The virtue of culture in understanding motivation at school : Commentary on the special issue on culture and motivation

Frédéric Guay

Department of Educational Fundamentals and Practices,
Laval University, Quebec, Canada

Abstract

Students' higher level of motivation is not based solely on intrapersonal factors as innate characteristics, but also on contexts in which students are supposed to develop their competencies. Thus, the cultural context is expected to shape motivation. Values and beliefs shared by a cultural group will affect students' motivation to learn and educational outcomes. This special issue on culture and motivation presents a collection of groundbreaking research ideas that advance our knowledge on how motivation is shaped by the cultural context and how motivation processes are affected by the cultural milieu. Hopefully, this special issue will stimulate new research that will advance our understanding of motivation at school.

There is a worldwide increase in the mobility of individuals across countries. For example, in 2011, approximately one Canadian of five was born in another country, which represents the highest proportion of the G8 nations. Most Canadian immigrants come from Asia (including the Middle East), although an increasing number come from Africa, Central America, South America, and the West Indies.This growing number of immigrants does not characterize Canada only. Other countries outside the G8 nations, such as Australia, also have a substantial proportion of immigrants (approximately 1–5). These new waves of immigrants have enriched the ethnic and cultural composition of numerous countries (Enquête Nationale Auprès des Ménages, 2011). However, such a composition presents major challenges for the educational systems of these host countries. Immigrants come with their own cultural background mirrored by their values and identities which may challenge the pedagogical methods or approaches used by teachers. For example, some immigrant students are uncomfortable with teachers who want to be called by their first name, and Asian students appear to prefer learning through reflection rather than action, whereas American students seem to prefer the reverse (Joy & Kolb, 2009).

The aim of this special issue was to present a set of empirical studies that take into account the way culture shapes students' motivation. This endeavour is commendable for at least three reasons. First, as mentioned above, our societies are becoming more multicultural and this may challenge how we teach. Second, the role of culture in motivation at school is an underdeveloped topic. Culture is rarely considered the main exploratory variable, being used mostly as a control variable and, more often than not, in an ill-defined manner. However, we should acknowledge that recent efforts have been made in this regard (Chirkov, 2009). Third, given the fact that motivation is expected to fluctuate across contexts, the role of culture

appears quite relevant (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Ultimately, culture is about context, that is, where a given group of individuals have shared common experiences. Articles in this issue address several important questions regarding the role of culture in students' motivation: 'Are personal and contextual determinants of motivation the same across countries?' Are there cultural differences in students' awareness of conflict between learning and playing? What role does culture play in moderating the effects of academic and social goals on academic achievement? Are there specific motivational forces that drive learning and achievement that may be related to culture? Does culture moderate the relations among personal best goal structure, individual personal best goal, engagement, and achievement? Does culture moderate the determinants of mathematics self-efficacy? Does culture regulate how students provide answers on questionnaires developed to assess self-efficacy and achievement goals for mathematics, and does culture moderate relations between these motivational beliefs and achievement? Additionally, these articles present various ways that culture and motivation can be conceptualized and operationalized.

Defining culture

In September 1940, the city of London was bombed by the German Air Force for 57 consecutive nights. More than one million London houses were destroyed or damaged, and more than 40,000 civilians were killed. The government and the British military command were sure, in the early days of the London Blitz, that a large percentage of civilians would panic, experience severe trauma, and evacuate the city. These potential behaviours did not actually occur. When asked about their unexpected behaviours, the Londoners explained their resiliency by the British 'stiff upper lip' (meaning unwavering determination). However, this incredible determination of Londoners in the face of adversity did not characterize only them, but also citizens of other countries also facing a series of terrible shelling[1].

Such cultural attributions to explain events are not uncommon. People use them frequently to explain their own behaviours or those of others. After all, culture is about shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations of events from a given group of individuals sharing a common experience transmitted across generations (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). In some circumstances, the psychological principle that we study could be as universal as the attribute of resilience presented in the London Blitz example above (hereafter referred to as 'etic'), but also particular for a given group of individuals (from now on called 'emic'; King & McInerney, 2014).

Research on culture has used various units of analysis. Some researchers study how cultural groups in a given country differ in education processes and outcomes (withincountry cultural differences) or how individuals differ in these processes and outcomes across various countries (between-countries cultural differences). Other researchers use typologies to describe culture (independent vs. interdependent self-cultures; Markus & Kitayama, 1991) or cultural clusters based on various meaningful dimensions, such as power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism–collectivism, and masculinity– femininity (Hofstede, 2001).

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[1] *This story is from Malcol Gladwell's book, David and Goliath: Underdogs, misfits, and the art of battling giants.*

The articles in this special issue provide a rather broad perspective on the ways culture is operationalized. These include studies on the between-countries cultural differences (Ahn et al., in this issue; Lam et al., in this issue; Li & Brown, in this issue; Usher, Butz, & Bong, in this issue) as well as studies on the within-country cultural differences (Martin, Collie, Mok, & McInerney, in this issue; Meissel & Rubie-Davies, in this issue). Clayton and Zusho (in this issue) and Liem (in this issue) did not assess the impact of cultural variations on students' motivation because they studied a single cultural group. This potential limitation is counterbalanced by the fact that these two papers study cultural groups of students that are not considered by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) to be from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies. That is, they evaluate Jamaican (Clayton & Zusho) and Indonesian (Liem) student populations, which are largely understudied in the extant literature on motivation at school. The authors of these two papers discuss their results in the light of past studies on WEIRD student populations and outline potential cultural differences.

