

Cross-Cultural Psychology: Overview

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Introduction

Cross-cultural psychology is a subfield of psychology that is built upon a positivist model of science. Historically it has developed out of natural scientific studies in psychology and anthropology and stands in contrast to hermeneutic studies in these fields.

Traditionally it has been caught in the ontological and epistemological debates of nature vs. nurture and emics vs. etics and has been criticized for its philosophical and methodological assumptions. It continues to develop along side the complementary perspectives of cultural psychology and indigenous psychologies and has been applied internationally to numerous practical issues.

Definition

Cross-Cultural psychology is an area of psychology that is concerned with uniformity and variation of psychological abilities, processes, and characteristics across cultures. It strives to be a scientific discipline that makes use of observation and measurement of psychological variables and seeks causal explanations for psychological similarities and differences recorded across cultures. The goals of cross-cultural psychology include the development of general laws of human thought and behaviour as well as the explanation of specific variations of characteristics measured by standardized testing. Integration of knowledge on these cultural similarities and differences into a grand explanatory theory

of psychology is also sought. The main areas of study for cross-cultural psychology include: cognition, perception, intelligence, language, emotions, personality, development, acculturation, social, morality, health, disorders, treatments, evolution and self (Berry, Poortinga, Segal & Dasen, 1992).

Cross-cultural psychology is contrasted and complemented by the perspectives of cultural psychology and indigenous psychologies. It is differentiated from cultural psychology on philosophical and methodological grounds where cross-cultural psychology is practiced as a positivist natural science while cultural psychology is practiced as a hermeneutical human science. *Cultural psychology* is the study of intentional worlds whose goal is to understand the experiences of people as embedded in cultural worlds of meaning where shared understanding and participation in the construction of those shared meanings is an ongoing process that involves the mutual construction of both the collective intentional world as well as the experiences of individuals (Shweder, 1990). This view recognizes the dialectics of psycho-social life as it is generated through cultural activities and is engaged in meaning-making through common activity and ritual. It is largely based upon the Vygotskian perspective of socio-historical development of mind, self and culture where emphasis is placed upon understanding the intentionality, agency, and teleological activity of everyday practical experiences (Ratner, 1997).

Indigenous psychologies are a collection of psychological models and practices that arise from various locations around the globe, each rooted in traditional cultural systems of knowledge and practice. The indigenous approach to psychology involves being “native” and not-transplanted. It examines mundane activities and behaviour

through locally derived frameworks and categories and is designed to be culturally relevant and appropriate to its participants and their cultural communities (Sinha, 1997).

Key words

Cultural psychology, indigenous psychology, *völkerpsychologie*, *völkgeist*, absolutism, relativism, universalism, emics, etics, culture, hermeneutics, positivism, artifacts, operationalism, *verstehen*, *besserverstehen*, activity theory.

History

Early foundations

The history of cross-cultural (and cultural psychology) can be traced back to early Greek scholars while indigenous psychologies can be traced back many thousands of years.

Most historical accounts begin with enlightenment scholars who were interested in the empirical study of cultural influences on psychological characteristics. Cross-cultural psychology traces its origins to the works of early scholars like Joseph Marie Degérando (1772-1842), Edward Burnet Tylor (1832-1917), William Halse Rivers (1864-1922), Francis Galton (1822-1911) and Frederic Bartlett (1886-1969). These scholars conducted studies of topics such as visual illusions, and tests of hearing, smell, taste, cutaneous & muscular sense as well as reaction-times and other empirical measurements of psychological abilities across cultures (Jahoda & Krever, 1997).

Cultural psychology arises from the works of early scholars like Giovanni Battista Vico (1668-1704), Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903), Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899) and Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) who gave rise to the study of *Völkerpsychologie*. These scholars shared interest in the *völkgeist* (collective consciousness) of cultures as expressed in art, poetry, myth, custom, and language. The

Russian cultural-historical school was later developed by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Alexander Luria (1902-1977) who were also influenced by Hegelian and Marxist ideas of dialecticism between individual consciousness and their cultures (Cole, 1996; Jahoda & Krewer, 1997).

In US-America, the culture and personality school flourished which challenged assumptions of universality and turned attention towards “native” approaches. Important contributions came from Franz Boas (1858-1942), Edward Sapir (1884–1939), Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), Margaret Mead (1901-1978), Cora DuBois (1903-1991) and later Erik Erikson (1902-1994). A leading proponent of this critical anthropology was Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) who refuted the universality of psychoanalysis and came to influence the growth of indigenous perspectives in anthropology and psychology (Paranjpe, 1998).

