



Cultural Ways of Learning: Individual Traits or Repertoires of Practice

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This article addresses a challenge faced by those who study cultural variation in approaches to learning: how to characterize regularities of individuals' approaches according to their cultural background. We argue against the common approach of assuming that regularities are static, and that general traits of individuals are attributable categorically to ethnic group membership. We suggest that a cultural-historical approach can be used to help move beyond this assumption by focusing researchers' and practitioners' attention on variations in individuals' and groups' histories of engagement in cultural practices because the variations reside not as traits of individuals or collections of individuals, but as proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities. Thus, individuals' and groups' experience in activities—not their traits—becomes the focus. Also, we note that cultural-historical work needs to devote more attention to researching regularities in the variations among cultural communities in order to bring these ideas to fruition.

Our article addresses the theoretical issue of how to characterize commonalities of learning approaches of individuals who are members of ethnic groups that historically have been underserved in U. S. schools (e.g., African-American, Latino, and Native American students). We believe that a cultural-historical approach offers a way to get beyond a widespread assumption that characteristics of cultural groups are located *within* individuals as “carriers” of culture—an assumption that creates problems, especially as research on cultural styles of ethnic (or racial) groups is applied in schools.¹ In this article, after a brief discussion about how cultural styles research has helped the field think of differences rather than deficits, we use cultural-historical theory to revise this default assumption. Our article also presses cultural-historical research to make progress in characterizing commonalities in the variations across individuals and groups.

Cultural Styles: A Way of Talking About Differences Rather Than Deficits

Research on cultural learning styles first appeared in the United States at the end of the 1960s, in Lyndon Johnson's “War on Poverty” and research efforts to understand “cultural deprivation.” Much of this work grew out of the critical need to ameliorate the inequitable and deplorable schooling experiences of poor

and working-class students in U.S. public schools—predominantly students of color, many of whom were English-language learners.

The cultural styles approach arose from these efforts as researchers attempted to leave behind deficit-model thinking, in which cultural ways that differ from the practices of dominant groups are judged to be less adequate without examining them from the perspective of the community's participants (Cole & Bruner, 1971; Hilliard & Vaughn-Scott, 1982; Howard & Scott, 1981; McLoyd & Randolph, 1985; McShane & Berry, 1986). An alternative to the cultural styles approach is to deny cultural difference; however, ruling out discussions of cultural variation has often meant that the cultural practices of the dominant group are taken as the norm. Although deficit-model thinking is still with us, the cultural styles approach offered an alternative by characterizing cultural ways of different groups in terms that are respectful, attempting to describe them without making value judgments that suggest value hierarchies in cultural practices.

Work on cultural learning styles, however, is sometimes used in ways that are overly static and categorical—in schools, in cross-cultural comparisons, and in some of the cultural styles work that tries to avoid or that challenges the deficit model. Treating cultural differences as traits, in our view, makes it harder to understand the relation of individual learning and the practices of cultural communities, and this in turn sometimes hinders effective assistance to student learning.

Helping Students Learn: Having Styles or Participating in Practices

A common objective across the various approaches we discuss is the desire to increase student learning. However, treating cultural difference as a trait leads to a strategy of locating characteristics separately in the person and in the “context,” and “crossing” style and context as in the Aptitude X Treatment approach. In educational settings, work on learning styles has often attempted to take context into account by seeking style matches between student and schooling experiences or between student and teacher (Banks, 1995). However, some applications of this approach are based on an assumption that an individual's “style” is a trait that is independent of tasks and contexts, and that is constant over time. Such a matching strategy does not account for change—in the individual, the activity setting, or the community—and it assumes one style per person according to the individual's group categorization. We are particularly concerned with the implications of such applications for students from nondominant groups.

