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### Online Resources

- BBC 4: In our time, broadcast on cultural imperialism.  
Introduction: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00548h4>
- Globalization 101: <http://www.globalization101.org/>
- International forum on globalization: <http://www.ifg.org/>
- The new influencer: <http://www.newinfluencer.com/>
- Undercurrents: Videos for social justice: <http://www.undercurrents.org/>

## Cultural Psychology

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### Introduction and History

Cultural psychology is an umbrella term for a multifaceted undercurrent to the discipline's dominant individual-centric (one-person) and natural-scientific paradigm, an undercurrent that has been present in psychology since its inception, but whose origins and key questions can be traced much further back in time. Wilhelm Wundt's monumental ten volumes of *Völkerpsychologie* (Wundt, 1900–1920) can be regarded as the earliest

manifestation of a cultural perspective within the incipient discipline. Therein, Wundt tried to analyze and systematize “higher” psychological processes (e.g., language use, moral thinking, or rituals) by means of historical, ethnographic, and linguistic comparison – i.e., by cultural-scientific means. Wundt's account of a “historical developmental psychology of mankind” probably exaggerated the systematics and purposefulness of that development and also suffered from a Eurocentric, if not sometimes blunt nationalistic, bias. It is partly due to these shortfalls that his “second psychology” – as Michael Cole (1996) has called Wundt's cultural-psychological endeavors in contrast to his “first,” i.e., experimental-physiological approach – fell into oblivion for decades and has only recently been revisited (Jüttemann, 2006). At any rate, mainstream psychology could not be convinced to this day that such higher psychological processes should be accessible apart from natural-scientific means and methods (i.e., apart from experimental investigation, statistical quantification, and mathematical formalization).

Wundt's concept of *Völkerpsychologie* built upon some preliminary work by other scholars, the journal “*Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*,” launched in 1860 by Hermann (Hajjm) Steinthal and Moritz Lazarus, promoted an interdisciplinary science of linguistic, history, philosophy, and psychology in order to understand the emergence of collective ideas and of collective psychological entities – of a “*Volksgeist*,” as it was called. Cole (1996) identifies further predecessors of Wundt's “second psychology” in the works of the nineteenth-century philosophers Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Gottfried Herder, as well as in Giambattista Vico's (1668–1744) *scienza nuova* – a visionary outline of a historical science of man that would understand him as fundamentally a meaning-making being and had a deep influence on the German philosopher Dilthey, the founding father of modern hermeneutics (compare Berlin, 1976).

Another pivotal influence for contemporary cultural psychology lies in the works of Lev Vygotsky, Aleksandr Lurija, and Aleksej Leont'ev, known as the Russian school of

“cultural-historical psychology” (compare the corresponding entry in this volume). Their central argument is that human thinking, feeling, behavior, and experience unfold in a specific historical and social practical context from which it must not be isolated. An impressive experiential account of the enormous extent to which thinking and perceiving is mediated by specific socially prestructured practical experience can be found in Lurija’s report on his field experiments in Uzbekistan and Kirgizia in the early 1930s (Lurija, 1976).

For cultural-historical thinking, it is the systematic use and development of tools (including language) that mediates all human activity with nature and with each other; tools are condensations of cultural practice which, at any one time, provide individuals with the ability to experience and act in a manner that is “meaningful” in regard to their cultural circumstances. That meaning is not something apart from human activity points to the anti-idealistic, praxeological perspective that lies at the core of cultural-historical thinking. In many regards, cultural-historical thinking anticipates insights of what, since the 1960s, is known as media theory. In turn, media theory (e.g., the works of Havelock, 1982, 1986) has inspired contemporary cultural-psychological perspectives that emphasize the co-constitution of culture, subjectivity, and media (Slunecko & Hengl, 2007).

### Definition and Theoretical Premises

“Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche” (Shweder, 1990, p. 1). As any scientific endeavor, it comes in a variety of shades. Despite this variety, some broadly shared meta-theoretical premises can be identified.

