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Carl Ratner

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CONTEXTUALISM VERSUS POSITIVISM IN CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Carl Ratner

Theories have the power to shape our conceptualization of psychological issues. Very general, abstract theories of ontology and epistemology have very specific and practical effects on cross-cultural psychological research. They shape our general understanding of culture, the interrelation between culture and psychology, and methodological principles of empirical research. Because theories are so powerful, it is vital that we examine them. Limitations in theory will lead to limited conclusions.

I will contrast two theories: contextualism and positivism. I argue that the ontological principles of contextualism are more helpful than positivism for conceptualizing what culture is and the relation between culture and psychology than positivism is. Moreover, the ontological principles of contextualism lead to epistemological principles and research methodology that are more suitable for researching cultural psychology than positivistic methodology is. Contextualism is thus more valuable for understanding “indigenous psychology” than positivism is.

ONTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Contextualism

There are many variants of contextualism. They include gestalt psychology, field theory, structuralism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, dialectics, genetic psychology, organicism, Marxism, cybernetics, systems theory, functionalism, ecological psychology, constructionism, postmodernism, ancient Greek philosophy, dialectical psychology (K. Riegel). Pepper (1942) included contextualism in his list of root metaphors, or *Weltanschauungen*. In the field of psychology, an exceptionally systematic and insightful presentation of contextualism is Asch’s book *Social Psychology* (1952; cf. Asch 1946).

I will concentrate on dialectics. I believe it is the most systematic and sophisticated variety of contextualism.

The central idea of dialectical contextualism is that elements are interdependent, interpenetrating, and internally related. As such, a particular element takes on the characteristics, or qualities, of other elements. Qualities vary with the context of interrelated elements.

Elements may be depicted as interlocking circles as in Figure 1.

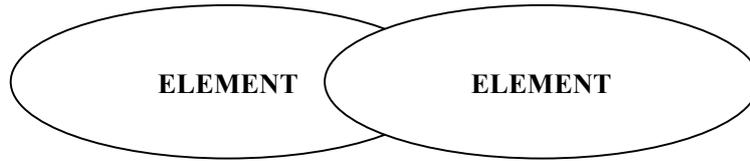


Figure 1
Dialectical Relation of Elements

The figure illustrates how an element is intertwined with and overlaps into another. This is how elements impart qualities to each other. Each element is thus a function of other elements. Its character is a complex blend of its own properties and those of its context. An element is not an autonomous thing with fixed, absolute properties.

Figure 1 shows a unity of differences. This is a central principle of dialectics as coined by Hegel. There is a contradiction of elements within a unity. This leads to reciprocal influence and change.

Within the complex of interpenetrating elements, one may be more powerful than another. Dialectics does not imply equal power. It does imply reciprocal influence, however the influence of each element need not be equal.

Positivism

Positivism in psychology adopts certain principles from British empiricism and logical positivism of the Vienna Circle. One of positivism's main ontological principles is that phenomena are separate, self-contained, simple, and homogeneous. This is known as atomism (cf. Ratner, 1997). Atomism is reflected in the positivistic notion of a variable, depicted in Figure 2.

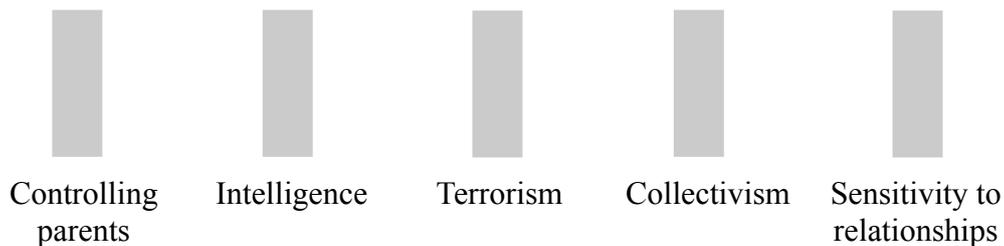


Figure 2
Positivistic Variables

A variable is depicted as a solid block in order to emphasize its separate, given, fixed, singular nature. Atomism is the fundamental feature (assumption) to all the others. For being a separate, independent thing isolates a variable from any qualitative, or internal, relationship with others that could modulate its quality. Qualitative invariance means that it can only have a singular, fixed quality. Qualitative invariance is the very definition of a variable: A variable is a factor with a given character that only varies quantitatively. Isolated quality is not modulated or enriched by other qualities. It maintains the same general form in all situations. Atomistic variables such as intelligence, controlling

