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The Need for a Qualitative Cultural Methodology

(La necesidad de una metodología cultural cualitativa)

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RESUMEN

Este escrito afirma que los métodos cualitativos son indispensables para investigar las características culturales de la psicología humana. Los métodos cualitativos se amplían de su empleo tradicional en la psicología —que es investigar el significado personal— para investigar la cualidad cultural de la conducta. Se critica a los métodos positivistas por ser insuficientes para investigar la psicología cultural, aunque pueden suplementar a los métodos cualitativos en ciertos casos.

Palabras clave: psicología cultural, métodos cualitativos

Abstract

This paper states that qualitative methods are indispensable for researching the cultural characteristics of human psychology. Qualitative methods are extended from their traditional use in psychology —which is to investigate personal meaning— to research the cultural quality of behavior. Positivistic methods are criticized as insufficient for researching cultural psychology, although they may supplement qualitative methods in certain cases.

Key words: cultural psychology, qualitative methods

Cultural, or sociohistorical, aspects of human psychology have attracted renewed interest recently. Disciplines devoted to this topic have expanded as evidenced by the growth of cross-cultural psychology, psychological anthropology, history of family relations, gender studies, ethnic studies, cultural psychology (Shweder, 1990), sociohistorical psychology (Ratner, 1991), communications studies, and culturally-sensitive psychotherapies. For these disciplines to conduct meaningful empirical research into the sociohistorical aspects of human psychology, a methodology must be developed that

is adequate to this particular topic. Methods that may be suitable to investigating other psychological facets may not be suitable for researching sociohistorical facets.

Ascertaining the sociohistorical character of psychology requires knowing the meaning of an act and knowing how that meaning is rooted in a particular culture. For instance, we would want to know the quality or meaning of an emotion and its cultural sources and organization. Or we would want to know the particular quality that memory has for certain people and the social origins, influences, and constraints that give rise to it.

Now the sociohistorical character of psychology is quite difficult to ascertain. How do we adequately know quality or meaning? How do we know an emotion really is love rather than something else? How do we know that a statement is a joke and not an insult? How do we know whether an untruth is a deliberate lie or merely a distorted perception of what occurred, or a faulty memory? How do we know whether or not a blink is a wink? And how do we know the psychological significance of differential reaction times to a stimulus? In general, how do we know that any particular response represents a certain kind of psychological phenomenon rather than some other kind? Furthermore, how can we establish the social origins and constraints which engender a psychological phenomenon, as well as the social organization of its form and content? These are the questions that a viable methodology must address.

Even extensive observations of behavior often fail to reveal its meaning. Take for instance, Fred Myers' (1986) detailed ethnography of the Pintupi aborigines of Australia. Myers spent several years living among the Pintupi and his observations are quite fascinating —far more persuasive than single experimental results obtained from a limited testing situation. However, one cannot help wonder how he inferred psychological meaning from his subjects' behavior. In one passage (p.120), he states that the Pintupi are greatly concerned about shame. For them shame is usually associated with the discomfort of being observed by others in the public domain, especially doing something that is ill-mannered or wrong. For example, children feel shame when a stranger approaches and they run behind their mothers. Unfortunately, this example does not convey the meaning or quality of the children's action. How does Myers know that running behind the mother is motivated by fear of being observed doing something wrong? Perhaps the children are simply afraid of strangers in general, not because the stranger may observe them acting inappropriately. And perhaps the children are simply playing a game and do not fear the strangers at all. Myers provides no evidence for his psychological conclusions, despite the wealth of information he may have at his disposal.

Myers also states that the Pintupi hesitate to ask strangers or distant kin for food because they are embarrassed that the request will appear presumptuous (p.122). In the absence of any evidence to support this assertion we must ask how Myers knows the reason for the hesitation— in other words, what is its meaning?

Sex is also said to be embarrassing among the Pintupi because it is a private matter that should not be brought to public attention (pp. 122-123). Men would not discuss menstruation because it was "shameful." But how does Myers Know the Pintupi found it shameful rather than disgusting, uninteresting, or simply taboo?

