

## Connecting Culture, Psychology and Biology

### Essay Review on Inghilleri's *From Subjective Experience to Cultural Change*<sup>1</sup>

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In recent decades, some of the best psychological theorists have turned their attention away from the individual, to examine issues more typically associated with social theory, sociology, and anthropology. One such theoretical issue is the relationship between individual actions and social structures, a topic of debate in sociology for many decades. A second such issue is the relationship between 'macro' social structure and 'micro' social encounters: How is it that social structures – such as economic classes, family patterns, and the workplace – relate to specific conversational encounters among members of the society [see the essays in Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981]?

Psychologists working in these areas include sociocultural psychologists, cultural psychologists, cultural-historical activity theorists, and ecological psychologists. For example, the study of *positive psychology* has led to a consideration of social context. Positive psychology – an approach publicly advocated by 1998 APA President Martin Seligman – argues that psychology should move beyond a narrow focus on a 'disease model' of psychology, and begin to study positive issues like creativity, happiness, courage, resilience, love, and fulfilling work. These psychologists have found that, perhaps more so than mental illness, the study of these topics requires the inclusion of social and cultural context.

But if one's readings in psychology were limited to APA journals, one might never realize that there are psychologists considering these social-theoretic issues. Most mainstream psychologists seem satisfied with the dominant paradigm, *methodological individualism* [Sawyer, in press]. Experimental psychological methods assume that individual mental activity can be studied in isolation, apart from any social context or culture. Methodological individualism is a variation of *reductionism*, perhaps the most successful scientific strategy ever devised [Bechtel and Richardson, 1993]. However, reduction-

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ism's success is beginning to threaten psychology; if one holds to reductionism, then ultimately psychology becomes an unnecessary scientific discipline, as it will eventually be reduced to biology and medical science. One notable attempt to counter reductionist biomedical explanations for behavior is the book by Elman et al. [1996], *Rethinking innateness*. Other theorists – observing that connectionist architectures and other complex nonlinear systems manifest *emergent properties* – have begun to argue that the human mind cannot be fully explained with mechanist, reductionist accounts [Bechtel and Richardson, 1993; Sawyer, in press].

The 1999 English translation of Paolo Inghilleri's [1995] book, *From subjective experience to cultural change*, touches on many of these issues. Since the mid-1980s, Inghilleri has worked as an ethnopsychiatrist in hospitals in Nicaragua and Somalia, combining his psychiatric training with anthropological methods. Using positive psychology – primarily Csikszentmihalyi's [1990] flow theory – Inghilleri has developed techniques to reintegrate these patients into their communities. This has required that flow therapy be applied with sensitivity to culture differences; those who know Inghilleri's work describe it as important, significant, and impressive.

However, this book is not just a report on his psychiatric work; it is much more ambitious. Inghilleri's goal is no less than to show how psychology can provide the bridge between biological and cultural evolution. Cultural evolution has long been a concern of Inghilleri's former advisor, Fausto Massimini, and of Mike Csikszentmihalyi, who wrote the 'Foreword' [see also Csikszentmihalyi's *The evolving self*, 1993]. In his focus on parallels between biological and cultural evolution, Inghilleri speaks to issues that American readers will associate with Daniel Dennett's [1995] book, *Darwin's dangerous idea*, or Steven Pinker's [1997] *How the mind works* (Inghilleri does not discuss these, probably because the original Italian version was published in 1995). In his attempt to avoid naïve biological reductionism, and to argue for culture as an independent level of analysis, he voices many themes of contemporary psychological theory. The uniqueness of Inghilleri's approach is that he attempts to accomplish these theoretical goals by drawing primarily on two American theories of intrinsic motivation: Deci and Ryan's theory of self-determination, and Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Almost half of the book is devoted to summaries of these researchers; Inghilleri's easy familiarity with these concepts reflects his many years of experience applying these ideas in his cross-cultural practice.

Inghilleri proposes that biology and culture are independent levels of analysis (following Massimini, he calls them 'teleonomic systems'), but that there are nonetheless substantive parallels in the evolutionary processes at two levels of biology and culture. Inghilleri points out that both of these 'systems of information' require individuals to reproduce: In a nod to Richard Dawkins, 'selfish genes' require individual bodies to reproduce, and drawing on Dawkins's concept of the *meme*, social and cultural patterns also require individual minds to reproduce. Thus, Inghilleri argues that linking the two levels requires a psychological theory. He critiques behaviorism, psychoanalysis, and cognitivism for focusing on 'homeostatic' aspects of the psyche and neglecting to explain evolutionary change. In developing a theoretical model that both accounts for 'regular replication' of psychic states, and also explains evolutionary change, Inghilleri draws on a diverse body of theories, including Popper's interactionist view of the mind/brain relation and its 'trialist' three-world framework, cross-cultural studies of ego formation, Mead's theory of self-formation through social interaction, and Moscovici's seminal theory of social representations.