parents, collectivism, schooling, terrorism, or sensitivity to relationships necessarily have a general, abstract character. They never include specific details such as the particular manner in which parents control their children, or the particular relationships that people are sensitive to, or the particular style of problem solving.

Generality is what allows a variable to be measured with the same instrument cross-culturally. Measurements are only comparable when quality is constant. Thus, the positivistic preoccupation with measurement is really a proxy for generality and abstraction. The epistemological focus on measurement as the premier method of knowing and describing cultural-psychological phenomena presumes and instantiates an ontological assumption that variables are general, singular, homogeneous entities.

CULTURE

Contextualism

From the contextualist point of view culture consists of interpenetrating, interdependent, internally related factors. The main factors can be categorized as social institutions, artifacts (housing, transportation, technology, eating utensils, artworks), and cultural concepts (about time, child, pleasure, property, and the self). Applying Figure 1 to these factors yields Figure 3:

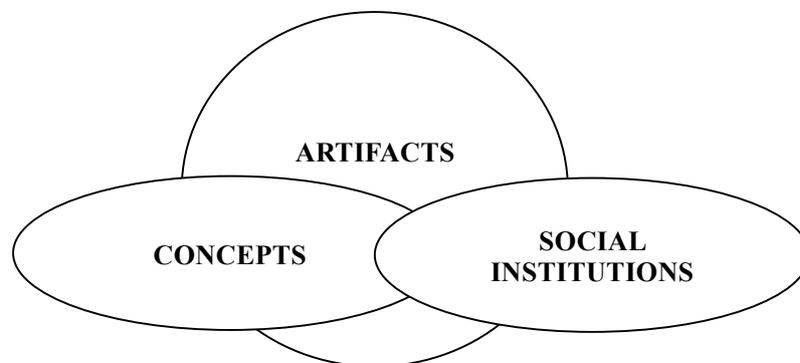


Figure 3
Dialectical Relation of Cultural Factors

The factors interpenetrate each other and the quality of each one varies with the others. As Hegel and Marx said, each factor is concrete or determinate (*Bestimmung* or *Bestimmtheit* in German). Each factor is a specific, distinctive complex quality that results from the context of interrelated factors.

For example, the cultural concept of a child varies with different social institutions, housing architecture, clothing, and games. Similarly, the institution of education is different in different social systems. In most peasant societies, education is hands-on apprenticeship of a real-life task, under the direct supervision of a master. There are no separate schools or school buildings as exist in modern societies.

Education is not a general, abstract, single thing with fixed properties. It is a complex unity of specific properties which vary with the context of related factors.

Western formal education is infused with characteristics from its context. This context includes consumerism, mass media, job competition, and a great value attached to material wealth. All these factors interpenetrate education and make it concrete, or determinate. It is this full complex quality of education that bears on learning, reasoning, memory, and self-concept.

Cole (2005) emphasizes this concrete modulation of schooling. He states that formal schooling has different concrete features in different societies which result from schooling being modulated by different macro factors. Japan and China have ethnotheories concerning the origin of intelligence as rooted in study and effort. Americans hold a different ethnotheory, namely that intelligence is innate. Japan and China hold to an ethnotheory regarding the person—as dutifully fulfilling a role, and being interdependent with others—that contrasts with an individualistic ethnotheory. Education also varies with social class (cf. *The Journal of Social Issues*, 2003, 59, #4).

