

Dewey's Cultural Theory and Psychology

When the history of Cultural Psychology is being discussed one often encounters the names of Lazarus, Steinthal, and Wundt in Germany, Rivers and Bartlett in Britain, and Vygotsky in the former Soviet Union. Missing from mention is the name of the American John Dewey. This is understandable since he did not explicitly formulate a theory of culture and psychology but, nonetheless, the theme runs throughout his numerous publications. It is this that I shall endeavor to encapsulate and, in the process, reveal Dewey's anticipation and rejection of evolutionary psychology. Such a task is impossible to do justice to in a limited space but I hope that I may at least offer some signposts to where the mind of this seminal thinker may be mined.

In his eightieth year, while reflecting back upon his psychological theorizing, Dewey (1939a) noted that the traditional, mentalistic psychology was being transformed by biology and cultural anthropology. Human experience (experience meaning here "participation in activities," and "of doings and undergoings") is what it is, he contended, because of its subjection to cultural agencies and intercommunication. In retrospect, he referred to the approach that he had been developing as "socio-biological psychology" and "biological-cultural psychology." His intention, with these appellations, was to convey the idea that cultures stimulate innate tendencies and remake them; they promote and consolidate those tendencies into patterns of purposes that are fitted to the prevailing cultural conditions (Dewey, 1939/1989).

According to Dewey the biological constitution of humans is common to the people of whatever grouping and, because of that, innate tendencies cannot be appealed to in accounting for the differences between groups. The ways in which human groups differ from each other therefore had to be due to the prevailing cultural conditions. As Dewey expressed it,

If we take all the communities, peoples, classes, tribes and nations that ever existed, we may be sure that since human nature in its native constitution is the relative constant, it cannot be appealed to, in isolation, to account for the multitude of diversities presented by different forms of association. (Dewey, 1939/1989, p. 22)

Human activity is the result of the biological newborn being adapted to and incorporated into the reverberations of the encompassing cultural milieu. At first each infant is unaware of the group's aims and habits and is even indifferent to them (Dewey, 1916/1961). In time, however, she or he will be incorporated into the group as one of its members. What bridges the gap is education (broadly conceived). The child is made aware of and drawn into the activities of his/her group. The prevailing, habits, values, beliefs are partaken of. The degree to which engagement occurs, from complete to partial, depends on the level of complexity and diversity of the group, and the range of its activities that may be introduced to the individual.

The Hegelian Period

Dewey's early career was steeped in Hegelian absolute idealism although in time he would transition to naturalism. What appealed most to Dewey about Hegel was his proposal of the unity of all things. This attraction to the idea of unity was presaged by the earlier impact of Thomas Huxley's organicist biology on Dewey. From Huxley he derived "a sense of

interdependence and interrelated unity” (Dewey, 1930a, p. 13) and to which he attributed his appreciation of the need for an organic conception of life. He would later write (Dewey, 1939b) that the word “unity” opposed dualisms, be they body and mind or person and environment (including the social/cultural environment). Unity, when applied to phenomena of psychology, also opposed the dismemberment of whole people into elements like reflexes, sensations, ideas, or functions. Thus, when he was introduced to Hegel, he found subject and object synthesized as a unity rather than opposed as a duality (Dewey, 1930a). This resonated with him. Hegel’s treatment of culture, furthermore, had no strict divisions between the institutions—the customs, practices, and organizations—that composed it. In short, Hegel provided the formulation of unification that he craved. The impact of that, and his commitment to the Hegelian viewpoint, was apparent in Dewey’s (1884) first psychological publication—*The new psychology*.