Learning styles constructs have been used to distinguish the learning styles of “minority” group members and to explain

“minority” student failure (see Foley, 1997; Kavale & Forness, 1987; Irvine & York, 1995 for reviews). For example, individuals from one group may be characterized as learning holistically whereas individuals from another group may be characterized as learning analytically or individuals may be divided into cooperative versus individualist learners on the basis of membership in a particular cultural group.

Addressing learning styles as traits also seems to be a common way to prepare teachers to make the link to diversity (Guild, 1994; Matthews, 1991). Clearly, teaching to a difference that can be labeled (e.g., learning modalities) sounds appealing to teachers who have limited resources, support, or training to meet the challenges of new student populations. An observation by one high school English as a second language teacher illustrates the application of a common perception reported in our studies of English-language learners:

I think it's also very important to include . . . multimedia techniques because we have a group now in school that is very diverse in their learning strategies. You know most are visual language learners, so if you give them something they can see or touch, they are tactile. That gets to them; they can understand that. (Gutiérrez, Crosland, & Berlin, 2001)

Of course, there is value in using multiple forms of assistance, including media. Our focus, however, is on the importance and benefit of knowing about the histories and valued practices of cultural groups rather than trying to teach prescriptively according to broad, underexamined generalities about groups. In cultural-historical approaches, learning is conceived of as a process occurring within ongoing activity, and not divided into separate characteristics of individuals and contexts (Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Lave, 1996). Including consideration of the history of a person's or a group's related engagements can account for “dispositions” they may have in new circumstances. However, the crucial distinction we are making is between *understanding processes* and *locating characteristics*. Without situating social practices and the histories of participants in particular communities, approaches that attribute style to membership in a group make it difficult to account for variation and change in individuals or their practices.

Treating Cultural Differences As Individual Traits Encourages Overgeneralization

The trait approach assumes that there is a built-in relationship between learning style and minority group membership. For example, approaches that accommodate instructional practice to group styles treat what is “known” about a group as applying to all individuals in the group. This makes it more likely that groups will be treated as homogenous, with fixed characteristics carried by the collection of individuals that comprise the group.

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines have called attention to the problems of “essentializing” people on the basis of a group label and have underlined the variability that exists within groups and their practices. Scholars examining cultural styles have argued for a more situated and dynamic view of the cultural practices of ethnic and racial groups (Banks, 1995; Gay, 1995, 2000; Irvine & York, 1995; Nieto, 1999).

Yet, the problem of overgeneralization persists, especially in attempts by schools to design learning experiences that comple-

ment the learning-style differences of particular ethnic groups (e.g., Dunn & Dunn, 1992; Dunn, Griggs, & Price, 1993). Although the work on learning styles often cautions against stereotyping and generalizing about the cognitive styles of various groups, matching individual learning style to a particular ethnic group may encourage the idea that patterns of performance derive from the essence of an individual or a group. For example, some studies that contrast the learning styles of students from several ethnic groups make prescriptions for creating learning environments that complement the learning-style differences of the various ethnic groups such as the time of day individuals of particular groups are receptive to instruction or the instructional seating arrangement most conducive to particular ethnic groups (Dunn, Griggs, & Price; Dunn, Gemake, Jalali, Zenhausern, Quinn, & Spiridakis, 1990; Hickson, Land, & Aikman, 1994).

Unfortunately, categorization of individuals in groups has been treated causally, yielding explanations and expectations of individual skills and behaviors on the basis of category membership, assuming that all group members share the same set of experiences, skills, and interests. This has led to a kind of tracking in which instruction is adjusted merely on the basis of a group categorization.²

Within a styles approach, a single way of teaching and learning may be used with a particular group without accounting for individuals' past experiences with certain practices or without providing instruction that both extends those experiences and introduces new and even unfamiliar ways of doing things. This stands in stark contrast to the strategic forms of assistance we have observed in robust learning communities where the co-construction of a community's various practices and individual development support the changing nature of participation and the forms of assistance provided in joint activity. In these classroom communities, students receive multiple forms of assistance and participate in rigorous learning activities that extend their initial approaches to learning and participation (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Tejada, 1999; Moll, Saez, & Dworin, 2001; Rogoff, Goodman Turkkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). As a result, students have ongoing opportunities to assume new roles and learn new approaches.

