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Title: The Three Psychologies: Cultural, Indigenous and Cross-Cultural

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One is actually heartened to read the five paragraph entry under “Cultural Psychology” which appears in Wikipedia, not only because that consensus seeking encyclopedia acknowledges the discipline of cultural psychology but also because they more or less get it right. Here is all or part of the lead sentence from each of the five paragraphs.

“Cultural psychology is a field of psychology which contains the idea that culture and mind are inseparable...”; “Cultural psychology has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s but became more prominent in the 1980s and 1990s”; “Cultural psychology is distinct from cross-cultural psychology in that cross-cultural psychologists generally use culture as a means of testing the universality of psychological processes rather than determining how local cultural practices shape psychological processes”; “Cultural psychology research informs several fields within psychology, including social psychology, developmental psychology, and cognitive psychology”; “One of the most significant themes in recent years has been cultural differences between East Asian and North Americans in attention, perception, cognition and social psychological phenomena such as the self.” They also write: “So whereas a cross-cultural psychologist might ask whether Piaget’s stages of development are universal across a variety of cultures, a cultural psychologist would be interested in how the social practices of a particular set of cultures shape the development of cognitive processes in different ways.” Perhaps the authors of the entry go overboard in associating cultural psychology with the view that “there are no universal laws for how the mind works” but for the most part they get the point.

¹ This presentation draws on formulations in several of my past and current writings on this topic, including “The Psychology of Practice and the Practice of the Three Psychologies” (2000), “The Revival of Cultural Psychology: Some Premonitions and Reflections (2007) and “Anthropology’s Disenchantment with the Cognitive Revolution” (In Press).

Given the title of my presentation (which invites a comparison of three approaches to the study of mental functioning called cultural psychology, indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology) permit me in the context of this short talk to just summarily announce that in my view so-called indigenous psychology and so-called cultural psychology are very similar to each other, and both seem quite different to me from both so-called cross-cultural psychology and so-called mainstream psychology, both of which I associate with what might be called “fundamentalism in psychology” – by which I mean the concern to discover structures and processes of mental functioning that can truly be called fundamental, basic, universal or hard-core.

I will start by characterizing cultural psychology. What is the object of cultural psychology? What is its proper aim? What is its proper subject matter? In three essays entitled “Cultural Psychology: What Is It?” (Shweder 1990), “Cultural Psychology: Who Needs It?” (Shweder and Sullivan 1993) and “The ‘Mind’ of Cultural Psychology” (Shweder 1996) I described the discipline in all of the following ways, which I shall group into two clusters, namely statements about psychological diversity and statements about the unit of analysis for cultural psychology (that is to say, the nature of cultural psychology’s psychological facts).

With regard to psychological diversity:

Cultural psychology was described as a project designed to reassess the uniformitarian principle of psychic unity and aimed at a credible theory of psychological pluralism. [I should note in passing that any theory of psychological pluralism would lack credibility in my mind if it staunchly denied the existence of any and all universals or the common capacities that make it possible for human beings to be mental beings in the standard sense of “mental” (knowing, thinking, feeling, wanting, valuing things as good or bad and having the ability to symbolically represent and express all those mental capacities). Indeed cultural psychology presupposes many universals. However, the search for and the privileging of things that are uniform across all peoples and cultures is not the primary project of cultural psychology, although surely cultural psychology need not be the only game in town.

Cultural psychology was described as the study of ethnic and cultural sources of diversity in emotional and somatic functioning, self organization, moral evaluation, social cognition and human development;

Cultural psychology was described as any investigation that constructs a model of a culture’s distinctive psychology by thickly describing the specific sources of non-equivalence and non-comparability that arise when stimulus situations are transported from one interpretive community to another. [Thus one is not surprised by the recent highly visible review article by Henrich, Heine and Norazeyan titled “The Weirdest People in the World?” and published in Behavioral and Brain Sciences on the basis of global psychological research they dramatically displayed the anomalous nature of experiment results from research with populations (typically college students) in what they call the WEIRD populations (the five letter acronym referring to subjects drawn from Western Educated Industrial, Rich and Democratic societies), which is where most research in mainstream psychology has been done.

Cultural psychology was also described as psychological anthropology without the premise of psychic unity.

So as you can see that a central claim of cultural psychology is that there may be multiple diverse psychologies, rather than a single uniform psychology. And a central problematic of the field is to make sense of that provocative claim and to do so, as one must, without denying all universals. “Universalism without the uniformity” is the slogan I like to use to characterize cultural psychology and as a way to insulate the discipline from the careless (indeed reckless) suggestion that it is a form of radical relativism.

With regard to the unit of analysis issue (or the nature of psychological facts) in cultural psychology:

Any particular cultural psychology (for example the mentality of Oriya Brahmins in India or Upper West Side secular liberals in Manhattan) was described as socially inherited “goals, values and pictures of the world” that have a causal relationship to, and help us understand and make sense of the choices, local action patterns and customary behavior of intelligent truth-seeking meaning-making agents in particular social groups.

