

Cultural Psychology

Richard A Shweder, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

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Abstract

There is a substantial portion of the psychological nature of human beings that is neither homogeneous nor fixed across time and space. At the heart of the discipline of cultural psychology is the tenet of psychological pluralism, which states that the study of normal psychology is the study of multiple psychologies and not just the study of a single or uniform fundamental psychology for all peoples of the world. Research findings in cultural psychology focus on differences in mentalities by virtue of membership in ancestral groups and raise questions about the value and social function of alternative forms of human subjectivity.

Cultural Psychology: What Is It?

A major aim of the discipline called cultural psychology is to document variations in modes of (and ideals for) normal psychological functioning in different ethnic communities. One assumption of the discipline – the premise of nonuniformity – is that there is a substantial portion of the psychological nature of human beings that is neither homogeneous nor fixed across time and space. Cultural psychology seeks to document the protean cultural aspects of human psychological nature, especially the ways fundamental features of the mental life of all human beings (the various capacities definitive of a subjective life – the abilities to think, know, want, feel, and value things as good or bad) assume different shapes in different cultural traditions. The discipline can be defined as the study of the distinctive mentalities of particular peoples (Balinese Hindus, Satmar Hasidim, Chinese Mandarins, secular coastal elites in the United States) (see Garreau, 1982; Geertz, 1973; Greenfield and Cocking, 1994; Heine, 2011; Kitayama and Cohen, 2010; Levy, 1973; Markus et al., 1996; Menon, 2013; Miller, 1997; Nisbett, 2004; Shweder, 1991; Shweder and LeVine, 1984; Shweder et al., 1998; Stigler et al., 1990).

Cultural psychology can thus be distinguished from the study of general psychology, which is the study of mental structures and processes that are so widely distributed as to characterize the normal psychological functioning of all human beings (or perhaps even nonhuman primates as well). Research in cultural psychology has, for example, systematically corroborated the special status accorded to the defense of female honor in the mentality of many Southern American White males (Nisbett and Cohen, 1995). Research in cultural psychology has authenticated the claim that there is a positive sense of empowerment and a feeling of virtue associated with modesty and the attitude of respectful restraint in the psychology of women in some regions of the contemporary non-Western world (Menon and Shweder, 1998). Such feelings of power and goodness associated with modesty contrast with ideas about (and ideals for) psychological functioning constructed in the contemporary Anglo-American cultural region. Research in cultural psychology has documented factional intragroup and cross-cultural differences in the normative ethical concepts (such as liberty, equality, respect for status, loyalty, and purity) that give shape and meaning to human

moral judgments and a personal sense of conscience (Haidt, 2013; Jensen, 2010; Shweder et al., 2003). Research findings in cultural psychology thus raise provocative questions about the integrity and value of alternative forms of subjectivity across cultural groups and within and between countries and regions of the world.

A second assumption of cultural psychology is that many mental states (and some mental processes) are best understood as by-products of the never-ending attempts of particular groups of people to understand themselves and to make manifest their self-understandings through social practices (Bruner, 1990; Geertz, 1973; Wierzbicka, 1993, 1999, 2013). That might be called the premise of self-reflexive social construction. Whether one studies Inuit Eskimos or Anglo-American middle-class conservatives or liberals, the aim in cultural psychology is to spell out the implicit meanings (the goals, values, and pictures of the world) that give shape to psychological processes (Briggs, 1970; White and Kirkpatrick, 1985). The aim is to examine the patchy or uneven distribution of those meanings on a global scale and to investigate the manner of their social acquisition, for example, by means of participation in the symbolic practices, including linguistic practices, of this or that tradition-sensitive cultural group (Haidt, 2013; Menon, 2013; Wierzbicka, 2013).

The Mental States of Others

One of the several aims of cultural psychology is to develop a language for the comparative study of mental states that makes it possible to understand and appreciate the mental life of others. 'Others' refers to members of some different cultural community who by virtue of life long membership in that group ascribe meaning to their lives in the light of wants, feelings, values, and beliefs that are not necessarily the same as one's own.

Cultural psychologists are interested, for example, in cultural variations in the degree to which feelings are constructed as 'emotions.' Anna Wierzbicka (1999) has suggested that while all normal human beings have feelings (e.g., pleasure and pain, arousal and serenity) many of the emotions lexicalized in the English language are not universally available in the mental life of people around the world. There has been

much research in cultural psychology into the character of the particular emotions (Ifaluk 'fago,' American 'happiness') that are salient or important in different types of social worlds (Lutz, 1988; Kitayama and Markus, 1994; Shweder et al., 2010).