There are several explanations for the sustained currency of trait approaches as plausible explanations of individual performance. Notions of individual learning styles are commonplace in both public and educational discourse. Descriptions and subsequent methods of identification of learning styles can be easy to understand and to identify within the taxonomies in inventories that provide measures of individual differences and resultant profiles (Price & Dunn, 1997). Furthermore, reductive notions of culture and cultural groups may reinforce the broad application of trait approaches.

Beyond Reductive Approaches

Often, normative views of culture are employed in ways that appear benign, especially when they purport to focus on individual differences rather than on deficits in the individual or in the social group. This is an exceedingly important issue as there continues to be a reductive tendency in the social sciences to seek and accept singular effects to explain social and cognitive phenomena. Supported by static or normative understandings of culture, the application of trait approaches to individual school performance

sometimes leads to what Rose (1988) calls a kind of “cognitive reductionism.”³ As Rose argues:

A further problem—sometimes inherent in the theories themselves, sometimes a result of reductive application—is the tendency to diminish cognitive complexity and rely on simplified cognitive oppositions: independent vs. dependent, literate vs. oral, verbal vs. spatial, concrete vs. logical. These oppositions are textbook-neat, but . . . are narrow and misleading. (p. 268)

In some cases, the learning or cognitive styles typologies have a basis in observations of average differences in some populations. In many cases, however, the typologies are offered simply as categories without research substantiating their relationship to the groups so characterized or to their utility for practice. As Tiedeman (1989) suggested, “To date, research evidence is inadequate to judge [cognitive styles] validity or usefulness in adapting instruction to individuals; some have been called seriously into question” (p. 599).

A cultural-historical approach can help researchers and practitioners characterize the commonalities of experience of people who share cultural background, without “locating” the commonalities within individuals. However, within cultural-historical approaches, there has not yet been sufficient attention to figuring out how to talk and think about regularities across individuals’ or cultural communities’ ways of doing things. To move beyond the idea of traits located in individual members of ethnic groups, we need to make progress in understanding regularities in how engagement in shared and dynamic practices of different communities contributes to individual learning and development.

Conceiving of style as an individual trait can lead to a strategy of matching characterizations of individuals (or collections of them), on the one hand, and characterizations of contexts on the other. This approach treats contexts as if they exist independently of the people active in creating and maintaining them, and views individuals as though their characteristics are unrelated to the contexts in which they and their families have participated in recent generations. We argue that people *live* culture in a mutually constitutive manner in which it is not fruitful to tote up their characteristics as if they occur independently of culture, and of culture as if it occurs independently of people.

A Shift to Experience Participating in Cultural Practices

We are concerned with how researchers and practitioners can conceive of regularities in approaches to learning among people of similar cultural background experiences without reifying those cultural patterns and practices as located in individuals. We propose a shift from the assumption that regularities in groups are carried by the traits of a collection of individuals to a focus on people’s history of engagement in practices of cultural communities. In cultural-historical approaches, cultural differences are attributed to variations in people’s involvement in common practices of particular cultural communities (Moll, 2000; Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, & Mosier, 1993). A central and distinguishing thesis in this approach is that the structure and development of human psychological processes emerge through participation in culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity involving cultural practices and tools (Cole, 1996).

People’s varied *participation* in the practices of dynamic cultural communities can be distinguished from *membership* in ethnic groups, which often is treated in an all-or-none, static fashion (Rogoff, 2003). Individuals participate in varying and overlapping ways that change over their lifetimes and over historical change in a community’s organization and relationships with other communities (Cole, 1998; Lave, 1996; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). As Cole and Engestrom (1993) argue, culture “is experienced in local, face-to-face interactions that are locally constrained and heterogeneous with respect to both ‘culture as a whole’ and the parts of the entire toolkit experienced by any given individual” (p. 15).