Cultural psychologists were described as naturalists who go searching for “mentalities”, carefully describing their distribution and form. In this regard cultural psychology was defined as the study of local or parochial “mentalities” rather than the study of a universal “mind.” This linking of the idea of multiple psychologies with the idea of a “mentality” has a long history, traceable at least to the premise of the 18th German Romantic philosopher Johann Herder. Herder’s premise (as summarized by Isaiah Berlin) was that “to be a member of a group 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.” In this version of cultural psychology the idea of “goals” includes wants, preferences and motives of various kinds. The idea of “values” includes emotional reactions of approbation and opprobrium as well as “goods” and “ends” that are thought to be “preference-worthy” or morally desirable. The idea of “pictures of the world” includes local definitions and categorizations, beliefs about means-ends connections and causal connections and metaphysical and existential premises of various kinds.

This dual emphasis in cultural psychology on conceptual content (“goals, values and pictures of the world”) as a central unit for psychological analysis and on the multiplicity of mentalities in the world strikes me as very similar to the aims of the indigenous psychology movement as articulated by some of its most prominent spokespersons such as Kwang-Kuo Hwang and Kuo-shu Yang. For example, compare what I have just said to Kuo-shu Yang’s list of ways to “indigenize” psychological research. Here are three of Professor Yang’s virtues for the aspiring indigenous psychologist of China.

- 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 through immersion into the natural, concrete details of the phenomenon to be studied.

That sounds very much like “cultural psychology” to me and the aims of both disciplines strike me as quite distinct from (but not necessarily better or worse than) the aims of mainstream psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Those two disciplines have established their identities in relationship to a research program I would describe as psychological fundamentalism (with the cross-cultural psychologists playing the important role of gadflies and frequently telling the mainstream that what they claim to be a universal process is really just a parochial process bounded in time and space).

Psychological fundamentalists, unlike most researches in cultural psychology and indigenous psychology, place their highest priority on the search for highly general (and thus often quite abstract or even mathematical) laws of mental functioning; and consequently they are not especially interested in the study of cultural and linguistic diversity; or in the way the content of thought (what you think about) can be decisive for how you think; or in the parochial aspects of human mentalities in particular social groups.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who was arguably the most famous American cultural anthropologist of the last 50 years, once remarked: “I have never been able to understand why such comments as ‘your conclusions, such as they are, only cover two

million people [Bali], or fifteen million [Morocco], or sixty-five million [Java], and only over some years or centuries' are supposed to be criticism."

Indeed, during the 1960s and 1970s, during the period when cultural psychology was being reborn as an academic research enterprise Geertz famously publicized the "thick description" of "local knowledge" as a royal road to understanding. By "thick description" he meant the interpretation of real world behavior (including communicative behavior) by reference to socially transmitted, time and place dependent beliefs and desires made manifest in the ordinary or taken-for-granted actions of members of a social group – the Balinese cockfight for example.

Nevertheless, whether the descriptions one seeks for why people say the things they say and do the things they do are thick or thin, from the mainstream perspective of the fundamentalists in psychology, merely pointing out the time and place bound character of that type of anthropological study of mind *is* criticism of a sort. This is not because mainstream psychologists have no personal curiosity about the distinctive aspects of Balinese versus Moroccan versus Javanese thought; or because as a breed they are so unworldly as to think that human minds are in all respects the same wherever you go; or because they are so dogmatic as to deny the existence of boundary conditions on the activation of (what they view as) fundamental cognitive processes (the field of cross-cultural psychology is in part all about pointing out all those boundary conditions on generalizations and worrying about the rush to treat local findings as fundamental, basic and universal); or because they are so narrow-minded as to overlook the reality of situated effects on the products of thought (related to the context, purpose and content of any cognitive act)

The main reason it is criticism of a sort when a mainstream psychologist says "that's mere content" or retorts "your findings 'such as they are' are geographically limited in scope and are culture-bound" is that the search for those aspects of the human mind that are invariant (fundamental, basic, deep, universal) is what defines high seriousness of purpose for most (although certainly not all) of mainstream academic psychology. It is

the discovery of such universal laws of thought that has become the measure of prestige in psychology as an academic guild. Still, given that aim of the trade, it is not hard to understand why most graduate students in psychology don't typically embrace travel to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco or a paddy field in Bali or a rain forest in Brazil as a royal road for getting at what they view as the basic or fundamental cognitive structures or processes enabling human beings to have a mental life at all.

When it comes to the study of the human mind, different aims lead to different judgments of research value (and academic prestige). This leads me to suggest that if the aims of two disciplines diverge (and if what seems "deep" or "fundamental" to one discipline seems "thin" or empty to the other; and, conversely, if what seems "thick" and reality binding to the other discipline seems fleeting or superficial to the first) so be it! Why not just let many flowers bloom? "Divided we stand" is not necessarily a bad principle; and in this instance the divergence of aims seems very real. Relax and enjoy it!

Long ago mainstream experimental psychologists developed a set of research strategies to aid in their search for highly general laws of mental functioning that transcend time and place, which of necessity directs them to control for or withdraw their attention from all the things that are variable in the mental life of human beings – beliefs, values, content, context, culture, language, etc.

