

Editorial

Why Cultural Psychology is everywhere

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The master program in psychology at the SFU Berlin includes a 2-semester course that invites students to look at clinical phenomena through the cultural psychology lens. A central question of the course is (and remains): What is culture? An easy start is to say what it is not. It is not an independent variable as it is usually treated like in cross-cultural psychology. We thus do not compare individuals or groups from different “cultures” and then try to interpret why we find (non-) significant differences between them. Culture does also not equal context, as Jaan Valsiner points out in, for example, his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology* (2012). This is easily understood when we look at individuals that migrate from one place to the other. The relocation involves the confrontation with another society (cp. Valsiner, 2012), or more precisely, with people that create this society. The individuals that are new to the place, nevertheless, feel – and are – different in, e.g., the way they approach and understand things. They might be unfamiliar with customs, the language, food, everyday objects, and only slowly learn to understand the meaning-making processes involved. Thus, they brought something with them: The meaning-making systems that they share(d) with the group(s) they belong(ed) to at the former location.

In his paper, Ido Nahmias looks at an extraordinary example of the processes involved in relocation. By interviewing his own grandparents, European Jews that migrated to Israel in the late 1940's, he is able to show how through language a sense of belonging can be established – also involving the counter processes of distancing oneself from the “old” place, and maybe even from a former “identity,” as Nahmias suggests. His interviewees speak of the wish to “disguise their foreignness” by using Hebrew instead of their mother tongues. They also speak of “belonging” to a place, but do not, at least not in the excerpts presented here, speak of “home”. Only when talking about the place they came from this term is used: His grandmother feels “let down” by her “home” because of the circumstances that made her leave. Also the term “feeling betrayed” is used, because she cannot be a “proud Slovakian” anymore. Home seems to be something highly emotional.

Roman Gallus and Christian-Tilman Schober provide a closer look at this concept of “home” – mainly through introspection, but also through interviews with fellow students. What they can show is that “home” is something dynamic, something that can either refer to a place, or a feeling, or both. And

even though many consider “feeling at home” a central aspect of healthy human life, there are some who consider it irrelevant for them, as one of their interviewee's states. We as researchers thus always have to be open for the individual's perspective that might be vastly different from what we expect.

In his article “Challenged life: How to live and cope with slow physical decline”, David Haupt shows one way of how to approach a research participant with this awareness. He follows and reflects the co-construction of meaning throughout the research process. This way, he can describe the ambivalences and dynamics that can be observed when someone is asked to share his*her own “Lebensweg”, which literally translates into “path of life”.

In all the mentioned papers, the participants were asked to talk about past events capturing memories of these events that will likely have changed over time and will have been reported in a certain way depending on the interviewer, situation, individual, as well as the interaction of all three. In the last paper of this editorial volume, Paul Lennart Hillmann poses the question of how music can trigger certain memories – music itself being a cultural phenomenon (cp. Boesch, 1993) loaded with individual and collective meaning. Hillmann shows quite vividly how, for centuries, the same song has been linked to certain life events whenever it was either played by the research participant himself or others.

So why is culture as well as cultural psychology everywhere? If culture is “within us”, or, as Valsiner (2012) puts it, “a tool within us” (p. 6) by which we create and make sense of the world around us, we can never get rid of it. It is part of every human experience, every encounter, and social interaction, which gives cultural psychologists the opportunity to study any aspect of human life: migration, home, dealing with physical decline, music. By diving into the phenomena, describing and understanding the processes involved, we come one step closer to understanding general human functioning that – in the end – will also help us (or others) to become better (clinical) psychologists.

References

Boesch, E.E. (1993). The sound of the violin. *Revue o Suisse de Psychologie*, 52 (2), 70-81.

Valsiner, J. (Ed.).(2012). *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.