People, Dewey (1884) judged, are not isolated, not independent of other people and society. The life of the individual is tied to the nation’s social life, to its *nomos*, to the spirit of its laws, and to its *ethos*, or the spirit of its culture. Through heredity, tradition, and education, by means of which the individual incorporates the wealth of the physical and psychical worlds, the individual is connected with the past in the present. Inherited, innate potential is fit to the prevailing conditions of the cultural milieu through experience and training, connecting the individual with those activities that are functional for the group. Psychology, he wrote, had benefitted from the biological concept of the organism. It led to mental life being recognized as a unitary, organic process rather than a collection of independent faculties. Furthermore, it supported Dewey’s emphasis on the relation of individual mental life to the persons who comprised organized society. Just as the concept of the environment was necessary to the concept of the organism, one could not conceive of the individual apart from the social. This is consistent with the modern ecological concept of *mutualism* in psychology: a unity and interpenetration of conceptual opposites (Still and Good, 1998), and a mutual dependence or symbiosis (Still and Good, 1992). To consider psychical life in isolation, developing in a void, was a mistake. It was within the organized society one is born into and functions within, that the individual gains mental and spiritual sustenance.

While Dewey was committed initially to the Hegelian perspective he gradually lost that devotion (Dewey, 1930a). Ultimately he regarded Hegel’s schematic organization as wholly artificial and eliminated the metaphysical proposition of an absolute mind manifesting in cultural institutions (Dewey, J. M., 1939). He retained, nonetheless, the opinion that the cultural environment shaped individual attitudes, beliefs, and values. This was consistent with his conclusion that there was a lack of empirical support for the then-prevalent notion of mind as pre-furnished and as separate from the physical world. The only psychology possible, apart from the biological basis of psychological processes, was a social psychology (Dewey, 1917), or a “biological-cultural” psychology (1939a).

Mind a Function of Social (Cultural) Life

By the 20th century Dewey was firmly anti-Hegelian and had transitioned to naturalism from idealism. The mind of the individual was now conceived of as a function of social life and incapable of operating by itself or of developing in isolation from others (Dewey, 1902/1943). In fact, the sort of mind that develops in environments that are non-social was of the defective, stupid order, or practically null (Dewey, 1917). Drawing upon the theory of evolution, Dewey contended that mind is not an inherent individual possession but a social

inheritance; it represents the manifestation, through the individual, of the historical endeavors and thoughts of humans, retained and propagated through the social medium (Dewey, 1902/1943). Mind is an acquisition, the result of being stimulated and nourished in the arena of human activity, shaped by social needs and the aims of the encompassing group. Mind for Dewey is a concrete system of purposes and beliefs formed through the interactions of biological potential with social (sociocultural) environments (Dewey, 1922).

An asocial, acultural psychology that isolates people from their environment detaches persons from their fellows and that is a mistake (Dewey, 1934/1980). From birth, each person is subject to the attention and demands of others who have themselves incorporated the habits of their group; a group- and culture-propagating process (Dewey, 1922). The origin of different groups and their development is not answered therefore by reference to psychic forces/causes. Instead, the matter is resolved by referring to actions, to the needs for food, housing, protection, company, mates, and so on (Dewey, 1922). Hunger, gregariousness, sexuality, fear, etc. are not psychic or mental forces in their first purpose; they are behaviors, ways of acting and interacting.

The problem one faces here is that of understanding the modifications that are made to native constitution as a result of those functions operating in the socio-cultural medium. Discussions of the inherent composition of human nature had sidestepped the central issue of how such constituents were stimulated or inhibited, strengthened or weakened, of how interacting with different cultural conditions determine their developed patterns (Dewey, 1939/1989). Humans enter life with primitive impulses that are undirected and loose (Dewey, 1922). These are the material of human nature. But human history teaches us that, while these impulses remained fairly constant, they have yielded a diversity of customs and institutions. The cultural environment provides the design by which each new entrant is transformed and loose impulses are molded into serviceable habits. While all humans require food, the type of food sought, and the sanctions of acceptability around consumption, are matters of acquired habit under the influence of custom (Dewey, 1938/1975). Customs serve as active demands with respect to ways of acting and as standards for individual activities; they are patterns that individual conduct is woven into (Dewey, 1922).