Of course, there are regularities in the ways cultural groups participate in the everyday practices of their respective communities. However, the relatively stable characteristics of these environments are in constant tension with the emergent goals and practices participants construct, which stretch and change over time and with other constraints. This conflict and tension contribute to the variation and ongoing change in an individual’s and a community’s practices (Engestrom, 1993; Gutiérrez, 2002).

We believe that looking for cultural regularities will be more fruitful—both for research and practice—if we focus our examination of differences on cultural processes in which individuals engage with other people in dynamic cultural communities, some of which involve ethnic or racial group membership in important ways. By cultural community we mean a coordinated group of people with some traditions and understandings in common, extending across several generations, with varied roles and practices and continual change among participants as well as transformation in the community’s practices (see Rogoff, 2003). For example, people draw on intergenerationally conveyed concepts, ways of talking, and belief systems that may be used and negotiated locally in communities that are often identified internally and by their neighbors in terms of ethnicity and race.

By focusing on the varied ways people participate in their community’s activities, we can move away from the tendency to conflate ethnicity with culture, with assignment to ethnic groups made on the basis of immutable and often stable characteristics such as Spanish surname or country of birth. Equating culture with race, ethnicity, language preference, or national origin results in overly deterministic, static, weak, and uncomplicated understandings of both individuals and the community practices in which they participate (Gutiérrez, Asato, Santos, & Gotanda, 2002).

We are not arguing that group membership defined by ethnicity, race, and language use is irrelevant. These categories have long-standing influences on the cultural practices in which people have the opportunity to participate, often yielding shared circumstances, practices, and beliefs that play important and varied roles for group members. People do not just *choose* to move in and out of different practices, taking on new and equal participation in cultural communities.

Toward a Cultural-Historical Way to Describe Cultural Regularities

From a cultural-historical perspective, we can examine people’s usual ways of doing things, trying to understand individuals’ history of involvement in the practices of varied communities, in-

cluding ethnic or national communities as well as others such as academic or religious communities (Rogoff, 2003). Consider the finding that children who immigrated recently to the United States from rural Mexican communities more often studiously observed ongoing events without pushing adults to explain them than did children whose families immigrated from Europe generations before (Mejía Arauz, Rogoff, & Paradise, 2003). To make sense of this difference, we may gain some understanding by examining the dynamic structure of the sending and receiving communities' traditions. For example, the rural Mexican communities' frequent inclusion of children in a range of adult activities may relate to the attentiveness of children who may have been encouraged to observe and take part in their families' work and social lives (Rogoff, Paradise, Mejía Arauz, Correa-Chávez, & Angelillo, 2003). The European-American communities' tradition of excluding children from adult activities—where they could observe what they are supposed to be learning—may also help us understand the proclivity of some of these students to request adult explanation even in a situation that calls for observation.

Examining cultural variation in terms of familiarity with different practices in dynamic communities organized in distinct manners is a very different approach than attributing a “visual” style to Mexican children or a “verbal” style to European-American middle-class children. We argue that it is more useful to consider differences in the children's, their families', and their communities' histories of engaging in particular endeavors organized in contrasting manners. This avoids the implication that the characteristic is “built in” to the individual (or a group) in a stable manner that extends across time and situations, and it recognizes the circumstances relevant to an individual's likelihood of acting in certain ways.

Cultural-historical theory leads us to expect regularities in the ways cultural communities organize their lives as well as variations in the ways individual members of groups participate and conceptualize the means and ends of their communities' activities. For example, Tejeda and Espinoza (2002) observed that high school students from migrant farm worker backgrounds often used hybrid language practices in sense-making activities designed to promote critical reflection about their course subject matter as well as about their life experiences as migrants. We noted similar linguistic practices in the learning repertoires of elementary school children in computer-mediated learning clubs (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Alvarez, 2001). As with the research of Mejía Arauz et al. (2003), intent observation and minimal question asking seemed to characterize the participation patterns of both the elementary school children and the high school students.

