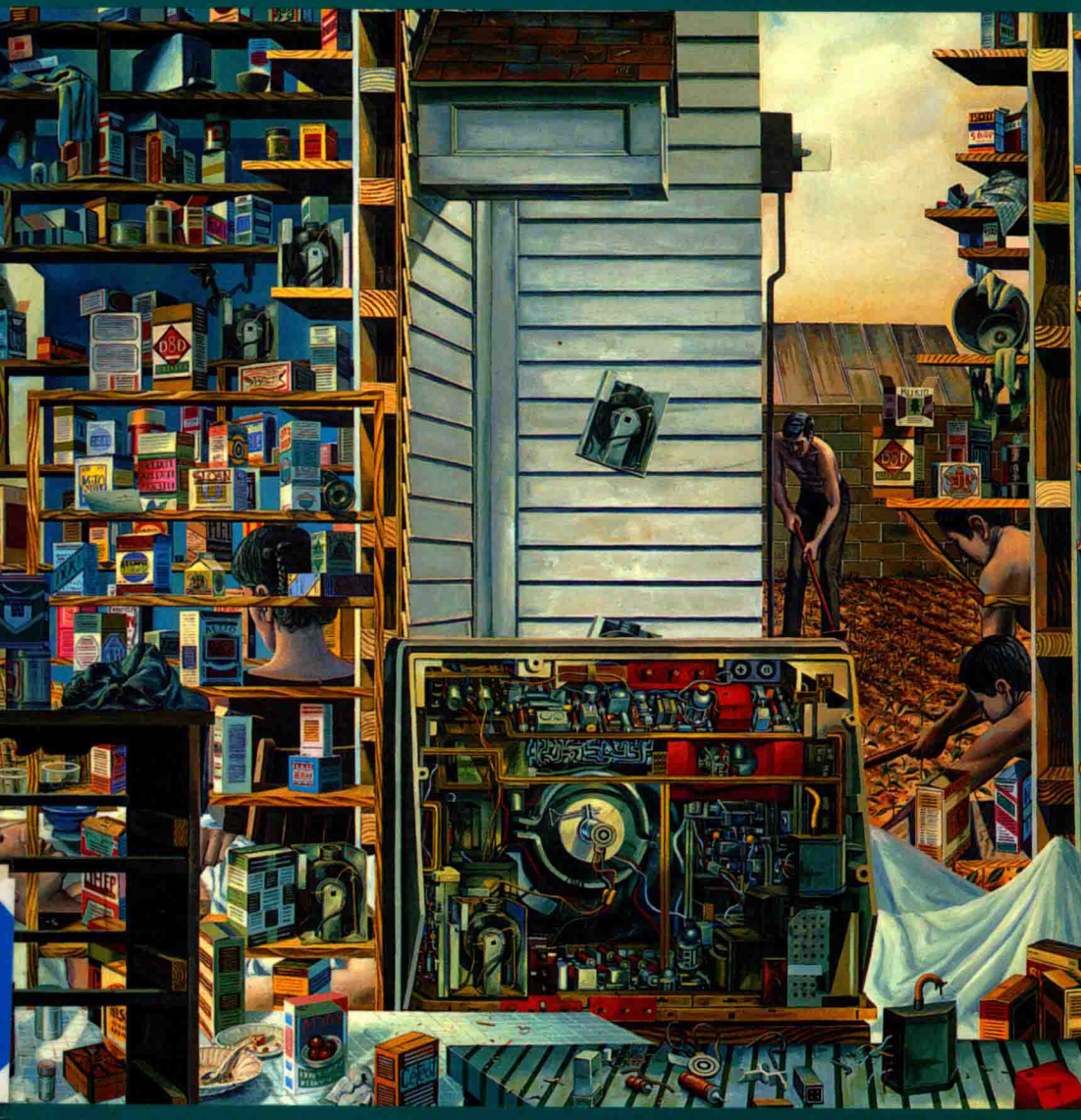
CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

A ONCE AND FUTURE DISCIPLINE



MICHAEL COLE

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I dedicate this book to my two mentors, William Estes and Alexander Luria, whose lessons in how to conduct one's life as a member of the community have been no less significant to me than their lessons in how to conduct psychological inquiry.

Foreword

by Sheldon H. White

MICHAEL COLE'S research projects and writings—multitudinous, adventurous, at times deeply searching and thoughtful—have done much to stimulate the growth of developmental psychology in the past three decades. This is a book of reflection and consolidation in which Cole takes the measure of what he has learned through his efforts, and in which he spells out a program for developmental psychology as a cultural-historical science. Cole addresses some fundamental questions. What does it mean to study a human's development scientifically? What kind of science do you arrive at? How broadly does it apply? What use can be made of it?