Positivism

Cross-cultural psychologists replace culture as a concrete system of interdependent and interpenetrating factors with a set of discrete variables. Instead of addressing capitalist society, or feudal society, with their concrete social institutions, cross-cultural psychologists speak of “schooling”, “commerce”, “urbanization”, “honor codes”, “large families”, “collectivism”, “traditionalism”, “masculinity”. These variables transcend and dissolve particular societies. Their characteristics are abstract, intrinsic, natural, fixed, universal, singular, and homogeneous.

These features of variables are evident in collectivism, which is far and away the most popular variable in cross-cultural psychology. Collectivism is construed as a singular, abstract, general variable with a homogeneous, fixed quality. It is applied to a wide variety of societies and must be abstract in order to encompass all of them. It denotes people’s identification with a group and a willingness to obey group norms.

Collective societies include small prehistoric hunting and gathering tribes, massive societies such as the former Soviet Union and China, small modern Israeli kibbutzim, and feudal manors. Collective societies can be autocratic or democratic. Collective bonds may be embraced, or detested. Triandis identifies 60 attributes on which collectivist cultures may differ.

Thus, collectivism tells very little about culture. It overlooks at least 60 specific attributes of the societies it encompasses.

Yet the term continues to be used in a very general sense. Cross-cultural psychologists speak of collectivism without specifying what kind of collectivism they are referring to. Triandis, himself, continues to employ the term. The reason is that positivists accept the ontology of atomistic, abstract variables.

The problematical abstract nature of positivistic variables is further illustrated in the case of traditionalism and modernism. Traditionalism is defined by five variables: submission to authority; filial piety and ancestral worship; conservatism and endurance; fatalism and defensiveness; male dominance.

In an excellent critique, Hwang (2003, pp. 251-252) points out that these abstract variables conceal crucial cultural dimensions. They therefore create the misleading impression that they denote something definite and common when they actually encompass quite disparate details.

Asian submission to authority derives from Confucian philosophy and embodies

very specific features. It's cultural significance in Confucian ideology is positive. It includes a) fulfilling one's duty in an honorable manner, b) respecting the wisdom of authority, c) respecting the benevolence of authority who is duty-bound to protect his charges and act ethically towards them, much like the father of a family. Submission to authority in the West is quite different. It is a pejorative attribute, regarded as a form of fear or passivity in the face of authoritarian control. Thus, submission to authority is interpenetrated and modulated by cultural factors. It is not a singular, abstract variable.

Treating cultural and psychological phenomena as discrete, abstract, singular variables can never capture their vibrant, nuanced, concrete, etc, indigenous features, regardless of the intentions of the researcher. In order to highlight these features, general abstractions, such as "schooling", "intelligence", "depression", "eating disorders" must be replaced by concrete terms that denote specific characteristics of a particular society. Thus, Chinese collectivism from the 1960s-80s would be termed "politically coercive, Chinese collectivism". Collectivism in other societies would have different concrete names.

A related problem with variables is that they naturalize cultural phenomena. They enshrine a particular social form as inevitable, general, and permanent. An example is Greenfield, et al.'s (2003) discussion of individualistic thinking. The authors attempt to correct a common problem in cross-cultural psychology, namely treating individualism/collectivism as givens without explaining why they exist. Greenfield, et al. attempt to explain individualistic thinking as produced by formal schooling, commerce and urbanization. They mention "the individualistic ways of the city" (Greenfield, et al., p.477). They state, "commerce and formal schooling are associated with a more individualistic mode of apprenticeship" (p. 473). They state that "school ecology favors attention to the individual psyche" (p. 476).¹

These statements assume that urbanization, commerce, and formal schooling are intrinsically individualistic, and necessarily foster individualistic apprenticeship and cognition. However, this assumption is false. As we have seen in our discussion of contextualism, any cultural factor varies with the set of other cultural factors that interpenetrate it. Schooling varies with different cultural contexts. Collectivistic societies such as the former Soviet Union and China (from 1949 through the mid-80s) structured school activities around team work and social responsibility that inculcated collectivistic thinking. Schools do not necessarily cultivate individualistic thinking.

