



Penelope G. Vinden

Clark University, USA

Gathering up the Fragments after Positivism: Can Ratner Make Us Whole Again?

Ratner, Carl, *Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology: Theoretical and Empirical Considerations*. New York: Plenum, 1997. ISBN 0-306-45463-7

The purpose of Ratner's book is to develop a qualitative cultural psychological methodology. As such, this is a worthy enterprise. To date, cultural psychology, a relatively new 'phenomenon' within psychology, has tended to piggy-back on methodologies used by other disciplines, both inside and outside psychology. A theoretically sound and rigorous methodology that is founded on the principles of cultural psychology is overdue.

The Legacy of Postmodern Thought: The Death of Science and the Rise of Culture

There can be no doubt that a variety of dramatic changes have occurred at almost all levels within academic circles over the past few decades, the blame or praise for which can be laid at the feet of what is popularly called postmodernism. Postmodern thought, with its strong belief in relativism, extending in its extreme to a denial of rationality, has challenged the very roots of the scientific enterprise upon which

much of academic life, and much of psychology, is based. If the existence of a reality 'out there' to be studied is called into question, if all opinions are in some sense equally valid (although for some, in reaction to being ignored for years, certain 'fringe' opinions seem to be more valid than the traditional 'core' opinions), if there is no center, then traditional science must no longer hold court in academic circles.

With the demise, for many, of traditional science has come a rejection of its time-honored methodology, quantitative methods. A rejection of this methodology, however, leaves us with a problem—how are we to study psychological processes? Should we therefore declare that psychology is not a science? The answer to some is clear—reject science and the purveyors of science, those evil quantitativists, as well. Others of us, however, are loath to give up science. Yet the alternative, qualitative methodology, has always been regarded as 'soft' by 'true' scientists. But in calling qualitative methods 'soft' are we not merely acquiescing to the voices of power that have held sway for too long?

In rejecting the structures of power that have controlled research methodology, postmodern thought has also brought to our attention the fact that academia has been guilty of marginalizing, if not silencing, many voices—on one view, all voices but those of the white, upper-middle-class male. Focus on the varieties of previously silent voices has naturally led to a closer examination of the totality of the environment within which those voices speak, resulting in an increased interest in 'culture'.

To be sure, mainstream psychology has tended to ignore a majority of voices that do not share the narrow cultural heritage of the founders of modern science. When culture has been the focus of attention in psychology, it is often accompanied by the attitude that culture is something 'they' have, something that can be manipulated, partialled out, or in some way abstracted in order to compare them to us. As a result, when culture has been included in experimental research (note that 'it' is often seen as something that one can choose to include or exclude), it has often been relegated to the status of an independent variable. Even those who have acknowledged the complexity of culture have still tended to view it as a set of independent variables which exert an influence on the rest of (presumably culture-free) experience. Ratner, however, issues a call to view psychology as cultural at its core.

The Cultural Character of Psychology

What does it mean to say that psychology is cultural? Researchers are

not agreed on the answer to this question. Indigenous psychologists, psychological anthropologists, cross-cultural psychologists, cultural psychologists—each group firmly believes that psychology is cultural. Yet each would define culture in different ways, and individuals within each group also differ from one another.

One of the threads that runs through various definitions of culture and its relation to psychology is the notion that cultural concepts are mental concepts, and that cultural meanings underlie psychological phenomena. In support of this view Ratner cites the work of Harré (1986), Shweder (1990), Lutz (1988), and even earlier versions of himself (e.g. Ratner, 1993). In a mentalistic view of culture, one names colors, feels emotions under certain conditions, remembers particular events, and so on, because of the specific, culturally conditioned concepts one has formed. As Rohner (1984) has pointed out, however, the tendency with this view has been to reify culture, to see it as an abstract entity with causal power. One can see how such a view could lead to a fragmentation of psychology, to treating culture as an independent variable which can be peeled away from behavior.