Contrast, for example, the ambition of Clifford Geertz (to observe, document and render intelligible a local way of life) with the ambition of the cognitive science eminence Roger Shepard, who sought to discover a universal law of generalization inherent in all categorization behavior, regardless of species or stimulus domain. I point to Shepard's quest as an illustration of a high prestige research agenda among psychological fundamentalists (Shepard, 1987; see Shweder in press from which this discussion is drawn; see Shweder 1990 for a fuller discussion).

Shepard's universal law (which he proudly likens to Newton's law of gravitational attraction) is an abstract representation of an exponential decay function for stimulus

generalization likelihoods for pairs of stimuli, showing the probability that a response learned to any one stimulus within some given domain (indeed any domain – consonant phonemes, color chips, triangles of different sizes and shapes, presumably social categories as well) will generalize to any other stimulus within that domain. His aim is to discover something fundamental, basic and deep about thought processes. Notably, Shepard acknowledges that from a strictly empirical point of view his proposed fundamental and universal law is truly descriptive of stimulus generalization behavior only when “generalization is tested immediately after a single learning trial with a novel stimulus” (1987: 1322). To my critical and interpretive anthropological eye that hardly seems like a minor disclaimer, but it does help me make the relevant point about divergence in scholarly aims.

The relevant point is that in order to get at what he genuinely aims to discover – a basic psychological process inherent in human categorization behavior – Shepard deliberately (and with his eyes wide open) chooses to limit his investigation of the effects of stimuli on similarity and difference judgments by focusing only on the reactions of subjects to unfamiliar stimuli encountered in one-trial learning environments. In other words on principled grounds he turns his attention away from several levels of reality that he himself knows play a major part in normal human classificatory behavior. He withdraws his attention from those levels of reality because he knows they will produce variable or diverse (he calls them “noisy”) results that are not universal across species or stimulus domains. He is trying to study human classificatory behavior the way a physicist might study the behavior of leaves falling in a vacuum tube rather than in a hurricane.

Thus for example he seeks to move his investigation beyond any observations or analyses of the objectively describable similarities and differences in the stimulus materials being studied. For as he notes, it has been shown – he views the relevant findings as “troublesome” and “discouraging” – that there exists no universal mathematical function for predicting the probability of a generalization response from the measurable physical characteristics of stimuli; those mathematical functions seem to vary by stimulus domain (1987: 1317). He is aware that the mathematic function for stimulus generalization for

the color domain may differ from the function for tonal scales; and that each of these may differ by individual or by species; and that within a particular stimulus domain (the color domain, for example) a response to a color chip may generalize to a distant hue at the opposite end of the spectrum (for example, red and green might be associated together as “Christmas colors”). Given that his cognitive science is going on a quest to discover a universal law of generalization underlying all categorization behavior he has good reason to suspect that there can be no universal law of the stimulus environment and that any truly fundamental and universal process must be a purely psychological function and not a psycho-physical function (1987: 1318).

Then he seeks to move his investigation beyond the observation and analysis of the influence of any and all possible learning processes. This is because Shepard understands very well that his proposed universal law is unlikely to describe generalization behavior under multiple learning trials because “differential reinforcement could shape the generalization function and contours around a particular stimulus into a wide variety of forms (1987:1322).

Finally, he seeks to move his investigation beyond the observation and analysis of any process involving long-term memory and its capacity to mentally re-cognize or imaginatively reshape the prior experience of a stimulus event. He takes this step because he is fully aware that the proposed universal law is not descriptive of generalization behavior when learning trials are delayed. He interprets that type of failure of validation of the universal law as “‘noise’ due to the internal representation of the stimuli” (1987:1322).

It is crucial to notice that Roger Shepard is not in the business of denying the existence of variability in human classificatory behavior or in discouraging others from studying time bound or place bound or stimulus bound mental processes or events. He is just doing his own business. His primary aim – the thing he cares about - is to move his research beyond all the “noisy” diversity (the shadows in the cave) in a search for pure psychological forms and invariant laws of thought. I do not find this particularly

distressing; quite the contrary it seems like an appealing (and potentially productive) application of the principle “live and let live.”

The relaxed recognition of cross-purposes can be quite revealing too. I suspect the cultural psychologists Michael Cole and John Gay (1972, p. 1066) will never forget one particular critical comment they received (in this case from a cultural anthropologist) when they first made some claims about cross-cultural differences in thought processes based on results from their cognitive experimental research in West Africa (among the Kpelle people of Liberia). In paraphrase and with a bit of elaboration (and poetic license) the critical comment went roughly as follows: “Thank you very much for your fascinating presentation but the thought processes of the Kpelle do not differ from our own; only their beliefs, values and classifications differ; which is why they perform so differently on psychological tests.” For most researchers of cultural psychology (a.k.a. indigenous psychology) the study of cognition is primarily about those beliefs, values and classifications; and in general the disciplines of cultural psychology and indigenous psychology do not place any special value on getting beyond those beliefs, values and classifications or transcending their particularities.

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