# The turn to culture

**LINDSAY O'DELL, GUIDA DE ABREU** *and* **SARAH O'TOOLE** *look at the role of culture in psychology.*

**W**ORLD events since 11 September 2001 have brought the need for understanding of cultural difference to the fore. Psychologists have a major part to play addressing issues such as identity, belongingness and culture in the light of globalisation, mass migration and mass communication. Interest within psychology in 'culture' is both a newly emerging area of psychology, known as cultural psychology, and a long-established tradition, known as cross-cultural psychology. In this article we will outline ways in which culture has been theorised in psychology, and examine the tensions and dialogues between different approaches to studying psychology in a culturally sensitive way.

## What is 'culture'?

The diversity in understanding of culture is illustrated by the 161 definitions offered by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (cited in Cole, 1995). It is these distinctive conceptualisations of culture that offer the basis for a distinction between the emerging cultural psychology and traditional cross-cultural psychology. Cole (1995) calls for caution in conceptualising culture in psychology 'since appeal to a "generally accepted" (let alone "the correct") definition is almost certainly a hopeless enterprise' (p.31). Definitions of culture reflect one's assumptions, theoretical orientation and interests in particular aspects of the world. Making explicit the concepts used to explore the role of culture is an essential aspect of engaging with a culturally sensitive psychology.

A common distinction in the conceptualisation of culture within psychology is the division of 'emic' and 'etic' aspects of psychology. The etically oriented researcher approaches the question of a cross-cultural psychology from a trans- or metacultural perspective, while emically oriented researchers attempt to view phenomena through the eyes of their subjects (see Helfrich, 1999).

Emic approaches are more commonly used within cultural psychology, where psychological processes are assumed to be mediated through different cultural contexts. For cultural psychology the meaning of the term *culture* is complex and can include all aspects of human lives and products; 'the medium in which psychological processes are enacted' (Greenwood, 1999).

Etic approaches are typically taken within cross-cultural psychology where psychological functioning is compared across specific cultures. Culture is used as a label to identify some type of belonging to a group, such as nation or an ethnic group. Etic study involves drawing upon the notion of universal properties of cultures, which share common perceptual, cognitive and emotional structures.

As such 'culture' is a given, theorised as an independent variable (see Helfrich, 1999; Valsiner, 2000) and assumed to influence the psychological functioning of individuals. Mainstream definitions of culture implicitly focus on intrapsychic essences and inherent central processes and consistencies. The assumption is that the psyche is 'fixed, interior, abstract, universal, and lawful' (Shweder, 1990, p.96; see also discussion in Griffin, 2000).

There has been concern from cross-

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cultural psychologists and others that research has often used Western concepts and methods that were then transposed on to 'other' cultures. Extreme examples of etic studies in the field of psychology involved, for example, applying tests, tasks and questionnaires developed in one country to participants in another country or community without adaptation to the local context, history and perspectives of participants. A significant amount of Piagetian studies were carried out all over the world using this approach.

The problematic nature of this approach is demonstrated by the work of Cole and his colleagues (Cole, 1996). They found marked differences in ability when testing Liberian people with tasks imported from the US (such as jigsaw puzzles, supposed to measure perceptual ability) and tasks they modelled on their ethnographic observations of local practices (such as estimating amounts of rice).

Studies like Cole's have led to increasing debate around the ways in which psychological measures and methods need to be culturally appropriate and understandable. For example, psychologists have questioned the applicability of Western notions of emotional experiences, identity development, mental health and trauma (see Cavill, 2000). Similarly, Malik (2000) argues that the notion of depression is not an adequate description of mental health

issues for her indigenous Pakistani and first-generation British Pakistani interviewees. Malik suggests that for her (arguably non-Western) participants, there is a need to understand distress as constituted and experienced differently in different cultural locations. Thus *depression* as a word and as a concept is not used by the participants to understand their distress. *Distress* was conceptualised not as an intrapsychic aspect of the individual but much more as a product of the social context and the relationships in which the distressed person lived.

## 'The new cultural psychology understands culture in a very different way'

Whilst the intentions of cross-cultural psychology have been to address issues of culture, it does so by drawing upon notions of universal experiences and psychological processes. Gergen and Gergen (2000) argue that in so doing the discipline is not addressing cultural difference, and cultural psychologists such as Ratner (2000) agree that much cross-cultural psychology in fact represents a total *neglect* of culture. The use of particular categories such as geographical location, ethnic or linguistic group to denote cultural difference does not address the very complex experiences and

identity issues faced by many people in the world today. For example, the notion of 'culture clash' is not a straightforward collision of two aspects of geographically located identity. Marshall and Woollett (2000) cite the example of the supposed culture clash experienced by British Asian young people, where the traditional assumption that people belong to either British or Asian culture is highly problematic because it assumes that culture can be represented in simplistic terms, such as being solely 'British' or 'Asian'. They argue that 'such a conceptualisation veils individuals' diverse and fluid commitments to cultures' (p.119) and fails to address the intersections of ethnicity with other aspects of identity, such as gender and class.

The new cultural psychology understands culture in a very different way to the conventions within traditional cross-cultural work. Marshall and Woollett draw on an understanding of culture as 'shared knowledge, experience, beliefs and meaning'. By viewing culture as a series of complex social locations, theorists such as Squire are beginning to research and theorise identities as 'they cut across established cultural categories' (Squire, 2000, p.1).