Though he includes himself (in past works) in this group, Ratner does not believe that a mentalistic or cognitive view is adequate, for it overlooks the social structures that give rise to the mental concepts. Lacking in this view is a concrete connection with 'practical matters' such as 'social relationships, social dynamics, or material, technological, and intellectual resources' (p. 95). What kind of social structures and resources does he have in mind? His more concrete list has a distinctly 'Marxist' flavor to it—principles of ownership, production and distribution of resources, class structure, division of labor, power relationships. As we shall see, Ratner does not want to align himself entirely with the new left—so for some no doubt his agenda is not radical enough—for he does not wish to abandon science, rationality and reality altogether. But he does issue a call for a new center for cultural psychology—not a cognitive one but a practical one. This practical core is also essentially a social one—in his words, practical social activity.

Practical Activity

That Ratner's formulation of cultural psychology has a Marxist flavor should come as no surprise, given that the notion of praxis has its roots in the work of Marx and Engels, and that the various versions of activity theory in vogue today are inspired by the likes of Vygostky, Leontiev and Luria. However, while Ratner aligns himself with current activity theorists in his assertion that psychological phenomena

arise out of practical social activity, he criticizes what he sees as a tendency to view activity in very general terms, rather than considering what he calls 'the concrete social organization of activity' (p. 101). Even concerns with which tools mediate psychological processes, he finds, all too often fail adequately to take into account the technical and social attributes of particular instruments.

Ratner gives many telling examples to back up his objections, showing how researchers, while they claim to see the importance of incorporating concrete social activity into their research and/or interventions, fail to do so. However, a closer examination of one of his examples raises some questions about the direction Ratner would have us go. Lave (1988), in her discussion of mathematical thinking, compares the use of math in everyday activities such as shopping with math activity in school. While she finds important differences in how mathematical calculations are done in these two social situations, Ratner faults her for not analyzing the culture of commercialism and consumerism that undergirds shopping, for not considering the fact that 'advertising works to stimulate desire, reduce rational and critical thinking, encourage conformity and structure a self-concept that depends on material consumption for confidence and personal satisfaction'—among other things (p. 101). Even if one is in total agreement with Ratner's social analysis, however, one is left asking whether or not this detailed social analysis has anything to do with the strategies one actually adopts in calculating prices. It is an interesting analysis, and perhaps helpful for understanding some psychological phenomena, but its connections with the concrete math situations are not obvious. If he does see a connection between a self-concept based on material consumption and the failure to use math strategies taught in school, he does not elaborate on it. Lave was asking a specific question—do people use school-taught strategies in the everyday world?—and she found an answer. Why they employ different strategies may have little to do with consumerism or commercialism and may have a simple explanation such as the unavailability of a calculator in the supermarket. An indepth sociological analysis of every phenomenon smacks of using a sledgehammer when a tack hammer would do—in a word, overkill. It also makes one wonder if Ratner does not have an axe to grind regarding the ills of a capitalistic society that is overshadowing his quest for an appropriate method for cultural psychology.

Combining the Practical and the Social

In emphasizing the concrete social character of psychological phenom-

ena, Ratner issues an important call to see these phenomena not as isolated or isolatable units of analysis, but as part of a web of social activity. Yet, while maintaining that activity and psychology are reciprocally related, he also seems to prioritize activity. There are several stages of social life that he posits, and the relationships between activity and psychology vary according to which stage the social life is in. In the first, or planning, stage of social activity, individuals, limited by intellectual, physical and social resources, create new strategies which define behavior in various domains. In this stage concepts are the key ingredient, mediating between activity and psychology. The second stage occurs once activities are institutionalized. At this stage psychological phenomena are more 'substantial' (p. 112), though it is not really clear what Ratner means by this. Institutionalized activities are a way of life at this stage, rather than a potential, that supplements the conceptual structuring of psychology. Lest the directionality appear to be one-sided, Ratner is quick to assert that psychological phenomena are active at both stages, sustaining, developing and changing activity in both the planning stage and the institutionalized stage—activity and psychological phenomena are 'interdependent, interpenetrating moments of one relation' (p. 114). Psychology is the subjective side of practical cultural activity, activity the objective side of psychology. It remains to be seen if Ratner can offer us a methodology that can separate the two, or at least shed some light on to the question of which side we are observing at any particular moment.

