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The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking: An Exploration in Experimental Anthropology by Michael Cole; John Gay; Joseph A. Glick; Donald W. Sharp

Review by: Benjamin N. Colby

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*The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking: An Exploration in Experimental Anthropology.* MICHAEL COLE, JOHN GAY, JOSEPH A. GLICK, and DONALD W. SHARP. In association with Thomas Ciborowski, Frederick Frankel, John Kellemu, and David F. Lancy. Foreword by George A. Miller. New York: Basic Books, 1971. xx + 304 pp., figures, illustrations, map, tables, 11 appendices, bibliography, index. \$10.00 (cloth).

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Experimental anthropology has never really developed as a subdiscipline, in spite of such notable examples as the Torres Straits expedition, some of Nadel's work, Lenneberg and Roberts in Zuni, and current work by Romney, Burton, and others with the triads test. If this book stimulates even a few anthropologists to experimentally investigate the crucial area of rule learning, recall, and other interrelationships between

thought and culture (as traditionally defined), it will do a great service. I suspect that it will do much more than this, however. It may well prove to be a landmark in the development of anthropology as a science. The numerous experiments with American and Kpelle subjects reported here by Cole, Gay, Glick, and Sharp all point to exciting results and underline the importance of such work to the development of culture theory which, if we define theory with any austerity, anthropology sorely lacks.

The experiments described in this book were done by a group of cross-culturally oriented social scientists at the recently formed School of Social Sciences, UC Irvine, under a program originated by Cole and Duane Metzger. The authors emphasize the need of ethnographic analysis prior to experimentation so that the kinds of activities typically engaged in by a people can be identified and taken account of in designing and interpreting the experiments. Ethnography thus should suggest the form in which experiments should be run as well as the contextual or cultural variables that must be taken account of.

Remembering, problem solving, and rule learning have traditionally concerned psychologists; yet because these activities are basically cultural processes, the neglect of cultural context has been the bane of countless psychological experiments. For some reason, anthropologists and psychologists rarely have combined their interests and, as a result, no serious comprehensive theory of the relation between typical cultural skills (mundane activities) and cognitive processes has appeared. Though the authors don't phrase it in exactly these terms, they hold that most "cultural" differences in cognition are really differences in mental predispositions or mental ruts. To oversimplify, for a moment, the subjects, American and Kpelle, literate and nonliterate, performed well or badly in the experiments according to whether the correct responses required that they stay in, or get out of, their ruts. For example, it was found that nonliterate Kpelle had not learned to develop structures to facilitate the storage and retrieval of new, somewhat alien, information. They improved when the experimenters more closely approximated a framework of a "per-

sistent social tendency" (i.e., culturally salient cognitive task). On the other hand, American school children are adept at creating their own subjective organizations on the spur of the moment. To me, one of the most exciting findings of the authors was that by using external cues (chairs), the experimenters provided a catalyst for spur-of-the-moment subjective organization. When provided with this catalyst, the Kpelle subjects did as well as the American ones.

Whether or not anthropologists might want to repeat some of the experiments reported, or to develop new ones, the implications of this book for further changes in ethnographic procedures are far-reaching. We should try to describe the contextual situations that evoke particular cognitive operations—be they the subdivision of a problem into sub-problems or the abstraction of common stimulus dimensions or other processes. As this was an exploratory project, the authors did not themselves do this, as they explicitly acknowledge at various points. Even so, they mislead the reader in calling the second chapter "An Unorthodox Ethnography." It is neither unorthodox nor an ethnography (by modern standards) but rather a description of Kpelle life with respect to traditional anthropological subjects—acculturation, education, etc. The chapter which follows, however, "Classification," is fully in tune with modern ethnographic semantics, uses an informal version of Metzger's ethnographic elicitation technique, and brings in some interesting free association data to compare with the results of the Metzger technique.

The next step would presumably go beyond these procedures to a description of what might be called saliency contexts in which particular semantic associations or cognitive processes are tied to a particular cultural situational context.

There are eleven appendices describing details of the experiments which should be helpful to those who wish to begin work at what may turn out to be a real cutting edge of anthropological research.

*Patterns of Discovery in the Social Sciences.*  
PAUL DIESING. Observations series.  
Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971. x + 350