

Review:

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**Carl Ratner (1997). Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations.** New York / London: Plenum Press, 276 pages, Cloth 0-306-45463-7, EUR 55.- / US \$ 59.50 / GB £ 38.75

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### 1. Introduction

*Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology* is a text born of the frustration many who work at the interface of the study of culture and psychology encounter. As author Carl RATNER notes in the preface, during research for an earlier book on the cultural foundations of cultural psychology, he came to a general conclusion: "Extensive descriptions of complex behaviors in meaningful situations were more informative than studies that employed standardized, quantitative measures of simple, overt responses" (p.ix). Thus begins RATNER's travels down a well-worn divide between qualitative versus quantitative methodologies in the social sciences. Joining an already established literature (cf. KING, KEOHANE, & VERBA 1994; RAGIN 1987) RATNER is keen on staking his own claim. While this book can be read on a number of levels, its primary goal is to establish a qualitative methodology for the growing field of cultural psychology, that will aid researchers to "discover the subtle, complex cultural facets of psychology that are not apparent in conditions, norms, policies, ideologies, and values" (p.3). [1]

Such a work is needed in a field of study with severe identity problems. During the past century, a number of marriages between psychology and the study of culture (read: anthropology) have resulted in new research agendas: culture and personality, psychological anthropology, and cross-cultural psychology. Cultural psychology is perhaps the newest manifestation, and arguably the one with the least concrete explanation and clear-cut research path (cf. SHWEDER 1991). RATNER sidesteps much of the hairsplitting that has characterized the growth of cultural psychology and offers an approach that seeks to include earlier research agendas. [2]

## 2. Chapter Outline

The book unfolds in six chapters in addition to a short introduction. The first chapter provides a critique of familiar arguments in the debates concerning the utility of qualitative versus quantitative research approaches. RATNER diverges from common lines of argument though to question the epistemological and philosophical underpinnings of positivist approaches. Positivist methodologies, he ultimately notes, "are akin to measuring rainfall in relation to plant growth" (p.48). While they can draw correlations, they can say little about the nature of the phenomena being linked and nothing about the processes that correlate them. While RATNER provides solid grounds for this critique, he unfortunately stops short before fruitful work can be done to improve the cleavage between the stated approaches. True, RATNER calls for an approach that would put qualitative approaches before quantitative research designs (as opposed to the reverse as some multi-method models follow), but there is no discussion of multi-method approaches that triangulate qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to move beyond a classification of primary and secondary methods. [3]

This qualification aside, the rest of the book provides much that is new. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a thoroughgoing analysis of qualitative methods themselves and measures for their improvement for the study of psychological phenomena. Chapter 2 introduces qualitative approaches for psychology and makes good use of MERLEAU-PONTY's (1962) "idealizing concept" as a way to conceptualize successful research strategies. [4]

Chapter 3 brings the reader back to the role of culture and in particular, "the cultural character of psychology," a phrase RATNER uses to describe the ways people collectively objectify the world around them into meaningful categories. Anthropologists and other students of culture may find RATNER's descriptions of culture thin, though his application of the concept to psychological phenomena are well-conceived and the examples employed in this chapter are helpful. Indeed, chapters 3 and 4 provide a fine introduction for researchers who come largely to the study of psychology and culture from the field of psychology. [5]

The final chapters take up the subjects of science and politics. In chapter 5, RATNER looks at the issue of whether or not qualitative cultural psychological methodology can be considered scientific, arguing again that epistemological underpinnings of positivist methodologies must be interrogated before new methodologies can be established. This chapter covers some of the ground of chapter 1, though arguably in a more succinct manner. Readers interested in RATNER's critique of positivism may wish to jump to here first and sidestep the earlier chapter. The book closes with a forceful discussion of the "sociopolitical underpinnings" that have resulted in the near supremacy of positivistic approaches. [6]

### 3. Potential Readership

This book will be of use to a wide range of scholars in anthropology, sociology, and psychology. As a work of in philosophy of science, scholars unaccustomed to this literature will find RATNER's approach and examples forthcoming and easy to follow. Perhaps the greatest drawback, however, lies in a lack of attention paid to the actual methods to be employed in this new approach. While I found the arguments compelling, concrete examples of the employment of methods would have been helpful. Perhaps, this will be the beginning of a new companion work. [7]

### References

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### Citation

Pribilsky, Jason (2001). Review: Carl Ratner (1997). Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations [7 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(2), Art. 18, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0102183>.

Revised 7/2008