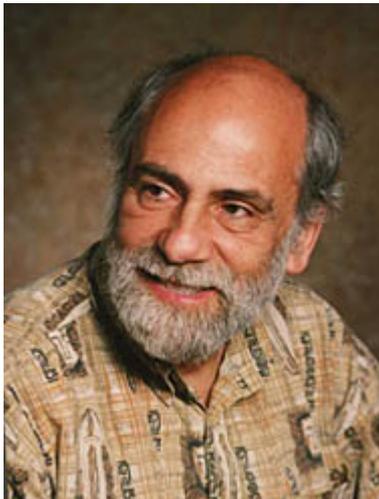


[Paul Rozin](#), one of the founding fathers of cognition-and-culture studies, is a psychologist with a rich set of interests. Even though he's often known for his work on food, and disgust in particular ([cockroach in your drink](#) anyone?), the list of his current projects alone would make many a psychological career look narrowly focused. However, this post will not dwell on the value of having such diverse interests, but on the value for psychology of adopting a richer set of methodologies.



In an insightful series of articles (see below), Rozin highlights some of the shortcomings of modern psychology (while his focus is primarily on social psychology, his remarks apply equally well to most of cognitive psychology). One of these shortcomings is the failure to sufficiently take into account—and study—cultural variability. Even the bulk of cross-cultural psychology only compares undergrads across countries (usually a ‘Western’ sample and an ‘Eastern’ sample). But Rozin draws our attention to the even less forgivable paucity of data regarding presumably less stark cultural variations along ethnic, religious, political or social lines. Understandably, for most Western researchers, a trip to Shanghai or Kyoto to carry out an experiment will be more attractive than one to, say, inner-city Detroit (I plead guilty here). But there also seems to be a publication bias: cross-cultural psychology journals are likely to publish more easily a comparative study of Chinese and American undergraduates rather than one comparing, say, blue and white collar workers in Philadelphia (coda: a publication bias nearly automatically translates into a grant bias which further compounds the problem). But I will not belabor this point, as the lack of cultural variability in the samples of psychologists has already been discussed on this blog.

Rozin's second important contention is that psychology has become too much hypothesis-driven and that it pays too little attention to the simple study and reporting of phenomena. In order to drive this point home, he engages in a comparison of psychology with her big sister, biology. Rozin points out that when biology was developing, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the study of phenomena—natural history—was playing the major role, while hypothesis driven research only kicked in much later. Of course, someone could point out that psychology does not have to replicate what may have been the errors of a young science and that modern psychology is perfectly justified in adopting the latest research methods from biology. But this criticism would miss the mark, as even modern biology is much less hypothesis-driven than modern psychology. Rozin drives this point home through the comparison of a sample of psychology and biology journal articles. He notes that many of the biology articles are simply driven by the fact that “little is known about X”, so that “informed curiosity seems like quite an acceptable justification for a study.” There is very little room in top psychology journals for the ‘mere’ description of phenomena. By comparison, and drawing only on my recent memory, there have been reports in top biology journals of observations such as coconut carrying octopi and spear throwing chimpanzees.

A related point is that psychologists may now be too bent on minute investigations of mechanisms,

again as opposed to making sure that these mechanisms fit within the larger picture of the known phenomena. Sometimes a phenomenon that is only reported in a few (or even a single) studies will give rise to many publications trying to elucidate the precise mechanisms that give rise to it. This is often done without pausing for a second and wondering of the original phenomenon is robust—if it occurs across a reasonable variety of situations—or if it is not part of a larger phenomenon—in which case studying the details of a particular situation is unlikely to yield a deep understanding of the mechanisms.

Why has psychology turned that way? Why does it, maybe in its efforts to differentiate itself from other forms of social science, seem to have gone too far and thrown out the baby with the bathwater? Rozin suggests several explanations, such as the tendency of people at the bottom of a scale—and psychologists are likely to feel that they are at the bottom of the natural sciences—to ‘overdo’ it. However, maybe the most likely explanation is that other people are already doing the work of reporting on phenomena. They are anthropologists, sociologists, demographers, political scientists, historians, economists... and psychologists seem to be wont to stay away from them or their findings—findings that, anathema, did not depend on the experimental method!

Obviously, there are exceptions to this trend. Rozin mentions the work of Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen on the Culture of Honor. Likewise, the research of Doug Medin and his collaborators on naïve biology relies heavily on careful experimentation, but also on ethnographies, interviews, historical data, etc. But this type of work is altogether too rare.

Much as the usual critique of psychology as being ‘culture-blind’, the present critique might come as old news to some readers of this blog. Still, I thought it might be worth repeating that, while psychology certainly has a lot to bring to other social sciences in terms of methodology (psychologists dream of a time when all anthropologists will know how to do an ANOVA), the reverse is at least as true. And such an avowal has more strength coming from a renowned psychologist.

Before finishing, I couldn’t help but add this wonderful quote of Solomon Asch that captures the present phenomena very well:

“[Psychologists] have, for example, striven to emulate the quantitative exactness of natural sciences without asking whether their own subject matter is always ripe for such treatment, failing to realize that one does not advance time by moving the hands of the clock.” (Social psychology, 1952, pp. xiv-xv, cited in Rozin, 2001)

Cockroach study:

Rozin, P., Millman, L., & Nemeroff, C. (1986). [Operation of the laws of sympathetic magic in disgust and other domain](#). *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(4), 703-712.

Papers on the topic discussed here:

Rozin, P. (2001). [Social psychology and science: Some lessons from Solomon Asch](#). *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 5(1), 2. [contains an hilarious—for psychologists—parody of their own field]

Rozin, P. (2007). [Exploring the landscape of modern academic psychology: finding and filling the holes](#). *The American psychologist*, 62(8), 751.

Rozin, P. (2009). [What Kind of Empirical Research Should We Publish, Fund, and Reward?: A Different Perspective](#). *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 4(4), 435.

Nisbett and Cohen on honor:

Nisbett, R. E., & Cohen, D. (1996). *Culture of honor: The psychology of violence in the South*: Westview Pr.

Medin and Atran on naïve biology:

Medin, D. L., & Atran, S. (1999). *Folkbiology*: The MIT Press.