Blurring the Social and the Cultural

Before we move on to the application of qualitative methodology to cultural psychology, however, it would be useful to summarize what Ratner's view has bought us thus far. On the positive side, he has clearly articulated the shortcomings in much of the theory and the research conducted both in mainstream psychology and in much of psychology that claims to be cultural. In defining culture, however, rather than bringing more clarity he leaves us with more questions. In particular, he seems to have conflated culture, society and social structures. Part of this may be intentional—if culture and psychology are inextricably bound together, then perhaps culture and society are as well. But if everything is interpenetrating everything else to such an extent that distinctions cannot be made, then there is no room to advance, nothing to study.

By dissociating himself from the mentalistic view of cultural

psychology, under which culture is the learned meanings of a group of people, Ratner opens the door for blurring the distinction between culture (the meanings) and social systems (the behaviors) which develop in response to and in tandem with cultural systems. While he tries to separate them somewhat in his two stages of social life, one is left wondering what is cultural about his view of psychology—why not simply call it social psychology? Perhaps his main problem with the mentalistic view of culture and psychology rests not on theoretical grounds but on his apparent desire to see real change in real people's lives. Certainly this is a laudable motive, and not one which I personally wish to undermine in any way. But to emphasize the conceptual side of culture is not to champion psychological change apart from socio-political change, as Ratner would maintain (p. 117). Rather, it is merely to recognize that there are two distinct, if related, processes going on. To be sure, psychological change does not occur merely by changing one's concepts. But neither does it arise simply by changing institutionalized behavior or social activities.

The Pitfalls of Positivism

Not surprisingly, Ratner begins his quest for a rigorous qualitative methodology by offering a critique of traditional positivistic (i.e. quantitative) methods. Seeking not merely to expose the shortcomings of the methodology, but also to expose the flaws in its epistemological underpinnings, he focuses on three main tenets of positivism, which he dubs atomism, quantification, and operationalism.

Atomism and Quantification

Atomism, briefly stated, is the view that the psychological phenomena can be clearly divided into discrete units that have 'intrinsic, independent, invariant, uniform, and simple natures'—what quantitative methodologists call variables (p. 15). The problem with variables, Ratner maintains, is that they are minimally cultural. Psychological phenomena, however, are cultural in character: they are 'a complex configuration of features that derive from social activities, relationships and conditions' (p. 15). Even when positivists try to allow for complex variables, the global variables they posit are made up of basic subvariables that are invariant across cultures. In other words, Ratner seems to allow for no universals in psychological phenomena. Rather, the complex configurations would be specific to each set of social activities, conditions, and so on, of which it is comprised.

A commitment to atomism leads the positivistic researcher to view

both stimuli and responses in a fragmented manner, which, while enabling quantification, overlooks the qualitative nature of psychological phenomena. Ratner gives many persuasive examples of how important interrelationships among phenomena and qualitative differences among cultures have been obscured or distorted in particular studies—for example, Triandis et al.'s (1988) questionnaire that measured concern for the in-group among Hong Kong participants. However, in most cases it is unclear whether a thorough-going qualitative methodology would have solved the problem, or simply a more informed quantitative methodology. Issues such as including abstract, trite statements in a questionnaire seem not to be intrinsically a problem with the methodology. As for his discussion on the uses and abuses of statistical significance tests, many of his objections (e.g. equating statistical significance with practical significance) are those which statisticians also inveigh against. The question then becomes whether it is the methodology that is at fault, or the abuses of the methodology at the hands of researchers.

Can We Live without Fragments?

The issue of fragmentation and subsequent quantification of phenomena is indeed an important one. To be sure, all behavior comes to us, as it were, in a steady stream, much as the sounds of a foreign language come to us in an undifferentiated flow—for example the chunk *alilachukayanki* from Quechua. When we do not speak or understand a language, we do not know what strings of phonemes or morphemes, words or sentences we are hearing. We can come to a certain measure of understanding by seeing when and how and by whom this particular piece of the flow of language used—people say this when they meet one another. Yet there are also meaningful smaller fragments into which we can divide this chunk. We can come to understand more fully by slowly learning to break the flow into smaller pieces. But not any fragmentation will do. We can come to understand in a complete way what *alilachukayanki* means only by looking at certain parts (*ali* means good or well, *ka-* is to be, *-nki* is a second person singular marking, *-chu* indicates a question, and so on)—the phrase asks ‘are you well?’ We can only understand the parts, however, by looking at the language as a whole. In the same way, psychological phenomena come to us in an undifferentiated stream. We can learn much from asking questions about when and how and with whom the phenomena occur, but we can also learn a lot by asking questions about parts of the phenomena. To prioritize one set of questions over against another is simply to prioritize one ‘fragment’ of

a phenomenon over against another, to empower one way of looking at things, if you will.

