



Abstract In his paper, David Matsumoto (2005) offers a critical approach to the adequacy of verbal reports as representations of culture, arguing that they represent a cultural ideology (what he calls 'consensual culture' or a 'consensual cultural worldview') rather than a culture's actual complexity ('cultural ways' or 'actual cultural behaviors'). I agree with the author that we make mistakes when describing our own culture. But the fact that we may sometimes err does not necessarily mean that we always do. The problem with such a view is that the denial of the epistemic value of verbal reports also invalidates the capacities of the scientist as a member of the culture, unless we consider the scientist to exist outside her/his culture. This is the classical objectivist approach in science and, furthermore, the assumption tacitly accepted by cross-cultural studies.

Key Words anthropological universalism, cross-cultural methodology, etic/emic approaches, verbal report

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To Believe or Not to Believe in Verbal Reports: The Denial of First-Person Authority and the Blind Spot of Universalist Cross-cultural Studies

In general terms, the central statement proposed by Matsumoto (2005) is an important and appealing one. The main thesis has two possible interpretations: either as a methodological criticism or, more radically, as questioning what we understand by 'culture'. Matsumoto opts for the former while I consider the latter more fruitful. Matsumoto's major criticism is towards the unavoidable social desirability implied in all forms of cultural verbal report. This criticism leads to a distinction between a biased, socially adequate 'cultural worldview' and the actual culture of a community. Cultural reports would deal with the former, while the source of information for the latter is still unknown. In order to refer to the more real cultural aspects, Matsumoto uses expressions such as 'actual cultural behaviors', 'cultural ways', 'cultural practices', 'culture in its totality' or simply 'culture'. But how

does he get acquainted with this 'actual culture'? Tracing a limit between the whole (the culture) and a part of it (the cultural worldview) necessarily implies the recognition of cultural contents that are not discernible in the cultural worldview.

Methodological criticism can lead us to defend the introduction of new methods in order to discover the unexplored cultural contents excluded from the 'cultural worldview'. This is precisely Matsumoto's choice, and is reflected in many passages of his paper: he emphasizes the importance of introducing methods to overcome the inherent problems of verbal reports (e.g. measuring implicit attitudes); he criticizes statistical artifacts which over-represent intergroup variance and artificially diminish intragroup variance; he claims that cultural values do not predict behavior; and he states that 'individualism' should be differentiated from 'autonomy'.

However, if Matsumoto's criticism were applicable, even the introduction of all these methodological improvements would not change the original diagnosis: cultural comparisons always risk oversimplifications and, moreover, they can be ideologically used for certain (or uncertain) objectives. In my opinion, this is the most important point made by Matsumoto. Eventual improvements in the methodology of comparing cultures will not solve the more fundamental problem of the instrumentalization of social sciences.

A good example of this point is the cultural literature cited by the author. Convincingly, Matsumoto shows how Ruth Benedict's (1946) analysis of the Japanese culture was accomplished without ethnographic fieldwork. Nevertheless, Benedict's work was later immensely cited, to a great extent due to its clear-cut description of Japanese (supposed) 'collectivist' culture. Regarding this point, I miss an analysis of the situation of the scientist when making cultural comparisons. I would expect not only methodological criticism in order to improve the instruments that allow us to diagnose a culture, but also reflection on our (cultural) situation when making cross-cultural observations. Benedict's analysis is an example of an *etic* approach to another culture: the analysis is made without abandoning the compromise with the analyst's own cultural values. The individualistic-collectivist dichotomy, as well as the search for universal cultural dimensions, reflects a typically occidental modern form of knowledge. This procedure strongly contrasts with an *emic* approach to cultures (e.g. Clifford Geertz's [1973] 'thick description'), which demands the suspension of our own criteria when evaluating cultural institutions and behaviors. Matsumoto's observation triggers the reflection upon cultural values that is implicit in

the act of making cross-cultural comparisons over universal, trans-cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, and unfortunately, it is not sufficiently developed.

