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What is This?

Rohner's analysis of the concept of culture is critically examined, considering in particular the distinction drawn between culture and social system. His view is contrasted with that of Segall, who regards the concept of "culture" as redundant for cross-cultural psychology. It is argued that neither of these positions is adequate, and suggestions are made for ways out of the dilemma.

DO WE NEED A CONCEPT OF CULTURE?

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A few years ago I ventured to express the view that a more rigorous analysis and operationalization of the concept of "culture" is probably a necessary condition for further theoretical advance in cross-cultural psychology (Jahoda, 1980). In the preceding article Rohner has provided a conceptual framework in which the crude global notion of "culture" commontly employed by cross-cultural psychologists is "unwrapped" into three major constituents. Rohner claims not merely to define "culture" theoretically, but also to operationalize it. In the first part of the discussion I propose to comment on certain aspects of Rohner's analysis, and then to consider the question of whether his approach meets the requirements for cross-cultural psychology and might perhaps serve as the springboard for further advances as mentioned above.

This same view of mine has recently been cited by Segall (1983), who regards it as completely misguided. The notion of "culture" is indeed unclear, but according to him there is no point in trying to make it less ambiguous because "the ambiguity of 'culture' is not what is impeding theoretical advance"

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(Segall, 1983, p. 127). Since Segall's ideas are obviously highly pertinent to Rohner's contribution, I have taken this opportunity to discuss both in the hope that this will help to throw further light on the crucial issues.

Hereafter the term "culture" will not be set off by quotation marks; this is done for convenience and should not be taken to imply that it has thereby become any less contentious.

COMMENTS ON ROHNER'S ANALYSIS OF THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

Culture is arguably the most elusive term in the generally rather fluid vocabulary of the social sciences. The number of books devoted to the topic would fill many library shelves, and thus it needs some courage to try again. Therefore I should like at the outset to pay tribute to Rohner for tackling these difficult issues and setting out his own position with commendable clarity.

Rohner sketches two sets of cross-cutting distinctions in his introductory remarks. The first is between those who regard culture as either a *behavioral* or a *meaning* system. The second contrasts those who attribute real independent existence to culture (the realists), with others taking the view that it is merely a construct (nominalists). Rohner himself comes down firmly on the side of the nominalists and of those who view culture as a meaning system.

As far as the contrast between "behaviour" and "meaning" is concerned, it seems to me that Rohner draws the line rather too sharply, for reasons to be explained in due course. What is more, having nailed his flag to this particular mast, he has apparently come to feel that anything else is not merely a different point of view, but actually wrong. This comes out most clearly in his discussion of the status of material objects, where he writes "Many behavioural theorists include not only behaviour in their conception of culture, but they *erroneously* [my italics] include the material embodiments of behaviour, i.e. artifacts." Now many distinguished anthropologists, past

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and present, have taken culture to cover also its material products. Why should this be a mistake? Rohner puts forward two distinct lines of argument to justify such exclusion. The first is that unless we know what an object means to people, it is irrelevant to cultural description. However, this can hardly apply to those who view culture as a behavioral system, since people obviously make use of their artifacts so that an adequate behavioral description will have to include them. One might even go further and suggest that even "meaning" theorists can hardly abstract meaning without reference to the objects themselves.

The second line of argument rests on a syllogism that has the major premise, "all culture is learned." The minor premise is that artifacts are not learned, and *therefore* cannot be culture. However, it is not merely ideas and beliefs associated with objects that are learned, but also the techniques for producing them. Thus, in my view medicine bundles, cooking pots, and so on do qualify for inclusion in culture—what, otherwise, would we do with them? They could hardly go into the other categories of "social system" or "society," and surely Rohner would not wish to leave them out altogether!

In a sense this is, of course, a rather peripheral issue, especially from the standpoint of cross-cultural psychologists. I was mainly concerned to demonstrate that when dealing with such a comprehensive construct as culture, arrived at by abstracting from the richness of human social life, one has to be very cautious in claiming that one formulation rather than another is the "correct" one. It is usually a matter of choice, depending on the purpose for which a particular intellectual tool is to be used. This does not mean, of course, that everything is entirely arbitrary so that nothing can be wrong. One common fallacy, of which most of us have probably been guilty at one time or another, is that of writing as though culture were a *cause* of behavior. Rohner rightly warns against this, as other anthropologists have done in the past. It is a kind of loose

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thinking, or perhaps merely careless writing, that may have been reinforced by Strodtbeck's (1964) classic phrase of "culture as treatment." Although Strodtbeck's phrasing was somewhat ambiguous and readily lends itself to such an interpretation, the text makes it clear that he was talking about "cultural experience"; moreover, since he wrote in the text about particular kinds of experience, one may be confident that he was not thinking about culture-in-general. It would seem that he envisaged, in fact, the specific variables discussed by Segall (1983) and to which I shall return. At any rate, reference to the "effects of culture" can be found in the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, so that Rohner's point still needs to be emphasized: in essence the term culture is a descriptive one, embracing a wide range of phenomena, whether these be meanings or behaviors. Hence, seeking to explain any component part in terms of the whole involves circularity.