The work of Malson *et al.* (2002) with young women in multicultural urban contexts is a good example of the ways in which psychological research can attend to the multiple aspects of young women's identities. Malson *et al.* interviewed young Asian and white women about their sense of style and their tastes in clothing. The researchers highlight the ways in which clothing and particular tastes in clothing and appearance were used to give a sense of belonging in which aspects of gender and ethnicity were drawn on in complex ways.

In addition to investigation of multiple identities, cultural psychologists are theorising the material world and the ways in which this mediates our psychological world. Cole (1995) proposes an understanding of culture as a 'medium constituted of artefacts'. An example of such an artefact is a calculator, which can be viewed either as a positive help with mathematical calculations or negatively as a way in which children are allowed to take the easy option.

Cultural psychologists have also examined how the wider local context mediates child development (see Abreu *et al.*, 2002; and Burman, 1994, on the construction of developmental

psychology). Joshi *et al.* (1999) have noted that British children today are less able to negotiate their local environment (for example, by using landmarks). They suggest that this change in abilities may be related to children being driven to school rather than walking on their own, because of increasing parental concern over 'stranger danger'.

### Science, methods and culture

Within cross-cultural psychology the dominant methodological approach is of traditional (social) science, and the role of the psychologist is seen as working outside of one's 'backyard' in order to understand the variations in psychological processes around the world. Bond (1997) characterises this approach:

> *...as a behavioural scientist, I want to discover a system whereby these cultural incompatibilities may be harmonised within a higher level of generality.* (page *xv*)

Thus, the assumption is that there are universal psychological processes underlying 'difference'.

The approach taken by cultural psychologists requires very different methods from those traditionally employed within cross-cultural psychology. The new theorising of culture has been paralleled by a need to rethink methods appropriate to culturally sensitive work (see Valsiner, 1995, 2001) in which theory does not have redress to underlying universal psychological functioning. Indeed, Griffin (2000) notes that 'most psychologists still lack the methodological as well as the theoretical tools to engage with the cultural domain' (p.24). She draws on the example of Valerie Hey's work of a feminist ethnography (an approach 'borrowed' from anthropology and not traditionally used in cross-cultural psychology) of girls' friendship groups in two urban secondary schools. Hey studied the specific cultural practice of girls passing notes to each other in school, where passing notes is a strategy used to keep adults and young men out.

Barbara Miller's (1995) work also exemplifies this kind of methodological approach in her study of the sons and daughters of Hindu immigrants in the US. Acting as a participant/observer she joined temples, schools, summer camps, youth events, family homes, as well as conducting formal and informal interviews. Miller reflects upon her own identity in her research with the young people from both European American and Indian Hindu communities. She found that the adolescents identified with her as a 'European American' and were able to share with her their feelings about growing up in the US. In addition, as an active and knowledgeable participant in Indian Hindu

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power, politics and identity, and argues that 'in such work, "culture" loses its comfortable independence from politics, and the inevitable involvement of cultural psychology in cultural change becomes explicit' (p.5). Moreover, a political awareness will enable scrutiny of social issues such as schooling, racism, experiences of trauma and understandings of childhood in ways that attend to the complex identities, senses of belonging, and other dimensions of human development, as embedded in specific sociocultural practices.

events, Miller found herself respected by the parents.

As well as new methods, cultural psychologists need political know-how. Within cultural psychology there is an acknowledgement that the discipline does not operate in a value-free social vacuum, but in one that is highly ideological and political (Burman, 1997; Valsiner, 2001). Shweder (1990) discusses ways in which cultural psychology 'properly understood and practised, is heretical' (p.97). Similarly, Squire (2000) notes that cultural psychology involves consideration of

### Conclusions

The assumption that 'culture' is homogenised and static is a view that is largely at odds with the contemporary world. As Hermans and Kempen (1998) argue, 'in an increasingly interconnected world, the conception of independent, coherent, and stable cultures becomes increasingly irrelevant' (p.1111).

The 'turn to culture' in psychology is, we therefore argue, an important one. Cultural psychology offers ways in which psychology can theorise learning, development, identity and belongingness in complex and sophisticated ways. It offers a direction for the development of

a psychology sensitive to the environment of the person without recourse to underlying universal psychological processes. It is from this approach to psychology, as Vygotsky identified at the beginning of the last century, that we can document the differences between people in different cultures in terms of sociocultural mediators and cultural practices available in their environment, rather than the biological make-up of their minds (Vygotsky, 1978).

We strongly believe that British psychology will benefit from adopting cultural psychological approaches. Current levels of migration, globalisation, and modern forms of communication challenge and disrupt the (assumed) homogeneous character of societies. Diversity in schools, communities and work requires approaches to psychology that go beyond the stereotyped and dichotomous comparisons provided by traditional cross-cultural studies. The 'turn to culture' seems therefore a very promising direction, but one that requires considerable development of theory and methodology.

■ *Dr Lindsay O'Dell is in the Centre for Psychology and Culture, University of Luton. E-mail: Lindsay.o'dell@luton.ac.uk.*
■ *Guida de Abreu is Reader in Cultural Psychology at the University of Luton.*
■ *Sarah O'Toole is a doctoral student at the University of Luton.*

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