Cultural psychologists are interested as well in population-based variations in social cognition, moral judgment, and the sources of personal fulfillment or life-satisfaction in different social groups. For example, they have studied the origin, significance, and place of filial piety and the social motivation to achieve in some East Asian populations (Yang, 1997; also see Kitayama et al., 1997). They have investigated the self-empowering aspects of ascetic denial and other forms of sacrifice among high-caste women in South Asia (Menon, 2000, 2013). They are concerned to document the divergent meanings and distinctive somatic and affective vicissitudes of such experiences as loss (or success or of not getting the things you want, etc.) for members of different cultural communities. It is in the pursuit of such research questions that they have discovered replicable cultural differences in reports about the quality of the experience of loss (and gain). In comparison to majority populations in Northern Europe or the United States, majority populations in Samoa and China are more likely to react to apparent loss with feelings such as headaches, backaches, and other types of physical pain than with feelings such as sadness or dysphoria (Levy, 1973; Kleinman, 1986). Cultural psychologists also seek to document differences in modes of thought (e.g., analytic vs holistic) (Hong et al., 2000; Nisbett, 2004; Nisbett et al., 2001), in self-organization (e.g., interdependent vs independent) (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), and in moral judgment (e.g., reliance on an ethics of autonomy vs an ethics of community vs an ethics of divinity) across different types of groups (Haidt, 2013; Jensen, 2010; Shweder et al., 2003).

In most of its research the field of cultural psychology has been pluralistic in its conception of normal psychological functioning and interdisciplinary in its conception of how to go about studying the origin, meaning, and social role of particular mental states on a worldwide scale. The field draws together anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, biologists, and philosophers in its study of the diverse, yet potentially effective, modes of psychological functioning that have been produced, and socially endorsed, in different cultural traditions, and have made those cultural traditions possible. Indeed, cultural psychology is sometimes described as the study of the way culture and psyche make each other up.

The Tenet of Psychic Pluralism

The premise of nonuniformity when taken together with the premise of self-reflexive social construction sum up to the master principle of the discipline of cultural psychology. This is the tenet of psychic pluralism, which states that the study of normal psychology is the study of multiple psychologies (mentalities, subjectivities), and not just the study of a single or uniform fundamental psychology for all peoples of the world. Cultural psychology is thus the study of the way the human mind (understood to consist of an inherently

complex, heterogeneous collection of abstract and/or latent schemata) can be transformed, and made functional, in a number of different ways, which are not equally distributed across time or space. Hence the slogan, "one mind, many mentalities: universalism without the uniformity," which is meant to give expression to goals of a discipline aimed at developing a credible theory of psychological pluralism. A much discussed essay on the 'weirdness' (in the sense of 'atypical' or statistically deviant) of experimental findings in mainstream Western psychology (research typically conducted on subject populations from Western Educated Industrial Rich Democratic (WEIRD) societies) highlights the hazards of rushing to claims about the so-called basic or fundamental or universal psychological processes (Henrich et al., 2010).

Cultural psychology can also be understood as a project designed to critically assess the limitations and incompleteness of all uniformitarian versions of the idea of psychic unity. Alternatively put, cultural psychology is the study of ethnic and cultural sources of diversity in emotional and somatic functioning, self-organization, moral evaluation, social cognition, and human development. It is the study of population differences in the things people know, think, want, feel, and value, and are customarily motivated to do, by virtue of life course membership in some recognizable group that has a history and a conception of its own destiny. "To be a member of a group," the eighteenth-century German romantic philosopher Johann Herder argued "is to think and act in a certain way in the light of particular goals, values and pictures of the world; and to think and act so is to belong to a group" (as represented by Berlin, 1976). Although the field of cultural psychology has many ancestral spirits (Giambattista Vico, Wilhelm Wundt, Wilhelm Dilthey, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict, Clifford Geertz) and some very prominent contemporary advocates (Jerome Bruner, Michael Cole, Jacqueline Goodnow, Patricia Greenfield, Shinobu Kitayama, Richard Nisbett, Hazel Markus, Anna Wierzbicka) Johann Herder is justly claimed as one of the original cultural psychologists, although he was probably not the first. For an account of the historical development of the field see Jahoda (1991) and Cole (1996).

Culture and the Custom Complex

One of the contributions of cultural psychology is to revive a conception of culture that is both symbolic and behavioral. In the history of twentieth-century anthropological thought the idea of culture has been variously defined, either behaviorally (as patterns of behavior that are learned and passed on from generation to generation) or symbolically (as the categories, beliefs, and doctrines that organize habitual or customary behavior and can be used to rationalize and justify a way of life). In research on the cultural psychology of a particular cultural community the notion of culture usually refers to community-specific ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient that are made manifest in behavior. To qualify as cultural those ideas about truth, goodness, beauty, and efficiency must be socially inherited and customary; and they must actually be constitutive of different ways of life, and

play a part in the self-understanding (including the self-criticism) of members of the community.

