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Lutz H. Eckensberger

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MORALITY FROM A CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

Lutz H. Eckensberger

1. A NOTE ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORALITY AND CULTURE

One of the many possibilities of understanding culture is proposed by Clifford Geertz who understood culture as *"a system of control mechanisms⎯plans, recipes, rules, instructions ... that guide behavior"*(Geertz, 1973). This opinion is based on the assumption that *"man is exactly the animal that is the most dependent upon such control mechanisms that exist outside the skin"* (p. 44). But these control mechanisms (rules systems) are not only "outside the skin", they are *also located in the heads of people.* Hence, culture also represents "shared" *knowledge and/or meaning systems* which consist of theories about what a *good person* is (personhood), about *nature, society* and the *meaning of life* (religion) or its embeddedness in a transcendental sphere or cosmos. These *rule systems* are partly implicit, partly explicit. This means that sometimes they can be learned or reconstructed directly in the social situations, but at other times they are hidden and thus have to be explicated. Only humans have explicit rules, only humans teach them intentionally. *Morality* is one of these rule systems (control mechanisms), and it is⎯as we will see⎯a unique one. Morality is not only a central aspect of culture, but also unique to humans.

Some consequences of this conception can be deduced easily: The relationship between culture and morality is *intrinsic*; morality is a *constitutive feature* of the culture concept as well as of concrete cultures; culture cannot be defined or investigated without heeding morality. But morality can also not be understood without reference to the culture concept. Secondly, cultural rules *complement* natural laws in explaining and understanding human activities (behaviors, cognition, affects). Finally and most important: *The study of morality necessarily leads to a perspective that conceives of psychology as a primarily cultural science rather than as a natural science.*

2. HUMAN ACTION AS A POSSIBLE UNIVERSAL FOR A CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

The most challenging requirement that a cultural psychology needs to fulfil is overcoming the tensions between the unique and the general, and between the subject and the culture or context, which should both simultaneously be part of any theory developed in this field[1]. In an early analysis (Eckensberger, 1979) these requirements were used as criteria to evaluate existing psychological theories from a cross-cultural

perspective. Without repeating these earlier arguments, the result was that only one theory family met these criteria. This was the family of *action theories* (e.g. Boesch, 1991) based on the French tradition of Janet (Schwartz, 1951), Lewinian field theory (Lewin, 1951) and Russian activity theory (see Eckensberger, 1995) as well as on German philosophy (from Dilthey, 1894 to Habermas, 1981). Action theories make use of the perspective of "*homo interpretans*", of humans as meaning creating and potentially self-reflective agencies. Action theories are not just a foundation for creating a culture-based psychology, they are also particularly attractive in the present context, in which morality is the object of theorizing and research, because the concept of morality analytically presupposes a decision made by a potentially self-reflective agency capable of deciding. Without the assumption of an agency, which can be held responsible for an action and its outcome, a definition of morality is hardly possible—which is why non-human nature is considered morally neutral.

It is emphasized that humans are not only influenced by culture, but that they also create culture, and use it as a lens or medium to understand the world, as a means of coping with it instrumentally and socially. In addition a common deep structure is assumed to be fundamental to this entire dialectical process linking the agency and culture. The model postulates that every human being as an agency is capable of reflective processes and that actions can be differentiated analytically at three levels. At the first level of *primary actions* all humans develop goals (intentionality), choose means and evaluate the processes resulting from interacting with the material environment (instrumental actions) or with others (communicative actions), thereby creating their understanding of the world during ontogeny (for a detailed explication see Eckensberger, 1990, 1995, 2002). Within the person schemata about the world are constructed, and in the environment material and social consequences of actions are produced, thereby forming the enabling and constraining conditions for further actions. These schemata are shaped by experiences gained in different material, social and symbolic contexts, like exclusively child-oriented activities in the West or within co-occurring care structures in some non-western cultures (Keller & Eckensberger, 1998), yet both can be formulated within the same action theory framework. If action barriers occur at this level, action controls or regulations are developed. Since they are structurally also actions, they are called *action-oriented or secondary actions*. These secondary actions lead to the development of control beliefs and normative frameworks in the person (agency), and to control myths, conventions and laws within the culture. They define constraints or support for further actions. Finally, the barriers during action regulations lead *to third order actions* which are *agency oriented*. Basically these are reflective processes that are applied to actions and action regulations, to the agency him- or herself (*self-reflection*), as well as to the very existence of the agency (*contemplation*).

