

Cultural Psychology: Studying More Than the 'Exotic Other'

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In psychology departments across the country, a growing number of psychologists are doing something called “cultural psychology.” As they unpack their experiences and observations, unveil their theories and methods, and unfurl their often surprising results, an air of mystery collects around them. Who are these people? What is culture? What does it have to do with psychology? Why should I care? How can I join?

To address these questions, several cultural psychologists explained who they are, what they do, how they do it, why it's important, and what it takes to succeed.

What Is Cultural Psychology?

Cultural psychology is an interdisciplinary field that unites psychologists, anthropologists, linguists, and philosophers for a common pursuit: the study of how cultural meanings, practices, and institutions influence and reflect individual human psychologies. It is not a freestanding area within psychology, and most cultural psychologists would like to keep it that way. Rather than cordoning it off as its own subfield, cultural psychologists want to benefit from the breadth of expertise of its sundry practitioners, and to have a broader impact on all areas within psychology and across the social sciences.

Cultural psychology differs from other areas not only organizationally, but also philosophically. In contrast to psychologists who tend to assume that their findings and theories are universal until proven otherwise, cultural psychologists tend to assume that their findings and theories are culturally variable.

“This doesn't mean that cultural psychologists aren't interested in discovering psychological universals,” explained APS Fellow Hazel Rose Markus, a social psychologist at Stanford University. “To the contrary. We suggest that the cultural patterning of psychological processes is precisely what is universal across humans. To discover these universals, however, we have to test our theories in other populations. We also have to explore the particulars we find and what they tell us about basic psychological processes.”

Steven Heine, a social psychologist at the University of British Columbia, agreed that the road to basic psychological theory may be paved with cultural differences.

“Cultural differences can be informative to mainstream psychological theorizing in the same way that brain injuries are to neuroscience. That Phineas Gage lost his ability to plan for the future when he lost most of his medial prefrontal cortex was extremely informative for understanding how healthy minds are able to forecast future events. Likewise, knowing that certain groups do or do not show the same tendencies under different social and cultural conditions is very informative of how minds work.”

So far, cultural psychologists' efforts have yielded a bevy of intriguing, often controversial cultural differences in psychological processes, including reasoning styles, motivation, perceptions of time,

space, and color, relational styles, and emotional experience, regulation, and expression.

The Nature of Culture

The presence of cultural differences and of a field called cultural psychology encourages the questions: What is culture? And what does it have to do with you and your psyche?

Culture is much more than foods, festivals, and costumes. It's the set of ideas that coordinate the actions and construct the meanings of a group of people. More often than not, these ideas are implicit and automatic, guiding our practices, structuring our institutions, and generally infusing the everyday business of our lives. As people engage with a culture's practices, artifacts, and institutions, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors come to reflect the culture's values and beliefs.

But that's only half the story. Culture shapes individual minds and behaviors as much as the minds and behaviors shape the culture. As a result, "People are active cultural agents, rather than passive recipients of cultural influences," said social psychologist Chi-Yue Chiu, University of Illinois. "They create, apply, reproduce, transform, and transmit their cultural routines in their daily social interactions."

One implication of the cyclical, transactional relationship between cultures and psyches is that culture is not an independent variable. Culture may predict, but it does not "cause." A second implication is that neither cultures nor psychologies exist independent of each other. Without human beings, cultures don't exist, and without cultures, human beings don't exist. Indeed, theorists increasingly argue that what separates humans from other species is our ability to produce and perpetuate cultures.

Mainstream psychological science's language and methods are primarily concerned with linear, causal relationships between separable entities. So cultural psychologists must create new terms and models to describe the processes by which cultures and psyches "make each other up." Current terms include mutual constitution, mutual influence, and mutual interdependence.

Developmental psychologist Joan Miller of New School University notes that neuroscientists face a similar challenge in describing the relationship between biology and mind. "Just as it is problematic to treat biological and psychological processes as discrete and separable, it is likewise problematic to understand mental events as occurring independently of cultural experiences," Miller said.