Developmental psychology came to life as a field of research at the turn of this century. There had been a rising tide of nineteenth-century writings about children, with authors examining their lives and circumstances philosophically, pedagogically, medically, politically, autobiographically, statistically, didactically, sentimentally, apocalyptically. Now there was to be a scientific approach to child development. At the beginning, the approach stood insecurely on scattered facts strung together with much theorizing. Followers of Darwin put together observations of children, animals, cross-cultural beliefs and practices, psychopathology, and so on, to sketch out an evolutionary

picture of the human mind. It was risky, speculative science; William James, in *The Principles of Psychology,* called it "wild work":

> So it has come to pass that instincts of animals are ransacked to throw light on our own; and that the reasoning faculties of bees and ants, the minds of savages and infants, madmen, idiots, the deaf and blind, criminals, and eccentrics, are all invoked in support of this or that special theory about some part of our own mental life. The history of sciences, moral and political institutions, and languages, as types of mental product, are pressed into the same service . . . There are great sources of error in the comparative method. The interpretation of the "psychoses" of animals, savages, and infants is necessarily wild work, in which the personal equation of the investigator has things very much its own way. A savage will be reported to have no moral or religious feeling if his actions shock the observer unduly. A child will be assumed without self-consciousness because he talks of himself in the third person, etc., etc. No rules can be laid down in advance . . . the only thing then is to use as much sagacity as you possess, and to be as candid as you can.

The hope was that comparative studies of mental development would reveal the plan of the child's growth, giving guidance to educators, parents, pediatricians, social workers, and others with responsibilities for children. And the natural history of the child's development would fit together with the data of comparative neurology, animal psychology, abnormal psychology, and cross-cultural studies in principled ways to yield an evolutionary psychology. The evolutionary psychology given by the comparative method at the turn of the century was thin and marred by Western ethnocentric biases, but it did offer the skeleton of a universal account of children's mental development. Given a somewhat Wagnerian rendition by Freud, it initiated an intriguing, influential, but ultimately quite controversial body of psychoanalytic writings. Could one go beyond facts strung together to make plausible theories? One could if one had systematic, rich, constructive research programs. The history of psychology is a history of the struggle to build such programs.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought organized cooperative research enterprises to psychology, scientific pro-

grams modeled on those of the natural sciences. Why did psychology follow the natural sciences? Psychology is occasionally pictured as a discipline haunted by a hapless, hopeless yearning for status as a *real* science. Without denying that there are touches of physics-envy to be found in some psychologists' writings, I think there is more to the problem than that. At the turn of this century, the physical sciences were well-formed, producing findings that were intellectually interesting and practically useful. There was good reason for psychologists to try to follow their pattern of cooperative activity, if only to see how far that pattern would take them. By concentrating on naturalistic questions and methods, psychologists sidestepped some tricky and risky issues. The twentieth-century scientific psychology of the universities, it must be remembered, emerged out of the nineteenth-century moral philosophy courses of the old-time American college. For a time, at least, the new psychologists of the universities (and those who hired them and provided resources to support their research) cherished the hope that a purely naturalistic, value-free enterprise of scientific psychology could yield data that would be used to provide easy, uncontroversial resolutions of the dilemmas, choices, and political confrontations of people living in the institutions of modern society.

But the science of the new psychology would prove to have hidden and awkward restrictions. The methods of a naturalistic scientific program would reveal patterns of organization of human perception, learning, and development, and the rhetoric of that program would assert that such patterns must be true for everyone everywhere. Michael Cole's point of entry into the problems of twentieth-century psychological science was the discovery that part of that assertion was not true. He took part in an effort to export the "new mathematics" to the Kpelle in Africa in the 1960s. He used Western research methods to study the cognitive development of Kpelle children living in a traditional society, and he came face to face with the fact that although tribal children classify, learn, remember, form concepts, and reason in everyday life, they do not perform in a sophisticated manner on experimental procedures designed for the study of age changes in those faculties. Western research procedures are grounded in a world in which children go to school at six years of age and are surrounded by the life, language, and thought of a modern society. Much of what

we consider to be normal to child development is simply a recognition of what usually happens when children grow up in such a world.

In this book Cole reviews the generality of his observations. He discusses the findings of a number of cross-cultural research projects and shows that there are always great difficulties in using traditional natural-scientific inquiries to compare peoples across cultures.