The modern era

In the 1960s cross-cultural psychology emerged as a clearly recognized sub-field of psychology where the *Journal of Social Psychology* began publishing studies on cross-cultural topics. By 1966 the *International Journal of Psychology* was established, soon followed by the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* in 1970. The 1972 *Annual Review of Psychology* included a chapter on psychology and culture as the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology and the Society for Cross-Cultural Research were formed. By 1973 the Directory of Cross-cultural Research and Researchers reported 1125 psychologists. In 1978 the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* was established and in 1980 the first edition of the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*

had been published. These developments brought cross-cultural psychology to the mainstream (Jahoda & Krewer, 1997; Berry et al., 1992).

In the 1980s indigenous psychological accounts became more commonplace such as Heelas & Lock's (1981) volume on indigenous psychologies which had been followed by several publications over the next decades (Sinha, 1997; Kim, Yang & Hwang, 2006). Cultural psychology had been clearly articulated by 1990 and the journal *Culture and Psychology* was first published in 1995 which focuses on cultural accounts. Today, psychological research and practice on culture and psychology has become widespread where a PsycINFO abstract search will garner some 48,000 citations.

Traditional debates

Nature vs. nurture

The nature-nurture debate is concerned with the relative importance of inherited versus acquired influences on psychological traits, abilities and processes. Cross-cultural psychology, by its very nature, is arguably best situated to examine the nature-nurture debate. The range of ideas on the nature-nurture debate in psychology can be classified into one of three types of interpretation representing the views of: absolutism, relativism, and universalism (Berry, et al., 1992). *Absolutism* is the position that holds biological factors responsible for psychological phenomena where species-wide basic psychological processes are studied. *Relativism* stands in dialectical opposition to absolutism holding that cultural factors are central in causing psychological phenomena. These views are reflected in the nature-orientation of sociobiologists and the nurture-orientation of social constructionists. While these perspectives hold that biological or cultural influences have exclusive bearing, Boyd and Richerson offer a Dual Inheritance model representing

universalism, a synthesis of these two opposing views. This cultural evolutionary model stems from the pioneering work of Donald Campbell and Richard Dawkins and has influenced many contemporary scholars who recognize both genetic and cultural influences on the evolution of the human mind and culture (Rozin, 2010).

Emics vs. etics

A related debate in cross-cultural psychology is the emic-etic debate which is concerned with the goals of knowledge production. The emic-etic debate considers whether universal (trans-cultural) features or specific (local cultural) characteristics should be the focus of research and understanding. Those who seek only universal characteristics advocate the position of searching only for *etics*. Conversely, those who are only interested in culturally specific features, seek the *emics* of one or more cultures.

Historically, cross-cultural psychology has developed the goal of finding etic features of psychology as measured by tests and instruments developed in one local (emic) context. These tests are often assumed to measure universal psychological characteristics when transported to test the abilities of people from other cultures. Berry et al. (1992) refer to this as an *imposed etic* which is ethnocentric in nature and is often discovered as an imposter only when the second culture offers contrasting concepts from their own indigenous emic. At this juncture two possible courses of action may ensue. One is to maintain a separation between cultures and their study, assuming cultural relativism and the incommensurate nature of perspectives. Alternatively, one might recognize that not all constructs are translatable (commensurate) but that common ground between emics may be discovered. In resolution of this debate, Berry et al. (1992) refer to three perspectives that arise: 1) *imposed etics* - emics imposed from one culture on another,

pretending to be universal, 2) *emics* - a plurality of local perspectives, and 3) the pursuit of *derived etics* through an ongoing comparison of indigenous emics toward the development of cultural universals. These perspectives largely align with the interpretive stances of absolutism, relativism, and universalism.

Critical debates: Culture and methods

Much of the critique of cross-cultural psychology comes from a hermeneutical perspective. Hermeneutics involves a critical examination of ontological, epistemological and evaluative claims in science and other human practices. In fact, “hermeneutic thought seeks to criticize the position that the methods and criteria of the natural sciences are normative for all forms of intellectual activity and that an ahistorical, objective, empirical account is sufficient” (Woolfolk, Sass & Messer, 1988, p.3).