Alternatively stated, the concept of culture as used in cultural psychology refers to what Isaiah Berlin called goals, values, and pictures of the world that are made manifest in the speech, laws, and routine practices of some self-monitoring group. These are sometimes also called cultural models (D'Andrade, 1995; Shore, 1996). Cultural psychologists thus engage in the interpretive, symbolic, or cognitive analysis of behavior. They assume that actions speak louder than words and that customs and habits are a central unit for cultural analysis. Thus, what John Whiting and Irvin Child (1953) once referred to as the custom complex is a natural unit of analysis or starting point for a study in cultural psychology.

Whiting and Child introduced the idea of a custom complex in 1953 but the basic idea was not really taken up and carried forward until the rebirth of cultural psychology in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Whiting and Child a custom complex "consists of a customary practice [for example, a family meal, arranged marriage, animal sacrifice, a gender identity ceremony involving circumcision] and of beliefs, values, sanctions, rules, motives and satisfactions associated with it." There are many labels that social theorists in different scholarly disciplines have placed on this type of unit of analysis, for example, a custom complex, a life space, a habitus. Whatever the label, this is the type of unit of analysis that makes it possible to conceptualize cultural psychology as the study of the way culture (ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient made manifest in practice) and psyche (what people know, think, feel, want, value, and hence choose to do) afford each others realization, and thus make each other up.

A Provocative Example of a Custom Complex: Genital Surgeries in Africa

A rather dramatic but highly illuminating example of a custom complex is the circumcision ceremony or genital surgery that is customary for both boys and girls in many East and West African ethnic groups. In the countries of Sierra Leone, Mali, the Gambia, Ethiopia, Somalia, the Northern Sudan, and Egypt genital surgeries are culturally endorsed and popular for both males and females, and receive high approval ratings from the vast majority of men and women in the general population. Human rights advocacy groups in Europe and in the United States have criticized the practice, labeling it 'female genital mutilation.' The expression 'female genital cutting' is also widely used by the mainstream media in Europe and North America; although those are not the ways the custom is labeled by those for whom it is a customary and personally meaningful practice. A recent review of the medical and demographic literature on African genital surgeries by a panel of experts and published in *The Hastings Center Report*, the bioethics journal, suggests that the widely publicized claims about the severe and negative consequences of the custom for health, sexuality, and childbirth have been hyperbolic and rather one-sided and deserve to be viewed with a skeptical eye (Public Policy Advisory Network on Female Genital Surgeries in Africa, 2012; also Obermeyer, 1999). In a detailed description of the cultural psychology of male and female circumcision among

the Kono people of Sierra Leone, Fuambai Ahmadu, who is both an insider and an anthropologist, has written as follows (Ahmadu, 2000: 301). "It is difficult for me – considering the number of these ceremonies I have observed, including my own – to accept that what appear to be expressions of joy and ecstatic celebrations of womanhood in actuality disguise hidden experiences of coercion and subjugation. Indeed, I offer that most Kono women who uphold these rituals do so because they want to – they relish the supernatural powers of their ritual leaders over against men in society, and they embrace the legitimacy of female authority and, particularly, the authority of their mothers and grandmothers."

Among the various goals, values, and pictures of the world (the cultural psychology) that make this practice meaningful and satisfying for those men and women for whom it is a custom complex are the following:

1. A culturally shared belief that the body (especially the genitals) of both males and females are sexually ambiguous until modified through surgical intervention. According to this picture of the world the foreskin of a boy is viewed as a feminine element and masculinity is enhanced by its removal. Similarly the slightly protruding visible part of the clitoris is viewed as an unwelcome vestige of the male organ, and Kono females, as described by Ahmadu, seek to feminize and hence empower themselves by getting rid of what they perceive as a dispensable trace of unwanted male-like anatomy.
2. A culturally shared aesthetic standard in terms of which the genitals of both women and men are viewed as ugly, misshapen, and unappealing if left in their natural state. For many African men and women the ideal of beauty is associated with a sexual anatomy that is smooth and cleansed (shaved) and free of all fleshy encumbrances. This aesthetic look has gained some popularity on a global scale and is well represented in the 'vaginal rejuvenation' operations offered to a middle-class clientele by cosmetic surgeons in Europe and North America.