Operationalism

With regard to his critique of operational definitions of psychological phenomena, Ratner focuses on the ontological assumption that these phenomena exist as overt behaviors, and the epistemological assumption that knowledge is obtained through direct observation. Though he may be correct in his analysis of the origins of the methodology in a world view that was unconcerned with the significance of behavior, that did not believe there was anything beyond the surface of acts themselves, he does not leave open the possibility that the methods might be used for other ends than the positivists originally intended. And again, the examples he uses parody quantitative methods. For instance, in response to research that studies aggression as expressed in hitting (p. 40), he rightly points out that not all hitting is aggressive, that there are many ways of showing aggression that do not involve physical violence, and so on. But it is arrogance, not necessarily a faulty methodology, that prompts researchers, quantitative or otherwise, to claim that what they are studying is the entire picture. Many of Ratner's examples involve the application of research to cultural situations which are radically different from the situations in which the questionnaires (etc.) had been devised. This is simply bad, insensitive research, and does not demonstrate that methods themselves are fatally flawed. Locating the problem in the positivistic focus on overt behavior is attacking the wrong problem—how is the activity that Ratner places as the locus of his methodology not overt behavior? The real problem is when research, any research, be it qualitative or quantitative, fails to take the meaning of behavior into account.

Principles of Qualitative Methodology

Ontological Principles

Rather than focusing on the techniques of qualitative methodology, Ratner engages in a discussion of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the method. The ontological nature of psychological phenomena is threefold: first, they are complex; second, extended in time; and, third, mental. The fact that psychological phenomena are complex mental phenomena which are expressed in multiple ways over an extended period of time provides (for him) the ontological basis for the necessity of qualitative methods.

That psychological phenomena are complex both in their nature and in their manifestation through time, no one would deny. Even the most quantitative of researchers would be foolish to proclaim, in finding a relationship, for example, between parenting style and aggressive behavior in children, that his or her parenting measure exhausts all there is to say about parenting, or that the behaviors studied represent all there is to say about aggression, or that expressions of aggression do not change over time. Admittedly, some researchers (likely both qualitatively and quantitatively oriented ones) do write as if they have given the last word on the topic at hand. However, when one looks at the list of components that Ratner says make up the complexity of anger—thoughts, values, perceptions, memories, reasoning processes (judgments, inferences, deductions), self-concept, associations—it is hard to image how any methodology would be adequate for the task. Then when one adds to this the fact that these components are all interrelated, and that the phenomenon of anger is permeated by other complex phenomena, doing psychology (let alone cultural psychology—for we haven't even begun to bring social institutions into the picture yet!) becomes an overwhelming task.

The third principle, that psychological phenomena are mental and have no fixed behavioral expression, opens up a familiar debate. The key word here is 'fixed'. The waters of the ocean are always moving, but can we not say that the tide is 'in' or 'out'? If there is no pattern to behavior, if not even a probabilistic relation between what people do and what they are thinking/feeling, the meanings they give to behavior, then how can we make any inferences about the psychological phenomena that we desire to know? Listening to what people say about their mental states is only interpreting a different kind of behavior—verbal behavior. Furthermore, this third principle seems to contradict Ratner's focus on activity as the locus of psychology. If there are no fixed behavior expressions of these mental states, how are they knowable at all? And from where does the institutionalized behavior arise that is so important if one is to change one's mental concepts?

