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# Growing Awareness of Cultural Aspects of Psychology as a Resource for Managing Progressive Social Change

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## Prefatory Comments

I suggest that CCP's early preoccupation with direct comparison between culturally-contrastive groups has been overtaken in importance by a number of trends in developmental and applied psychology. Some Western theorists now acknowledge reflexively that their interpretation of psychological variables is itself informed by a particular cultural system of meanings. A growing number of non-Western theorists have proposed alternative cultural psychologies. Mainstream developmental psychology has incorporated culture as an essential dimension of the field, leading to increasingly systemic theories. Cultural sensitivity is widely perceived as essential for the design and interpretation of psychological assessment. The IACCP has contributed to these trends by fostering inter-cultural communication among psychologists working in many different cultural contexts around the world. Collectively, they are in a position to impress on the next generation of planners and policy-makers the importance of culture in the formulation of strategies for managing progressive social change.

The success of IACCP in creating a "big tent" (Berry 2014) can in my view be attributed to the Association's tolerance of theoretical and methodological diversity. Reflecting on the first half-century of Cross-Cultural Psychology (CCP), it strikes me that, over and above the field's early preoccupation with direct comparison between culturally-contrastive groups, it has contributed significantly to the following important trends in developmental and applied psychology.

- Reflexive acknowledgment of cultural embeddedness by some Western psychologists
- Rapprochement between psychology and anthropology
- Emergence of alternative cultural psychologies from societies outside the West
- Incorporation of culture as an essential dimension in theories of human development
- Recognition by assessment practitioners of the importance of cultural sensitivity
- Public advocacy for the importance of culture in the formulation of strategies for managing progressive social change.

## Acknowledging the Cultural Embeddedness of Western Theories

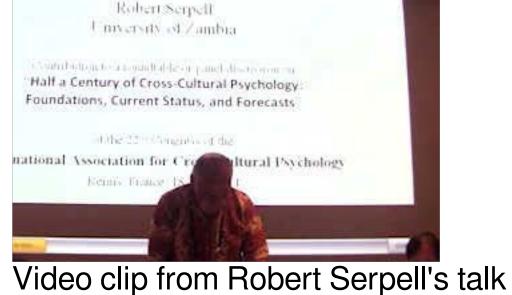Several influential Western theorists now acknowledge reflexively that their interpretation of psychological variables is itself informed by a particular cultural system of meanings. Notable examples are Ernst Boesch's (1991) symbolic action theory, Ken Gergen's (1985) social constructionism and Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) reflexive sociology. Rather than construing their home culture as a constraint to be overcome by rising

above it, these authors, like Barbara Rogoff (2003), include cultural embeddedness as an essential aspect of theory formulation (Serpell, 2002).

## Rapprochement Between Psychology and Anthropology

The cover of Gustav Jahoda's (1982) book, Psychology and anthropology: a psychological perspective, epitomizes its theme with a lithograph by M.C. Escher (1944) that shows two creatures emerging from a single figure, traveling in opposite directions, but eventually circling round to encounter one another, face-to-face. Adopting the role of an interpreter for psychological audiences, the author makes a strong case that the 'craft' of anthropology is well suited to the discovery of inner meanings and pervasive patterning in a culture which could not be achieved with the rigorous, but also often superficial and sterile methods of experimental psychology. In a text rich with concrete examples, Jahoda showed that psychology had much to learn from anthropological studies, a lesson that has been taken to heart by a whole generation of cross-cultural psychological researchers.

Michael Cole, whose seminal book, 'The cultural context of learning and thinking' (1971) was subtitled "an exploration in experimental anthropology", led the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition's (1978, 1979) twin reviews entitled "Cognition as a residual category in anthropology" and "What's cultural about cross-cultural cognitive psychology?" The latter ended with a call for "specifying culturally organised activities on a level which the psychologist can use" (p.169).