Although the action levels are formed in this basic sequence (the older one gets, the more these levels are simultaneously active), all levels are necessary to understand a human action: In order to understand a simple act, like writing this chapter, one has to know my immediate intentions (to make my point within the time span of the deadline given), but also the standards or conventions, in which the chapter has to be written (length, APA format), as well as the fact that I am aware of deviating from some other theoretical positions held. In addition, this may be essential for my self-identity as a cultural psychologist, etc.

This framework serves as an analytical tool, insofar as it allows for the integration of psychological and cultural constructs, for instance, defining morality and

distinguishing different domains of social cognition and – quite generally enables the integration of many psychological concepts (cognitions, affects, control beliefs, self construal, etc.).

Apart from this action theory also serves as an empirical tool because it guides the process of data gathering (course of actions/interactions), the strategy of data analysis (utterances/interpretations) and of course the interpretation.

3. APPLICATION OF AN ACTION THEORY FRAMEWORK TO INTERPRETATIONS OF DATA AND DISCUSSIONS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

Our research originally started with Kohlberg's theory on the development of moral judgment, which clearly is the most influential theory in this field, not only in developmental psychology, but also in cross-cultural research (cf. Eckensberger & Zimba, 1997).

We applied the action theory model to morality and its development in context. The results are manifold and promising. First, we reconstructed moral development by using the action elements as a criterion for the structure of moral reasoning and justification (goal taking instead of role taking). This procedure resulted in stages that with increasing age involve increases in the kind and number of action elements considered in a moral decision. This analysis ended up with more stages (eleven) than Kohlberg proposed (Eckensberger & Reinshagen, 1980, Eckensberger, 1986), and in four instead of three levels of moral judgment. These are generated in two "social interpretation spheres", the *interpersonal sphere*, defined by concrete interactions with concrete persons, and the *transpersonal social sphere,* determined by functions and roles. According to our data and theoretical analysis, development proceeds from *heteronomy* to *autonomy* within both levels (Eckensberger, Döring & Breit, 2001). It is important, however, that heteronomy is quite generally defined as the realm of necessities, that is, by external and internal constraints, and not as narrowly as in the Piagetian tradition by external constraints only. Second, heteronomy at the transpersonal level also comprises autonomy and heteronomy at the interpersonal level. The ideal in this case, however, is truth and objectivity, which partly involves necessities, but at the same time is also of benefit to all.

From a bird's eye view, a considerable amount of support for Kohlberg's central claims exists in cross-cultural research (that the development of moral judgments is universal, that no stage regressions and no stage skipping occurs). However, there are also serious doubts whether this theory really captures the ethical concepts of other cultures. Some arguments are formulated top down (using moral principles) and others bottom up (using empirical data) (cf. Eckensberger & Zimba, 1997, for details). Some will be dealt with in the following, and they will be dealt with in an action theory context. They are discussed predominantly at the second and third level of actions.

3.1. The centrality of agency

One can argue that without a self-reflective agency religions would not exist. This view implies that religion is an effort of humans to deal with the inevitability of death (Eckensberger, 1993). This applies to the religiosity of the individual person as well as

the institution of religion which is considered the cradle of culture (Morin, 1973). All religions commonly also fulfill much broader functions: They provide ideas about the ontology of earth and heaven/cosmos (e.g. genesis in the Bible) and, most important in the present context, they organize life on earth by formulating rules of conduct like the Ten Commandments. Hence religions are basically similar to ethics. In some religions/cultures this is also true for law as, for example, in China and Islam (Ma, 1998; Haque, 2002). But in the West, morality and religion were separated during the Enlightenment (at least at the level of theology and philosophy). For this reason agency is of the utmost importance for defining autonomy and responsibility in Western morality, as both form the basis of a deontic intrinsic morality, which is not derived from any transcendental power or religious structure. But in many non-western cultures no separation of religion and morality (sometimes also law) occurred during history. Thus the existential dimension of the agency is underlined in all rules of conduct. Huebner and Garrod (1991), for instance, pointed out that in *Hindu* and *Buddhist* cultures morality is embedded in conceptions about the very nature of human existence itself. Vasudev (1986) elaborates that in Hinduism morality and religion are inseparable. In particular the law of *karma* (i.e., adding up of good [*dharma*] and bad [*adharma*] actions that may also have been committed in earlier lives) is regarded as crucial. This leads, of course, to types of moral reasoning totally different from the ones defined in Kohlberg's stage theory and manual, but this does not mean that they are not structurally equivalent. All in all these examples indicate that the concept of agency, which is basic to all action theories, is essential for prescriptive norms or principles.