All psychological phenomena and structures are regarded as intrinsically dependent on cultural lifeworlds, both in regard to their practical and discursive dimensions. This dynamic and reciprocal *co-constitution of culture and psyche* is the pivotal premise of cultural psychology. Not only do *contents* of consciousness vary over time, but psychological structures, functions, and

processes themselves develop over time; forms of subjectivity are culturally soluble, so to say, and even the very idea of mind is a historical and cultural artifact (compare Taylor, 1989; Jaynes, 1976). In other words, cultural psychology holds that psychological phenomena are *historical* in nature, which means that they – unlike universal laws – have their particular trajectories and destinies within each culture. For example, an attitude as, e.g., independence or an emotion as, e.g., romantic love, that have been virtually unknown to a European of the early Middle Ages, may suddenly bloom in particular cultural and socio-economic situations. To understand, document, and bring to awareness such rise and fall of psychological phenomena and psychology-related discourses pertains to the core interests of cultural psychology. In doing so, it understands all such phenomena as co-constitutively intertwined with the ecological, economic, and social operating of a given cultural system – and with the media that this system employs or hosts. In the words of Ratner (2012), culture and psychology (read: subjectivity, mentality) “are internally integrated and . . . interdependent. Psychology is . . . necessary and functional for constructing/maintaining culture; and it takes on the characteristics of the culture that it constructs.”

In essence, cultural psychology wants to understand the *meaning* of actions, expressions, cultural artifacts, written or drawn documents, etc. Meaning is a reference value that does not lie in the experienced object, but is *endowed by consciousness*. Moreover, meaning is always relational: something is being related to something else; in the simplest case, an actual experience is related to a prior experience and obtains its meaning from this relation. A (re)turn to meaning was part of the ambition of the so-called cognitive revolution in psychology during the 1950s and 1960s in its endeavor to overcome the mechanistic stimulus-reaction concept of behaviorist psychology. As Bruner (1990) convincingly argues, however, this revolution soon found itself turned into a reductionist approach. Instead of understanding the human mind in its creative and active capacity for meaning-making, mind became the kind of ahistorical information-

processing device as which it is now known to contemporary cognitive psychology.

As any scientific effort that revolves around meaning, cultural psychology is *interpretative* in nature, i.e., it wants to understand the orientations, practical and discursive rules, according to which people of certain times and places create their cultural web of meaning and act accordingly. Any *nomothetic* psychology, by contrast, strives for models and laws (*nomoi*) that apply everywhere and anytime and can only be acknowledged – and not created – by human beings. It is significant for mainstream nomothetic psychology that it tends to discredit alternatives without such universalistic knowledge claims as relativistic. Cultural psychology, on the contrary, subscribes to an epistemology according to which knowledge is inherently *positional* and *perspectival*, i.e., bound to the knower's particular location in space and time. That means there are multiple conceptions of the real and no transcendent means of ruling among them. These conceptions do not arise out of the blue, however, but are informed by a specific array of social, economic, ecological, and technical circumstances at any one time.

Cultural psychology does not understand itself as another of subdiscipline of psychology, i.e., the one that takes care of the cultural variations, but as an all-encompassing perspective that comprises psychology as a whole. Rather, cultural psychology represents a fundamental alternative to mainstream psychology in that it always keeps in mind its own embeddedness in the overall cultural situation. Culture is not something an observer can simply “step out” of by some methodological precautions but rather a pervasive and continuously developing symbolic “field of action” (Boesch, 1991, p. 29), which always encompasses the operating of science too.

### **Traditional Methodological Debates: Cultural Psychology versus Cross- Cultural Psychology**

For the novice reader, cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology may look quite alike as