Consider the case of aggression and its expression in militarized warfare. Loosely organized aggression, the original impulse, may lead to hand-to-hand fighting but it, by itself, does not produce war—the intervening social conditions of politics, economics, and science do (Dewey, 1922). The manner in which natural combativeness manifests is thus subject to alteration through the influence of customs and traditions which are malleable. War, as an institution, is a social pattern of aggression, variably expressed across history rather than fixed (Dewey, 1938/1975). In its modern form, war is more than an impulse to aggress against an immediate antagonist. It has to be excited and sustained by social institutions that arouse emotional reactions, like fear and suspicion, toward distant strangers against whom the individual combatants harbor no personal animosity. It is maintained through propaganda and other modes of persuasion. Social forces and conditions can lead the combative tendency in whatever direction, including non-military wars against disease, poverty, and injustice—more benign expressions of the same impulse.

On Culture

The conditions that determine the character of specific groupings are exceptionally important since these shape a people's desires, and beliefs, and set their purposes; they are what nurture

individual minds (Dewey, 1922). These include the history, and current expression, of religion, law, politics, technology, and the means of interpersonal communication. The human environment for life and action is hence more than physical; it is cultural (Dewey, 1938). People the world over have very wide ranges of cultural resources, environments, and institutions (Dewey, 1902a) and the quality of mind that develops depends on the social conditions that shape it (Dewey, 1917). Rather than fixed, the variability in the human institutions that have been developed report on the plasticity of human nature (Dewey, 1938/1975). In economic organization, for instance, there has been slavery, communalism, feudalism, and capitalism.

The world of humans is more than physical characteristics; it involves organized meaning systems that condition relations with the physical environment. In cultural environments the physical conditions are modified by the interwoven traditions, customs, interests, purposes, and occupations that enclose them (Dewey, 1938). Consider the metals gold and silver and the mineral diamonds. Gold, silver, and diamonds have meanings additional to their physical properties since they are valued for their socially created exchange value. They are physical but they acquire human meaning. Through culture, individuals avail themselves of the significances that have been acquired historically, such as monetary value, and of the meanings embodied in, and conveyed through, language. Meanings cohere in language because of their place in the group's expectations and habits; language operates within common activities, interests, institutions, and customs (Dewey, 1938).

Culture, for Dewey (1939/1989), is a term that refers to the complex of conditions by which people associate with one another, how they interact and live together. Cultures are historical. They result from the prolonged and accumulating interactions of humans with their environments (Dewey, 1934/1980). Most important in this is the interplay of political, economic, and legal forms, commerce, industry, technology, and science, and the prevailing values and guiding social philosophy of the group (Dewey, 1939/1989). For the individual, these forces effect the quality of mind established through the person's occupational activity.

In the search of any group for those functions to which the mind is relative, the occupations of the group present themselves as central (Dewey, 1902a). The basic types of activity determined by occupations control the establishment and exercise of habits. They establish the objects and relations that are significant, the material that demands attention. Such activities are so basic and ubiquitous that they provide a pattern for the structural arrangement of the mental characteristics of the participants. Work, the pursuits answering human needs and goals, has an essentially social character and constitutes the world lived in (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008). Even the basic acts of maintaining life are arranged such that they are fitted to social plans of action which modify instinctual acts and thoughts. The result is a mental type that is in accord with the occupation (Dewey, 1902a). This holds for whatever occupation, whether the manual laborer type, the military type, the merchant, and so on.

Humans live through interpersonal associations in linguistic communities partake of transmitted culture (Dewey, 1938) and it is primarily through the adoption of speech that mind emerges (Dewey, 1925/1958). As Dewey conceived of it, language is composed of physical existents such as sounds, marks, pictures, but something more (Dewey, 1938). Those phenomena do not function as just physical things when operating as media for communication. They possess meaning, a representative capacity that has been established through agreement in action. Language is the instrument for joint activity and cooperation (Dewey, 1925/1958). It establishes continuity between natural occurrences and established meanings.

The capacity of humans to respond to and use meanings, rather than just react to physical conditions, distinguishes humans from animals. In their communicative exchanges humans transcend their animal natures. One could differentiate therefore between the lower (physical) side of human experience and the higher (ideal or intellectual) side. Central to this distinction being made was the historical development of signs and symbols and their adoption and expansion in subsequent generations.