Epistemological Principles

When it comes to discussing the epistemological principles—which he claims link the ontological nature of the psychological phenomena to the practical outworkings in methodology—Ratner dismisses them in one sentence:

The epistemological principles are that psychological phenomena must be comprehended as complex mental phenomena that are internally related to other phenomena, have multifaceted qualities as a result of this inter-

penetration, and are deciphered from numerous, interrelated, extended expressions. (pp. 58–59)

In other words, because psychological phenomena are the way they are, we must know them as they are. This seems a rather trivial interpretation of the meaning of epistemology, however, and one that is not particularly helpful. Is Ratner implying that the traditional distinction between ontology and epistemology is not valid? If so, this would be helpful to discuss this in more detail. To be sure, we need to know something or at least make some presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon which we are studying (ontology) before we can study it. And yet, to know that, we need to have some theory about the nature and scope of knowledge (epistemology).

What epistemological principles do we need if we are to justify a qualitative methodology? Would these principles necessarily differ from those which justify a quantitative methodology? Originally, a quantitative methodology was based on the epistemological principle that all meaningful propositions (except for logic and mathematics) must be empirically verifiable. Popper (1959) clarified and expanded upon the positivistic view by claiming that the criterion of falsifiability was more important than verifiability. On this view, since we can never know the truth (i.e. never verify beyond a shadow of a doubt that our propositions are true), we must put forward hypotheses and rigorously test them to see if they can be proved false. This claim is at the heart of quantitative methodology and its love affair with the null hypothesis—since we can never prove what we think is true, the statistician works hard to falsify what he or she thinks is false, thus leaving the ground more firm under the cherished belief.

Popper's falsifiability principle is grounded in an important assumption that is certainly one which most researchers today would agree with—we can never know with complete certainty. While Popper may have meant this principle to apply only to science, leaving ontological principles free from falsifiability, others today might be more radical in their claims. Clearly, however, Ratner does not want to go all the way to the postmodernist conclusion that all truth is an illusion. Rather, he appears to be claiming that his ontological principles concerning the nature of psychological phenomena are not just his opinions, but are true statements about the nature of psychological phenomena. His agenda, then, may be more radical than even he suspects. In his seeming conflating of ontology and epistemology he may be saying that we must simply take a stand for the nature of a phenomenon, and then base our methodology directly on what we assume that nature to be, without as it were going through any theory

of knowledge. In some ways this seems like a radical move. Yet we must also ask ourselves if it is not tautologous. If our methods are based on what we assume the phenomenon is like, will we not then simply always find what we are looking for? Is Ratner promoting some sort of complex behaviorism, where a study of activity is substituted for a study of behavior?

Methodological Principles

A closer look at his methodological principles should give us an answer to this question. This is not an easy task, however, as the outline of his methodology is divided between two chapters—one which speaks generally and one which focuses on the cultural applications of the methodology. This division in itself should give us pause—if psychology is, as he claims, cultural in character, how then can a methodology which is based on the nature of the phenomenon be discussed apart from culture? In fact, and this may be a major flaw in his argument, how is it that he has been able to discuss the ontological nature of psychological phenomena without making mention of culture? Has he too fallen prey to the tendency of many recent researchers to ‘add on’ culture to an already fully developed theory of psychology?

The Role of Verstehen

The thrust of Ratner’s qualitative methodology is to ‘expand’ on an individual’s behavior in order to understand the complex psychological phenomena that underlie it, to infer the mental activity from extensive outward expressions. This dichotomy between outer and inner activities some might want to argue with, but it is not one with which I personally find fault. Some may wish to study only overt behavior, but as long as we are going to talk about thoughts and feelings, beliefs and desires, motivations and attitudes, I think they are fair game for analysis. The art of inferring the unperceivable mental from behavior Ratner takes to be the *Verstehen* (understanding) articulated by philosophers such as Dilthey and Weber. *Verstehen* is not simply introspection or intuition, but an objective rational understanding. The way to arrive at this objective understanding of the phenomenon is to ‘constantly check one’s assumptions against the evidence that is available, and revise them to increasingly accommodate this evidence’ (p. 60). Does this sound just like the positivist agenda of hypothesis testing? Thus far it does not differ. The difference arises, however, in that the quantitative researcher seems to move in a more linear fashion, making hypotheses, testing them, revising and

retesting, always looking at a limited and narrow set of data. The qualitative researcher, Ratner claims, proceeds in a more circular fashion. In philosophy this is the hermeneutical circle, which arose from the phenomenological tradition. It differs from the positivistic agenda, in that the scope of what counts as evidence is more extensive, and every interpretation of experience is constantly being re-evaluated in light of the whole of which it is a part, and the whole is always being re-evaluated in terms of the parts. Ratner's approach differs from a strict phenomenological technique in that he wishes to include the historical/social/cultural relationships as part of the whole. This method of proceeding is of course closely related to his view of the nature of psychological phenomena, namely that they are only evident in complex, multiple interconnections of behaviors and relationships. Yet this shows us a potential problem with *Verstehen*—the very definition of a psychological phenomenon presupposes *Verstehen*.