Given that culture cannot be taken to cause behavior, what is the relationship between, on the one hand, culture in Rohner's sense of a symbolic meaning system and, on the other, the social system? Here we run into some problems, and since these are important from the standpoint of cross-cultural psychology, they will be discussed in some detail. Having taken pains to separate culture as shared meanings from "social system" as patterned behavior, Rohner struggles hard to keep them apart; but it is not easy to do so convincingly. On more than one occasion he uses the analogy of a game, where a game (that is, culture) is defined by the sum of its rules. Within the rules players are free to behave in very different ways, and they may even violate the rules if they can get away with it. Knowledge of the rules is not enough "to predict what particular play will be used in a particular situation."

Elsewhere Rohner notes that his cultural system comprises networks of complementary meanings relating to rights, responsibilities, and norms. These define such relationships as those between shaman and client, bus driver and passenger, husband and wife, and, in general, the status/role system within society. Lest one be tempted to connect this with behav-

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ior, Rohner hastens to add that what matters here is not behavior per se, but the meanings used to define and evaluate behavior. In order to press home his point he cites a study in Trinidad where a cultural norm was found to be entirely ignored in actual behavior. Thus, he argues that, empirically, there is *only* (my italics) a probabilistic relationship between culture and social system.

Let us now consider these arguments. With regard to the game analogy, there is obviously scope for considerable range of variation in behavior within the rule, as there is in the enactment of social roles. However, such variations cannot be interpreted as implying that the behavior is largely independent of the rules or roles. This becomes clear when one considers transgressions of the rules, which, as Rohner rightly states, may occur in varying degrees. However, if the rules or roles are ignored altogether, then it is no longer possible to speak about a game or a social system. This is not contradicted by the case of Trinidad, which is of course not uncommon. Anthropologists often note that a particular norm tends to be regularly breached, but this occurs within an overall framework in which the bulk of the norms tend to be observed. It should also be noted that the statement that a relation is probabilistic is not inconsistent with it being causal in character—in the social field practically all predictions are only probabilistic. I am not suggesting a simple causal relationship between norms or roles and behavior, nor do I wish to debate this vexed question at length. The point I should like to stress is that the nexus is far closer than Rohner would like us to believe, and in general, norms and roles are relatively good predictors of behavior.

Finally, one might ask how investigators manage to get at culture if it is really so remote from behavior, and here I quote Rohner: "One *constructs* an image or theory of culture . . . through observation or the measurement of verbal behaviour, or through inferences about *why* people behave as they do through observation or the measurement of their physical behaviour" (italics in original). Thus when it comes down to

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the nitty-gritty of actual methods, the close link between meaning systems and behavior is tacitly acknowledged!

All this is not to deny the usefulness of an analytical distinction between culture and social system for certain purposes, but in practice they are hard to separate. Since one can never be sure in advance how closely they are linked in a particular domain, it is not safe to concentrate on one to the exclusion of the other. This is also why anthropologists of any persuasion cannot, in practice, confine themselves to either symbolic meanings or overt behavior. There is a lesson here for cross-cultural psychologists, many of whom confine themselves to "the measurement of verbal behaviour," sometimes referred to as "subjective culture," without concerning themselves with the relationship of such measures to actual behavior in the social field.

In spite of the critical remarks about some aspects of Rohner's article, it does, in my view, offer a rather comprehensive and well-balanced survey of anthropological notions concerning culture. This in itself is clearly a valuable contribution and as such is to be welcomed. Among the wide range of approaches, Rohner adopts the currently dominant one of culture as a meaning system. The question then arises as to whether this viewpoint constitutes a useful formulation for cross-cultural psychology. Rohner himself seems to take it largely for granted and makes hardly any explicit attempt to "sell" his approach. In fact, it is only at the end of his lengthy article that he devotes a single page to this crucial issue. It begins with a blunt and somewhat disconcerting statement that "relatively little research within cross-cultural psychology has much to do with 'culture' per se." Although the following passages are more gentle and cautious, they also seem to imply a critique of the work of cross-cultural psychologists. Right at the end Rohner appears to be saying that if, by any chance, cross-cultural psychologists wish to do "true" cross-cultural analyses, then his scheme would serve as an efficient tool. Generally Rohner seems to recognize that his particular con-

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cept of culture is not very relevant to the currently dominant practices in cross-cultural psychology.