There is of course much more to be said about the beliefs, values, sanctions, rules, motives, and satisfactions associated with female (and male) genital surgeries in Africa. Nevertheless in the light of these and other culturally endorsed reasons a genital surgery is experienced as an improvement of the body in many East and West African ethnic groups (Ahmadu, 2000; also see Shweder, 2013).

The cultural psychology of the customary practices of any particular community is likely to result in a depiction of other minds that is unsettling, astonishing, or at least surprising for those whose goals, values, and pictures of the world are characteristic of the cultural psychology of some other group. Radical divergences in visceral attachments and in the moral evaluation of particular custom complexes (such as male and female genital surgeries) are themselves important topics for research in cultural psychology. Indeed, the cultural psychology of moral evaluation is currently an active research area (Fassin, 2012). Moral concepts (e.g., human rights, justice as equality) privileged in some sections of society and in some regions of the world are not necessarily the moral concepts that are most salient and important in other sectors of society and regions of the world (Haidt, 2013; Jensen, 2010; Shweder et al., 2003).

Cultural Psychology: What It Is Not

The tenet of psychic pluralism and the emphasis on goals, values, and pictures of the world as a source of psychological differences between cultural communities distinguishes cultural psychology from other fields of study (such as cross-cultural psychology and national character studies) with which it should not be confused.

It Is Not Cross-cultural Psychology

Research in cultural psychology proceeds on the assumption that psychological diversity is inherent in the human condition, and that culture and psyche are interdependent and make each other up. It should be noted in passing that any theory of psychological pluralism would lack credibility if it staunchly denied the existence of any and all universals. Indeed, as should be obvious, cultural psychology presupposes many psychological universals (e.g., feelings; wants; goals; ideas of good and bad, of cause and effect, of part-whole relationships, etc.) (see [Shweder et al., 1998](#)). However, the search for and the privileging of things that are uniform across all peoples is a project that goes under other names, for example, general psychology or perhaps even cross-cultural psychology.

Some of the goals of cross-cultural psychology (which is here contrasted with cultural psychology) have been described by [Segall et al. \(1998\)](#). One goal is “to generate more nearly universal psychology, one that has pan-human validity” and to attain “a universally applicable psychological theory.” A second closely related goal is to “keep peeling away at the onion skin of culture so as to reveal the psychic unity of mankind at its core.” It is for that reason that cross-cultural psychology (not to be confused with cultural psychology) can be viewed as a vigilant cousin of general psychology; for they both share the same uniformitarian goals. Such goals give a distinctive character to cross-cultural psychology. And they help explain why all of the following kinds of activities are typical of research by cross-cultural psychologists and distinguish it from research by cultural psychologists.

Thus one of the aims of cross-cultural psychology is to determine the boundary conditions for generalizations generated in the Western labs with Western (mostly college student) subjects, generalizations which, prior to critical examination by cross-cultural psychologists, have been presumptively interpreted as fundamental or natural and universalized to the whole world (see the results of the review of research in cross-cultural psychology by [Henrich et al. \(2010\)](#)). The aim here for the cross-cultural psychologist is not to represent the distinctive cultural psychology of particular peoples. This aim does not result in research focused on differences in the way members of different communities perceive, categorize, feel, want, choose, evaluate, and communicate that can be traced to differences in salient community-based goals, values, and pictures of the world. Rather the aim for the cross-cultural psychologist is to make sure that the hope for universal psychology is truly universal and to throw out any claim that only holds in the Anglo-American world. This is an extremely useful corrective for the tendency of Western psychologists to over generalize

their findings, but it is not the same as undertaking a project in cultural psychology.

A second aim of cross-cultural psychology is to establish comparability or equivalence for measuring instruments across different populations. Often the goal here is to try to show that people in different cultures really are alike, and that any reported differences in performance were due to noise, or inappropriate measuring instruments, or bad translations, or misunderstandings about the way to ask and answer questions. The instincts of a cultural psychologist run in quite a different direction. For a cultural psychologist (not to be confused with a cross-cultural psychologist) the ‘noise’ is interpreted as a signal about true differences in cultural meanings (goals, values, and pictures of the world), and not as something to eliminate or overcome. Indeed, cultural psychologists are likely to worry if one’s measuring instruments travel easily and well from university classroom to university classroom around the world and display the same psychometric properties here and there. They may suspect that one has not really landed in a truly different culture at all. This is because “Peeling away the onion skin of culture so as to reveal the psychic unity of mankind at its core” is not what cultural psychology is about.