3.2. Morality as a prescriptive standard for human actions: Duties

In several contexts it is claimed that Western ethics is primarily rights based, while non-western ethics is duty based. For example, the Japanese (Confucian) principle of *giri-ninjo* (obligation) is referred to, which seems quite similar to the Indian *ethic of duty dharma* (obligations to others and one self; Miller, 1994; Shweder, Mahapatra & Miller, 1987).

The impression that Western ethics is rights based, may have been conveyed by the dichotomy of individualism-collectivism, which often seems to imply that individualism is based upon individual rights, or even on egoism. This is misleading however: Kant (1968/1788) distinguished between "acting dutifully" and "acting because of a sense of duty", i.e, out of a moral obligation, which basically means to act *autonomously.* In this sense non-western cultures are also autonomous, which implies that individualism is not the same as autonomy (Kagitcibasi, 1996). Thus regardless of the exact structures of these duty concepts, they are all based on an agency as a necessary precondition.

3.2.1. Duty to develop the agency

Self-development is itself considered a mandatory obligation. In India this is one function of education (Clemens, 2004). In Hinduism and Buddhism self-cultivation as a goal is even considered ultimately to "free" the self from the self (Hinduism: the universal Atman; in Buddhism: the Nirvana), which is also a solution of the fear of death, but a very "radical" one. This faith is, however, also only understandable through action theory, because it is reached by contemplation, which is a self-oriented action.

3.2.2. Duty to maintain harmony

Durganand Sinha (1996) confronted the Western concept of control (as secondary actions or control ideals at the third level) with the Eastern concept of harmony as an ideal. This idea applies to man/man-relations as well as to man/nature-relations in Hinduism. In Indonesia the ideal of *rukun* means social harmony, but also harmony between youths/elders (Setiono, 1994). Similarly in China the Confucian concept of *Yin and Yang* relates to the balance between man/man, man/women and man/nature. There are also explicit conflict solving strategies in China that aim at "harmony maintenance" (Hwang, 1998). These imply "taking care of face" (vertical in-group), "giving face" (horizontal in-group) and "striving for face" (horizontal out-group). These are regulatory strategies that are not explicit in the West, and they all serve the *goal* of maintaining harmony. The ideas of harmony certainly guide action, yet they are often not based on equality (justice), but rather on equity.

Like justice equality is based on respect. Respect is, however, distributed unequally. This is true for respecting older persons (*hormat*) in Indonesia, and *filial piety* in Confucian cultures. In India justice is generally understood as what one deserves. But "deservingness" varies depending on a variety of aspects: *Kinship* (eldest son deserves most), *Varna (Cast* – Brahmins deserve most), *gender* (men deserve more). *Equality* thus only exists, when all other factors have been considered (Krishnan, 1997). Respect, however, may even be extended beyond other persons in the society. Vasudev (1986), for instance, elaborates the Indian principle of *respect for all life*, leading to the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*) in Hinduism.

Emotions, as important processes in action evaluation and regulation, like shame and guilt, can also vary in different cultures. Shame, for instance, may be experienced in China after moral transgressions that usually elicit guilt in the West (Bedford, 2004). They both derive from considering oneself as agency to be responsible for actions, however, in cultures that produce "interrelated agencies" or "extended agencies" (the term I prefer) others are also an integral part of agency, and have to be considered in keeping balance or harmony. Even though shame is evoked in this cultural context, the basic function of emotions as regulators of actions remains the same. Emotions are just embedded in different meaning systems, and this is what action theory takes into account.

3.3. The embeddedness of the agency in the cultural context

Probably the most salient feature of recent cross-cultural literature is the greater visibility of the social context into which agency is embedded in non-western cultures, which, as we saw, also leads to somewhat different mandatory standards or ethical principles. Similar to the interdependent self-construal identified in Japan (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) several other conceptions of the self as part of different social realities exist. Often a *private* and a *public* self are distinguished: In Hinduism an individual role (*samanya dharma*) and societal role (*varnaashram dharma*) has to be taken. In Hong Kong, China *a small* and a *big "I"* are distinguished (Ma, 1998). In Japan the dichotomy *tatamae* (one's natural, real, or inner wishes) and *honne* (standards by which one is bound outwardly) exists (Lebra, 1976).

