Crossroads between Culture and Mind

Continuities and Change in Theories of Human Nature

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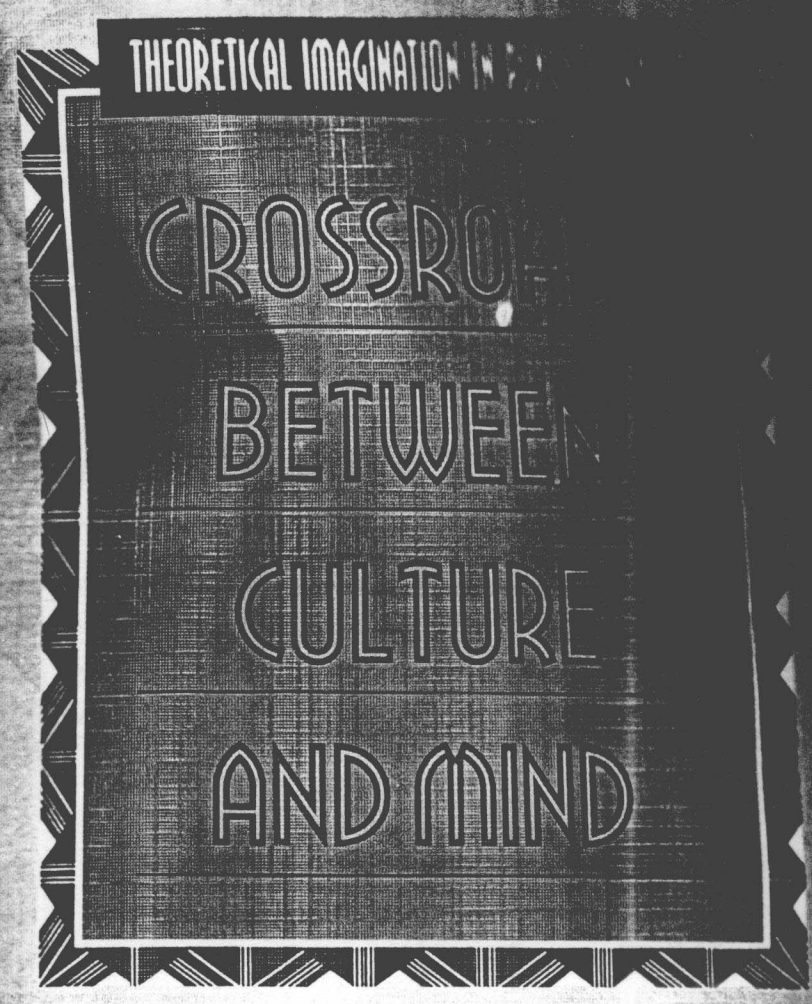

Continuities and Change in Theories of Human Nature

CROSSROADS BETWEEN CULTURE AND MIND
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'An impressive and broad-ranging work about the historical origins of what today is called cultural psychology. There are very few scholars in the world who could have written this book with as much insight as Jahoda, and the result is a volume which promises to be the authoritative work on this topic for years to come.'
James V. Wertsch

The relationship between 'mind' and 'culture' has become a prominent – and fashionable – issue in psychology during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The conflict is between those who see the human mind as being generated from, and an intimate part of , culture and those, usually termed cognitivists, who view the mind as essentially separate from the environment.

Gustav Jahoda traces the historical origins of this conflict to demonstrate that thinkers' preoccupation with the relationship between mind and culture is a very old one. The salient issues began to crystallize three centuries ago in Europe in the form of two distinct traditions whose contrasting conceptions of human nature and the human mind still remain the focus of current debates. The dominant one was produced by the scientific approach that had proved so successful in the physical realm, and was associated with the Enlightenment. The opposite view, which dates back to Vico and was espoused by anti-Enlightenment thinkers, is that the mind is separate from nature, an entity that both creates and is extensively modified by culture in a constant cycle of mutual determination. The growing prestige of experimental psychology has led to a heated debate between supporters of the rival traditions: is psychology a science or a cultural discipline?

Jahoda identifies the current form of this debate as but a phase in psychology's long fascination with the role that culture plays in the formation of the mind. This book is a formidable achievement by one of Europe's most distinguished and erudite psychologists.