I am not trying to attack Myers provocative conclusions. I simply use his ethnography to illustrate the problem of psychological meaning —which has never been adequately addressed by psychologists. We need a fuller analysis of peoples' activities in order to reveal the meaning. Brief, summary statements— or single, simple test scores —are simply inconclusive. We shouldn't have to take the author's word about meaning. We should be able to meaning revealed in the description. Furthermore, the cultural character of this meaning should be indicated by identifying the distinct form and content that this meaning bears as a result of social sources.

A two-pronged approach that can ascertain cultural meaning combines qualitative with a sociohistorical perspective. Qualitative methodology is necessary to reveal the full meaning of a psychological act. And a sociohistorical perspective is necessary for illuminating the cultural character of that meaning. This methodology can be called qualitative cultural methodology because it employs qualitative methods informed whit a cultural sensitivity.

Qualitative research principles can be drawn from approaches such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and dialectics to extract an integral set of complementary concepts. These concepts can be used collectively to produce a comprehensive portrait of psychological phenomena. A cultural analysis of the social origins and character of psychological phenomena can be drawn from sociohistorical psychologists such as Vygotsky, Luria, Leontiev, Klineberg, and Bronfenbrenner; anthropologists such as Boas, Levy-Bruhl, Geertz, Montagu, Hallowell, Shweder, and Kleinman; social philosophers such as the Frankfurt school and the later Sartre; sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias; and historians such as the French Annales school.

Of course, I am not the first to have addressed the issue of sociohistorical psychological methodology. Other social scientists have made headway in developing an appropriate methodology. The work of Michelle Rosaldo (1984), Catherine Lutz (1988), Unni Wikan (1990), Karen Lystra

(1989), Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1990), Arthur Kleinman (1977, 1980, 1982), Naomi Quinn (1992), and Jules Henry (1963) are notable examples. Their work illuminates the social quality of psychology through wide-ranging observation, interviews, letters, and diaries. While this work is valuable, it stands in need of refinement. For it is often unsystematic, impressionistic, and incomplete. Its methodological principles are frequently not explicated but are rather employed implicitly. These weaknesses plague both the qualitative and the cultural aspects of the methodology. Feminist calls for a culturally-sensitive, qualitative methodology are even more vague on both fronts (cf. Reinharz, 1992; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Harding, 1987).

In qualitative cultural methodology, qualitative methods are employed to research sociohistorical aspects of psychology. Because qualitative methods have been devised and employed by humanistic researchers to disclose personal meaning, extending their purview from personal meaning to the sociohistorical content of psychological phenomena requires a significant reorientation. Qualitative methods need to be informed with a new perceptual— a social perspective —that poses socially revelant questions (to the researcher and to the research subjects) and attends to cultural content embedded in psychological phenomena.

Conversely, research which has traditionally employed a social perspective will be enriched by qualitative methodology. For qualitative methodology can employ its rigorous, systematic analysis of meaning to discover sociohistorical meaning in psychology.

Specifically, a qualitative analysis can disclose the particular from in which cultural content is embedded in psychological phenomena. This cultural character is not easy to ascertain. It cannot be inferred from limited knowledge of social conditions. For instance, an individual's psychological reaction toward unemployment cannot be predicted from joblessness itself since his attitudes can range from blaming the economic system, to blaming an individual manager, to blaming oneself for losing the job. Attitudes about finding new work may similarly vary from optimism to pessimism.

Official ideologies are similarly insufficient for knowing the actual psychology of people. Ideologies are assimilated in different degrees: they may be ignored, they may be accepted as hollow guidelines for polite speech but not for behavior, they may be reluctantly accepted as guidelines for socially successful behavior while being resented on moral grounds, or they may be assimilated as compelling moral standards which motivate personal acts, social behavior, and speech (D'Andrade & Strauss, 1992).