Salvaging Quantitative Methods

As Ratner proceeds to give us more details of the qualitative methodology it is not obvious why his methodology is clearly qualitative. The first stage is to identify a psychological phenomenon through behavioral (including verbal) responses. In order to fully understand the quality of the phenomenon, the researcher must identify the kinds of situations in which it does and does not occur, being sure to note the kinds of stimuli which bring it about, and what effect the experimenter might have on the response. The researcher must also be sure to understand the configuration of other psychological phenomena with which it is closely related. It is important to employ all these principles simultaneously. But it is also true that good interpretations consist of 'few concepts that logically explain all the relevant data' and that every 'interpretation must be confirmed or disconfirmed by specific empirical details' (p. 67). Is this anything that would necessarily preclude the use of quantitative methods?

Ratner does indeed acknowledge a place for positivistic methods, though in a position definitely subordinate to qualitative procedures. Rather than supplementing qualitative methods with quantitative, he proposes adopting them into qualitative procedures (e.g. calculating the frequency of qualitative responses), transforming them (e.g. by prioritizing psychological significance over statistical significance) or assigning them a subsidiary role in the analysis. This method of proceeding, he claims, is not the same as simply mixing the methods. Yet he is not clear how one is to determine whether or not one is mixing, subordinating, or modifying. While he gives examples, it

might have been more helpful to have some principles abstracted from those examples.

Culture and Qualitative Methodology

As Ratner takes his general methodology and ‘culturalizes’ it, a closer look at one of his examples would be instructive. His basic theme seems to be that the socio-historical aspects of relationships must be taken into account in order to understand any psychological phenomenon. Yet some of his examples seem to take this injunction to an extreme. Americans who tend to leave interpersonal relationships without serious discussion of problems or attempts to change are seen as mirroring the business world, where corporate leaders routinely abandon businesses and relationships with the community when they encounter economic difficulties. But does an analysis of the economic community really reveal anything we didn’t already know about interpersonal relationships—that for many they are based on self-interest and lack of compromise? Is the economic activity really the basis for what happens in interpersonal relationships? Apparently Ratner thinks it is, for in another example he claims that the normative economic activity of firing employees in order to cut costs is the cultural basis of the random killing of bystanders and other seemingly senseless acts of violence. While there may be parallels between what happens inside and outside the business world, it seems equally (if not more) plausible that there is a third, more general principle at work (e.g. the exaltation of individual self-interest over the interests of the group) that is responsible for abandoned relationships, both interpersonal and economic. Furthermore, significant ways in which the two realms of activity differ are ignored or overlooked in the effort to find similarities, and there may be other mitigating factors which make other cultural values (e.g. respect for life) fade into the background in some situations but not in others.

In a final chapter, Ratner takes a bold step in calling us to eschew the positivistic definition of science and reclaim the notions of validity, precision, objectivity, predictability, and so on, which most qualitative methodologists have dispensed with. Rather than abandoning science altogether, he invites us to redefine it, taking the valid notions from a positivistic approach, and combining them with the valid notions of what has often been called a non-scientific approach. The resulting ‘non-positivistic science’ he claims will have objectivity, validity, generalizability of findings and causal power.

His descriptions of this new science, however, leave me unsatisfied.

The objectivity that he espouses is not certain, absolute knowledge, but 'rigorously acquired knowledge' (p. 193), what Dewey calls warranted assertions, 'supported by a wealth of evidence that has been rigorously collected . . . is logically consistent, and has been scrutinized and cross-checked by the scientific community' (p. 194). Again, one wonders how this kind of objectivity differs from a positivistic approach. Validity comes through suspending one's presuppositions. Paradoxically this does not mean denying them but rather seeing clearly how they have influenced one's interpretation of the other. Yet how is one to acquire that overarching view which can clearly separate one's own conceptions from the others'? Causal explanations involve particular social activities and values that give rise to psychological phenomena. Yet is it possible that the individual can be overlooked with such a strong emphasis on the social?