The fact that some twentieth-century psychology has produced findings that are only true within situational boundaries is not completely surprising. Before this century, a number of distinguished philosophers argued that in order to fully understand how the human mind works we will require two psychologies of different orders. We will need the kind of naturalistic psychology with which we are familiar, analyzing mental phenomena as constructions built out of sensations, ideas, associations, reflexes, or sensorimotor schemes. We will need also a less-familiar "second psychology" describing higher-level mental phenomena as entities given form by the language, myths, and social practices in which the individual lives. Such a second psychology would not be expected to yield universal findings. Since higher mental processes are formed by culture, they differ from one society to another.

Cole traces the lineage of proposals for a second psychology through the writings of Vico, Herder, von Humboldt, John Stuart Mill, and Dilthey and, among contemporary writers, through Toulmin, Price-Williams, Boesch, Shweder, and Bruner. There is a lineage of *cultural psychologists,* he says, that has consistently argued for an emphasis on mediated action in a context; the use of the "genetic method" understood broadly to include historical, ontogenetic, and microgenetic levels of analysis; the grounding of analysis in everyday life events; the assumption that mind emerges in the joint activity of people and is in an important sense, "coconstructed"; the assumption that individuals are active agents in their own development; rejection of cause-effect, stimulus-response, explanatory science in favor of a science that emphasizes the emergent nature of mind in activity and that acknowledges a central role for interpretation in its explanatory framework; methodologies that draw upon the humanities as well as the social and biological sciences (Chapter 4).

We have to see this lineage of cultural psychology not simply as an exercise in intellectual history but as an achievement, ideas about

principles slowly and with care and creativity being realized in a set of social practices. The effort to put a programmatic second psychology on the ground began in the 1920s, when the brilliant young Soviet psychologist L. S. Vygotsky reacted to a fractionation of psychology into schools, or a "crisis," that was being described with varying degrees of alarm by psychologists around the world. At the heart of psychology's crisis, Vygotsky believed, was the emergent recognition of the need for a human science of psychology to stand beside the existing natural science of the time. It is one thing to set forth an in-principle need for such a science as philosophers have done in the past, quite another to find the methods, ideas, and organizational mechanisms that will allow human beings acting together to create such a science.

At the very beginning of the road, Vygotsky recognized, there is the need to come to terms with the reality such a human science must deal with. Vygotsky argued that we must understand human mental life as deeply connected to the objects of human manufacture in the world around us. Human beings live in a world of human artifacts—tools, words, routines and rituals—changeling objects that are at one and the same time things the individual must deal with and repositories of prior human thought and judgment. When children learn the sequence "January-February-March-April-May-June-July-August-September-October-November-December," are they learning about the rhythms of the natural world or about an organized social practice by which people deal with such rhythmicity? They are learning both, of course, in the same activity. It is extremely difficult for the empiricist epistemology on which ordinary American psychology is grounded to come to terms with that.

At the heart of Michael Cole's work since the 1960s, I believe, has been the long, slow realization of cultural-historical psychology as a cooperative human enterprise. No one has done more to make that psychology a reality. Understanding, as only a well-trained experimental psychologist can understand, that psychology comes to life only when there are research procedures through which people can experience and know the world together, Cole has sought to find such procedures. There was a great hill to be climbed at the beginning. The reality human psychological scientists explore is different from the reality of the natural scientists. Cole traces the personal

experiences that brought him, step by step, towards an understanding of Vygotsky's psychology with its grounding in German idealistic epistemology. He asserts a philosophical position in a clear, circumstantial, and anecdotal discourse: "An artifact is an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the history of its incorporation in goal-directed human action. By virtue of the changes wrought in the process of their creation and use, artifacts are simultaneously ideal (conceptual) and material"(Chapter 5).

Artifacts are the fundamental constituents of culture. The growth of the human mind, in ontogeny and in human history, must properly be understood as a coevolution of human activities and artifacts. The words we speak, the social institutions in which we participate, the man-made physical objects we use, all serve as both tools and symbols. They exist in the world around us; they organize our attention and action in that world and, in the aggregate, they create "alternative worlds." In the formation of a human culture across historical time, cultural mediation produces a mode of developmental change in which the activities of prior generations are cumulated in the present as the specifically human part of the environment. The social world influences the individual not only through the agency of flesh-and-blood people who converse, communicate, model, or persuade, but through the social practices and objects unseen people have built up in the world around that individual. There are the prescribed forms of social interaction: routines, schemas, scripts, games, rituals, cultural forms. There are the manufactured objects that silently impregnate the furniture of the world with human intelligence: words, maps, television sets, subway stations.