both are interested in other cultures. Nevertheless, it is crucial to distinguish cultural psychology from its nomothetic rival sibling, cross-cultural psychology. The former strongly tends to an “emic” viewpoint, wherein other cultures are interesting in that they may provide contrast relations to understand what is going on in *one's own* culture. Cross-cultural psychology, on the other hand, is concerned with the experimental investigation of performance differences of human thinking, perceiving, attitudes, etc., *across* cultures. Methodologically, it proceeds as if one could overview cultures from a god's eye perspective (“etic” view). In approaching other cultures, it does not question the universal validity of its own methodology and terminology. To put it more poignantly, cross-cultural psychology is obsessed by the “Platonic aim of characterizing the inherent central processing mechanisms of the mental life” (Shweder, 1990, p. 11), i.e., of a mental life that is conceived as universal. On this behalf, making sense of cultural differences results in a peculiar epistemic constellation or, rather, contortion: when cultural differences have to be accommodated within an overall universalistic frame, they must be placed at the very fringes of the system. In this manner, they implicitly propose a kind of cultural “noise” that surrounds a universal mental processing device, performing in different environments (Slunecko, 2008). This way, the obvious fact that people from other cultures are different is somehow accommodated in psychology yet remains at the periphery of its concern. Cultural psychology, on the contrary, puts culture at the very center of the discipline. Culture is not an intervening “variable” but rather the fundamental precondition of any human knowing and practice (cf. Vygotsky 1962, 1978), including all forms of scientific knowledge.

For the very most part, categories and variables employed in cross-cultural research stem from European-American templates. The simplest yet dominant research strategy here is to translate a Western questionnaire and present it to subjects, often to student populations, in another country. Such research typically yields assertions of differences between cultures.

When reviewing such research in regard to his own culture of origin, Sinha (1997), one of the most outspoken critics of the methodological shortfalls of cross-cultural psychology and at the same time one of the advocates of an indigenization of psychology, finds that they describe Indians as, e.g., more fatalistic, passive, authoritarian minded, indifferent to contradictions, or less morally mature than Westerners. Such descriptions remind him of colonial times but contribute little to understand the particular embeddedness – and meaning – of such qualities within the semantic web of Indian culture. Along the lines of such research strategy, thus, psychology remains in principle a monocultural endeavor, confined in the parameters of its own knowledge production, and yielding results that assert and reproduce hierarchy relations between cultures. In a cultural-psychological scenario, on the contrary, psychological attitudes are not understood this way; they are not like nails that can be hammered from one culture to another culture; rather, they are constructions from one particular (i.e., Western) indigenous psychology that necessarily will take on different connotations in other cultures, if they are transferable at all.

Cultural psychology is thus not favoring a scenario in which one particular indigenous psychology (i.e., the European-American), in a kind of hidden battle for human nature, gives – by way of methodological prescriptions and prescribed methods – a piece of its mind to all others. In contrast to what often follows from cross-cultural research and in contrast also to a certain tendency in Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie* and even in the writings of the cultural-historical school, contemporary cultural psychology also does not put different ways of thinking, behavior, emotional experience, etc., in hierarchical relations. It abstains from judgments on the moral or epistemic value of other systems of knowledge, emotion, etc. It is this very bracketing of knowledge claims that open up the space for understanding the genesis and dynamics of such systems of meaning, including one's own.

### Practice Relevance for Research

It follows from the above that from a cultural-psychological perspective, collective phenomena are best studied in their natural "habitats." Therefore, cultural psychology generally dismisses experimental research in favor of studying everyday practices (Bruner, 1990), intentional worlds, schemes, or scripts (D' Andrade, 1984), which per se relate to collective processes of meaning-making and performance. Such collective processes and worlds of meaning can be explored in multiple manners that range from field observations to group discussions up to discourse analysis and to the analysis of cultural artifacts. As a genuinely interpretative endeavor, cultural psychology definitely has an inclination to qualitative methods (Ratner, Straub & Valsiner, 2001). In this regard, it borrows and advances research methods from neighboring disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, anthropology, ethnomethodology, or culture studies, and it explores psychological methods developed in other cultural contexts (Gergen, Gulerce, & Misra, 1996). The quest for (universalistic) cause-effect relationships is generally dismissed in favor of a hermeneutic perspective (Straub, 1999).

In a cultural-psychological perspective, there is no such thing as a context-free research environment. Rather, the psychological laboratory is seen as – highly artificial – construction that nonetheless carries strong cultural presuppositions – e.g., to isolate individuals from their contexts (see below) – and allows only a limited array of answers. These answers are strongly preempted by the research conditions of the laboratory and the built-in power structure and role pattern between the experimental "subject" and its "investigator" (Danziger, 1990).