Even detailed knowledge of normative behavior in one social domain (e.g., politics or business) does not illuminate the full complex of thoughts

and feelings which individuals have about that domain. Competition may be normative for businessmen, however they may resent and fear it, or relish it. Their psychology is not disclosed in their institutionalized roles. Similarly, a structural knowledge of the family's position in society does not fully predict the psychological character of romantic love, sexuality, or children's developmental processes. These must be investigated in their own right. Knowledge of social norms in one domain (e.g., the economy) is ever less predictive about social psychology in a different domain (e.g., the family).

Finally, an analysis of social influences does not predict the actual psychology of individuals because the influences become internalized via a complex, inventive process. Culture is not directly transplanted from outside the mind to inside it; the individual incarnates culture by selectively adopting and organizing ("totalizing") its strands according to his experience. The individual selectively assimilates the culture in the very process of adapting to it. He refracts culture while reflecting it. While an analysis of social systems can illuminate the parameters within which psychology functions, it does not disclose the particular form which those parameters take in psychological functions. John Thompson (1990, p. 105) stated this well when he said

> The reception and appropriation of cultural products is a complex social process which involves an ongoing activity of interpretation and the assimilation of meaningful content to the socially structured background characteristics of particular individuals and groups. To attempt to read off the consequences of cultural products from the products themselves is to neglect these ongoing activities of interpretation and assimilation; it is to speculate about the impact of these products on the attitudes and behavior of individuals without examining this impact in a systematic way.

Thomas & Znaniecki (1958, p. 1834) similarly expressed the ideal that, "social science cannot remain on the surface of social becoming, but must reach the actual human experiences and attitudes which constitute the full, live, and active social reality beneath the formal organization of social institutions, or behind the statistically tabulated mass-phenomena which taken in themselves are nothing but symptoms of unknown causal processes and can serve only as provisional ground for sociological hypotheses" (Cf. Blumer, 1969, chaps. 1, 2 for a similar statement from the symbolic interactionist perspective).

This sentiment underlies Pierre Bourdieu's work. He insists that formal, codified norms do not capture the reality of human activity. Activity is contructed by people in addition to prescribed norms and often in contra-

diction to them. To designate the reality of constructed activity in contrast with official norms, Bourdieu coined a special name, *habitus*. It denotes regular, habitualized behavior that is built up rather than handed down, and is implicit rather than explicit (Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 76-86).

The cultural character of any particular funtion must be specifically investigated in the actual operation of that function. The social psychology of love, competition, sexuality, anger, intelligence, logical reasoning, memory, or sadness can only be ascertained through their diverse forms of expression (behaviors, attitudes, feelings) over a range of situations (interactions). This is the task of qualitative methodology.

On the other hand, the cultural character of psychological phenomena can only be comprehended in relation to a social structure— as congruent or incongruent with institutionalized practices, opportunities, and obstacles in various sectors of society. While psychological activity is more complex than the normative practices which constitute social structure, it definitely derives from those practices. As Bourdieu (1990, p. 91) points out, "The habitus, which is the generative principle of responses more or less well adapted to the demands of a certain field, is the product of an individual history, but also, through the formative experiences of earliest infancy, of the whole collective history of family and class... Different systems of preference correspond to classes of conditions of existence, and thus to economic and social conditionings which impose different structures of perception, appreciation and action." Relating psychological phenomena to social structure— analyzing the congruence and the tension between them— is the task of a sociohistorical analysis.

Qualitative and sociohistorical perspectives must cross-fertilize each other if a viable sociohistorical methodology is to germinate. C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 226) suggested the need for such a relationship in his exhortation to explicate the dialectical relationship between social institutions and the individual.

> Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues —and in terms of the problems of history-making. [Conversely] Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles— and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, even adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations.

Relating troubles and issues, or biography and history, requires a cultural qualitative methodology.

Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 364) eloquently expressed the need for such a "cultural phenomenology" in the following words:

> What is needed is some systematic, rather than merely literary or impressionistic, way to discover what *is* given, what the conceptual structure embodied in the symbolic forms through which persons are perceived actually is. What we want and do not yet have is a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time, in a word, a scientific phenomenology of culture.

