Book Review/Compte rendu

Brekhus, Wayne H. *Culture and Cognition: Patterns in the Social Construction of Reality.* Chichester, UK and Malden MA: Polity Press, 2015. 218 pp., $24.95 paper (9780845571772)

In the past twenty or so years, the sociological study of culture and cognition has emerged as a synthesis of cultural sociology and cutting-edge developments in cognitive psychology. Whether they define culture in the Geertz's sense as a people's "way of life" "transmitted historically" through "patterns of meaning," or in the more contemporary sense as a group's shared repository of symbolic material (Swidler 2001, 12), sociologists studying culture and cognition are typically interested in how cognitive processes vary according to the culture of the particular groups, networks, or interactional settings of which an individual is part. Although the study of culture and cognition now encompasses theoretical traditions inspired by Durkheim, Goffman and Bourdieu (4-9), all share the view that thinking is embedded in social life. In his comprehensive overview of recent empirical studies of culture and cognition, Wayne Brekhus argues that the most fundamental aspects of human thinking – the ways people perceive the world around them, mentally sort objects and other people, remember events and even construct identity – not only are shaped by social life, but also come to shape it.

Brekhus makes his argument by considering the theoretical implications of empirical studies of five fundamental groups of cognitive processes: 1) perception, attention, and framing, 2) classification, categorization and boundary work, 3) meaning-making, metaphor and frames of meaning, 4) identity construction, 5) memory and time. He devotes a chapter to each of these cognitive processes, where he provides a thematic overview of empirical studies in each area. For instance, he discusses how classification, which he defines as "[the central way] we sort, make sense of, and construct social reality from the stimuli we attend to" (59), changes as groups dispute, negotiate and change social hierarchies. Observed across diverse subcultures, like rock-climbers (62-62) and mushroom-pickers (73), as well as important fields of bureaucratic management like urban planning (76-78), classificatory schemes reflect and reinforce hierarchies of worth and desirability. For "mushroomers,"

(people who gather wild mushrooms) the discovery of particular, "elite" species of fungi carries cultural capital, netting the finder a higher status within the group. In the case of urban planning, pigeons, classified as "dirty," "deviant," or "out-of-place" – of less social worth than domestic animals like dogs and cats – are used to justify the gentrification of "problem" areas in the city, enabling the displacement of vulnerable populations and the restoration of a particular social order.

The social classification of objects according to their type, desirability, worth and importance extends to memory and identity. In the case of memory, the collective interpretation of history's significant events, such as the Holocaust, can be re-classified, opening up new avenues for social action. Brekhus explains, while discussing Jeffrey Alexander's work on the Holocaust, that as long as Nazi violence was interpreted as a series of war crimes, it could be seen as a limited, peculiar evil – one among numerous others in human history. The classification of such violence as a Holocaust, however, re-cast it as a catastrophic, definitive event for all humankind, and allowed for new forms of political action (105-106).

Classification is important not only to the interpretation of events, but also to the self-interpretation and the interpretation of others that occurs as people construct their identities. The attribute of being socially marked or unmarked is central to this identity construction. Brekhus explains that an unmarked category is one that serves as an implicit cognitive reference point, against which other categories – the marked – are compared. The most obvious example here is racist thinking, in which whiteness is taken as the "generic, un-raced, default racial norm" (26). Thus, for example, residents of a "good" neighbourhood might implicitly define themselves as white and wealthy. Whether discussing mainstream news agencies' framing of "looting" or the relative unimportance of visual markers of sex difference for the unsighted, Brekhus explains how people often define their identities by differentiating themselves from socially marked others (113), showing how identity work is laden with power relationships. The political nature of identity work extends to the identification of others. For example, Brekhus discusses Saperstein and Penner's 2012 study, in which the authors found that National Longitudinal Survey of Youth interviewers unconsciously identified their interview respondents as white or black according to each respondent's social outcome in the year prior to the survey. Respondents who reported having been in poverty were more likely to be classified as black, for instance (68). In this case, interviewers unconsciously juxtaposed one socially marked category – poverty –with another – blackness – to identify their respondents.

In addition to discussing fundamental cognitive processes like classification, memory, and identity-work, Brekhus also discusses one of the major theoretical debates around culture and cognition: the debate over "automatic and deliberative cognition." Automatic and deliberative cognition are two "cognitive styles" (28) that can be used to characterize any cognitive process. While automatic cognition happens quickly and unconsciously, deliberative cognition is conscious. Automatic and deliberative cognition have become key areas of focus for cognitive sociologists, especially those concerned with the sociology of morality (See Ignatow 2010, for example). Brekhus does well to show how the difference between automatic and deliberative cognition has been the wedge issue between cultural "toolkit" theorists, like Ann Swidler, and "embodied" theorists like Jonathan Haidt, Stephen Vaisey and Omar Lizardo (172-183). Brekhus' discussion of the cultural sociologists' counter-critique – that cognitive sociologists focus too much on the micro level and that they undertheorize the connection between practical and discursive consciousness (176) – is particularly important, because it reveals substantial areas for further research in culture and cognition. One of Brekhus' additional contributions here is to show that cognitive styles need not be conceived as different ways of using culture – as they are in Vaisey's dual process model (2009), for example – but can also be seen as being produced *by* culture, as in Leschziner and Green's study of culinary and sexual fields (31).

One wonders if Brekhus could not have integrated some of the debate around automatic and deliberative cognition into his discussion of the central empirical issues. For instance, although he states that "people do boundary work around (…) classifications" (111), it is unclear whether this work is primarily done through automatic cognition, deliberative consciousness, or both, and in what circumstances. Brekhus discusses how identity is seen within the symbolic interactionist framework; further discussion of how identity is theorized within toolkit and more "embodied", Bourdieusian approaches would have been useful. Nevertheless, his overview of the "five contemporary traditions" in Culture and Cognition – the collective representations tradition, symbolic interactionism, the social mindscapes tradition, the cultural toolkit tradition and the cognitive psychology tradition – remains a useful orienting point for readers (9-21).

Overall, Brekhus book is an excellent overview of how key cognitive processes vary according to culture. His summaries of the empirical literature are concise, yet detailed enough to provoke theoretical reflection. *Culture and Cognition* would be a good resource for upper-level undergraduate or graduate courses in social psychology or for scholars who

are looking for a guide to situate themselves within the growing field of culture and cognition. By organizing the study of culture and cognition around key aspects of cognition, like classification, identity, memory, and time, Brekhus distills the most important findings of contemporary cognitive sociology. He makes these findings accessible, interesting, and most importantly, available for application in a variety of research contexts.

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References

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