

## Reply to Wolff-Michael Roth's Review Essay "Culture and Identity" published in *FQS* 4(1)

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**Key words:**

cultural  
psychology,  
qualitative  
methodology,  
critiques, science,  
objectivity,  
individualism,  
social  
constructionism

**Abstract:** I discuss ROTH's critical review of my book *Cultural Psychology: Theory & Method* and show it to consist primarily of negative opinions about trivial points. He fails to review substantive issues which appear in the book and he fails to rebut my perspective with alternative theoretical or empirical material. Readers will hopefully approach my book with an open mind.

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When the editor called my attention to ROTH's review of my book *Cultural Psychology: Theory & Method*, I anticipated finding a spirited discussion on issues I had raised in the book. What I found, however, was little discussion of issues and, instead, a set of ROTH's opinions of what he dislikes about the book. I will show that his review has little intellectual merit. [1]

In this reply I will not spend time defending the merits of my position, which I do in the book. Instead, I will address ROTH's form of criticism. Hopefully, readers will reconsider whether they wish to read the book. [2]

His criticism of my second chapter is a good place to begin. In this chapter, I criticize individualistic approaches to agency. I contrast them to a cultural account of agency that I explain in the first chapter. There, I sought to explain how agency is integrated into culture, and how its form and content depend upon the particular culture one lives in. Enhancing agency, therefore, requires humanizing the social system. In the second chapter, I observe that many cultural psychologists regard agency as an intrinsic property of the individual. In addition, they construe agency as outside culture, using cultural tools for its own purposes. I present a lengthy critique of the assumptions and implications of this approach as well as the evidence that is marshaled to support it. I also cite the psychologists who endorse this approach to agency. Here is what ROTH says about this chapter: "In the second chapter, individualistic approaches to agency, those that treat psychological phenomena independent of culture, are merely sketched in strawperson [sic] fashion and then (viciously) attacked ... I did not appreciate the personal nature of the attacks." (ROTH, para. 58) [3]

This comment hardly represents the chapter. A scholarly critique of my chapter would have addressed my argument against the individualistic approach, it would have explained the shortcomings of my argument, it would have leveled counterarguments against my criticism of the individualistic approach to agency, and it would have provided examples of my "strawperson [sic] fashion" of criticism. ROTH does none of this. He misconstrues my critique as personal.

However, I never say anything personal about the psychologists. I simply identify who they are and then criticize their approach to agency. [4]

ROTH never addresses the substance of my critique of individualism. Instead, he fixates upon trivial matters:

"For example, *Cultural Psychology* takes multi-authored studies and attributes them to only one or the other author who then becomes the strawperson [sic]. In the case of BRANCO and VALSINER (1997), the second author is constructed as the object of attack, whereas in the case of BRUNER and AMSTERDAM (2000), the first author becomes the target." (ibid) [5]

So, the way I present names is a major objection to my book?—I emphasized VALSINER, BRUNER, and other prominent psychologists, even when some of their work was co-authored, because I was addressing their arguments which they have presented in individual works. To be consistent, I continued to use their names after citing their co-authored words. How terrible of me! ROTH claims that this use of names is part of my "strawperson [sic] fashion" of arguing, but it has nothing to do with constructing a straw man. I fairly represented my target's views through extensive quotations. ROTH does not present a single instance where I distorted their views. [6]

Nor does he present a single instance of my leveling a personal attack on my targets. He opines: "I am not fond of directing the critique of issues at authors as persons. [E.g.,] 'VALSINER's antagonism between individual agency and culturally constructed, shared activities rests on a belief that culture is toxic to individual autonomy and fulfillment'." (ROTH, para. 59) Where is the personal attack here? Do I attack VALSINER's personal qualities, do I insult him? In the quotation, I explain VALSINER's view of culture and psychology. I then present quotations from VALSINER to support my explanation. VALSINER says that social influences are cultural viruses that are affect-laden meanings meant to infect personal belief systems. To bring this up is not a personal attack. Does ROTH really think that I should not mention people's names when I am critiquing their views? It really seems as if ROTH is grasping at straws to find ways to attack me. [7]

ROTH raises another trivial criticism when he says, "The different targets (including Jerome BRUNER, Sylvia SCRIBNER, Jaan VALSINER) are then summarily denoted as 'individualists,' and many statements are made about them as a group irrespective of their considerable differences" (ROTH para. 58). It seems that ROTH is against classification altogether. All categories group individuals together despite differences. "Doctor," "romantic poet," "impressionist painter," "baseball player" invite statements about the members of the category despite considerable differences among the individuals therein. There is nothing wrong with making statements about "individualistic psychologists" as a group. In fact, prohibiting this would prohibit any scholarly critique of a general position. It would force the criticism to be directed at individuals which is just what ROTH opposed, and what he erroneously accused me of doing. [8]

ROTH loves to substitute his personal opinion for any scholarly argument: "Not only do I find it difficult to accept that persons 'hold' beliefs (sic) like they 'hold' wallets in their hands, beliefs that can be accessed by means of interviews independent of the particular activities in which individuals act ..." (ROTH para. 59). Now a scholar would present an argument why people do not hold "beliefs." Abjuring scholarship, ROTH tells us his personal problem that he finds it difficult to accept this formulation. Why is his difficulty worthy of publication in a scholarly journal? [9]