The discovery or invention of symbols, including words and language, to Dewey, was the single most important occurrence in human history since no intellectual advance would have been possible otherwise (Dewey, 1929). Language, taken broadly as Dewey took it, is more than spoken or written speech. It includes all communicative means from art to rituals and ceremonies, monuments, industrial products, tools, and machines, which speak to those who understand and use them (Dewey, 1938). The main point of language is communication in cooperative activities (Dewey, 1925/1958). It is the means of retention and transmission of acquired meanings, of information, habits and skills, to subsequent generations (Dewey, 1938). Through it organic behavior is transformed into intellectual behavior, a product of living in cultural environments which permeate all forms of activity. It compels the person to absorb the meanings, customs, goals, beliefs, and institutions into their behavior. People are not islands unto themselves but exist in association with each other in a milieu permeated with meaning.

No matter how exaggerated the differences between peoples of different groups may be, those differences cannot be accounted for by an appeal to innate constitution (Dewey, 1922). If it were not for the incorporated traditions, which form into mental activities, people would be functioning at a bestial level (Dewey, 1934/1980). Behavior is saturated with influences that are of cultural origin and filled with meaning (Dewey, 1938). It is culture, not biological inheritance, which is the basis of the group differences in intellectual capacities. Neither civilized person nor supposed savage is civilized or savage by way of native constitution but by the culture of which they partake (Dewey, 1934/1980).

Between Cultural Differences: The Savage and the Civilized Mind

In early 20th-century vernacular, peoples from less civilized cultures were referred to as savages or primitives, and were generally deemed inferior due to innate biological differences (explained by polygenesis or racial inheritance and craniometry or skull measurement (Gould, 1981). By 1900 notions of racial hierarchies were used in Western society to explain observed differences (Lieberman, Littlefield, and Reynolds, 1999). To Dewey (1902a), in contrast, the observed differences were the product of cultural resources and institutions. Judgments of biologically deficient capacity therefore, misguided ethnocentrism.

The so-called savage mind was being measured against the “civilized mind” as the comparative standard. Given such an appraisal, it was no surprise that the result was negative. Such an interpretation, however, was false. Their mental organization, taken by itself and without comparison to minds organized under different circumstances, was actually an indication of a positive mental arrangement. These people’s apparent lack of the supposed higher mental plane was due to neither dullness nor apathy. It was a matter of cultural relevance and what was relevant were the skills appropriate to the task of living and the demands that they must answer to. Irrelevant qualities, qualities of service to civilized society, bore no consideration. They should not be evaluated, therefore, by criteria foreign to their occupations. The mind of the savage is the result of, rather than the cause of,

institutional backwardness (Dewey, 1916/1961). Social arrangements, being primitive, arrest observation and imagination. They restrict the objects attended to and limit the stimuli available for the development of mental functions (but that can change).

The difference between undeveloped and intelligent ability is a reflection of the historical progression in the quality of human acts. It indicates a transition from external to internal control or a transition from reactive to purposive behavior. The so-called savages' attention is limited to a relatively small number of natural objects due to their lack of control over natural conditions (Dewey, 1916/1961). Very few natural objects enter into their associated behaviors. Their observations and imagination are arrested by prevailing social customs and fail to enrich their minds. The stimuli to which they attend are crude in comparison to the psychologically weighted stimuli of civilized society. Advances in civilization have meant that more objects and natural forces have been brought into activity as instruments and means for achieving ends. It is the superior stimuli for evoking and directing action, rather than an inherent superior capacity, that are at the heart of the difference. Put simply, it is a matter of developed semiotic procedures and a lack thereof. The civilized person has to hand the collective achievements of prior generations—the artifacts, tools, and technologies and their encapsulated meanings, to draw upon and be empowered by, that the less civilized does not.