Yet since the cognitive revolution and the rise of neuroscientific methods, psychologists have increasingly considered biology the cause of behavior, and named the brain the seat of the mind. If we take seriously the proposition that human beings are both biological and cultural beings, though, it makes sense that the sources of mind may be found both in the head and in the world. Markus accordingly advocates that psychologists "scan the sociocultural environment for the sources of the structure of behavior, just as we currently scan the brain for those sources."

The Exotic Other

One good reason to care about cultural psychology is the empirical evidence that many psychological processes once deemed universal seem instead to be culturally variable. Another is the mounting empirical evidence for the role of culture in human evolution and development.

A third reason is simply that the world is getting smaller.

“Rates of globalization are skyrocketing,” observed cultural anthropologist Rick Shweder, University of Chicago. “As the world globalizes, we will have to negotiate the ground rules for the production and distribution of cultural practices and beliefs. There will be a huge niche for cultural psychologists who understand what culture is and what it does.”

A fourth reason is that, just as the world outside our labs is becoming smaller, the worlds within our lecture halls are becoming larger. Fifty years ago, diversity in higher education ran the gamut from tweed to gabardine. As immigration laws have changed and access to higher education has increased, the student bodies to which psychologists offer their science have changed from lily white to varicolored. Increasingly, the psychology that European American researchers produce does not resonate with the experiences of these multicultural consumers.

The good news for psychologists who want to do cultural psychology is this: You’re already doing it.

Kwan

“Mainstream psychology is really cultural psychology, dealing with a very particular cultural context,” said social psychologist Virginia Kwan, Princeton University. That particular cultural context is the middle-class, college-educated, predominantly Protestant European-American milieu from which the vast majority of psychological researchers and research participants hail.

Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, a social psychologist at the University of Michigan Business School, underscored how strange this group is.

“People often describe cultural differences in terms of the exotic other, but rarely talk about why Americans are the way they are. But in my research comparing American relational styles to those of East Asian and Latin cultures, it’s Americans who are the anomaly. So I actually shifted my research to focus on American culture.”

The college student populations with which the bulk of psychological research is conducted are also an odd lot. Even among Americans, only 24 percent of those over age 25 have college degrees.

Social psychologist Fathali Moghaddam, Georgetown University, has speculated that non-student populations would reveal a more striking cultural difference than purely academic groups, even though many studies have already documented cultural differences among college students.

“If you look at the details of life in modern universities across cultures, they are very similar to each other, and very different from those of life outside of universities. For example, university students in Istanbul read, listen to, and wear many of the same things as university students in Washington, DC. However, the lives of these students in Istanbul are quite different from those of people in the villages of western Turkey, just as the lives of university students in major American cities are quite different from those of people in other American contexts.”

Oh, the Places You’ll Go!

Perspective on your own culture’s commitments, as well as insights into another’s, requires the same

first step: go away. Immerse yourself in the everyday business of living in another culture. It is only through the contrast of cultural systems that their operating principles become salient.

Cultural psychologists differ in their opinions of how deep the cultural immersion has to be before it imparts its wisdom. Psychological anthropologist Alan Fiske, University of California, Los Angeles, often recommends a lengthy stint of fieldwork, replete with language learning and participant-observation.

“Not interviewing, not videotaping, but genuine participant observation [is the key],” Fiske said. “Culture consists mostly of practices, skills, and motives whose cognitive representation is primarily procedural, not explicit semantic knowledge. We learn about each other’s cultures by participating in them, not by asking about them.”

Psychologists often have to settle for less than ideal immersion, however, because psychological training often does not include time for such fieldwork. Many draw initial insights from their own cultural backgrounds and then supplement these insights by reading texts from anthropology, history, and sociology. Sanchez-Burks, for example, recommends reading Weber and de Tocqueville to understand European-American culture.