Leaving no stone unturned, ROTH discovers another sin I have committed. I employed adjectives "that in other context [sic] (e.g., APA journals, British and British-like cultures) would be considered as exaggerations" (ROTH para. 62). E.g., I described GOLDHAGEN's research on the psychology of the Holocaust as a remarkably *clear* and *skilful* application of qualitative methodology to cultural psychology. I said that GOLDHAGEN *vividly* describes acts that the perpetrators carried out. And I stated that his conclusions are convincing, because they logically mesh with the data. There is no exaggeration here, though I certainly am exercising my right as an author to express my evaluation. (Even dry APA articles speak of *cleverly designed* research, *robust* data, etc.) This charge is another red herring which has nothing to do with any substantive theoretical or empirical issues. I think that if I described ROTH's work as clear, skilful, and logical he would have no objection. His comment on my usage of adjectives seems to be a specious way of denigrating my book. [10]

Another of ROTH's unsubstantiated and unwarranted charges against me: He accuses me of describing actions by German soldiers during the Holocaust "without the appropriate data to support them" (ROTH para. 62). True to form, he doesn't demonstrate why my data is inappropriate by presenting any data which contradicts it. Once again, he feels his opinion alone is sufficient. Actually, the question of data misses the whole point of the example. I presented GOLDHAGEN's analysis of the Holocaust as a useful methodology for cultural psychology. He rigorously describes a pattern of German soldiers' behavior, then infers their psychology (motives, emotions), and then infers cultural factors that generated this psychology and behavior. I analyze his method of analysis. That is the point. I am not presenting an exhaustive, conclusive historical study of the Holocaust. I even state that some of GOLDHAGEN's evidence and conclusions may be incorrect, however, what is of interest is his method of inferring cultural influences on psychology. Thus the accusation that my evidence is inappropriate is not relevant to my purpose. [11]

ROTH condemns my statement that the Holocaust was complex, irrational, unusual, and mind-boggling. He says this "seems to go against the very purpose of cultural psychology, namely to develop an intricate understanding of why people do what they do, and how culture mediates their actions" (ROTH para. 62). Now anyone reading my book knows that this is exactly how I analyzed the Holocaust. I presented GOLDHAGEN's analysis as a clear and skillful application of cultural psychology to understanding the psychology and behavior of the Holocaust perpetrators. But explaining the cultural psychology of complex, irra-

tional behavior doesn't negate its complexity and irrationality. ROTH implies that cultural psychology somehow abolishes all complexity and irrationality by explaining reasons for it. This is a gross misunderstanding of cultural psychology. [12]

In a few instances ROTH touches upon an issue rather than asserting his opinion about trivia. However, he has little to say about the issues and what he does say is poorly conceived. For instance, he complains about my view of science. He objects to my position that psychological data are independent of the researcher and can be studied objectively. He counter poses the authority of KUHN to claim that:

"Competing paradigms cannot even agree on what is appropriate data and what is not. Specifying what is acceptable data means, consistent with the activity theoretic approach to cultural psychology, specifying the entire activity system within which something is taken as data. Thus, other explanations might be different because they are framed within a different paradigm that does not accept as data what GOLDHAGEN and RATNER accept." [ROTH, para. 67] [13]

First of all, this is a serious debate in social science. For ROTH to be scholarly and convincing he should explain why his point is valid and mine isn't. He should develop an *argument*. It is not enough to state that KUHN says such and such, as though that settles the issue. *Issues* need to be *analyzed* in a critique, although ROTH is averse to comprehending this. So once again ROTH has not provided a worthy critique of my position. [14]

However, *his* opinion is easily debunked. According to him, any activity theoretic approach can construe data as it wishes. No one can argue because that construction must be respected within the activity system that generated it. This rampant subjectivism could lead, for example, to construing the Holocaust as a beneficial cleansing of human civilization. This is the obvious fallacy of the extreme form of social constructionism which ROTH opposes to my view of science. [15]

Within social science, certain rules of evidence *are* accepted by practitioners of different theories and methodologies. Logical interconnectedness is one of these. Most social scientists can agree whether a conclusion logically follows from properties of evidence. For example, people claim that identical twins reared together have similar psychological attributes because of their identical genes. It is easy, however, to demonstrate that this conclusion is illogical because the similar psychology could equally be due to similar rearing conditions. Psychobiologists and social psychologists from divergent psychological perspectives can and do see the truth of this rebuttal. No one insists that the genetic conclusion is valid because of the theoretical system which generated it. [16]

I argue that GOLDHAGEN establishes a tight logical connection between the pattern of behavior that German soldiers manifested, their psychological functions (emotions, perceptions, memories, motives) and their cultural ideology of anti-Semitism. Other conclusions about their psychology and cultural influences are

less consistent with this behavior. There is nothing, in principle, wrong with this kind of assertion. ROTH is wrong to reject it out of hand and to claim that no assertion of this kind is appropriate. Of course, someone might demonstrate that another conclusion is superior to GOLDHAGEN's because it is more logically consistent with behavior. The debate, however, would be in terms of which conclusion is more logical. Logical consistency would remain the underlying criterion accepted by the parties to the debate. ROTH claims that different parties would not/could not agree on basic rules of evidence. This is untrue. If it were true, there would never be any way of settling disputes. Every opinion would be accepted as correct within its frame of reference. We have already seen how dangerous, as well as ludicrous, this would be. In fact, if any theory and its data are inviolable, then ROTH has no justification for criticizing my approach and evidence. [17]

Given the shortcomings of ROTH's review of my book, I hope that readers of FQS will make a fresh decision whether to read it. [18]

## Author

[Carl RATNER](#) has been developing a theoretical and methodological approach to cultural psychology for several decades. He has published *Cultural Psychology and Qualitative Methodology: Theoretical & Empirical Considerations* (Plenum, 1997) and *Cultural Psychology: Theory & Method* (Plenum, 2002). RATNER currently gives workshops on qualitative methodology especially in relation to cultural psychology. His articles can be read on his web site.

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## Citation

Ratner, Carl (2003). Reply to Wolff-Michael Roth's Review Essay "Culture and Identity" [18 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4(2), Art. 11, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0302116>.