Inghilleri's exposition focuses on his first goal: to account for the regular replication of psychic states. By analogy with genes, evolution requires invariant reproduction. The second theoretical goal, to explain the evolution of complexity, is relatively neglected; Inghilleri does not present a theoretical account of a genetic/memetic model of psychic or cultural evolution. There is no discussion of random mutation, of sexual reproduction, or of evolutionary processes like speciation. Does cultural evolution, by analogy, occur through random mutation and environmental selection? These are some of the key critical issues surrounding Dennett's application of the meme analogy [see Gould, 1997].

The novelty of Inghilleri's book is that he attempts to apply motivation theories – including the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan and Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory – to explain the invariant reproduction of culture. Although he is not explicit enough in making this argument, Inghilleri seems to be claiming that attention and motivation processes are the psychological mechanisms that mediate cultural evolution; that culture cannot reproduce unless it attracts individuals' attention by giving them experiences of flow and optimal experience (p. 121). This claim is hard to reconcile with Csikszentmihalyi's own severe attacks on much of modern life, particularly television viewing, which Csikszentmihalyi [1990] criticizes for not contributing to flow at all; how would Inghilleri explain the reproduction of those elements of culture that do not provide individuals with optimal experience?

In addition to these theoretical discussions, Inghilleri also summarizes his intriguing approach to mental health (based on his original and important ethnopsychiatric work in Ethiopia and Somalia): that psyche is formed through an internalization of the surrounding social world, a process mediated through subjective experience. This theory has led Inghilleri to emphasize removing patients from mental hospitals, where they are 'excluded from the cultural network' (p. 100), and reintegrating them in the community. I found these discussions particularly interesting, although they are not explicitly used to further his theoretical argument.

Although Inghilleri, in the end, does not satisfy his ambitious theoretical goals, the reader will be treated to excellent integrative reviews of contemporary motivation theory and a valuable introduction to his own clinical work. In his critiques of contemporary experimental psychology, Inghilleri is on target. However, his critique (p. 2) that the controlled experimental methodology of mainstream psychology is largely responsible for psychology's excessive reductionism is not developed; I was excited by his claim and looking forward to an exploration that would draw out the reductionistic implications of experimental methodology (a project that sorely needs to be done). But Inghilleri spends much of the chapter critiquing Piaget and Freud, neither of whom used this method. So, is the method important or not? Or is it something else that has led psychology astray?

Inghilleri often uses distinct theoretical concepts interchangeably – such as 'mechanistic' and 'reductionist' – without clarifying their differences, and even subtle differences are crucial to his argument. For example, Inghilleri states that flow experiences are not mechanistic because they arise from the interaction of self and environment, and thus are 'not mechanically predetermined by information already present in consciousness' (p. 88) nor by 'learned behavioral schemata' (p. 69). But none of the theories he criticizes are mechanistic in this way, either. Behaviorists do not argue that behavior can be 'mechanically' predicted by analyzing the individual; the environment must be a part of the 'mechanism'. Likewise, a psychological theory can be mechanistic and not reductionistic (as is true of many contemporary connectionist accounts) [see Bechtel

and Richardson's term 'emergent mechanism', 1993]. Inghilleri needs to negotiate these subtleties to explain exactly how his theory avoids mechanism.

Compared to texts by social theorists, Inghilleri's approach seems quite psychological; I would have liked for Inghilleri to say a bit more about social and cultural context, especially given his extensive fieldwork experience. For example, what differences, if any, did Inghilleri notice in the flow states of patients in Nicaragua and Somalia? Were these different from the descriptions that have appeared in Csikszentmihalyi's own writings? In what ways can his ethnopsychiatric work be used to extend flow theory? This would have been a more coherent and convincing book if it had more closely focused on the practical implications deriving from Inghilleri's extensive field experiences, and the necessary theoretical extensions to flow theory. The value of Inghilleri's work is found on page 108:

These recent studies seem to point out once more the importance of subjective experience in processes of individual change carried out in close connection with the various contexts of life ... [and these theories] might also help to develop useful interventive strategies in clinical and therapeutic settings.

I salute Inghilleri for attempting to develop the social-theoretic implications of his important therapeutic applications of positive psychology. Too few psychologists are willing to consider the social and cultural dimensions of human behavior. In my experience, European psychologists typically display much greater theoretical sophistication than their American counterparts. A book like this – explicitly interdisciplinary and antireductionist – is rarely attempted by today's psychologists. One of the problems facing the social sciences today is that the most important issues – the relationship between individual actions and social structures, how macrostructures are reproduced in specific encounters – require incredible interdisciplinary breadth, and the ability to make creative and substantive connections among very different bodies of literature. A tall order, and Inghilleri has made a worthy attempt.

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