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Reflections of a "Pre-Nominal" Cross-Cultural Psychologist

Gustav Jahoda

University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, g.jahoda@strath.ac.uk

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Reflections of a "Pre-Nominal" Cross-Cultural Psychologist

The beginning of my story dates back almost half a century, and can be viewed in the light of chaos theory - you know, the beating of a butterfly wing in Brazil results in a storm across the Atlantic. In my case it was the invasion of the body of a colleague by a virus that resulted in me, rather than him, being asked to look after a visitor from New Zealand. I was much impressed when he told me that to become a good social scientist one ought to learn at first-hand about other cultures. So two years later I got a job in West Africa and started doing cross-cultural psychology. But like Mr. Jourdain, who only later discovered that he was speaking prose, I did not know then that I was doing cross-cultural psychology, since the term had, as far as I know, not yet been invented.



At the time I was very much the odd man out, regarded as something of an eccentric by my colleagues back home. In the intervening years more and more people have become interested, and the area has become relatively respectable. I use the word "relatively", since mainstream psychology is far from having welcomed us warmly. The impact varies greatly according to domains, though not in a logically coherent way. For instance, one would have thought that culture is particularly important for both developmental and social psychology. In the former this has to a considerable extent been taken on board, but social psychologists, notably experimental ones, continue with what in my view are often trivial pursuits. I have tried to show in the past that a substantial proportion of their findings are unlikely to be more than locally valid, but my challenge was almost totally ignored.

The reasons for the resistance have probably more to do with institutional vested interest, conservatism, and practical problems, than with theoretical considerations. Perhaps rather more disturbing to me is an attack from another quarter, namely Michael Cole, many of whose views I share, and whom one might have expected to be an ally. Let me explain. In an excellent book expounding his vision of cultural psychology, Cole (1996) has a chapter headed "cross-cultural investigations". In it he surveys a sample of three areas, namely perception, intelligence, and memory. It is a concise and acute summary, difficult to quarrel with it as regards factual content. However, when it comes to evaluations, the accent is throughout on shortcomings and limitations.

Beginning with the classic work of Rivers, he writes that "these results are what one would expect" (Cole, 1996, p. 66). Surely this is true only in hindsight! As far as modern studies of illusions are concerned, it has been shown that several complex factors are involved; and if the fact that, as he puts it, "many key issues about causality remain

problematic" (Cole, 1996, p. 52) is taken as rendering the whole project questionable, then the same could be said about many fields of research, and not only in psychology.

The second theme dealt with by Cole, namely intelligence, is certainly problematic; but no more so in cross-cultural than in mainstream psychology. Moreover, it is rather a peripheral issue for cross-cultural psychology. The third and last theme is that of memory, to which Cole himself together with his colleagues made important contributions. It must be admitted that generally cross-cultural research on memory has not been very impressive, and I shall come back to that. At any rate Cole suggests, in accordance with cultural activity theory, that cultural differences in remembering arise from variations in "organization of activity in everyday life". The case for this is convincing, but it is worth noting that the broad drift of the argument is rather similar to that of Rivers in relation to perception; while visual acuity is more or less the same in all cultures, exceptional ability to make use of minimal visual cues is highly context-dependent.

In sum, the contrast between cross-cultural and Cole's cultural psychology is perhaps rather less sharp than he contends in seeking to demonstrate the superiority of the latter. He concludes with some harsh words about what he calls the 'standard cross-cultural approach':

Assuming that my assessment of these three examples more or less characterizes accomplishments in other psychological domains, the marginality of cross-cultural research to mainstream psychology is not difficult to understand. Its substantive offerings appear modest, and the evidence on which they are based is suspect. (Cole, 1996, p. 68)

In sum, Cole's assessment tends to exaggerate the weaknesses and play down the achievements; hence it is rather unfair. On the other hand, there are in my opinion no grounds for complacency. Hence I shall use this opportunity, perhaps inappropriately on such an occasion, to voice some of my misgivings. However, I am not alone: my views are in line with some of those expressed by A. C. Paranjpe (1997). My discussion will initially be focused on the declared objectives of cross-cultural psychology, and I shall suggest that these are, at least in part, misguided. Its threefold goals, as set out in the important volume by Berry, Poortinga, Segall and Dasen (1992), may be summarized as follows:

1. Transport and test: investigating the applicability of western hypotheses and theories in other cultures
2. Exploring cultural variations in psychological functioning;
3. Arriving at universal laws.

As regards the first goal, transport and test, it can hardly be said that a great deal of progress has been made. This is not just the fault of cross-cultural psychology, and can also be attributed to the nature of most psychological theories; they are often formulated in a manner that renders rigorous testing difficult. Moreover, for the mainstream to abandon or even modify theories, the weight of evidence has to be very substantial, and this is

usually not feasible given the usually slender resources. Nonetheless, if this were a major goal, results obtained in that direction ought to be more visible after a quarter-century. There should be a chapter or at least just a paper, entitled "Western theories cross-culturally tested and found wanting"; but I have never come across anything like that. Before discussing the second goal, let me first jump to the third, distal one, of a universal psychology based on cross-cultural research. Some of my friends and colleagues believe that this will soon be within our reach, but I do not share that faith for the following reasons. First of all, I have not met any clear and convincing explication of the way in which a universal psychology might be generated. One proposal has been to, as it were "strip away" culture, which would leave universal human nature. The trouble is that by doing so one also strips away an essential feature of humanity. For as Geertz (1973) graphically put it, humans without culture would be mere unworkable monstrosities. The problem arises from the fact that human behavior is a complex function of both biology and culture, and the boundaries between the two are uncertain, varying according to domain and context. Cultures themselves differ not merely geographically, but change over historical periods, while the time-scale of biological change is vastly greater. Given this variability, it would seem that a universal psychology would have to rest largely on biology, as is implicit in much of mainstream theorizing. In other words, in so far as one is concerned with certain *partial* aspects of human functioning such as, for instance, information processing or remembering, universal features will be identifiable. But the goals of arriving at a universal psychology via cross-cultural psychology, is, in my opinion, little more than a chimera.

