

Reviewed by
Katrina Boulding

Cultural Psychology deals with the intersection of the individual mind and culture, two topics that are often left to be treated by separate disciplines whose ideas are not easily shared. Cole disagrees with the division of mind from culture, and offers up a bridge in the form of cultural-historical activity theory. This approach describes the co-construction of individuals, culture, and material environments. It involves studying mediation through artifacts, in context, through everyday activities.

The book is ripe with ideas. Two that I found most engaging, and which I think help explain Cole's project, are his emphasis on studying activity (such as learning) in everyday context, and his example of learning language.

Cultural artifacts need to be considered within their social, cultural, and historical context of consumption and production. Yet, context is not a simple concept. Context flows from the past and future as they interplay to create the present. It is social structure, individual human thinking, and our physical environment interacting and shaping each other. Cole also points out that an important result of looking at culture and mind in mediated context is that we cannot expect all individuals to either express culture in the same way or to have internalized the same parts of a culture. A person creates meaning based on previous experience and knowledge, changing constantly along with new experience. This is why, Cole points out, that looking at individuals along side the study of culture is so important. They cannot be separated from each other.

Cole emphasizes this through the study of language and communication. A child, isolated from the world, will not develop language. Language is a practice that exists between two people in a physical and social environment, and develops over time. As a child learns language, they make

sense of words through activity and context (in all its variations described above). This means that the experience of language is not consistent from one person to the next. Yet, as children develop their own nuanced versions of words and sentences, they still share a common enough structure - as a result of the shared tool of language - for meaning to be shared between people. Language is constantly reconstructed and recreated as it is used. It cannot be fully understood outside of the context of use.

Cole practices what he suggests as he writes the book: he explores his ideas through his personal history with the subject, the history of related ideas, modern day debates, descriptions of analytical tools, and examples of its application in the field.

Cultural Psychology demonstrates the power of the cultural-historical approach to understanding people, culture, the process of communication, and the environments in which we live.