Such a sociohistorical methodology will disclose the sociohistorical character of psychological activity, processes, functions, and phenomena such as perception, motivation, emotion, reasoning, memory, personality, and psychological dysfunction. This methodology will shed light on individuals' unawareness (or unconscious) as well as their awareness. Sociohistorical psychological methodology discloses culture in psychological functioning; it does not simply explore psychological differences in (among) cultures. That is, we are not simply interested in the different form that psychology takes in different cultures; we are interested in knowing how psychological differences reflect the different cultures, or how cultural values and practices permeate psychological functions to make them different. Discovering psychological differences in culture can be accomplished by simply comparing performances on psychological dimensions without substantial knowledge of the cultures themselves. However, understanding culture in psychology —or the manner in which culture organizes psychological functions —requires sophisticated knowledge about the culture so that it can be perceived in various forms in the very interstices of psychological activity.

Articulating a rigorous qualitative cultural methodology requires counteracting the dominance which positivistic methodology has exerted over social science research. While positivism may have contributed a few useful techniques to social science, it cannot continue as the dominant paradigm. Positivism is insufficient for researching the sociohistorical aspects of psychology. In fact, positivism's domination of social science research has retarded the development of an adequate qualitative cultural methodology. An adequate methodology depends upon critiquing the positivistic paradigm and developing an antithetical one.

The antithesis between positivism and qualitative cultural methodology is evident from the historical struggle to found modern social science over half a century ago.

In a trenchant analysis, Dorothy Ross (1991, chap. 10) observes that before the rise of positivism in the 1920's, cultural aspects of psychological experience were investigated by qualitative methods which were informed by a cultural sensitivity. Examples of this work are Wundt's encyclopedic *Folk Psychology*, Vygotsky's sociohistorical psychology, Thomas & Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, and Robert & Helen Lynd's *Middletown*. The first two decades ot the twentieth century also witnessed flourishing research into psychological anthropology by the Boasian school of anthropology. These works sought to comprehensively understand psychological experience in relation to broad culture. W.I. Thomas's description of his research on thc Polish peasant conveys a sense of this grandiosity. In a letter written in 1991, Thomas states:

> My work on thc Poles is so comprehensive that it would be difficult to outline it. I am of course analyzing the peasant's attitude toward life, with reference to a better understanding of him as a factor in American life. This involves an examination of the relation of character and mental attitude to forms of government, family and community relations, economic conditions, the educational system, forms of recreation, etc. (cited in IIearle, 1991, p. 31).

The classic social psychological works obtained data from diverse sources. These included wide-ranging observation, ethnographies, interviews, latters, diaries, sermons, school curricula, third-party accounts, folklore, and questionaries. These data were analyzed for the ways in which they reflected economic, political, and legal occurrences.

These classic works of the 1920's were inspited by an activist concern for reforming the social structure which caused psychological problems. The qualitative cultural methodology was well-suited for addressing this concern because it revealed the impact to the broad society on psychological functioning.

While these investigations generated some quantitative psychological data, it served to illuminate the quality of experience. Quantification occupied a decidedly subordinate role to qualitative methods since the goal of this research was to comprehend the social quality of experience —that is, the social character and meaning of psychological experience.

This qualitative cultural approach was cut short in the 1920's by the rise of behaviorialism— otherwise known as operationism, positivism, and scientism (Bryant, 1985, chap, 1991, chap. 10). Wundt's folk psychology was unscrupulously smothered by a conspiracy of silence among Anglo-American psychologists; W.I. Thomas was seduced into the positivist camp —in part by marrying a pupil of the positivist sociologist Wm. Ogburn; and positivists ravaged qualitative cultural studies such as *The Polish Peasant.*

Positivists championed a methodology which was anathema to the classic works of cultural psychology. 1920's positivists construed psychological phenomena as discrete variables. These variables were defined as overt behavior responses which could be readily observed and quantified. Each variable was deemed to possess an intrinsic, fixed nature, independent of social context. Culture could cause variations in a variable's quantity but not its quality. For instance, intelligence, emotionality, and mental illness might manifest cultural differences in degree (extent) but not in kind. Proclaiming itself to be the only legitimate pretender to the throne of science, positivism delegitimized any research that failed to fragment social psychological phenomena into separate variables, operationalized them as behavioral responses, and subjected them to quantitative meansures and statistical analyses.