GUSTAV JAHODA is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Strathclyde. He is the author of *White Man* (1961), *The Psychology of Superstition* (1969), and *Psychology and Anthropology* (1982).

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To the memory of

JEAN

who made it all possible.

Preface

Authors commonly feel the urge to explain why their own work is not just 'yet another book' on the topic – and I am no exception. The past two decades have seen the appearance of a considerable number of texts on the history of psychology, and the reader might understandably suspect that this could be another such text masquerading under an esoteric title. Now I must admit that the main theme of the present work is the history of psychology, but it focuses generally on aspects most other histories choose to exclude.

In a well-known article intriguingly entitled 'Does the history of psychology have a subject?', Roger Smith (1988) pointed out that textbook history of psychology 'projects back' the subject as it is at present rather than portraying it as the meaningful activity it was in the past. In other words, such history mainly traces the development of the currently dominant paradigm of 'scientific psychology'. The history of psychology as a cultural discipline tends to be largely neglected. One hears little, if anything, of the great nineteenth-century debate about the place of psychology in the world of knowledge; and the echoes of this debate increasingly reverberate today, though participants often remain unaware that they are echoing.

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century, what Alexander Pope called 'the proper study of mankind' was not divided up into separate academic disciplines. Thinkers of the most varied backgrounds, including philosophers, historians, philologists, anthropologists, biologists, and many others, were concerned with what may broadly be termed 'psychological' problems. Not only did they claim a legitimate interest in such issues, but they often made notable contributions. While these do not usually figure prominently, if at all, in texts on the history of psychology, they have been recorded by social historians, historians of anthropology, and others. I

cannot, therefore, claim that the material is new, except perhaps in some minor particulars; numerous specialist scholars have covered most of the ground to be surveyed, and I shall have occasion to refer to them. On the other hand, I have not relied entirely on secondary sources, but have gone back as far as possible to original writings, sometimes venturing to offer my own interpretations. What is relatively new – or at least somewhat unusual – is the particular perspective from which the material is being viewed.

Many of the original sources are in French or German, and when translated versions existed and were accessible I made use of them, unless they appeared inadequate. In other cases, where the references are to French or German originals, the translations are my own and the titles appear in the Bibliography in the original language. In general – and particularly with German texts that have elaborately nested clauses which would be practically unreadable in English – these translations are not literal. My objective has been to convey an adequate rendering of the sense, though of course I may not always have succeeded.

The germ of the idea for the present book dates back about a decade to my stay at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies. There I came into close contact with a group of professional historians from whom, as an amateur, I learnt a great deal. Later, in Geneva, I had useful advice from Fernando Vidal, a historian of psychology with a broad vision. As far as anthropology is concerned, I owe much to discussions over the years with Bill Epstein and Ioan Lewis, and was helped by Jean Jamin's extensive knowledge of the history of French anthropology. Maurice Mauviel, whose special interest is the history of French psychology and related problems of culture, drew my attention to some early work.

My conversion from merely 'cross-cultural' to a wider 'cultural' psychology is largely due to the influence of Michael Cole, who also has a sophisticated appreciation of historical issues. When he discovered that I was working in this field, he generously placed at my disposal some of the material he himself had collected. I also owe a great debt to Bernd Krewer, widely read in the history of German psychology and anthropology. Not only did he help me to clarify my ideas, but he was tireless in obtaining copies of all kinds of now obscure publications.

I would like to thank Gün Semin, editor of the series, for suggesting the present title, and to make special mention of the invaluable assistance received from Farrell Burnett, senior editor at Harvester Wheatsheaf; she patiently provided advice and guidance at every stage of the preparation.

A grant from the British Academy, for which I am grateful, enabled me to obtain copies of rare material from various libraries.

Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the support from my family and friends, which enabled me to carry on at a difficult time.