### Critical Debates and Future Directions

The research formats of mainstream psychology (including cross-cultural psychology) converge in the tacit assumption that the individual is its primary or even its only possible addressee.

Even if it approaches group or cultural phenomena, mainstream psychology's research strategies revolve around samples of individuals and aggregate the results obtained from individuals. But what if this very assumption of the individual as the basic unit of psychological analysis and research design is itself culturally flawed? What if this individuo-centric basic axiom – combined with its twin axiom of universalism – would be the least favorable starting point to access the constitutive role of culture for psychological phenomena? And what if this is not simply an error but a systemic contortion?

As cultural psychology holds that all psychological phenomena, all forms of subjectivity, and all scientific efforts are historical in nature and are intertwined with the ecological, economic, and social operating of a given culture (see theoretical premises), it questions mainstream psychology's pervasive habit to put the individual in the center of its epistemology. It rather holds that the individuo-centric format that dominates contemporary (folk) psychology must be constitutive of and epiphenomenal to the total cultural situation too. In other words, individualism is regarded as a form of a subjectivity that is compatible and sustains the current socioeconomic, gender, and power hegemony. To put it more poignantly, it is the subjective side of capitalism.

Cultural psychologists, thus, are inclined to decode discourses (compare the entry on discourse analysis) and research formats that implicitly (via methodology) or explicitly (via theory) propagate images of the human being as one who freely, rationally, and in isolation decides among alternatives for the sake of his or her own profit and happiness maximization as expressions of late-capitalist ideology. In essence, the suspicion boils down to the idea that this very isolation is the form capitalism takes in the realm of subjectivity; this is, so to say, the psychological prerequisite to instigate – isolated – individuals against each other. Cultural psychology is part of critical psychology insofar as it does not consent to or collaborate with such discourses. By contrast, cultural

psychology wants to understand the complex history and dynamics, along which this discourse of isolation and flexibilization has become the dominant cultural mindset; it wants to understand how such ideology has emerged as the assembly point of modern Western mentality, how it has stabilized, and how it has become that successful under specific economic and ecological circumstances; and it wants to understand whose interests it serves in today's world.

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#### Online Resources

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## Cultural-Historical Psychology

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### Introduction

From the 1920s onwards, a group of Russian psychologists, revolving around the intellectual “troika” of Lev Vygotsky, Alexandr Luria, and Aleksej Leont’ev, started to come up with a corpus of closely interwoven experiments, field investigations, and theoretical writings which later were to become the basis of the cultural-historical school. Although it was confronted with political resentments and suppression in the Soviet Union and the USA for

many decades, cultural-historical psychology still stands as one of the most consistent and inspiring approach in the field of psychology. It provides fruitful concepts and inspires new investigation methods in many different areas of the discipline, such as developmental psychology, social psychology, linguistics, cultural psychology, and critical psychology.

### Definition

Even though its topics range from aesthetics to perception and neurology, and from developmental to culture studies, and though its methodology comprises experimental as well as qualitative and field research, the meta-theoretical consistency of the cultural-historical writings is very high. This is due to its unfaltering epistemic focus on the activity of human actors (an offspring of the cultural-historical school, essentially spawned by Leont’ev, is known as activity theory) and on processes.

Most fundamentally, the cultural-historical school knows that any activity is culturally pre-structured and that it is always embedded in a sociocultural field or sphere. Any human activity unfolds in a particular historical context, a particular life-world – and thus always refers to the activity of other humans and in particular to their artifacts. That activity is culturally pre-structured is true even in the case of a lone actor; also for such actor culture would be present and manifest in the language and tools he uses – in other words, in practices which he could have never come up with just by himself. To paraphrase Hegel, tools and language are objective culture; through them we are embedded or woven into a culture-specific matrix of which we can never escape.

It is typical for the cultural-historical school that it does not treat practical, social, and language intelligence and their respective development separately of each other (cf. Vygotsky & Luria, 1994), but rather emphasizes the function of language for the use of tools and, vice versa, the tool character of language. In other words, practice with the hard medium (tool) and with the