Clearly, there was no room in this approach for qualitative cultural research. The global conception of societal context was anathema to the positivist demand for small, identifiable, "manageable" elements. Psychological functions were therefore no longer linked to broad social systems but were related instead to discrete factors like income level and ocupational category. The insistence on quantitative behavioral measurement led to rejecting qualitative descriptions of experience. The rich cultural content of experience was no longer evident in the quantified, truncated behavioral responses. This replacement of qualitative descriptions by quantitative data was dramatic in American sociology where, from 1963 to 1978 the percentage of studies employing survey (questionnaire) methods increased from 48 to 80 percent, and multivariate analysis increased from zero to 47%. Interpretive methods fell correspondingly from 50% to 17%, and the inclusion of sample quotations and typical statements in reports declined from 43% to 6% (Bryant, 1985, pp. 171-172).

Finally, the activist impulse which used social science research to reform the social structure, was anathema to the dispassionate scientist who considered himself a methodologist and commited more to his profession than to society. The increased political conservatism of positivistic social scientists was noteworthy in sociology where "The would-be scientific sociologists of the 1920's and 1930's sought to distance themselves from the ideas of progress earlier promoted by both reformers and evolutionary theorists" (Bryant, 1985, p. 142; Oberschall, 1972, pp. 242-244). Psychologists similarly replaced their earlier concern about the unique nature, current condition, and future improvement of humanity with "value-free" research on psychological processes employing positivistic methodology. Leary (1980) observes how the "triumph of method" pre-empted psychologists' earlier social idealism. He states that in the 1920's and 30's, "Despite

the call of some psychologists, there was no mass movement toward, or great concern about, developing a socially relevant psychology" (Leary, p. 294). Political science also succumbed to behavioral domination, although somewhat belatedly. As Seybold (1982, p. 274) described it,

> By definition, traditional political science, constitutional law, political history, and radical political science research were not part of the 'new political science.' This perspective stressed survey research as the dominant technique in the field, which in turn placed further limits on the topics which could be investigated. In short, a narrow pragmatic orientation bacame prominent which excluded other possible perspectives.

A few pockets of resistance remained undaunted. In sociology, the Lynds and C. Wright Mills remained steadfast in their use of qualitative cultural methodology and their advocacy of social activism. A few historians were equally bold. And psychological anthropologist continued to produce ethnographies in flagrant violation of positivist proscriptions.

Numerous social scientists directly criticized positivism (cf. Bierstadt, 1949; Blumer, 1969; Mills 1959, chap. 3; Henry, 1964; Ratner, 1987; Staats, 1983; Bickhard, 1992; Green, 1992; Leahey, 1980, 1981, 1983). Some of the most powerful attacks were levelled by ex-positivists who renounced their former doctrine (Kock, 1959, 1976, 1992; Giorgi, 1970). Their argument was that positivism is more ideology than science. Positivism does not reflect natural science research practice, and it is fatal to genuine social science. As Vygotsky put it, the "blind transportation of the experiment, the mathematical method from the natural sciences created in psychology the outward appearances of science, under which, in reality, was hidden a complete powerless before the phenomena under study" (cited in Van del Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 149). Positivistic mothods cannot comprehend the full, complex psychological nature of psychological phenomena. Nor can these methods comprehend the social character embedded in psychological activity.

These critiques by social scientists paralleled the contention of philosophers and natural scientists than positivism does not reflect actual research practice or thinking in the natural sciences (Hanson, 1965, 1969, 1970). A.J. Ayer's repudiation was particularly noteworthy because he was the premier advocate of logical positivism in England. However, he eventually concluded that "nearly all of it was false" (Ayer, 1978, p. 107).