COMMENTS ON SEGALL'S REJECTION OF THE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

At the outset it may be noted that Rohner and Segall have one thing in common: both are at pains to deny that culture can, in any simple way, be regarded as a cause of behavior. Their denials, however, stem from very different reasons, rooted in their divergent perspectives. Rohner views culture as a descriptive term referring to shared symbol systems, and for him it constitutes an important and useful intellectual tool. Segall, by contrast, proposes that the concept of "culture" is altogether redundant in cross-cultural psychology. For him culture is nothing but a complex bundle of independent variables, so that by saying that something is an effect of culture rather than that of a specific independent variable, one is not making a meaningful statement about causal relationships.

Naturally Segall does not confine himself to dismissing culture, but puts forward what he considers to be a more satisfactory alternative scheme. Citing LeVine (1970) in support, Segall (1983, p. 128) suggests that we ought to start with the *dependent* variable. Thereby we can be sure that we are dealing with an interesting and worthwhile problem, and then embark upon a search for causes. Moreover, the causes we are interested in are universal ones: "we are seeking variations in the way groups of persons do things in order to determine the variables which control those behaviors, anywhere and everywhere." What then are those independent variables that will provide universal causal explanations? According to Segall (1983, p. 130) they "include basic institutions, subsistence patterns, social organizations, languages, and social rules governing interpersonal relations" as well as a number of other things such as ecology. How do we select the relevant independent variables for our causal analysis? For this Segall (1983, p. 132) recommends, as an overall framework, Donald Campbell's

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evolutionary epistemology, the keys being adaptiveness and a systematic fit: "To commence the theorizing, we simply ask ourselves *what* among the things we know about these environments . . . could have selected these behaviours, and *how*, via what process . . . did they become adaptive?" Then we start our empirical research with "a series of studies wherein we winnow away those competing hypotheses that don't do as well as others."

It is all made to sound perfectly straightforward, but is it really? First of all it should be noted that Segall chose to quote the first part of LeVine's (1970, p. 566) argument, but not the second, which begins as follows:

> Contemplation of etiological research in this field, however, exposes the greatest weakness of the psychological sciences in general and cross-cultural studies in particular: there is a lack of a body of well-documented variations to explain.

LeVine was mainly concerned with demonstrating how little reliable knowledge we have about cultural differences, owing to the imperfections of our measures. But this also has an implication in relation to Segall's (1983, p. 129) statement "first find a puzzle, and then try to find the variables that solve it." What he does not say is how to find the puzzle, and LeVine makes it clear that it is often hard to be sure whether one is dealing with a real or pseudo-puzzle. Many, if not most of the differences with which cross-cultural psychologists are concerned, be they related to visual illusions, eyebrow signals, memory, color vision, attitudes, and so on, are not readily identifiable by superficial scrutiny, and require sensitive instruments for their detection. As LeVine points out, our instruments are rather fallible; but here it is even more important to stress that usually some research has to be done in the first place in order to discover the puzzle.

Suppose now that we have found one that we have good reason to regard as genuine, and are thus ready to search for

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appropriate independent variables as candidates for causal explanation. We are then faced with the bewildering multiplicity of variables that, according to Segall, jointly constitute culture. It may be mentioned in passing that several of those listed by him, such as "basic institutions" or "social organizations," are open to much the same objections as is culture. Leaving that aside, how do we select from the remainder? Segall exhorts us to "think like biologists" and to look for the factors that make particular behaviors "appear adaptive," suggesting that this is also in line with Berry's (1976) ecocultural approach. He envisages that some factors will "impress" us more than others, and it is these that we ought to pursue.

Unfortunately such guidelines are not very practical, stemming as they do from an oversimplification of current evolutionary thinking. The concept of "adaptation" is, for biologists themselves, a most difficult and contentious one. Lewontin (1978) discusses the difficulties in defining the environment for the process of adaptation, pointing out that there is an infinity of ways in which the environment can be broken up arbitrarily, and pointing out the fact that organisms actively create parts of their environment. There is, furthermore, the awkward problem that all organisms are, in an important sense, already adapted; as another biologist (Lewin, 1982, p. 1212) wrote, "virtually every aspect of an organism is a specific adaptation"—but an adaptation to which part of the environment? Segall, but surprisingly, fails to provide any answers to such vexing questions. Berry (1976), to whom he refers as though Berry had solved these problems, was in fact well aware of the ambiguity of the concept of "adaptation" and wisely did not make any specific claims. He (Berry, 1976, p. 14) wrote: "In our present usage (adaptation) refers to the changes in culture or behaviour which are associated with changes in an environmental setting." It would seem that several cross-cultural psychologists have read more into his model than Berry's statement justifies.