These descriptions of regularities are useful in understanding literacy development. However, our references to “migrants” and “English-language learners” and their practices are used as *descriptors* rather than as categorical classification of individuals or groups. We attribute the regularities to the students' participation in familiar cultural practices as well as to their public schooling experiences that restrict engagement and limit the use of the cultural resources that are part of their repertoires. We must also understand such regularities in light of the colonizing practices of which they have been a part (Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutiérrez,

2003).⁴ A cultural-historical approach assumes that individual development and disposition must be understood in (not separate from) cultural and historical context. In other words, we talk about patterns of people's approaches to given situations without reducing the explanation to a claim that they do what they do *because* they are migrant farm workers or English-language learners. We attend to individuals' linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires as well as to their contributions to practices that connect with other activities in which they commonly engage.

Repertoires for Participating in Practices

By “linguistic and cultural-historical repertoires,” we mean the ways of engaging in activities stemming from observing and otherwise participating in cultural practices. Individuals' background experiences, together with their interests, may prepare them for knowing how to engage in particular forms of language and literacy activities, play their part in testing formats, resolve interpersonal problems according to specific community-organized approaches, and so forth. An important feature of focusing on repertoires is encouraging people to develop dexterity in determining which approach from their repertoire is appropriate under which circumstances (Rogoff, 2003).

Characterizing children's repertoires or proclivities would involve characterizing their experience and initiative in prior cultural activities (Rogoff, 1997). We would characterize their repertoires in terms of their familiarity with engaging in particular practices on the basis of what is known about their own and their community's history. For example, students who have participated in varying cultural traditions would differ in repertoires for engaging in discussions with authority figures, answering known-answer questions, analyzing word problems on the basis of counterfactual premises, seeking or avoiding being singled out for praise, spontaneously helping classmates, observing ongoing events without adult management, responding quickly or pondering ideas before volunteering their contributions, and many other approaches that are sometimes treated as characteristics of individuals.

It is relevant to take into account the development of the cultural activities as well. To understand both individual and community learning it is necessary to examine the nature and forms of cultural artifacts and tools used; the social relations, rules, and division of labor; and the historical development of individuals and communities. We would then be able to characterize a child's repertoires and dexterity in moving between approaches appropriate to varying activity settings. In the process, we would have a historical developmental account of that child's or that community's familiar, value-laden experience, and we would be able to speak about the usual, customary, or even habitual approaches taken by individuals (and communities) in known circumstances. The circumstances would have to be taken into account as aspects of the regularities described and not just “crossed with” the independent characteristics of individuals.

A Few Suggestions for Proceeding With the Idea of Repertoires of Practice

For both researchers and teachers, the trait approach has the attraction of apparent simplicity. In research and practice, we often have to proceed on the basis of partial information. We need to consider the implications for research and educational practice when only a little cultural information is available.

For example, how can a teacher proceed with minimal cultural background information on which to base action? The teacher would look for students' familiarity of experience with cultural practices by seeking to understand the students' short- or long-term history. For example, a new teacher in an African-American low-income neighborhood, inspired by Carol Lee's (1993, 2001) research, may wonder if he or she can extend the students' out-of-school skills in analysis of metaphor and figurative language to the analysis of literature, making use of familiarity with the practice of "signifying" (ritualized language play involving clever insults). To do so, the teacher would need some understanding of this practice and would need to check his or her assumption that these students are familiar with it, to confirm or disconfirm his or her hypothesis that these students have similar background experience with Lee's students. Rather than pigeonholing individuals into categories and teaching to the students' "traits" or attempting to replace those traits, the emphasis would be placed on helping students develop dexterity in using both familiar and new approaches.