Ultimately, Cole's cultural-historical approach to the study of mind dictates that when we study human development we must make the study of surrounding social practices part and parcel of our inquiry. Similarly, if we want to change the pattern of a human being's activities, we need to address the surrounding situations in which those activities live.

Particularly interesting examples of Cole's developed psychology are to be found in Chapters 9 and 10 of this book—chapters in which his cultural-historical psychology is applied. In Chapter 9, Cole reports on a cultural-mediational approach to the teaching of reading. His Question-Asking-Reading approach to the teaching of reading

was based on the Vygotskian principle that in human development the interpsychological (transactions between people) precedes and sets the stage for intrapsychological (complex mental processes within one child's mind). Group discussions of passages of reading were organized so that individual children "played" distinct lines of inquiry. An interpersonal world of interpretative discussions of texts was created. "The person who asks about words that are hard to say" talked with "the person who asks about words that are hard to understand" and "the person who asks a question about the main idea of the passage," and so on. Children played these roles in an environment designed to be engaging to children and to promote goals associated with reading. The intellectual dramaturgy worked. "Overall," Cole says, "I judge Question-Asking-Reading to be a successful application of cultural-historical theory to the problem of differential diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties."

Cole's program, as a distinct and organized entity, is over now. Yet the principle of teaching reading comprehension by personifying thought processes is coming into wider use in the schools—becoming, appropriately enough, part of the "buried intelligence" of school procedures. Not only does the second psychology use methods distinct from those of naturalistic psychology, but its findings enter into ordinary life, are useful to people, in distinctly different ways.

In this intervention project, and even more in the series of Fifth Dimension projects described in Chapter 10, Cole reveals an imaginative ability to weave together intellectual and social elements to create a principled educational intervention within an artfully designed and appealing microculture. It took the second psychology to create the Fifth Dimension projects and, beyond that, it took some empathy and some flair.

Part of what Michael Cole has contributed to contemporary psychology is a cultural-historical psychology, a second psychology on the ground. Part of what he has offered is the *romantic science* he learned from the man with whom he did his post-doctorate, the late great Alexander Luria. Luria's romantic science, "the dream of a novelist and a scientist combined," looks at people alternately in terms of scientific categories and diagnostic nomenclature and as whole human beings. Another contemporary follower of Luria's practices romantic science—Oliver Sacks, the neurologist, in whose case stud-

ies brain-damaged people, autistic individuals, retarded people, idiots savants, come to life as sympathetic figures who struggle to live within their limitations just as we struggle to live within ours. Perhaps it is the methods of cultural-historical psychology and the spirit of romantic science that will allow us all some day to have a psychology within which human beings can live and breathe.

Contents

Introduction

IN THIS BOOK, in the spirit of its title, I explore the origins and possible future of the field of cultural psychology, the study of the culture's role in the mental life of human beings. I begin with a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, it is generally agreed that the need and ability to live in the human medium of culture is one of the central characteristics of human beings. On the other hand, it is difficult for many academic psychologists to assign culture more than a secondary, often superficial role in the constitution of our mental life.

This situation brings me to my first question: *Why do psychologists find it so difficult to keep culture in mind?*

My efforts to answer this question take me into the history of psychology to discover how culture came to be so marginal to the discipline. I then review earlier efforts that relied primarily on cross-cultural methods to include culture within psychology's scientific program. My focus is on both the difficulties these efforts encountered and the successes they achieved.

Once I have explained why it has been so difficult for psychologists to keep culture in mind, despite many decades of effort by many

talented researchers, I address a second question: *If you are a psychologist who believes that culture is a fundamental constituent of human thought and action, what can you do that is scientifically acceptable?* My goal is to describe one principled way to create and use a culture-inclusive psychology.

Of course, this goal is by no means original. In recent decades many scholars whose work I discuss have sought to make the case for a culture-inclusive psychology. They argue that so long as one does not evaluate the possible cultural variability of the psychological processes one studies, it is impossible to know whether such processes are universal or specific to particular cultural circumstances.

For example, John and Beatrice Whiting, anthropologists with a long-term interest in human development, wrote: "If children are studied within the confines of a single culture, many events are taken as natural, or a part of human nature and are therefore not considered as variables. It is only when it is discovered that other peoples do not follow these practices that have been attributed to human nature that they are adopted as legitimate variables" (1960, p. 933).