There is, however, an alternative approach adopted by one of the *cultural psychologies*. I use the plural, since its several versions take very different positions regarding universality. What cultural psychologies have in common is the conviction that methodological behaviorism is unsuitable for the study of culture and mind. Shweder's version eschews such an aim altogether, concentrating on the need to understand *particular* cultures in depth. By contrast, Cole and his associates have sought to cut the Gordic knot by returning to the notion of *culture-in-general* as conceptualized by Tylor at the end of the 19th century. This permits the formulation of a universal cultural theory, at least for the important developmental domain. Since all humans have culture, one does not necessarily have to go to exotic places for one's empirical work. The theoretical emphasis is on common processes rather than cultural variations. The cost of this approach, as far as theory is concerned, is that one is forced to remain at a high level of abstraction.

Let me return now to the second goal, namely investigating cultural variations in psychological functioning. Since this is effectively the major area of cross-cultural research, the relevant passage in the Berry et al. (1992) text will be considered in more detail. The stated objective is an exploratory one, designed to discover variations not present in one's own culture. Two means of achieving this are suggested. One is to keep a sharp lookout for "novel aspects of behavior". The other could be a by-product of the first aim: if on testing a Western theory in another cultural setting one fails to obtain the expected results, one should seek to uncover the factors responsible for that failure.

Thereby novel and interesting cultural variants might be found. The concrete example offered to illustrate both the first and second sub-goal concerns learning and memory. As regards the first, they consider the question whether primacy and recency effects are universal; if such effects are not found, one should investigate further how lists are memorized. It might be, for instance, that "individuals may evidence different mnemonic devices during a memory study". It is noteworthy that there is hardly any further mention of memory in the volume, and the term does not appear in the index.

It is probably no accident that this kind of illustration was selected, since follow-up studies are more readily feasible when dealing with cognitive processes than with such spheres as, say, attitudes, values, personality, or identity. As regards the latter, post-hoc speculative interpretations are most commonly found. There is thus a gap between declared aims and aspirations, and what is actually done. Moreover, it seems to me that the gap has widened over time. This view is based on my impressions, admittedly superficial, of the kinds of changes that have taken place over the decades. They are based mainly on trends discernible in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology (JCCP)*. This is no doubt a somewhat biased source, since many investigations are published elsewhere. Nonetheless, since it is a kind of flagship, its contents are surely not insignificant.

One thing that becomes apparent is that cross-cultural psychology has become a healthier activity over the years, and this is not just because more and better antibiotics have become available. Let me explain: those of us who laboured as pioneers often worked in remote villages and were thus exposed, in my own case, to such afflictions as malaria or dysentery. We were in direct contact with people, and thus in a position to observe "novel aspects of behavior". Here is an example: I encountered a superbly skilled illiterate basket weaver, and commissioned him to copy a special kind of basket from a photograph. To my astonishment, the finished product turned out to be totally different from the picture, which he believed to have followed faithfully. This led on to a series of studies of 2D visual space perception.

It would seem that this kind of approach has become increasingly rare. In a large majority of studies there is no direct personal contact between researcher and the people studied. Hence there is little if any opportunity to observe variations in behavior. Moreover, we commonly criticize the mainstream for basing their theories on such an unrepresentative sample of humanity as is constituted by American college students. But studies reported in the JCCP also predominantly rely on college or to a lesser extent high school students, ignoring the fact that a substantial part of the world population still has little or no formal schooling.

The modal style of recent work reported appears to be one of getting together with colleagues in other countries, usually equated with cultures. Some kinds of questionnaires or scales are administered, recording differences and similarities. This is of course something of a caricature, but only in the sense of an exaggeration of characteristic features.

Let me hasten to add that it is of course perfectly legitimate to employ such an approach as part of a coherent research program; but more usually that is not the case. Or

again, one popular exercise consists of attempts to find out whether a particular measure works across cultures, but going no further. One is reminded of Kuhn's (1962) remark that: "In the absence of a paradigm ... all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant. As a result, early fact-gathering is a far more nearly random activity than the one that subsequent scientific development makes familiar" (p. 15).

There appears to have been a return to what, if I remember rightly, John Berry once called the "anecdotal" approach, which is purely descriptive of "interesting" differences. There is unlimited scope for such exercises, especially if one ignores the warning issued by Campbell and Naroll about the problems of interpreting comparisons between two natural groups. The chances are that any such comparisons will throw up differences, for a wide variety of reasons. More important and instructive would be the discovery of invariances as attempted by Ype Poortinga. In sum, the question arises whether the previously mentioned efforts are really worth while, if their product is not cumulative and fails to contribute to the building up a coherent body of knowledge. Perhaps in our post-colonial and rapidly changing world this would be too much to expect. Nevertheless, we should not shy away from asking ourselves critical questions about fundamental issues.

Although I have taken advantage of this forum to voice some of my misgivings, I would not wish to leave you with the impression that my general attitude is negative. After all, I have spent a good part of my life in cross-cultural psychology, and would like to see it continue to flourish. Nor would I want to gainsay the solid achievements reflected in the three volumes of the new edition of the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology* (Berry et al., 1997). But we should not rest on our laurels.

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