A third major aim of cross-cultural psychology is to focus on the so-called independent variables of the cultural environment (for example, nucleation of the family, literacy vs nonliteracy) that are thought to either promote or retard psychological development. In such research development is almost always defined in terms of universal norms for promoting progress in cognitive, emotional, or social functioning (e.g., Piaget’s notion of ‘formal operational’ thinking or Ainsworth’s notion of healthy ‘attachment’). Cultural psychology is primarily concerned with the elaboration and discovery of alternative or plural norms for successful psychological development, which is another way it can be distinguished from cross-cultural psychology ([LeVine, 1990](#)).

It Is Not National Character Studies

Attempts to characterize whole populations in terms of generalized dispositions (e.g., authoritarianism, Apollonianism, high need for achievement) went out of fashion in psychological anthropology in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This happened for several reasons but largely because looking for variations in types of personality traits to explain differences in cultural practices or custom complexes (and vice versa) turned out to be something of a dead end. It was discovered that if one tries to describe individuals within and across cultural communities in terms of general dispositions or traits of character, then within group variations typically exceed between group variations. It was discovered that hypothesized ‘modal personality’ types typically characterize only about one-third of the population in any particular cultural group.

A major insight, although a fragile one, of recent work in cultural psychology is that it is better to represent and interpret human behavior the way sensible economists do rather than the way global personality trait theorists do. That is to say, it is better to think about behavior as emanating from agency or the exercise of will by individuals, and to analyze it as the joint

product of 'preferences' (including goals, values, and ends of various sorts) and 'constraints' (including beliefs, information, skills, material and social resources, and means of various sorts). This avoids the hazards of dispositional approaches in which behavior is interpreted as the by-product of mechanical forces pushing both from inside (in the form of personality traits) and outside (in the form of situational pressures). Ultimately, a fully successful piece of research in cultural psychology must avoid nominal dispositional categories such as holistic versus analytic and render behavior intelligible in terms of the particular goals, values, and pictures of the world that motivate and inform the domain-specific behaviors and routine practices of specific intentional agents. To do otherwise is to reify cultural stereotypes and fall into some of the traps of the past.

The Future: Going Indigenous

The field of cultural psychology that has reemerged on the North American and European scene during the past 30 years is quite similar to an intellectual movement that has grown up in the non-Western world and is increasingly known as indigenous psychology. Indeed the Society for Humanistic Psychology of the American Psychological Association has even created an Indigenous Psychology Task Force (<http://www.apadivisions.org/division-32/leadership/task-forces/indigenous/index.aspx>). One of the most eminent theoreticians of this movement, Kuo-shu Yang, the Taiwanese social psychologist who was originally trained in the United States, lists several ways to 'indigenize' psychological research. Here are four of Professor Yang's virtues for the aspiring indigenous psychologist of China (Yang, 1997):

1. Give priority to the study of culturally unique psychological and behavioral phenomena or characteristics of the Chinese people.
2. Investigate both the specific content and the involved process of the phenomenon.
3. Make it a rule to begin any research with a thorough immersion into the natural, concrete details of the phenomenon to be studied.
4. Let research be based upon the Chinese intellectual tradition rather than the Western intellectual tradition.

Those are some of the virtues that define cultural psychology as well, although it remains to be seen how many of us can live up to such demanding standards. Even today with the rebirth and renewal of cultural psychology not all research actually begins with fieldwork or with "a thorough immersion into the natural concrete details of the phenomenon to be studied." All too often research still starts with a published finding from some Western lab, which is then subjected to critical examination by means of various attempts at replication with populations from other societies. Whether the habits and norms for conducting research in mainstream psychology will change remains to be seen. The recent attention to the 'weirdness' of research findings with restricted subject populations in WEIRD societies has certainly sparked some debate about how to reform the norms for research training in the United States (Henrich et al., 2010). Although fieldwork, local

language learning, and the sampling of diverse populations are not yet a standard feature of training in the discipline of psychology, given the increasingly international and interdisciplinary character of collaborative scholarship in cultural psychology one looks forward to more and more research that keeps faith with Kuo-shu Yang's high ideals.

See also: Affect and Emotion, Anthropology of; Body: Anthropological Aspects; Cognitive Anthropology; Colonialism, Anthropology of; Comparative Method in Anthropology; Cross-Cultural Research Methods in Psychology; Cultural Relativism, Anthropology of; Cultural Views of Life Phases; Culture: Contemporary Views; Ethnocentrism; Family: The Anthropology of the Concept and Its History; National Character; Personhood, Anthropology of; Prosocial Behavior, Cultural Differences in; Social Constructionism; Urban Anthropology; Values Across Cultures, Development of.

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