Commerce also varies with the cultural context. Commerce in contemporary capitalism—where everything has been commercialized, including genes, ideas, water, and the labor power of humans—is very different from commerce in 17th and 18th century America—which was subsidiary to subsistence production within the family and only encompassed a few marginal products. (Marx distinguished simple commodity production from capitalist commodity production.) The two forms of commerce have substantially different effects on socialization practices and psychology.

Cities also take on the characteristics of related macro cultural factors. They are not intrinsically individualistic. Sumerian cities 3,000 years B.C. were clan societies ruled by monarchs. Later Greek city-states were also communal rather than individualistic. Cities only developed individualistic tendencies with the growth of capitalistic economy and politics.

Thus, Greenfield, et al.'s attempt to explain individualism/collectivism fails. They simply exchange one set of givens (I/C) for another (schooling, urbanization, commerce). The explanatory variables they propose do not explain why individualism arose. They obfuscate the fact that individualism and collectivism are characteristics

of the way schools, cities, and commerce are socially organized and related to other macro cultural factors.² Greenfield, et al.'s variables misconstrue a particular social organization of macro cultural factors as the only form they can take.

The conservative political implications of variables are obvious: as long as we engage in commerce, live in cities, and have schools, our social and psychological activities will have an individualistic character. Commerce can never be organized cooperatively; pricing mechanisms can never be used non-capitalistically to distribute goods equitably. The only way to mitigate individualism would be to renounce schooling, cities, and commerce. Since this is impossible, we are doomed to a bourgeois life style in perpetuity.³

In view of this ineluctable destiny, the diversity and pluralism of cross-cultural psychology must be questioned. While cross-cultural psychologists recognize various etics, the fact remains that wherever cities, commerce, and schools happen to exist they naturally have an individualistic character. The abstract character of positivistic variables further negates concrete qualitative etics. Thus, cross-cultural psychological variables do not significantly increase our options for social and psychological life. Increasing the diversity of variables does not address flaws in the very notion of a variable.

The abstract, artificial, singular character of positivistic variables makes them unrepresentative of cultural phenomena. As such they have little specific effect on psychological phenomena. There is little that is distinctive to being a “controlling” parent, or a “collectivist” society, or a “traditional” society. Consequently, these abstract variables can have little distinctive affect on psychology.

Researchers are prone to believing that abstract variables have more explanatory power than we have indicated. They claim, for example, that individualism explains the distribution of rewards/resources according to the principle of equity—i.e., according to the work that one has contributed. However, individualism, per se, does not imply this principle. Individualism simply emphasizes personal independence and goals. The equity principle can only be explained by concrete social factors which must be added to individualism. This is revealed in a statement by Leung & Stephan (2001, p. 382-383): “individualism is related to the preference for the equity norm because equity is compatible with the emphasis on productivity, competition, and self-gain in individualist cultures.” Concrete social goals of productivity, competition, and self-gain are necessary to account for equity.

Claims for a robust influence of abstract variables on activity are only supported by specious statistical tests of significance that assess the statistical probability of obtaining the numerical results, but do not assess the degree or meaningfulness of the relationship. In fact, statistical tests of significance pronounce the most miniscule and tenuous relationships (e.g., correlations of 0.10) as “significant” (Ratner & Hui, 2003; Ratner, 2006a, p. 159).

RELATION OF CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENA

Contextualism

According to dialectics, culture and psychological phenomena interpenetrate each other.

The dialectical relationship is depicted in Figure 4.