Ayer belatedly admitted that one of positivism's most serious defects was its insistence that sense observation be the criterion of empirical verifiability (that is, scientific statements must be descriptions of sensations, and all concepts are reducible to sensory data).

If these charges are true, then positivist standards for acceptable and unacceptable methodology have no force. Positivism does not represent scientific objectivity and rigor in general and it is specially unsuited to guide the investigation of social psychological phenomena. In fact, objectivity may consist in practices which are diametrically opposite to positivist doctrine. Once the positivist approach to science is debunked, the door is opened to admitting as scientific a broadly conceived sociohistorical psychology which employs qualitative cultural methodology.

In presenting qualitative cultural methods as legitimate scientific tools, sociohistorical psychology takes a unique position. Most advocates of qualitative or cultural methods present them as *alternatives* or *supplements* to scientific research. Their argument is that positivism represents science, however complex psychology is not fully comprehensible by scientific investigation. The need therefore exists for methodologies typically make no claims for objetivity, precision, validiy, or predictability for those are the criteria of science. Alternative approaches pride themselves, instead, on being intellecually provocative in interpreting psychological phenomena without being bound by scientific cannons. Thus, the correspondence theory of truth advocated by positivism is replaced by a coherence theory of truth. These alternatives (or supplements) claim that it is only by being non-scientific that they can avoid the narrowness and artificiality which they see as intrinsic to scientific methodology.

Sociohistorical psychology takes a diametrically opposite position. It contends that positivism's flaws are the result of its *scientific deficiencies*. The way to avoid these pitfalls in research is by engaging in genuine scientific practice, not by abandoning science to the positivist. Looking outside of science for science for solutions to factual questions results in skepticism, solipsism, and mysticism whose fallacies and dangers are legendary. Genuine science faithfully investigates the profundity of its subject matter; it does not impose arbitrary cannons which produce trivial, artificial data. Sociohistorical psychology strives to be scientific in this manner. It draws inspiration from the great scientists whose systematic, penetrating search for truth has produced the vast knowledge that is indispensable for human fulfillment.

In criticizing positivistic science one should be careful to distinguish general scientific principles from their particular positivistic form. While the latter deserve repudiation, the former deserve respect. The general principles of science are that it should thoroughly comprehend its subject matter, that scientific concepts should correspond to the real nature of phenomena, that essential elements and relations be distinguished from unimportant and even spurious factors, that causal relationships be identi-

fied, than concepts be clear and open to empirical test, that observations be intersubjectively verifiable, and that things are accessible to human understanding. These principles are indispensible for gaining authoritative knowledge and for avoiding authoritarian, dogmatism. However, nothing about these principles mandates that positivistic cannons— which restrict science to sensory observations of simple, immediate, physical phenomena —be accepted. Indeed these particular cannons can be seen to undermine the general guidelines.

Positivists combine both levels within their program (cf. Vienna Circle, 1973, pp. 306-308) and this has served to confuse both its adherents and its critics. Its adherents, of course, assert the unity of their particular approach with that of science in general. Anyone deserving of the title "scientist" must conduct science as the positivists order. This misconception has been used to turn criticism of positivism into a rejection of science in general. Strangely enough. this misconception has been accepted by most critics and has led them to reject all science in the process of rejecting positivism. However, a more analytical perspective which distinguishes the general level of science from the particular level allows one to repudiate positivism while accepting science.

Sociohistorical psychology seeks to recue objectivity and truth from their corrupted positivist forms. We must not let the positivist conception of truth and objectivity —including observation and experimentation— in the social sciences blind us to other realistic, objective approaches. Our goal is a non-positivistic science which will restore the dignity to truth, objectivity, observation, and experimentation which it has had in the hands of great scientists such as Einstein. Just as Einstein's sympathy for logical positivism was directed at its general principles not its particular cannons (Holton, 1973, chap. 8), so we must take the concern which positivist have for objectively investigating reality and realize it in a way that positivits themselves never can. By adopting positivism's general goals we recognize contributions of the doctrine while repudiating its flaws.

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