Ontological hermeneutics: Critique of “culture”

The definition and conceptualization of culture has been debated since the early days of psychological anthropology and cross-cultural psychology. Historically, conceptualizations of culture have been tied to “race” or perceived biological differences among peoples. Ethnocentric terms like “savages” or “primitives” have also been used to identify people from groups seen to be biologically and culturally inferior to their own, as seen in Carolus Linnaeus’ 1735 *System of Nature* (Cole, 1996). While some advocate such absolutist orientations today, most contemporary cross-cultural psychologists define culture through descriptive accounts of behaviours, rules and norms, structural accounts of organizations, and historical traditions. Keith (2011) reviews several contemporary definitions of culture ranging from information sharing among a group of people to the use of tangible objects as well as the development of a subjective sense of culture through

everyday practices. He concludes that culture is a “group of shared behaviors, values, and beliefs that are passed from generation to generation” (p.4) that forms into a variety of constellations of features. While these cross-cultural definitions cover a range of features of what culture is, they tend to view culture as an objectively definable variable that can be quantified.

Ratner (1997) offers a critique of positivist cross-cultural psychology based upon its faulty ontological and epistemological assumptions. First, positivist psychology assumes that psychological phenomena are conceptualized as separate, independent variables that can be easily objectified and quantified. Culture too is seen in this manner where it is reduced to observable properties of a shared environment. This type of philosophical atomism fragments culture into superficial and trivial features and fails to acknowledge the systemic processes that comprise a living cultural tradition. Ratner points out that this atomism “obscures the nature of psychological phenomena” (1997, p.21), also failing to recognize that culture is a complex configuration of meanings expressed through extended responses to ongoing social situations and contexts.

Building from the Russian cultural-historical school of psychology, Cole (1996) presents culture as a labyrinth of meaning expressed through people’s interaction with artifacts of culture that are at one of three levels. *Primary artifacts* are objects of significance to everyday activities (i.e., axe, bowl, needle). *Secondary artifacts* are the representations of those objects in terms of their use and meaning in the forms of recipes, traditional beliefs, norms, schemas, scripts and roles. *Tertiary artifacts* are imaginative works of art, products and creative processes. Culture involves all of these types of artifacts and their mutual influences as well as and human engagement with them and the

activities, meanings, and understandings people develop in relation to them. Culture, as mediated by our relationships to artifacts, is both *subjective* (experiential) and *objective* (material). This dialectical approach to activity and practice views culture and human experience as intertwined and not separable. In essence, the distinctions between cross-cultural and cultural definitions can be understood through their advocate's commitments to Heideggerian modes of being (Woolfolk, Sass & Messer, 1988). Cross-cultural psychologists typically adopt a mode of *disengaged being* (present-at hand) while cultural psychologists adopt a mode of *engaged being* (ready-to-hand).

Methodological hermeneutics: Critique of positivism

Cross-cultural psychology is grounded in the worldview of positivist natural science while cultural psychology is grounded in the human science tradition of hermeneutics. Since its inception, psychology has been a house divided between these perspectives and extensive methodological debates exist between them. Controlled experiments are the ideal model in general psychology for determining causes of psychological phenomena, however, because it is impractical and unethical to conduct such experiments on cultural influences, cross-cultural psychologists often substitute quasi-experiments, naturalistic, and statistical methods to determine the causal influences of culture on psychological variables (Berry et al., 1992). These methods invoke operationalism, objective observation and quantification determine the causal laws behind the manifestation of psychological phenomena.

Operationalism has been strongly criticized in cross-cultural psychology because it reduces psychological phenomena to behaviours by assuming that psychological phenomena *are* overt behaviours. This faulty assumption leads to mis-measurement