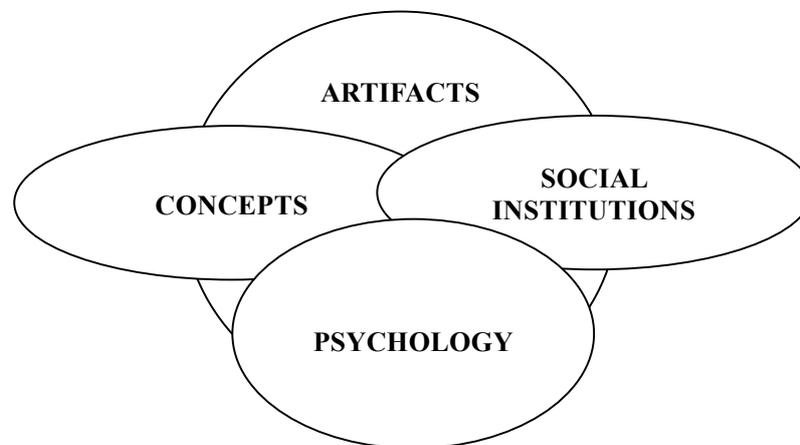


Figure 4
Interpenetration of Cultural and Psychological Factors

Psychology is part of culture, and culture enters and organizes psychology. Cultural factors thus constitute the quality of psychological phenomena. Psychological phenomena reciprocally support cultural factors. Psychological phenomena also mediate the impact of culture on behavior. When we confront a teacher, a politician, a parent, or an advertisement, we react toward them in terms of culturally organized perceptions, emotions, motives, cognitive processes, and personality.

Contextualist research elucidates the manner in which culture penetrates and organizes psychological phenomena. The point is to know why and how psychological phenomena embody cultural factors; not simply that cultural factors are associated with psychological phenomena.

The interdependence and interpenetration of factors gives each a concrete character that reflects its relation with others. We can conceptually disengage certain relationships to study. We can study the influence of cultural concepts on psychological phenomena. However, our study of limited elements always includes recognition of their concrete character which stems from their position in the complex of factors. Furthermore, we ultimately study complex interactions among elements. We study how psychological phenomena reciprocally influence cultural factors and also mediate our behavioral responses to them (Ratner, 2006a, b). Reciprocal influence does not mean equal influence. Certain elements may be more powerful than others.

Positivism

Positivism construes culture and psychology as discrete variables. The predominant influence of culture on psychology is depicted in Figure 5.



Figure 5
Positivistic Relation Between Cultural Variables and Psychological Variables

The quality of psychological phenomena is external to the quality of cultural factors. Culture never modifies the quality of psychological phenomena; it only affects the degree (as all variables only vary quantitatively, not qualitatively). Education raises IQ, it does not alter the quality of IQ. Poverty lowers IQ. Group size affects the degree of conformity and the degree of cohesiveness. Their qualities, however, remain invariant.

The external relationship between cultural factors and psychological phenomena is enshrined in research design. The objective of positivistic research is simply to document a quantitative association—e.g., education raises IQ scores 10 points. Positivistic research rarely illuminates the internal relation, or interpenetration, of factors. We never learn what education has to do with intelligence—i.e., what is the nature of IQ and the nature of education that enables the latter to influence the former (Ratner, 2006a, pp. 158-162). In contrast, contextualism emphasizes the internal relation between factors as depicted in Figure 4.

EPISTEMOLOGY/METHODOLOGY

The ontological principles of contextual and positivism lead to different epistemological and methodological principles.

Contextualism

The dialectical ontology of interdependent, interpenetrating factors leads to utilizing stimuli and responses which are embedded within, and represent, a concrete cultural and psychological context.

The stimuli we utilize are embedded in the cultural context of the subjects. They are culturally meaningful, or “ecologically valid”. The responses we elicit in order to infer psychological phenomena are also “ecologically valid”. They represent culturally significant behavior. Stimuli and responses must partake of a cultural context if we are to learn about culturally organized psychological reactions to cultural stimuli.

Contextualist epistemology and methodology further stipulate that a stimulus be

presented within a pattern of related stimuli so that subjects can comprehend its meaning. Since the quality of an element depends upon its internal relation with other elements, the quality of a stimulus employed in research must be clarified by presenting it within a context of related stimuli—e.g., questions, statements, physical stimuli.

The quality of a response also depends upon a context of related responses. To infer the psychological quality of a response, we must apprehend the response within a pattern of responses. Apprehending the meaning of a stimulus or a response by referring to a context of related stimuli or responses is known as the hermeneutic circle.