Through cultural advances humans have developed and arranged signs to serve as means, in advance of upcoming consequences, to either secure or avoid them (Dewey, 1910/1933). This characteristic differentiates between savage and civilized humans. A savage may note signs that portend, such as the danger suggested by waves crashing against the rocks, but the civilized person makes such indicators deliberately in order to regulate conduct—for example, lighthouses and warning buoys have distant foretelling functions. Less civilized persons may expertly read weather signs but those that are civilized develop weather services which make use of such signs. They turn them into artificial, symbolic forms, indicating in the present what is absent or remote, and distribute that information before the conditions manifest as natural signs. The hallmark of civilized culture is the deliberate institution, prior to the manifestation of emergencies, of means for detecting, preparing for, and even warding off threats, rather than responding to conditions in their immediacy. Civilized peoples have developed numerous mediating terms between the stimulus conditions and overt acts.

The Fallacy of Racial Inferiority and Biological Determinism

In an address to the *National Negro Conference*, Dewey (1909/1977) asserted no “so-called” race is inferior to another. Where “races” do differ is in the opportunities provided to them by their social environment. If a group is disadvantaged, he believed, it is a social not a biological disadvantage and to discriminate against them and curtail their full development was a waste. Every opportunity to advance should be provided all persons, regardless of race. Dewey, of course, was addressing the specific situation of the non-White population of the United States.

The suggestion that groups of people in underprivileged conditions are there because of some inherent inferiority was a falsehood. It was the result of a lack of educational opportunities in school and in vocation, in the venues provided for the development of their full potential. The disfavored, as much as the favored, group should be given every advantage that they can rise to; society should provide the conditions that will draw upon the human resources that are available to it. Differences of race, he maintained, are slight when compared with individual differences amongst people collectively. All ranges of skill, from inferior to superior, exist in

every race and a society that fails to offer every chance to realize the full potential of its constituents is failing the totality of its people. It is unjustly failing those capable individuals from depreciated groups as well as depriving itself of a valuable resource.

As much as Dewey rejected racist biological determinism, he also anticipated and rejected evolutionary psychological explanation. While people may differ in their innate propensity to benefit from experience Dewey rejected arguments that account for human conduct in terms of fitness or adaptations to conditions from the distant evolutionary past. For Dewey (1898) the term *fit* was one that had to now refer to social structures and the concomitant demands, ideals, and habits that assured effective conduct under the present circumstances. The life conditions to which *fit*-ness originally applied have changed, the environment has become very much a sociocultural one, and current adaptations are to the encompassing social conditions. That is to what they must be *fit*. The biological impulses inherited from distant ancestors have to be modified, restrained, and curbed in order to be effective under current conditions.

Through education and the establishment of effective action, along with the curtailment of unserviceable impulses or ineffective tendencies, one has a form of natural selection by society upon individual action. Acts initiated by impulses that were formerly useful, under current conditions, may have to be suppressed or others substituted. Through education, which is broader than mere schooling, individuals learn and prepare to become fully active in the arena of human social life (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008). The conduct of individuals is given shape through their being inculcated with the habits of thought, feeling, and action of their group (Dewey, 1897). Of course a subgroup that suffers discrimination and blocked opportunity will manifest this apparent inability but the interpretation of this as biological and fixed misses the point. Effective conduct is enculturated conduct for engagement with the present and the future, adaptable rather than fixed.

Within-Culture Psychological Restructuring

The demands that current conditions make upon us condition our acts. Such demands involve not just the requirements of others (family, group, or profession) but the tools and other artifacts with which the culture has equipped itself. That noted, it must be further acknowledged that cultural systems are subject to reorganization as they increase in complexity, and this increase or social restructuring will be reflected in the psychology of the group. Individual mental structure has its patterns of goals and desires altered with every major change within social constitution (Dewey, 1929/1962).

