

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING AND THINKING



THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LEARNING AND THINKING: AN EXPLORATION IN EXPERIMENTAL ANTHROPOLOGY

by Michael Cole, John Gay, Joseph A. Glick, and Donald W. Sharp
Basic Books, \$10.00
Reviewed by Patricia Marks Greenfield

Modern anthropologists study the diversity of human environments yet believe in the psychic unity of mankind; psychologists, on the other hand, tend to apply experimental techniques and tests developed in one milieu to very different cultures, even as they affirm the profound influence of environmental variation on behavior. Faced with this paradox, Cole, Gay, Glick and Sharp adopt experimental anthropology as a solution. As they conceive of this method, ethnographic analysis provides "a picture of the intelligent, adaptive behaviors that people engage in every day" (page 21). These adaptations presumably require certain intellectual processes; the researcher

explores them with controlled experiments. At each stage of research, experimental techniques and results are measured against the ethnographic criterion; the goal is always "to minimize and evaluate the extent of the distortion that observation introduces into the natural situation" (page 22). While cross-cultural psychological research on intellectual processes has been moving in this direction—that is, away from ethnocentrism—Cole, Gay, Glick and Sharp have produced the first coherent *theory* of the relation between psychology and anthropology.

Their theory emerged during long-term study of cognitive processes among the Kpelle of North Central Liberia and Guinea ["The Puzzle of Primitive People," by Michael Cole, *PT*, March 1968]. This book, the third major volume to emerge from the project, reports the last few years of research.

They begin, hoping to discover universal cognitive processes. A persistent theme of the findings is that the major cognitive processes identified by Western psychologists may be found in the most traditional Kpelle tribesman, but that the situations in which a Kpelle uses a given skill may be quite different. This approach leads to a multitude of variations on an experimental theme to find out in what circumstances a particular skill—for example, classification, memory, or logic—will manifest itself in Kpelleland. The experimental variations sometimes seem more relevant to the culture of the psychologist than to that of the Kpelle; the chapter on classification suffers from this flaw. Such sections are tough sledding for the general reader because of technical data analysis in some places and complex research design in others. But at many points the experimental variations reveal important and seemingly universal intellectual skills in the Kpelle that conventional methodology would have missed. And the Kpelle mind comes alive for the reader.

One important accomplishment of the authors' ethnographic research is

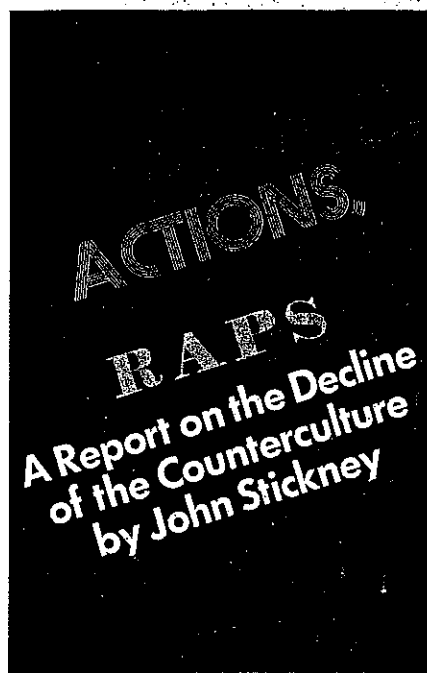
the uncovering of the epistemological stance of Kpelle culture toward knowledge and thinking, a stance that undercuts the very presuppositions of much Western testing and experimentation. For example, the authors point out that "In a society where secrecy is a major social phenomenon, asking questions is also a very delicate enterprise" (page 45). They go on to recount an incident in which John Gay asked a blacksmith to calculate how much he would earn from the sale of six axes. He answered correctly, but became angry when Gay asked him how he knew the answer; the blacksmith then asked Gay for *his* sources of information. This attitude toward knowing must make traditional Kpelles reticent to explain, for example, their reasons for grouping objects in classification experiments, such as those reported in the book. Despite having this important and relevant kind of information about Kpelle culture, the authors point out that they have, in general, failed to demonstrate concrete links between specific ethnographic facts and specific experimental findings. Still, an ethnographic fact like secrecy becomes a constant factor that should not affect the *pattern* of results, and it is this pattern that the authors depend on for their interpretations.

