

Theme issue

“Culture and psychology in comparative perspective: The case of Estonia”

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Guest Editor

Editorial

Trames enters its second year with a theme issue devoted to the understanding of culture and psychology in comparative perspective. In a certain sense, the title of this issue is formulated in a redundant form. No culture or individual psychological attribute can be understood without a minimal comparative perspective. Something cannot be big, hard, or even excellent by itself. There must be something else which is small, soft and not so excellent compared with the first something. Awareness of a particular culture and individuality can only emerge after another culture or individuality which is sufficiently different from the first one is comprehended. An isolated culture or individual does not have any specificity or character. Juri Lotman was certainly right when defining an elementary unit of meaning-generation as “a binary system, consisting at least of two semiotic mechanisms (languages) which are in a relationship of mutual untranslatability, yet at the same time being similar, since by its own means each of them models one and the same extrasemiotic reality” (Lotman 1997:10). In order to reach the level of self-description, it is essential to accept the external viewpoint on oneself. Only from this external viewpoint it is possible to discover oneself as a unique and specific object (11). One important role of the humanities and social sciences is to provide society with the self-description which inevitably presumes the understanding of the larger whole, for example Europe, to which the society belongs or wishes to belong.

A feature common to all papers included in this issue is the comparative perspective. Jaan Valsiner, who started his scientific career in Tartu, compares the

possibilities of exercising science in small and big countries. His optimistic message is that the science of a small country is not inevitably small. In his article, he however raises a most painful dilemma faced by the Estonian humanities and social sciences today – as it was a hundred years ago – whether to remain provincial or whether to attempt to become truly international. Nobody can doubt for which alternative he is giving his voice.

All other papers but one are making genuine contributions to understanding Estonian culture in a comparative framework. Anu Realo is attempting to solve the puzzle why Estonia has obtained the reputation to be a collectivistic country in international cross-cultural studies, contrary to Estonians' own national myth about their extreme individualism. Another puzzle, tackled by Olev Must, is literacy. The literacy of Estonians exceeds remarkably the level which could be expected from current socio-economical indicators alone.

Further, it is generally acknowledged that Estonians, like Finns, are not very talkative. Tiia Tulviste is describing in her article the process of socialization which led to Estonians becoming a quiet nation. This topic harmonizes well with another paper, written by Piibi-Kai Kivik, who studies what silence means to Estonians compared with Canadians. Vilve Raudik and Ulla Ryyänen analyze the meaning of illness in Estonia and Finland. Mikko Lagerspetz' paper is devoted to the analysis of the change of public discourse which happened during the last few years.

Finally, my own essay about the quality of the social sciences (and in fact humanities as well), echoing Valsiner's thoughts, is rather critical about the current situation. Yet, as scientists we have to accept what we have determined to be the truth and the acceptance itself may be a remedy for improvement already. Perhaps it is even more true about the current Estonian social sciences than about science in general what Otto von Neurath said, and what Willard van Orman Quine likes to repeat: we are in the position of a mariner who must rebuild his ship plank by plank while continuing to stay afloat on the open sea. Let us hope that by launching a journal like *Trames*, and by publishing this very issue as a part of the larger project, we have already repaired one plank of the ship.

In conclusion, it is a pleasant obligation to mention and thank the many colleagues who helped, in one way or another, in the process of the edition of this special issue. I am especially grateful to Merry Bullock, Wolfgang Drechsler, Larry White and Aleksander Pulver for their essential contribution.

References

Lotman, Yuri (1997) "Culture as subject and object in itself". *This journal*, 1(51/46), 7–16.