Video clip from Robert Serpell's talk

One important response to that challenge was the article by Charles Super & Sara Harkness (1986), "the developmental niche: a conceptualization at the interface of child and culture," arising from a protracted encounter between the two primary disciplines in which the authors received their initial training. The (husband and wife) authors brought together conceptual insights from developmental psychology and cultural anthropology in a powerful synthesis that has inspired a huge number of empirical studies, as witnessed by its impressive record of over 1000 citations according to Google Scholar.

## Alternative Cultural Psychologies

Reacting to the reluctance of many theorists of so-called mainstream psychology to take seriously the challenges to the generality of their theories posed by the findings of CCP, a growing number of non-Western theorists have proposed alternative cultural psychologies, grounded in non-Western cultures prevalent in their home society. Virgilio Enriquez (1977) in the Philippines launched one of the first indigenous psychology movements, Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Filipino Psychology) which attracted a massive following (Lagmay, 1984; Church & Katigbak, 2002). Durganand Sinha has articulated the need and potentiality of indigenous psychology, both for India (1994) and more generally (1997). Uichol Kim and colleagues have done so for Korea and other East Asian societies ((Kim & Berry 1993; Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006), and Bame Nsamenang (1992, 2006) has made similar recommendations for West Africa.

## Systemic Theories of Human Development

On the other hand, much of the mainstream of developmental psychology has incorporated culture as an essential dimension of the field, leading to increasingly systemic theories (Serpell, 1999). Notable examples are Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, Arnold Sameroff's (2009) transactional model of development, and the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory developed by Michael Cole (1988) and others expanding the ideas of Vygotsky and Leontiev.

Cole's (1996) powerful integrative overview of Cultural psychology: a once and future discipline has since become one of the defining expositions of the field of cultural psychology, cognate with but firmly independent of cross-cultural psychology. Pierre Dasen (2003) has proposed a meta-theoretical framework for integrating Bronfenbrenner's notion of nested levels of ecological systems and Super & Harkness's developmental niche with some of the older theoretical concepts of psychology and anthropology such as adaptation, transmission, learning processes, values and cosmology.

## Culturally Sensitive Psychological Assessment

The recurrent problem of cross-cultural equivalence that has dogged direct comparisons of psychological functioning between culturally-contrastive groups (Frijda & Jahoda, 1966) has spawned a broad recognition by practicing clinicians, counselors and educators in multicultural settings that cultural sensitivity is essential for the design and interpretation of psychological assessment. Once considered a radical idea, this principle is now part of establishment orthodoxy in the USA, manifested in the American Psychological Association's (2002) guidelines on multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists.

# The Practical Importance of Culture for Managing Progressive Social Change

The contribution of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology to these trends has been both direct and indirect. Over and above promoting and disseminating the formulation and empirical testing of explicitly cross-cultural theories, the Association has, through its convivial conferences, symposia and publications, fostered inter-cultural communication among psychologists working in many different cultural contexts around the world. The esprit de corps of the Association has built up a meta-theoretical, philosophical field of consensus whose distinctive contributions to the wider world of ideas include recognition that culture matters in most human fields of endeavor, and that despite the prevalence of cultural diversity as a source of conflict, productively cooperative communication across differences is possible. That optimistic consensus has informed a number of international alliances to articulate the implications of research at the interface of psychology and culture for the design of public policy in the fields of health, education and early childhood intervention (e.g. Dasen, Berry & Sartorius, 1988; Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang & Broberg, 1992; Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996; Eldering & Leseman, 1999; Garcia, Pence & Evans, 2008; Serpell & Marfo 2014).

A consensual theme of those alliances, despite internal theoretical controversy, has been the need to impress on the next generation of planners and policy-makers the importance of culture in the formulation of strategies for managing progressive social change. Culture may often be a more relevant dimension of diversity to be addressed in the frame of reference for international discourse about progressive social change than political nationalities, not least because cultural pluralism, rather than homogenisation may be an essential ingredient of intranational democracy.

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