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Introduction

Mind, Culture and History

What is matter ? Never mind.
What is mind ? No matter.
(*Punch*, 1855)

The relationship between 'mind' and 'culture' has emerged as a prominent issue during the last quarter of the twentieth century. It could be said to have become fashionable, and followers of fashion commonly feel themselves to be modern and up to date, in complete contrast to their predecessors. Those who are better informed are well aware that fashions tend to be cyclical, so that similar themes recur in different guises in successive periods. The aim of the present work is to provide a broad perspective of the elements of continuity and change in ideas about culture and mind, mainly over the past three centuries. I shall seek to show that while some questions have been answered and others recognized as false or meaningless, there are some important ones we continue to ask; and, moreover, that there are at least two basically different styles of approach to these questions that divide opinions to this day. Any historical survey of this kind encounters certain difficulties and pitfalls that must be explained at the outset, beginning with history itself.

On the History of Ideas

Contrary to an illusion widespread among the lay public, 'history' does not consist mainly of a collection of 'facts' ready to be consulted. Rather, it involves the selection and interpretation of relevant material in the course of which some degree of subjective bias is unavoidable. Much has been written about the principles that should govern this process, and one version of so-called 'historicism' – there are many different ones (D'Amico, 1989) – holds that specific ideas are embedded in a broader context and

can be understood and adequately interpreted only *within* that context. In fact some would maintain that any idea is constrained by what Foucault called an *episteme*, an intellectual framework which determines the conditions and the very possibility of kinds of knowledge in a particular place at a particular time.

Fortunately it is neither necessary – nor would I be competent – to enter into the technical details of these issues. The existence of a flourishing tradition dealing with the history of ideas indicates that one need not worry unduly about the more extreme claims that one needs, as it were, to get into the skin of past writers. There is no way in which one could exchange one's twentieth-century mind with an earlier one; and therefore, as George Herbert Mead (1956) rightly noted, each generation discovers a somewhat different past. Moreover, even within the same generation it is possible to find totally divergent interpretations of the past. Thus Philippe Ariès (1973), in his well-known history of childhood, pictured the Middle Ages and early modern period as the good old times when children were not isolated but integrated into adult life. By contrast, Lloyd de Mause (1976), in his 'psycho-history', claims to unravel a horrific tale of child murder and physical as well as sexual abuse. Fortunately, the risk of such radical divergences is much smaller in a sphere of the history of ideas. For unlike the history of childhood, where inferences based on fragmentary materials are entailed, the history of ideas can draw directly on the writings of the various thinkers whose positions are to be examined. Yet quite apart from the ever-present possibility of the distorting effect of personal bias, complex ideas expressed by past writers are frequently open to alternative interpretations.

The Meaning of Words: 'Mind' and 'Culture'

One particular aspect of this general problem demands some detailed discussion – namely, terminology. The problem is a pervasive one in the history of science:

> Meticulousness in the translation of sources is particularly important when dealing with older specialist terms whose meaning has changed in the course of time. Linguistically speaking, several of the central expressions used are the same today as they were in the past, but their meaning might have changed radically so that a direct translation in such cases would be misleading indeed. (Kragh, 1987, p. 136)

The issue is further complicated by the fact that in addition to changes over time, the ideas to be discussed in this book are those of writers in

languages other than English. Dictionaries are not much help even for current usage. For instance, if one looks up 'mind' in an Anglo–German dictionary, one finds '*Seele*', '*Verstand*' and '*Geist*' which, retranslated, are 'soul', 'reason' and 'spirit'; the corresponding terms listed in an Anglo–French dictionary are '*âme*', '*intelligence*' and '*esprit*'. There is thus no exact equivalent of 'mind' in German or French, just as there is no precise equivalent of '*esprit*' in English, as the expression '*esprit de corps*' indicates.[1] In practice this is not an obstacle to current international psychological communication, but it does become important in discussing ideas of even the relatively recent past, such as those of Wundt. The meaning of a term is commonly embedded in theoretical assumptions, such as that of a distinction between 'soul' and 'spirit' or 'mind', which were taken for granted at the time but no longer make sense to us. I might illustrate this in relation to Kant, a philosopher who influenced psychological theorizing from Herbart to Piaget. Kant referred to the study of the soul as '*Pneumatologie*', while his '*Anthropologie*' broadly corresponds to what is now called psychology.