This book also lays to rest some earlier claims about the "primitive mind." For example: do "primitives" memorize by rote while "civilized" people use meaning to help them remember? No. In a standard memory experiment American subjects are the only ones to show any tendency towards rote memorization. But the Kpelles actually memorize very little in this situation. Again and again, the traditional Kpelles appear to apply intellectual skills—memory, classification, or logic—*only* when the skills have clear functional relevance—quite the re-

verse of a rote approach to intellectual tasks. For instance, in recalling an array of objects, Kpelles do not cluster them according to domain—food, clothing, tools or utensils. While each domain is important, the contrast among them lacks significance in this situation. Although the categories themselves are not arbitrary, the structural relation among them is. However, when the same heterogeneous group of objects is embedded in a story so that each category—food, clothing, tools, and utensils—becomes associated with a different character, and the point of the story is to differentiate among the characters, then the Kpelle use these categories to recall the items. The story endows the categorical contrasts with functional significance, and the Kpelles respond with formal classification skills.

The Western style of formal education, now an important force in Liberia and a major variable studied in this book, seems to alter this need for functional relevance. Many of the experimental comparisons between schooled and unschooled Kpelles show that formal education fosters the use of general, as opposed to specific, cognitive skills in a wide variety of situations. Although the authors contrast their view of the role of schooling with my own ["Language and Learning," by Patricia M. Greenfield and Jerome S. Bruner, *ET*, July 1971], I see their view as a further development of Bruner's and my own claim that formal schooling encourages *context-free* cognitive operations. Indeed, in many instances their results parallel my own in Senegal and Mexico, as well as those of other investigators working in still other cultures. This is encouraging for those who would take cross-cultural comparison out of the realm of exotic eccentricity and put it at the center of the study of a universal human psychology. *The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking* is an extremely important step along that road.

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STREETS, ACTIONS, ALTERNATIVES, RAPS; A REPORT ON THE DECLINE OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

by John Stickney
G. P. Putnam's, \$6.95

Reviewed by Todd Gitlin

Travelers to the interior of the counterculture include, as yet, no Alexis de Tocqueville, no Karl Marx, and no Hieronymus Bosch. The new tourists cannot reach beyond wild, almost random generalization and superficial reportage of bad journalism that spins gargantuan theories and descriptives, ranging from Charles Reich's image of countercultural Eden to horror stories about the Manson family, neither of which is adequate to the facts and process of a decidedly mixed—and evolving—bag. John Stickney's book is a case in point.

Streets, Actions, Alternatives, Raps assembles, triptych-style, a mélange of scenes barely visited and people talked with in the summer and fall of 1970. Rarely have so many words said so little about so many. The portraits are the by-now-familiar one-dimensional accounts of bewildered and contingent young persons busy at the arduous work of surviving with some integrity, energy and purpose. The objects of these portraits presumably are no more or less one-dimensional than the rest of us, but Stickney has not penetrated

their worlds. As for scenes—political-tribal-musical, communal—he did not stay long enough in any of them to dig beneath the trivial details of gesture, facade, pose and persona, all of which he flaunts indiscriminately in a parodic *New Yorker* style. He accepts gossip as history, and mystique as insight, and he races from one scene to another barely catching his breath.

The counterculture emerges as a bizarre and arbitrary collage of freaky but intent style. Bizarre it is by the country standards, but arbitrary it is not: the corrections in which the young are moving reflect, however complexly, their experiences of growing up in America. But in order to get a fix on this historic process, a reporter must have either a keen eye for significant detail, or a good, analytical intuition. Stickney, a former *Life* reporter, shows neither. He lacks both the passion of engagement and the cool intelligence of detachment.

In their place, he offers a naive and sentimental naturalism, which at times faithfully reproduces the naiveté of the counterculture. He scrambles the committed, inane, superficial, searching occult and practical aspects with a mass of irrelevant detail and off-the-wall speculation on the meanings of this and that. It is not that any particular glimpse is wrong, but that his entire approach is haphazard and, finally, lifeless.

Though the book is subtitled "A Report on the Decline of the Counterculture" (but only on the dust jacket), there is no clear sense of a direction, let alone causes, of decline, or for that matter, of ascent or the complicated fluctuations that make up the truth. Stickney tries to straddle a loose identification with the counterculture and misleading objectivity, neither of which summons up reality. When he reports revolutionary pomposity, I am not persuaded that he recognizes it as such. When by implication he applauds alternative projects, like a food cooperative in Eugene, he ignores their limits. Since he is no more than a curious observer, since the ground of his concern is absent, one doesn't know from which