3.4. Interpersonal and transpersonal social spheres

Several arguments and data in cross-cultural research indicate that the universality of the transition from stage three to four in the Kohlbergian scheme is doubtful. Setiono (1994), for instance, claims that the Javanese concepts of *hormat* and *rukun resemble* Kohlberg's stage three, but that Javanese people actually show a local adaptation, in that they already reach an optimal moral development at stage three. Thus Setiono (1994) calls these concepts *moral principles*. Ma (1998), on the other hand, reconstructs indigenous Chinese stages of moral thinking by first defining "a general or master structure", which underlie both Western and Chinese sub-structures. The latter is based on the Chinese (Confucian) principle of *jen* (love, benevolence, human-heartedness, man-to-manness, sympathy, perfect virtue), which leads to the norm of filial piety and social altruism, social order and the norm of propriety. However, the indigenous stages are only proposed for stages four and higher: stages one to three (!) are assumed to be identical to those in the West. Hence sometimes benevolence is interpreted as stage three and sometimes as a moral principle. This tension may be overcome by distinguishing the two levels of social spheres (interpersonal and transpersonal) mentioned above. This can be demonstrated most clearly with respect to the different conceptualizations of "we-ness" in other cultures. In Indonesian *Kita* and *Kami* refer to *"we-ness"* at different "levels" of social reality (Hassan, 2002): The *Kami*-mode refers precisely to the level of *"interpersonal relations"* and groups based on empathy and reciprocal respect, also implying discrimination and exclusion of others; the *Kita*-mode, however, refers to the *"transpersonal level"* of moral thinking (Eckensberger, Döring & Breit, 2001), which implies commonality with others oriented towards *basic human* virtues and principles that are *true for all of humankind* and not just for a particular culture.

3.5. Norms and facts

Action theory is particularly helpful in research on the domain specificity of social cognition. In this field moral conventions and morality (Turiel, 1983) are differentiated by their functionality. Whether a specific situation is interpreted as representing conventions or morality, is determined by how the facts are interpreted through the eyes of the beholder,. Action theory is helpful in explaining this, because norms and facts are systematically interrelated in a single act. The means of acting are related to the goals by *final* (in order to) reasoning, whereas the consequences in instrumental actions follow *causally* from having performed them. Therefore, the assumption or knowledge of causal processes (facts) also influences the moral interpretation of a situation as an example taken from Africa (Zimba, 1994) may serve to show. The Chewa and Tumbuka of Zambia distinguish sexually "hot" individuals (teenagers and adults of child-bearing age) from sexually "cold" ones (infants, seriously sick persons, neophytes in the rites of passage, and adults who there are no longer sexually active). They also believe that engaging in *chigololo*, that is, premarital sex by "hot" individuals, *causes* (!) illness amongst the "cold" moral patients. *Chigololo* pollutes sexually "hot" individuals and makes them transmit the pollution to sexually "cold" individuals through fire, touch,

salt and air. Consequently they interpret premarital sex as a "moral" issue, as opposed to American university students who understand such activity as either a personal issue or as a convention.

The "causal chain" of harm, which the Chewa and Tumbuka perceive, is not shared at a universal level. Yet, it demonstrates that protecting moral patients from harm, regardless of how this is conceived in a specific context, can take different forms, conceptualizations and characteristics. Actions that do not protect moral patients from harm are morally wrong in principle, whether local or universal, whether allowed or forbidden. Harming is harming, also in an African context.

4. CONCLUDING REMARK

It might look as though cultural psychology as a perspective (or paradigm) and action theory as its preferred theoretical framework are just a lens through which one can look at various empirical data in psychology. But this would be a misunderstanding. It is a way of looking at the world, but not at given data, because data (their gathering as well as their interpretation) already depend upon the perspective taken (Eckensberger & Burgard, 1983). Even though I used examples from existing literature, they were all based on qualitative research methods to allow me to make my contextual interpretations; this would have been more difficult with quantitative data.

The perspective we propose is not just relevant to cross-cultural research, but for psychology in general. Culture is central for and unique to humans, and therefore a psychology that claims to deal with humans cannot do without it. It is as simple as that. Culture in this perspective is not an independent variable, but an integral part of psychological processes and structures. It defines the meaning of what and how we think, feel and behave. Therefore psychology cannot do without culture and its meaning systems. This implies that we have to develop theories, which take into account the differences of meaning in different cultures and the underlying deep structure of meaning in culture. Action theory can serve as a step in this direction. But this has many methodical implications (Eckensberger & Burgard, 1983). Their detailed treatment is beyond the scope of this contribution, but they will certainly involve a more taken for granted application of qualitative methods. At present the use of qualitative methods has to be justified in every case. Quantitative approaches represent the normal, conventional tools. If we focus on the concept of meaning as the core of psychology, then this treatment of the two approaches may even be reversed in the long run. In any case, complementing the nomothetic by a cultural perspective in psychology would in the long run also imply the necessity to specify arguments supporting the use of quantitative methods.

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AUTHOR

Lutz H. Eckensberger

Lutz H. Eckensberger, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, German Institute for International Educational Research and Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. E-mail: eckensberger@dipf.de.