Interestingly, Matsumoto uses appealing first-hand experience to validate his general claim. Here we have an example of non-application of the basic argumentative principle of *'tu quoque'* (Latin: 'you too'): What a scientific theory says must, in principle, be applicable to the theory itself or to the scientist him- or herself. *'Tu quoque'* also means that a scientific position must be self-applicable. This is not the case with Matsumoto's claim. When he argues that people who practice Judo are not reporting the culture but (only) a cultural worldview, we must ask whether Matsumoto himself is not speaking from his own cultural worldview. Is what he offers in opposition to the verbal reports given by his participants not a verbal report in itself? Here we can clearly observe that his claim involves a separation of himself (as an observer) from the experimental subjects who, according to him, fail to reliably describe culture. If we accept Matsumoto's thesis, we have to admit that Matsumoto himself, as a member of his culture, can eventually have the same difficulties in separating a cultural worldview from his own verbal report of his culture. As long as he does not admit this logical contradiction, we can claim that his procedure is a typical analysis of a 'monologic hermeneutics' (as opposed to 'dialogical hermeneutics') (see Groeben, 1986): he denies the reflexive capacities of his reported subjects, but he ascribes them to himself (and maybe to social scientists in general). Why then would we believe that Matsumoto's intuitions about his own culture are more reliable than those of his interviewed subjects?

I agree with Matsumoto that we make mistakes when describing our own culture. (Probably this error is directly related to the level of abstraction of the judged item: the more abstract the judged item is, the more likely people are to fall into socially available simplifications.) It is unlikely that anybody can make an exhaustive description of an entity as complex and evolving as culture. But the fact that we may sometimes err does not necessarily mean that we always do. The fact that our opinion is fallible does not lead to the conclusion that our opinion should be ignored.

The negation of the epistemic value of subject reports is certainly not something new in social sciences. It is to be found at both ends of the psychological object/subject scale: in the limit between (individual) mind and (collective) culture; and in the limit between mind and the neural system. Throughout history, there have been attempts to explain subjective meaningful construals from the point of view of society or

of neurobiology. In the first case, it is argued that individual meanings are *only* absorptions of pre-existent, social constructions (Foucault's epistème), which leads to the conclusion that 'the individual does not exist'. In the second case, individual meanings are *only* by-products of neurobiological processes, so the conclusion is that an exhaustive biological theory will replace any theory of the 'intentional stance'. Both cases deny the authority of the first person.

Matsumoto's statement that verbal reports are indicators not of culture but of cultural ideologies seems close to the negation of the authority of the first person from a socio-macrostructural viewpoint. In this approach, the position of the social scientist within social reality is problematic. Denial of the epistemic value of verbal reports also invalidates the capacities of the scientist as a member of the culture, unless we consider the scientist to exist outside her/his culture, and therefore to have a vision of culture 'from nowhere'. This is the classical objectivist approach in science and, furthermore, the approach Matsumoto promotes.

I consider Matsumoto's proposal to be highly relevant: he warns of the dangers in believing that verbal reports reflect culture directly. Furthermore, in this context, it makes sense to think of stereotypic 'consensual worldviews', as Matsumoto suggests. In my opinion, this empirical fact should lead to a deeper reflection about the need to complement quantifications of cultural features with ample descriptions of cultural contents. However, this involves the unfolding of the metatheoretical assumptions of cross-cultural studies: the search for a few universal dimensions in which all cultures can be discretely classified, paying the high cost of the loss of the dynamic idiosyncrasy of each culture. In order to be able to capture this richness, you have to abandon universalism and situate yourself in a particular point of view, namely the one of the culture you are studying. The right way to comprehend the complexity of a culture is to apprehend from within its way of life. From the outside, Amerindian cannibalism is a crime. From the inside, it allows aborigines to adopt the subjective perspective of their enemies (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). Clearly, classifying complex cultural behaviors as individualistic or collectivistic is not enough to comprehend culture.

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Biography

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