, he argues “has a lot to gain from embracing systematic controlled comparisons and clear methodology” (p162), which he believes are epitomized in the methodological rigour of psychology. The use of these methods in cultural studies and the systematic questioning of intuition, will improve the ethnographic approach of anthropology through enhancing the quality, reliability and validity of the data.

Secondly, he provides a solution on an epistemological level. Ross echoes a contemporary concern that psychological research does not sufficiently understand or account for the impact of culture. If psychological research attends to culture at all, it tends to address it as a variable (Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997). Ross argues that if “culture is not an entity outside human beings, but rather a process of meaning making...” (p171), then it should be studied “as a process, rather than a unit” (p172). The focus of study therefore should be “the individual as he or she participants in a larger context” (p171). For the quest to conceptualise culture Ross describes tools “to explore individual mental models and test the extent to which they are shared ... among the members of a group” (p172). By obtaining individual (idiosyncratic) positions, and then applying the “formal methods” of psychology to analyse and relate these to each other, broader patterns of culture can be abstracted.

Ross’s position (of culture as a process, and the related analytic steps for the understanding of the individual) is significant as these are issues with which psychological theorists are currently grappling (see Stetsenko & Arievidt, 2004). The “culture as a process” argument has yet to be completely incorporated into psychological research (Cole, 1996). However, although there is value in this approach, there are several confusing steps in Ross’s argument.

Although he says the unit of analysis should be “the individual as he or she participants in a larger context” (p171), his method suggests a focus in on “the individual”, which then cumulatively becomes an understanding of ‘culture’, rather than studying the individual situated in cultural context, and/or, culture as a process. Ross’s call to create an analysis of culture through an analysis of individuals also seems to contradict a trend in psychological theorizing to problematise the individual as the unit of analysis and to resolve the individual-social dualism (see Leontiev 1978, 1981; Engestrom 1999, Tulviste, 1999, Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999; Chaiklin, 2001, amongst many others). Stetsenko and Arievidt (2004) argue that current psychological research works with the self as embedded in, and interwoven with, socio-cultural contexts, rather than a context-independent self, “possessing” things such as personality traits and attributes. They highlight the need to account for transitions between the self and broader socio-cultural processes.

Psychology thus *has*, and *continues* to grapple with the concept of culture (see Shweder, 1990; and Cole, 1996, **Cultural Psychology: A once and future discipline**). In fact in the cognitive sciences, the notion of contextually situated cognitive processes was addressed by Russian psychologists in the early 1900s (see Vygotsky 1978; Davydov & Radzikhovskii, 1985; and a new autobiography of Alexander Luria, by Cole, Levitin & Luria, 2006). The concept of situated cognition has also been dealt with extensively in psychology (for example see Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wertsch, 1998).

Ross’s critique of the anthropological methodology (that it does not get to the “core” of what culture is) will not necessarily be resolved by adopting ‘traditional methods’. In addition, although ‘intuitive’ or more interpretive approaches in the social sciences still need to address issues of validity, reliability and generalisability, the “rigour” within this research paradigm is evaluated differently from the criteria for “truthfulness” used in experimental designs (Reason & Rowan, 1981; Kvale, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Silverman,

2000). Neither the preference for a positivist approach, nor the individual as unit of analysis fit easily with changes happening in psychology. Perhaps the issue one should problematise is the conceptualization of the individual-social dualism.

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