where “operational definitions fail to recognize that a particular phenomenon may be expressed in different acts and that a particular act may express different phenomena” (Ratner, 1997, p. 44). Positivism also assumes that “valid knowledge must be obtained by direct observation of obvious patterns” (Ratner, 1997, p. 39) accompanied by the quantification of behaviours by reducing qualitative variations into quantitative differences. “Quantifying the degree of a phenomenon works against investigating qualitative variations because measurement implies that quality is uniform” (Ratner, 1997, p. 27). Because of these failings, claims of causality can be rejected as erroneous and misguided (Cole, 1996). To remedy these shortcomings, Ratner and Cole advocate the development of a qualitative cultural psychology that embraces methodological hermeneutics and activity theory in developing a better understanding of the relationships between culture and psychology. Borrowing from the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey, the notion of the hermeneutical circle is used to identify cultural psychology methods as being always open and revisable along with grounding interpretation in pre-existing knowledge and assumptions. Dilthey’s methodological principles of *verstehen* and *besserverstehen* also play important roles in cultural psychological methods. *Verstehen*, involves understanding the lived experience of people through the extrication of meaning from verbal expressions and behaviours expressed within a socio-historical context. *Besserverstehen*, or “better understanding,” is the ultimate goal of cultural psychology which seeks to go beyond subjective experience to “elucidate features, relationships, and dynamics of psychological phenomena that may not appear in subjective experience” (Ratner, 1997, p. 61). Building from Russian cultural-historical *activity theory*, cultural psychologists call for a systemic structural analysis of cultural artifacts and activities

including the deciphering of important characteristics and relationships between cultural-psychological phenomena, such as tools, art, concepts, roles, situations and other expressions of engaged being (Cole, 1996).

Challenges have also been raised against cross-cultural psychology as being hegemonic, ethnocentric and not representative of people from other regions and cultures (Sinha, 1997). Many advocates of indigenous approaches seek self rule and empowerment in response to their experiences of colonial denigration of their traditional knowledge systems (Paranjpe, 1998). They also caution against the drive for a single universal psychology at the expense of others where the loss of emic knowledge systems, languages and cultures through “globalization” has effectively lead to a cultural genocide for many (Davis, 2009). These scholars advocate a state of intellectual pluralism where various indigenous systems are recognized on an equal basis and not as lesser developed or erroneous systems.

International relevance

Cross-cultural psychology is essentially international since it is primarily interested in the comparison of cultures which exist across nationalities. International activities are central to much of cross-cultural psychology through cross-national comparisons and the examination of national cultures. Additionally, various indigenous and traditional psychologies are expressed from a wide variety of nations, each offering their own unique perspectives that are grounded in their eco-cultural locations. International organizations of psychology embrace the study of cross-cultural, indigenous, and cultural psychology and members can be found across the Americas, throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Sinha (1997) identifies the growth and development of indigenous

psychologies in a variety of nations including: Africa, India, China, Japan, Korea, Latin America, Turkey, Philippines, and Pakistan.

Practical relevance

While cross-cultural psychology began as the scientific study of universal features of psychology in a few specific areas, cross-cultural perspectives have come to infiltrate much of mainstream psychological research and practice. A full range of topics have been extensively studied as part of cross-cultural psychology in the areas of: acculturation, childrearing, lifespan development, education, social behaviour, health, communication, organizations and work, psychopathology, psychotherapy and wellbeing (Berry, et al., 1992; Keith, 2011).

Future directions

Central debates in research, practice, theoretical and applied areas will no doubt continue into the future along with diversification, indigenization, and the pursuit of derived etics. Diversification will continue to examine historically marginalized cultural groups and bring voice to their issues, concerns, politics and dynamics of culture (Lips & Lawson, 2011). Indigenization will expectedly involve theoretical (development of distinct conceptual frameworks), structural (institutional and organizational) and substantive (content) contributions (Sinha, 1997). The indigenization processes is expected to develop for many cultures from the initial importation and implantation of foreign (imposter etic) psychologies through to indigenization and later autochthonization (Adair, 2006). In order for complete autochthonization to occur there needs to be a critical mass of researchers who are sensitive to make use of culturally relevant variables in their work. There also needs to be contributions made to local understanding and a greater utilization

of indigenous curricula and classroom teaching along with the development of graduate training programs to develop infrastructure and sustain the accomplishments made.

Technology will also play a significant role in how we experience, transmit and understand culture and psychological phenomena as well.

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Online Resources

Organisations

International Union of Psychological Sciences - <http://www.iups.org/>

International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology - <http://www.iaccp.org/drupal/>

International Association of Applied Psychology - <http://www.iaapsy.org/>

Canadian Psychological Association Section on International /Cross-Cultural Psychology
- <http://www.cpa.ca/aboutcpa/cpasections/internationalandcrossculturalpsychology/>

American Psychological Association Division on International Psychology -
<http://www.apa.org/about/division/div52.aspx>

Journals

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology - <http://jcc.sagepub.com/>

International Journal of Psychology - <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/pp/00207594.html>

Culture and Psychology - <http://cap.sagepub.com/>