

Symbolic Resources

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Symbolic resources, sometimes called cultural resources, are cultural elements (i.e., created by people and loaded with meaning) that become resources in the process of being used by people to act upon the world, another person or themselves. This definition includes such diverse phenomena as using a shovel to dig a hole and being calmed by listening to soothing music.

Essentialist vs. Processual Definitions

Two uses of symbolic resources can be observed in the literature. On the one hand, inspired by sociology, some authors believe that certain people have better access to these resources, such as when they are said to have cultural, symbolic, or economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). From this standpoint, it can be difficult to distinguish what is not a cultural or symbolic resource. On the other hand, inspired by Vygotsky's (1971, 1986) conception of mediated action and the pragmatist emphasis on activity (e.g., James, 1890; Dewey, 1934), a second strand of research has examined what cultural elements people actually *use*, in situated actions and interactions, intending to achieve specific outcomes (which may or may not be achieved). In this latter sense, a resource only exists in the process of being *used*.

Comparable Notions

Note that the essentialist vs. processual distinction has also been used to designate comparable phenomena under a different term. Studies on cultural artifacts (Cole, 1996) and cultural tools raise comparable issues. Some perspectives emphasize that cultural objects constitute "tool kits" that can potentially be used, whereas others prefer to examine how these become relevant or transformed through their uses (Swidler, 1986) and appropriation (Perriault,

1989; Rogoff, 1995; Wertsch, 1998). Rabardel (1995) proposed to distinguish cultural "tools" (objects from the culture) from "instruments" (objects in use). Using the notion of "resource" emphasizes both the fact that it is part of a process, and that the use has an intention – it is a resource for something.

Distinctions Between Resources

Gillespie and Zittoun (2010) distinguished two types of resources and two types of uses. Resources can be tools used to act upon the physical world (e.g., using a shovel to dig a hole) or signs used to act upon the mind of self or other (e.g., telling oneself or someone else a story). Any resource can either mediate action without being consciously used (e.g., the unreflective use of a keyboard or language) or be reflectively used with intention (e.g., carefully choosing music to try and induce a romantic mood). If the notion of "cultural resource" can possibly cover all these types of resources, the notion of "semiotic resource" or "symbolic resource" can be limited to tools that are used meaningfully to act upon a mind (of self or others).

Research on Symbolic Resources

The notion of symbolic resource has been useful to explore how people deal with ruptures and adapt to new situations, drawing on previous knowledge and cultural elements. Studies have examined: how migrants or refugees mobilize elements from their initial symbolic systems to adjust to new situations (Hale, 2008; Hale & de Abreu, 2010; Kadianiki, 2010; Mahmoud, 2009); how tourists use guidebooks and films to navigate exotic lands (Gillespie, 2006); how nationalism is created and sustained (Zimmer, 2003); how members of minority groups fight for their rights or recognition (Amsler, 2009; Isop, & Hockey, 2001;

McCloud, 2005); and how people adapt to war (Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008). Such studies suggest that symbolic resources can support individual sense-making, learning and identity dynamics, and group boundary and meaning work (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003). The notion is sometimes used in a more generic way, to designate the process by which cultural guidance operates in human development (Valsiner, 2007). No cross-cultural research has been conducted on symbolic resources, probably because the use of cultural elements is assumed to take place within all groups and cultural systems. However, different cultures vary in terms of the uses of symbolic resources they encourage or forbid, for whom and for what purpose. Also, the notion of symbolic resource has proven to be particularly relevant to study situations of cultural disruption or innovation, such as in intercultural contact (e.g., migration, refugees, inter-group conflict).

Semiotic vs. Symbolic Resources

Most of the elements used as resources as described are of a semiotic nature or have an important semiotic component, such as social representations, news, guidebooks, or religious texts. An additional distinction can be made between these resources meant to address a socially shared, or real issue, and resources used to create an imaginary world. Zittoun (2004, 2006) has restricted the notion of symbolic resources to examine how people use fictional artifacts (e.g., books, films, songs, arts) to deal with developmental tasks (e.g., naming a child, moving home, or entering professional life). Such fictional artifacts guide processes of imagination, thus creating a specific sort of zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986) or potential space. Fictional symbolic resources enable users to connect emotional and embodied experience with abstract ideas; they mediate linking past to future orientations; and they support exploration of alternatives and counterfactual situations (Zittoun, 2006).

Methodological Approaches

Because of the personal nature of uses of existing cultural elements, most studies on uses of symbolic resources have been primarily qualitative case studies. However, the dimensions along which symbolic resources can be used are becoming better understood, and researchers have attempted to study symbolic resources with questionnaires (Stankovic, Baucal, & Zittoun, 2009) and experimental designs (Cerchia, 2009).

New Research Directions

The first question for future research is to understand how children learn to use symbolic resources and become more reflective users. A related question is the relation between these more complex and reflective uses and formal education (Zittoun, 2010; Zittoun & Grossen, 2012). A second important question concerns how symbolic resources can be better designed to support usage. Gillespie, Place, and Murphy (2010) have created picture-cards for use as symbolic resources to aid people with aphasia, not only in communicating with others, but also to organize their own thoughts. The picture-cards are placed on a mat, and can be rearranged to form a conceptual map of the user's thoughts on a given topic. In this case the cards are reflectively used to act upon the mind of self and other.

Finally, future research should focus on the more general question of imagination and creativity. Not only do people use existing cultural elements, but they often use them in creative ways, and moreover they often create their own cultural elements which become symbolic resources either to themselves or someone else (Glaveanu, 2010a,b). Accordingly, we need to look beyond immediate use, to the creation and possibly destruction of symbolic resources.

SEE ALSO: Cognition; Cole, Michael; Vygotsky, Lev

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