Consider an everyday example. A mother slaps her son. How do we know the psychological significance of this act? It could express her hatred for him, an uncontrollable temper, love for him, a desire to protect him, a desire to retaliate for something he did to her, a desire to show him who's boss, or a wish to toughen him up to adversity. The psychology of her slapping him is only clarified, and made determinate, by understanding it within a context of interrelated acts. We must know previous interactions between mother and son, we must observe the specific way in which the slap is delivered, we must see her facial expression, we would listen to what she says during and after the slap, we must know the situation in which she slapped him, we would observe whether she slaps him in the future, we would count the frequency of slaps she has given in the past, we would compare her behavior toward him with her behavior toward her daughter, and we would listen to how she explained her behavior when she discusses it with her husband. From this wealth of behaviors and circumstances, we infer the psychological significance of the slap.

Of course, interpretation is subject to mistakes. This occurs in everyday life as well. However, it is also pivotal to an objective understanding of psychology. Guidelines for deriving objective interpretations of behavior-in-context have been developed by qualitative methodologists. Grounded theory and phenomenology are particularly specific methodological approaches (cf. Ratner, 1997, 2002, 2007).

Positivism

The epistemology and methodology of positivism follow from its ontological assumptions. (Epistemology recapitulates ontology.) Stimuli and responses are de-contextualized. Interpenetration of stimuli with each other, or responses with each other, are explicitly ruled out as confusing and unscientific. We shall examine decontextualized stimuli and responses separately.

Utilize isolated stimuli which represent no concrete cultural or psychological context.

Peng employed such stimuli in a study on holistic vs. linear perception (Ji, Peng, & Nisbett, 2000). The authors hypothesized that indigenous cultural concepts make Chinese perception more holistic than Americans'. Their measure of holism was sensitivity to environmental relationships.

To measure sensitivity to environmental relationships, the authors presented stimuli on a computer screen for a brief period. Subjects were asked to estimate the frequency with which particular stimuli appeared together. Accurate estimates indicate sensitivity to environmental relationships.

These stimuli are separate from any cultural context. They are ecologically invalid. They are artificial forms which do not represent culturally meaningful figures. The

authors even say, “All the figures were schematic to ensure that there was little cultural-specific symbolic meaning.”

It is peculiar that cultural psychologists would attempt to draw conclusions about the cultural character of perception by deliberately employing culturally meaningless stimuli. Since the stimuli are ecologically invalid, they cannot elicit culturally meaningful responses. If the subjects are not familiar with the material, they cannot use familiar perceptual, cognitive, or emotional strategies for responding to it. Therefore, the research is inconclusive about culturally structured perception.

Peng selected a test on the basis of technical expediency (short, simple, quantifiable) rather than for its insight into how human beings perceive relationships.

Rather than recognizing that their decontextualized test is irrelevant for drawing conclusions about culturally organized, concrete perception, the authors draw a sweeping, definite conclusion from it. They conclude that, “East Asians are more attentive to relationships in the environment than Americans.”

This conclusion is overstated. There is no such thing as “sensitivity to environmental relationships” in general. No person, or group of persons, is sensitive or insensitive to all environmental relationships. The authors have adopted the positivist assumption that sensitivity to relationships is a singular, abstract, contentless variable which pertains to all phenomena and which manifests only quantitative differences among people. This is why they never delve into the details of what kinds of relationships among what kinds of objects in what environments are salient to subjects. Yet these details are the concrete substance of perception.

Restrict responses to simple, overt, singular, fragmented acts.

Positivists use as data single, truncated, overt response. They assume that a single behavioral response is a psychological phenomenon; or, at least, fully expresses it. This is the assumption behind operational definitions. They define psychological phenomenon as a single, simple, overt response. There is no need to encourage the subject to express his psychology through a multiplicity of responses because a single response sufficiently represents it.

Single, simple, overt responses do not indicate the quality of psychological phenomena. The failure of fragmented, simple responses to reveal culturally organized psychological phenomena is evident in two examples.