The way I have tried to handle this problem, particularly acute in German, was either to explain the meaning but to add the original term, so that the informed reader can make her or his own translation, or – in the case of well-known terms such as *Völkerpsychologie* – simply to use the original one.

When it comes to 'culture', additional problems of a somewhat different kind are encountered. While a shared understanding of the meaning of 'mind' can be taken for granted, so that there is no need to try and define it, the same cannot be said of 'culture'. Paradoxically, this term was comparatively straightforward initially, but becomes increasingly difficult to grasp as one approaches the present. Originally it stems from 'cultivation', as in 'agriculture', although Cicero already used *cultura mentis* figuratively to refer to philosophy. But for centuries it meant producing or developing something, such as 'the culture of barley' or 'the culture of the arts', and it is still applied in this sense, as in the phrase 'culture of bacteria'. It was only in eighteenth-century France that the single term *culture* began to be used and to acquire the sense of training or refinement of the mind or taste, rapidly extended to refer to the qualities of an educated person. All this, of course, is far removed from the current usage in the social sciences.

An allied expression that recurs in the literature is 'civilization'. The *concept* can perhaps be traced back to the Greek orator Isocrates, who proclaimed in the fourth century BC that it was Attic education and the attainment of a humanitarian ideal, rather than mere descent, that made a person a Hellene as distinct from a barbarian (Jüthener, 1923). The word 'civilize' in the sense of 'bringing out of a state of barbarism' had already been current in the seventeenth century, but the noun 'civilization' was also

coined in the eighteenth century and, unlike 'culture', has not undergone any radical change of meaning. The noun, it should be noted, existed only in the singular and was more or less equivalent to 'enlightenment', an ideal of intellectual and moral progress; its opposite was 'barbarity', a term not confined to 'savages'; thus Russia and even Sweden were said to have emerged from 'barbarity' (Braudel, 1980, p. 180).

For most of the nineteenth century and beyond, 'culture' and 'civilization' were often treated as more or less synonymous,[2] 'culture' sometimes being used in the sense of 'rudiments of civilization'. Around the middle of the century the plural forms began to emerge, a significant change that marked a transformation in world-views: the normative ideal had given way to a recognition that 'cultures' or 'civilizations' can vary in time and space.

Primitive Culture (1871) by Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) is usually regarded as a turning point. Its famous first paragraph begins with the words 'Culture or Civilization' and then defines culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor, [1871] 1958, p. 1). It was no accident that Tylor used the singular, since he was concerned with the characteristics of human culture in general rather than with cultural variations. At any rate, modern usage of the term is generally taken as having started to crystallize from Tylor's formulation, subsequently becoming transformed largely owing to the influence of Franz Boas (Stocking, 1982). However, the phrase 'modern usage' is in need of qualification. The term 'culture' is now one of the most frequently used terms in the social sciences, its meaning normally being taken for granted. This tends to create an impression of universal consensus – to some extent justified in so far as there is probably a core of common meaning, but somewhat misleading because different writers, even within the social sciences, vary quite considerably in their handling of the concept. There is no single agreed definition of 'culture'; the well-known monograph by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), which also contains a comprehensive history of the term, lists no fewer than 161 different ones.

Since 'culture' is central to the present theme, this nettle will have to be grasped. I shall not try to select one out of the plethora of definitions, nor be so foolhardy as to attempt yet another. Instead, a rather rough-and-ready effort will be made to discuss what, at the present time, seem to be taken as the *necessary* attributes of the concept, and to point to variations in some of the more peripheral aspects.

There is, first of all, complete consensus that nearly all innate, biologically determined aspects of humans are excluded from 'culture'. There are two slight provisos to this, one being that clearly all normal humans have a built-in potential to acquire culture (Trevarthen, 1983). The other concerns language, generally considered as part of culture:

although the basic capacity for language is innate, becoming a speaker of any particular one is a cultural matter. There is also agreement that 'culture' is, in Tylor's classic phrase, something 'acquired by man as a member of society'; and, furthermore, that something is transmitted, with modifications, through the generations. Views tend to vary as to what exactly that 'something' is, and there has been a substantial change over the past generation. During the 1950s the emphasis tended to be on patterns of *behaviour*, but later 'culture' came to be conceptualized mainly in terms of knowledge, meaning and symbols. For instance, Rohner (1984, p. 119) called it a 'symbolic meaning system', while Sperber (1985, p. 74) referred to 'culture' as essentially 'widely distributed, long-lasting representations'. Others regard affective systems as equally important aspects of 'culture'; some would also include cultural *products* in the form of artefacts. Since these include buildings, roads, and so on, such usage tends to blur the boundary between 'culture' and the physical environment.