Psychologists can also take better advantage of the short bouts of travel that their discipline does allow. “Don’t travel like a tourist,” advised social psychologist Sheena Iyengar, Columbia University’s Graduate School of Business. “Travel in a way that allows you to live more like the people there. Stay away from fancy hotels, which are basically the same wherever you go. If you can, try to stay in people’s houses.”

Nisbett

Another approach to studying cultural psychology is relying on the expertise of others. “Somebody on the team, at least at the outset, has got to be a native,” said social psychologist and APS Fellow Richard Nisbett, University of Michigan. “Ideally, somebody on the team knows both cultures reasonably well, but sometimes it’s enough to have one person who knows one culture and one who knows the other.”

When considering possible cultural groups for research, budding cultural psychologists need not worry about encroaching upon other researcher’s turf. “Most of the non-Western world is ripe for the picking,” said Heine. There are also many under-explored populations within the United States. For example, Ying-yi Hong, a social psychologist at the University of Illinois, would like to see more research on bicultural, multicultural, and multiracial populations.

Hong

“These groups of people have often been neglected in previous research because they are viewed as not ‘pure’ enough to represent one culture,” Hong said. “However, they are arguably the fastest growing population in many places because of increased mobility and migration. By investigating these individuals, we may be better able to understand how culture dynamically influences people’s psychologies and how people negotiate their different cultural identities.”

Oh, the Places You Might Not Go!

While cultural psychologists may find it easier to cross the globe in search of deep psychological insights than their mainstream counterparts, they may also find it harder to ascend the academic hierarchy.

“The greatest obstacle to doing cultural research,” Moghaddam said, “is the publish-or-perish culture of academic psychology. Theoretically sound, culturally appropriate, and fine-tuned research with samples from at least two populations takes a long time. When you’re doing that kind of research, it’s very difficult to churn out the number of articles necessary to survive in the system.”

Even APS Fellow and Charter Member Harry Triandis, one of cross-cultural psychology’s founding fathers, did not wholeheartedly pursue cultural research until he was comfortably tenured.

“When I first started my career, I focused my research on attitudes and attitude change,” Triandis said. “That’s how I got promoted. I became a professor first, and later I became a cross-cultural psychologist.”

Heine enumerated some of the logistical barriers that cultural psychologists face in conducting their research. “After you have learned the cultural systems and languages in which you want to work, developed theory, and specified hypotheses, you then have to secure samples in both cultures,” he said. “Unless you have a collaborator who is fully committed to the project, it can be difficult to find someone to help you collect data. ... It can also be difficult to find a collaborator with the facilities that you require.

“As for [student] participants, you have to keep in mind that the school terms are at different times of the year in different countries, which can add significant delays to getting the data from the two samples, and further delays in running any follow-up studies. If participants are not students, or if the university does not have a subject pool (as is often the case outside of North America), unfavorable currency exchange rates can make studies very costly. There are also significant costs and challenges with creating materials that are appropriate in another culture, translating them and any open-ended data that you collect, and in training experimenters.”

Having overcome these obstacles and produced exciting findings, many cultural psychologists still confront the fact that cultural psychology remains a somewhat marginalized discipline.

“Cultural psychology tends to be treated as non-essential in terms of hiring, curriculum development, and other central aspects of the discipline,” Miller said. “It receives its own summary chapter in handbooks or texts, but is otherwise sometimes overlooked as a critical force in understanding basic psychological processes.”

Despite these logistic and professional hurdles, a growing number of psychologists are pursuing cultural psychology. For them, its perils are outweighed by its powerful attractions, such as contributing to psychological functioning, engaging with ideas from other social sciences, hobnobbing with international colleagues, and having a good excuse for extensive travel.

Perhaps social psychologist Michael Bond, Chinese University of Hong Kong, best summarized the appeal and likely posterity of cultural psychology: “Cultural exploration has enough intellectual intrigue to occupy an academic lifetime,” he said. “I am never bored, but constantly being stretched.”

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