Over the course of his life Dewey had occasion to witness massive changes in American society and could not help but notice that the psychological character of the American people had been altered as a result. During the pioneer days of American life, a small population was scattered throughout a country that offered unfettered opportunity (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008). Living largely in isolation the pioneers had to be self-sufficient, independent of others. There was a national doctrine that rested upon individualism and self-sufficiency. The American progenitors were constantly moving, territories were expanding, but even those who remained settled had things to do for themselves (Dewey, 1930b). Forests had to be cleared, houses and fences built, clothing and candles made, and food provided. The people were self-sustaining and self-sufficient. It was “an every-man-for-himself society” (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008, p. 97). People were mostly alone and communities were unorganized and lacking institutions and traditions. Rather than ready-made, their world had to be fashioned through

their own efforts. Inventiveness, adaptability, and courageousness were psychological qualities that resulted from such occupation.

The pioneer period came to an end around 1880–1890 and passed into an age of commercialism and industrialization (Dewey, 1930a). Although the frontier was gone, there was still mobility but now it was by train along established routes (Dewey, 1930b). Journeys were no longer to the unknown and unfamiliar. Where one arrived was now similar to where one had left. The people had similar habits, news, music, and ready-made goods being peddled and advertised. The mental attitude was drastically changed. Rather than a society in which things had to be done, in which minds were stimulated by a demand to create and produce, an emphasis was placed upon receptivity, for taking up and reproducing the discoveries and ideas of others. Critical judgment was no longer given a premium. People became gullible, submissive, and passively drunk in the bunk of authority proffered through methods of persuasion. Independent judgment was lacking. People had become consumers of ideas, as well as of products, rather than producing their own.

The things one needed were now being made by unknown others in the service of unknown producers. Contact with the producer had shifted from direct contact with craftspeople to contacts with what machines produce. The work of a single person could now affect the welfare of others due to commodity production (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008). With modern inventions life shifted to congested cities and work to mechanized factories (Dewey, 1902b). Life was becoming specialized and labor ever more divided; nothing was self-explanatory to the worker who was now set to a partial task in production. Whereas, previously, workers had known the fabrication process as a whole, and of their part in the process, workers in factories became but fractional components in a complex, mechanical process. Individuals ceased to exercise critical discrimination and education failed to prepare independence of judgment and choice (Dewey, 1930b).

On the other hand, the demands for education had increased due to the vast expansion in the required makeup of mental equipment needed to adapt to modern conditions of successful living (Dewey and Dewey, 1915/2008). Reading and writing had become essential to daily action in attending to street signs, identifying the correct trolley, avoiding places of danger, to dealing with unseen events and performing one's occupation. Change demanded that scientific and technological advances be brought into the school and that such social restructuring would find its influence in the resulting educated minds. In less than a century the changes in society, the sociocultural changes, affected radical restructuring in the psychological makeup of the people and that to Dewey was a lesson for psychologists to draw from (to which I would add especially personality psychologists).

In Conclusion

The lesson of history to Dewey (1922) is that human nature remains the same but produces a diversity of customs and institutions, and, as we have seen, this finds expression in individual mentality. In contrast, at the time that Dewey was active there was a tendency to regard psychology as a matter of isolated individual consciousness (Dewey, 1899/1910). Psychology was thus conceived of as merely an account of consciousness and the impact of the socio-cultural milieu through sociogenesis was disregarded. Dewey's alternative conception was that the individual of concern to psychology was a social individual rather than an isolated, self-sufficient person—an asocial, ahistorical conception. Human nature may be relatively fixed but its expression is not.

There is no doubt that people differ in their natural endowments but it can be questioned whether they are thereby condemned to fixed modes of expression (Dewey, 1938/1975). Unchangeable human nature would mean predestination. If, however, human nature were truly fixed and unchangeable, education would not exist since such efforts would be futile. Education implies the modification of native makeup in the formation of new modes of thought, feeling, and desire. The native capacities are adapted to the current context. By way of example, Dewey suggested, a personal endowment for musical expression depends on the prevailing conditions for its development and expression. Beethoven, he proposed, had he not been born into civilized, 18th-century Europe, would have excelled in the music of the primitive group, were that his circumstance. He may have developed percussive skills, for instance, but he would have had no skill at symphonies since the necessary instrumentation and symphonic culture would be lacking. In the final analysis, it has to be realized that individuals are neither separate nor independent but are inherently social and cultural beings, and that is the context and condition of the emergent psychological being.

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