The frequent use of such terms as 'system' or 'structure' in connection with 'culture' also implies that it is generally seen as not just a random assembly of specific features, but as having some coherence and organization (for a more extended discussion, see Shweder and LeVine, 1984). These, then, in broad outline, are the main features of 'culture' in modern social science discourse.

Words and Concepts

At this point readers might well begin to doubt whether the implicit promise of the title is really capable of being fulfilled, since it entails a retrospective application of the concepts of 'mind' and 'culture'. Now except for the terminological intricacies discussed above, there seems to be no fundamental difficulty with regard to 'mind' as long as one thinks of it broadly as the key feature of 'human nature'. Ideas and beliefs about 'human nature' not only go back to the beginning of recorded history, but exist in some form in all known human groups; and they are being increasingly studied under the heading of 'indigenous psychologies'. For earlier periods, long before the advent of specialization, one can draw freely on the writings of a wide range of thinkers including philosophers, physicians, naturalists, travellers and, later, anthropologists and sociologists. Such usage is sanctioned by the practice of most conventional histories of psychology. For in spite of the fact that the term itself dates back only to the late sixteenth century (Lepointe, 1970), authors usually have no compunction in tracing origins back to Antiquity.

By contrast, there appear at first sight to be strong objections to the retrospective use of the elusive term 'culture', which has undergone radical

changes. Let me try to show that, quite apart from the cumbersomeness of a constantly changing vocabulary, there is a case for using the term 'culture', at least as a kind of rough-and-ready shorthand for past ideas.

The argument rests on the fact that the absence of a term does not preclude the presence of concepts, otherwise articulated, that – at least broadly – correspond to or overlap with what we understand today by 'culture'; and I would submit that even before the eighteenth century, and certainly by then, such concepts were available to all prominent thinkers. Since this will be documented more fully later, it will suffice here to cite the example of Montaigne's famous essay 'On Cannibals', written in the sixteenth century:

> . . . il n'y a rien de barbare et de sauvage en cette nation . . . sinon que chacun appelle barbarie ce qui n'est pas de son usage; comme de vray il semble que nous n'avons autre mire de la vérité et de la raison que l'exemple et idée des opinions et usances du pais ou nous sommes. (Montaigne, [1580] 1954, p. 33)

In the above, reproduced in its original archaic French, Montaigne is saying that everyone calls 'barbarism' whatever does not correspond to their own customs; and he states that we have no other criterion of truth and reason than the example of the opinions and customs of the country in which we find ourselves. Now these 'opinions and customs' are important aspects of what we still mean by 'culture'. As late as 1872 Walter Bagehot employed the expression 'the cake of custom' to refer to cultural traditions. The view that Montaigne can be regarded as having been concerned with culture is widely shared, and a number of commentators have described him as one of the first 'cultural relativists' – that is, taking the view that each culture should be judged only in terms of its own standards. Corresponding notions, such as Voltaire's '*mœurs et esprit*' or Hume's 'moral causes' of differences between peoples, were widespread in the eighteenth century. This, of course, should not occasion any surprise. A term like 'culture' is a kind of construct that groups together a set of phenomena, and what makes up the set will largely be a function of implicit or explicit theoretical assumptions. Past thinkers held different theories and applied different labels, but they were concerned with similar phenomena.

Thus I would submit that it seems defensible to employ the term 'culture' diachronically to designate a certain commonality of meaning. This usage is not intended to imply direct lines of intellectual descent, but it will be instructive to show what are at least suggestive parallels in the ways different thinkers have handled certain concepts, and how they have struggled with fundamental problems that are by no means fully resolved even today. In doing so, they often employed arguments that have a familiar ring; but whether or not the meaning is exactly the same and they really