The researcher's work, from a cultural-historical approach, is similar: focus on understanding developing individuals and changing communities, making first guesses about patterns and seeking confirmation or disconfirmation to extend what is known. Researchers thus need understanding of the practices under study, including an understanding of the relationship between a community's practices and the routine practices in which an individual participates. They would check their assumptions about an individual's familiarity with the focal practice as well as seek further information about whether and how an individual might participate in the practice.

The work ahead of us is to characterize the dynamic patterns of individuals' participation in building on historical constellations of community practices, continuing and transforming across generations. In this concluding section, we offer some specific suggestions that we have found useful in moving into this approach in our research.

1. To avoid making overly general statements based on research, it helps to speak of the findings in the past tense—"The children did such and such"—rather than the continuing present—"Children do such and such" (Rogoff, 2003). Using the past tense marks the findings as statements of what was observed rather than too quickly assuming a timeless truth to what is always a situated observation. Summary statements that refer to activities or situations in which observations were made are likely to help avoid generalizing too quickly about populations. Only when there is a sufficient body of research with different people under varying circumstances would more general statements be justified.
2. To ground cultural observations in the historical, dynamic processes of communities, labels that refer to research participants can be treated not as categories but as narrative descriptors of the participants' backgrounds (e.g., middle class, Catholic, farming, of Armenian heritage, in California, immigrated to escape massacre, two generations ago). In other words, ethnic and other cultural descriptors may fruitfully help researchers examine cultural practices if they are not assumed to imply an essence of the individual or group involved, and are not treated as causal entities.

3. To examine how aspects of participants' community background cluster and how they change, it helps to treat them as a constellation of factors (Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). This contrasts with trying to isolate or "control" independent categories to determine which is the active ingredient causing an outcome or a trait. Rather than trying to hold all "factors" but one or a few constant, cultural research requires focus on the dynamically changing configuration of relevant aspects of people's lives.
4. To avoid overgeneralizing, statements based on single observations should be made very cautiously, limiting generalization of simple observations of test performance or behavior under restricted circumstances beyond the situations observed. The aim is to ground observations across multiple settings and communities and to assume various vantage points to understand the complexity of human activity. The intent, especially in regard to poor children and children of color, would be to identify a course of action or assistance that would help ensure student learning, rather than to define who a child is or that child's future potential (Berlin, 2002).

We propose these suggestions to advance the conversation about how to account for both cultural regularities and variations, with a cultural-historical emphasis on understanding individuals as participants in cultural communities. We believe that attending to these issues will help move us away from oversimplified approaches to the learning, achievement, and potential of individuals and cultural groups.

NOTES

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¹ The practice of trying to locate cultural difference within individuals leads to commonplace but ludicrous statements such as referring to individuals as diverse (e.g., "The class has a large proportion of diverse students")—referring to students from educationally underserved populations as diverse with the implication that the others are the standard—thus, normalizing the dominant group. Difference cannot be attributed to a single side of a contrast.

² Or, even more insidious, the presumed characteristic may be used to justify restricting opportunities, as with teachers who refer to a group's presumed cooperativeness to justify placing some students in activities that they have not chosen (while others' preferences are granted), or for requiring some children to share textbooks or other materials: "Well, you see, Hispanics are cooperative children. They don't mind sharing things. These other students like to work alone and independently. With Hispanics it is all right to have students work together" (Ortiz, 1988, p.79).

³ Another colleague credits what she calls "main effects junkies" in part for this tendency in the social sciences.

⁴ For example, Spanish is the first language of many of the students we observe, which is an artifact of their interaction/participation in their communities' activities. It is also an artifact of the colonization of Central America and the U.S. Southwest. A similar analysis can be developed, in part, for the students' code switching from Spanish to English (i.e., their participation in multiple communities and institutions as well as their language status, English-only policies, and other factors). These

are not neutral cultural practices. Cultural tools must be understood in terms of the current and historical intent.

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