Conclusion

Overall, Ratner has issued a clear and necessary call for psychologists to look at psychological phenomena not as mere isolated objects, but as connected wholes, dynamic, complex phenomena that are not understandable apart from a network of historical and social relationships and activities that exist through time. He has shown us the depth of theoretical issues involved in choosing a methodology, and has drawn our attention to the ways in which our methods can distort the nature of the phenomena we are studying. While his principles of qualitative methods are definitely worth pondering, he leaves this reader wanting more. Some of his most interesting thoughts regarding the research process come almost as asides; for example when he compares psychological and physical research, stating that 'far more sensitivity, empathy, sophistication, and comprehensive observation' is needed in the study of psychological phenomena (p. 185). But exactly how am I to become more sensitive, more empathic, more sophisticated, and so on? The practical suggestions he gives—develop appropriate relationships, comparing diverse modes of responding—seem to beg the question, for if I am not sensitive, how will I know what kind of relationships are conducive to psychological expression?

In the end, it may be that there is a certain fuzziness that is simply part of the territory, and that it is my own positivistic roots that are sprouting up again, demanding a clear-cut methodology that will guarantee results of a certain sort. Granted the theoretical underpinnings of a positivistic point of view are highly questionable. But is it not possible to sever the methods from their history, and use them to

answer certain questions? Ratner seems to open the door to that possibility, for he does give quantitative methods a role in the study of psychological phenomena.

At the same time, however, his critique of the socio-political underpinnings of positivism is so damning that one wonders what possible role could be left for any kind of quantification. Through this critique Ratner provides us with an example of a socio-historical analysis of the psychological phenomenon of our cultural commitment to positivism. Though he sets aside the language of causality—he uses instead terms like ‘reflects’ and ‘reiterates’ to show parallels between assumptions and preoccupations of our society—he lays blame for the rise of positivism at the feet of capitalism. Qualitative methodology, for Ratner, reflects humanitarian values which aim for the betterment of human life. While such a methodology would encourage individuals to express themselves, and would seek to articulate clearly the meaning of the individual’s expression, every subject’s expression is not equally important (as it is to the positivist), but ‘certain phenomena and responses are more important than others’ (p. 235). The greater good (the good for the majority?), then, must be what Ratner has in mind. If so, then he has come full circle and we are left with the knotty problem of deciding who determines what ‘humanitarian’ is, which individuals are to be encouraged but then marginalized, and what is the good for which we are striving. Capitalism and positivism may not have provided an answer to these questions, or may have given answers with which many of us are not happy. It is not clear, however, that socialism and humanitarianism will guarantee more satisfactory answers.

References

- Harré, R. (1986). *The social construction of emotions*. New York: Blackwell.
- Lave, J. (1988). *Cognition in practice: Mind, mathematics, and culture in everyday life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Lutz, C. (1988). *Unnatural emotions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Popper, K. (1959). *The logic of scientific discovery*. New York: Basic Books.
- Ratner, C. (1993). A sociohistorical psychological approach to contextualism. In S. Hayes, L. Hayes, & H. Reese (Eds.), *Varieties of scientific contextualism* (pp. 169–186). Reno, NV: Context Press.
- Rohner, R. (1984). Towards a conception of culture for cross-cultural psychology. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 15(2), 111–138.
- Shweder, R. (1990). Cultural psychology: What is it? In J. Stigler, R. Shweder, & G. Hardt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1–43). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Triandis, H., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M.J., Asai, M., & Lucca, N. (1988). Individualism and collectivism: Cross-cultural perspectives on self-in-group relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54, 323–338.

Biography

PENELOPE G. VINDEN is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. She has conducted research in children's understanding of mind in Peru, Cameroon, and Papua New Guinea. She continues to explore the cultural construction of mind among low-income Hispanic and Caucasian families in the Worcester area. ADDRESS: Penelope G. Vinden, Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main St., Worcester, MA 01610, USA. [email: pvinden@black.clarku.edu]