Another recommendation by Segall (1983, p. 135) also needs some consideration, namely that our search for the "right"

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independent variables "must be guided by an expectation that those variables relate to the behaviour we are trying to explain in ways that make that behaviour adaptive in whatever environment it occurs." I find it difficult to understand what is meant here. The statement is evidently informed by the wish to reach for universals, but seems to imply that one should not be concerned with variations associated with particular environments. Yet the latter is precisely what cross-cultural psychologists most frequently study.

This brings me to the actual research examples cited by Segall with the aim of showing how his recommendations can be put into practice. There is first the by now classical work on illusion susceptibility. As Segall rightly described it, there existed a genuine puzzle established by researchers over a period of half a century. It should be noted that the solution arrived at was mediated by a psychological theory, namely that of Brunswik. The second example, concerning the meaning of eyebrow gestures, constituted the *discovery* of an interesting puzzle rather than its solution. No independent variable has been found that could explain why learning a particular meaning of an eyebrow gesture in one set of cultures, and a different meaning in another set, should be "adaptive."

There is a feature common to these examples to which attention should be drawn: both refer to well-described *limited* and segmentary aspects of human behavior. This is, of course, merely a statement of fact and in no way a criticism—it applies to much, if not most, cross-cultural research. The reason for stressing it is that the chances of accounting for such segmentary processes in terms of one or more independent variables is vastly greater than in cases where more complex behavior is involved. The phrase "the chances" is of course deliberate, since even with simple behavior it is rare that a single independent variable is sufficient (as well as necessary) for explanation. Thus I am persuaded that degree of carpenteredness is a key factor influencing susceptibility to rectangular illusions, but not that it is the only one.

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My general contention is that Campbell's evolutionary framework (which I also find valuable) is not, and was not intended to be, suitable for the kind of tasks advocated by Segall. For that purpose more specific theories, hypotheses, or hunches are required, though obviously the evolutionary framework can be kept in mind when elaborating these. An ambitious attempt along these lines was LeVine's (1973) approach to personality development, which sought to relate psychoanalytic theory to Darwinian evolutionism. So far it has not led to any empirical research, and for the reasons outlined any such work would face formidable obstacles.

CONCLUSION: WE DO NEED A FRESH CONCEPTION OF CULTURE

For Segall, culture is nothing but a collection of isolated bits and pieces, "anything one person can learn from all other persons"; hence, he regards the notion as redundant. For Rohner, on the other hand, culture and social behavior constitute systems, not random assortments; this means the presence of organization and structure, a set of relationships linking the various component parts. Rohner took this for granted, as most anthropologists would, as the basis of his work. There is plenty of solid evidence to support this contention. For instance, the introduction of steel axes (an independent variable?) into a culture that did not possess iron or steel implements produced dramatic changes in many areas, not merely of economic but also of social life (Holmberg, 1973).

As long as one is merely concerned with isolated responses such as illusion susceptibility or eyebrow signalling, the sociocultural system can usually be ignored. However, cross-cultural psychology is not confined to relatively simple processes, as shown, for example, by the great surge of interest in cultural differences in cognitive development. When it comes to such complex behaviors emerging over time, the approach via straightforward independent variables proposed by Segall does, I would submit, become inappropriate. Leaving aside the possibility of genetic determinants, behavior of this kind is

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probably the resultant of a host of interrelated factors rooted in the culture-specific experience of the individuals concerned. This is the problem with which we are confronted. In fairness I must admit that my passing remark, quoted by Segall, failed to make this clear. I hope that this fuller exposition remedies my earlier omission.

The burden of my case is that the notion of culture as nothing more than a set of independent variables is adequate only for a limited set of problems. If we are to account for higher-level psychological functioning in different cultures we also need some means of characterizing the intricate yet orderly patterning of various social worlds. Rohner's dichotomy of shared meanings versus systems of social behavior, while appropriate in some anthropological contexts, does not take us any further toward that goal. The concept of a sociocultural system, acceptable to Rohner, is possibly more promising. Yet Segall is no doubt right that we have, at present, no means of handling such a concept in ways that would render it empirically useful. It would either have to be transformed from a vague abstraction into something that can be more clearly specified or other more effective intellectual tools will have to be forged.

Without pretending that I clearly see the path ahead, there are perhaps some pointers. One is the notion of "cultural complexity" as employed, for instance, by the Whiting's (1975), which is a hybrid of the kind that might serve our needs—although treated as a variable, it is in fact at the same time the property of a system. Another interesting concept is that of the "developmental niche" proposed by Super and Harkness (1981, 1982). They define it as a theoretical construct designed to describe culture as it is experienced by an individual at any given developmental stage. Further progress along such lines may enable us to escape from the dilemma epitomized by the respective positions of Rohner and Segall.

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