More recently the same argument has been made by Marshall Segall, John Berry, Pierre Dasen, and Ypes Poortinga, four psychologists who have spent decades engaging in cross-cultural work: "given the complexities of human life and the importance of culture as a behavioral determinant, it obviously behooves psychologists to test the cross-cultural generality of their principles before considering them established. It is obvious, then, that the scientific study of human behavior requires that they employ a cross-cultural perspective" (1990, p. 37).

This line of argument seems so commonsensical that it may be difficult to understand why such a patently correct point of view does not have the corresponding effect on the discipline. Why isn't cross-cultural research fully integrated into psychology's project of establishing basic principles of human behavior? A simple answer, the complexities of which I will spend a good deal of time deconstructing in this book, is that general psychology does not know what to make of a good deal of the data that cross-cultural psychologists produce because the research does not live up to the methodological requirements of the discipline.

Among those interested in exploring the role of culture in mind,

a rather sharp and well-articulated division of opinion has developed in response to the dual facts that cross-cultural research is widely ignored and that its findings are difficult to interpret. Many cross-cultural psychologists believe that increased attention to problems of methodology will eventually lead to cross-cultural psychology's integration into the mainstream of psychological research (for example, Segall et al., 1990). From this perspective, the problem can be solved by rigorous application of known methods. In place of the all-too-prevalent one-shot experiments, what is needed are multicultural comparisons that allow the "unpackaging" of culture as a variable so that firmer causal conclusions can be reached. The effort to "unpackage" culture leads the psychologist naturally into interdisciplinary work with anthropologists, sociologists, and linguists, both as a source of methods for making the appropriate observations and as a source of theoretical ideas about how to handle the resulting complexities.

A second group believes that not only cross-cultural psychology, but the entire enterprise of scientific psychology from which it derives, is so deeply flawed at its foundation that an entirely new discipline for the study of culture in mind must be formulated. This opinion is expressed forcefully by Richard Shweder, who writes that for the general psychologist "there is no theoretical benefit in learning more and more about the quagmire of appearances—the retarding effects of environment on the development of the central processing mechanism, the noise introduced by translation of differences in the understanding of the test situation or by cultural variations in the norms regulating the asking and the answering of questions . . . Rather, if you are a general psychologist, you will want to transcend those appearances and reach for the imagined abstract forms and processes operating behind intrinsic crutches and restraints and distortions of this or that performance environment" (Shweder, 1990, p. 12).

In effect, Shweder is asserting that the cross-cultural strategy for introducing culture into psychology is simply misguided. No amount of increased methodological sophistication can rescue the enterprise. In its place he proposes not a refurbished new subdiscipline of psychology but a new discipline, which he calls *cultural psychology*. Rather than seeking to understand the mind as a general processing

device, Shweder argues, cultural psychology sees the mind as "content-driven, domain-specific, and constructively stimulus-bound; and it cannot be extricated from the historically variable and culturally diverse intentional worlds in which it plays a coconstitutive part" (ibid., p. 13). Shweder looks to interpretive branches of the social sciences and to the humanities for the methodological foundation of this new discipline.

As will become clear, I have a great deal of sympathy for Shweder's critique of general psychology and his attempt to formulate an alternative which places culture at its core instead of at its periphery. I am also convinced that in formulating an alternative way to think about culture in mind, it is important to integrate knowledge from all of the humane sciences, which, as I will show, are part of psychology's birthright.

However, I am not entirely clear on the shape that an alternative discipline would take. The reasons for my ambivalence will become clearer as the presentation proceeds.

I begin in Chapter 1 by looking at the prehistory of psychology as a discipline, adhering to the principle that to understand something it is important to know its history. Chapter 1 inquires into the ways in which culture's relation to thinking was dealt with before psychology came into being. In an important sense, cultural psychology was there "in the beginning." Of special interest is the link between the advent of psychology-as-science and the way cross-cultural research was conceived and conducted. In Chapter 2 I trace major attempts to apply the strategy of standardized cross-cultural research, emphasizing both the problems of interpretation it calls down on itself and its accomplishments. Chapter 3 focuses on development. In it I describe attempts to improve standard methodologies by conducting multidisciplinary research on cognitive development that takes people's everyday experiences as a starting point. This approach can be viewed either as a "reform" of the standard experimental method or as an alternative methodology. It leads necessarily to coalitions with anthropologists, sociologists, and field linguists, to find not only "native versions" of existing tasks but "native tasks" that are then modeled in experiments. At the time when I was carrying out research in that tradition I referred to my work as "experimental anthropology and ethnography psychology."