One is the questionnaire that Hofstede designed to measure individualism-collectivism. The questionnaire consists of 6 simple items! It is important to emphasize that entire societies have been labeled as individualistic or collectivistic based on 6 items. Responses are restricted to a 5-point Likert scale as to how important each item is to the subject:

One illustrative item is: Have a job which leaves you sufficient time for your personal or family life.

Hofstede claims that this item measures individualism—it expresses “actor’s independence from the organization.” However, this is an arbitrary assumption. Wanting time for your personal or family life does not imply that you are concerned with yourself independently of the organization. You may value family and the organization. You may believe that relaxing time with your family may help you work better on the job (Ratner & Hui, 2003). Restricted responses provide no evidence about psychological states.

It was none other than Rensis Likert, the inventor of the Likert scale, who warned, “Direct answers to direct questions cannot be taken at face value” (Likert, 1951, p. 243).

One other example illustrates the ambiguity of fragmentary responses. In Peng &

Nisbett's (1999) study of the cultural character of reasoning, the hypothesis was that Americans and Chinese reason differently as a result of culture-specific epistemology. They presented "dialectical" and "non-dialectical" proverbs to subjects.⁴ In this case, the stimuli may have been ecologically valid. However, the response measure was not. They asked whether subjects preferred dialectical or non-dialectical proverbs. The operational measure of reasoning was a single Likert scale rating of preference. But, liking a proverb does not indicate a reasoning style. I may like Hegel's philosophy although I do not think like he did. Thus, Peng's data indicate nothing about the reasoning style of the subjects. His conclusion that Chinese think dialectically is unwarranted by the data. It is speculative because a single, simple, fragmentary response does not provide information about psychological processes (cf. Ratner, 2006a for further discussion).

Of course, it is much easier to measure liking on a 7-point scale than it is to analyze reasoning style. So Peng chose an expedient measure rather than a psychologically meaningful one. This is like the man who looks for a lost key where the light is because it's easier to see things there.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that ontological and epistemological theories powerfully shape our conception and investigation of psychological phenomena. Theories are far more powerful than scientists' intentions. You may have the best intention to comprehend the indigenous psychology of a particular group of people. However, if you employ positivistic theory, your conceptualization of the issues and your research methodology will prevent you from reaching that goal. In contrast, the ontological and epistemological framework of contextualism will help you to arrive at that goal.

NOTES

¹ In another publication, I erroneously accused Greenfield, et al. of treating individualistic and collectivistic socialization practices and cultural symbols as appearing on their own with no basis in social institutions and other macro factors (Ratner, 2006, p. 27). Actually, the authors do attempt to explain individualism and collectivism as emanating from commerce, cities, and schooling.

² Contextualism allows for qualitative variations in the character of a thing as a result of its dialectical interpenetration by other things. However, contextualism does not consider the social process and political struggle that form macro cultural factors. Contextualism is a general model of interrelationships that encompasses natural, social, and psychological phenomena. The particular processes involved in the particular interrelationships — e.g., the activity and political struggle involved in social relationships—are beyond contextualism, per se. They require a cultural-historical analysis (cf. Ratner, 2006a).

³ The conceptual power of variables (and all methodological and theoretical constructs) is enormous. It forces Greenfield, et al. (and most other cross-cultural psychologists) into espousing pro-capitalist ideology quite unwittingly (cf. Amadae, 2003, for an analysis of the political basis, function, and institutional support for this ideology).

⁴ Peng's terminology is incorrect.. He erroneously uses the term dialectics to refer to Chinese thinking that actually is a form of Confucianism and Taoism. These ancient doctrines are not dialectical, as I point out (and Mao pointed out) in Ratner & Hui, (2003). Peng is also wrong to characterize Western thinking as linear and non-contextual. The use of contextualism in Western thought shows the error of this characterization.

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AUTHOR



Carl Ratner

Carl Ratner, Ph.D., Institute for Cultural Research & Education, Trinidad, CA 95570, USA. Email: cr2@humboldt1.com.