Few of the papers focused on typologies or cultural clusters because they compared a limited number of countries. However, since Lam et al. (in this issue) gathered data in 12 countries, they were able to use the Hofstede Individualism Index (IDV) in their analyses as well as an index of socioeconomic development, the Human Development Index (HDI), thereby making it possible to test the exploratory power of these variables at the country level.

The etic and emic processes discussed above are not necessarily two opposite dimensions. The complementarity of emic and etic approaches to research has been recognized as suitable to better understanding psychological characteristics as well as the form and function of various social systems. For example, in a research project one could observe shared characteristics between cultures (etic) as well as unique aspects (Clayton & Zusho, in this issue) that are fundamental to our understanding of motivation at school.

In the articles from this issue, some cultural differences emerge at the mean level, as well as at the process level. Mean-level differences are simply variances on a dependant variable among cultural groups. Process-level differences are those indicating a dissimilarity in the degree of association between an independent variable and a dependant variable across cultural groups. More specifically, in some articles there are mean-level differences in variables, but the variables predict outcomes in a similar manner. A good example of this is the paper by Ahn et al. (in this issue), where U.S. students reported higher mathematics self-efficacy than Korean and Philippine students, but where the variables predicting mathematics self-efficacy were similar across countries (Lam et al., in this issue). Such papers indicate that the psychological processes at play are similar across countries.

In other articles, there are no mean-level differences between variables but these articles predict outcomes in different ways (i.e., process level). For example, Meissel and Rubie-Davies revealed that, in New Zealand, mathematics self-efficacy predicted mathematics achievement differently for different cultural groups (European, Maori, Pasifika, and Asian). Interestingly, those differences were not because students interpret responses differently on a questionnaire assessing mathematics self-efficacy.

Why should culture affect motivation?

Research on motivation spans many areas of psychology, such as organizational (Grant & Shin, 2012), developmental (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), and educational (Wentzel & Wigfield 2009), and is built on various theoretical frameworks (Pintrich, 2003). Irrespective of these areas or theories, scholars have come to more or less a common ground with respect to defining motivation:

> Motivational theories are concerned with the energization and direction of behavior. The term motivation is derived from the Latin verb movere, which means to move. In other words, motivational theories attempt to answer questions about what gets individuals moving (energization) and toward what activities or tasks... (Pintrich, 2003, p. 669)

Moreover, motivation at school is usually conceptualized as changeable. Researchers and practitioners alike thus propose that for two students having the same ability level in a given school subject, the one who is more motivated will better succeed (Guay, Ratelle, & Chanal, 2008). For this reason, many interventions have been introduced to enhance school motivation, and hence to improve students' perseverance and academic achievement (Guay, Lessard, & Dubois, 2016).

Students' higher level of motivation is not based solely on such intrapersonal factors as innate characteristics, but also on contexts (including cultural ones) in which students are supposed to develop their competencies. Thus, the cultural context is expected to shape motivation (i.e., cultural specificity). Values and beliefs shared by a cultural group will affect students' motivation to learn and educational outcomes (Maehr & Nicholls, 1980). For example, Ahn et al. (in this issue) posit that in collectivist cultures, students would assign greater weight to vicarious experience and social persuasion as determinants of self-efficacy (i.e., the subjective belief that students can successfully perform behaviours for achieving a desired outcome) compared with students from an individualistic culture. The cultural specificity effect of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures on motivation was also proposed for the following motivational constructs: Students' engagement (Lam et al., in this issue), the conflict that students experience between their need to learn and their desire to play (Li), and students' achievement goals (Liem, in this issue; Martin et al., in this issue). In a qualitative study, Clayton and Zusho used prototype theory (i.e., how individuals deal with their perceptions of the world) to explore the organizational and hierarchical structure of Jamaican students' conceptualization of motivation. This qualitative study thus offered the possibility of verifying whether the words used by participants of a given cultural group overlap with the existing motivational literature. Interestingly, the results of this study revealed some overlap with the current literature (etic), but also some factors that were somewhat unique to the Jamaican context, such as religion, family, and the educational system (emic).

Across studies in this issue, results were relatively consistent in revealing that culture moderates few of the observed relations between antecedents and motivation and/or between motivation and outcomes. Consequently, the motivational resources investingated in these papers appear to be less tied to cultural values, and rather more universal in nature. The benefits of these motivational resources are thus not restricted to western cultures as some

psychologists have maintained (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), but have been found in many cultures, including Asian ones. This does not mean that culture is irrelevant to motivation, quite the contrary. It means that culture would shape students' motivation levels, but not the association between motivational levels and potential determinants and consequences of these levels. According to this perspective, culture has an additive effect on motivation, not a moderating one. Indeed, being motivated (e.g., higher goals, high self-efficacy, high engagement, low conflict) allows students to express their own potential more fully, whatever their cultural values. As posited by some researchers (Ryan & Deci, 2009), these motivational processes may be nested under fundamental and universal (etic) psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence that are crucial to optimal functioning and well-being of all human beings (Deci, Ryan, & Guay, 2013).

However, we need to be careful about overgeneralizing such effects. Not all studies in this special issue highlighted these moderation effects, but this of course does not mean that they do not occur in other samples or with other motivational variables. For example, some meta-analyses (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004) have found that culture moderates some motivational processes, including self-serving bias (people making more internal, stable, and global attributions for positive events than for negative ones) and that Asian samples displayed significantly smaller biases than U.S. or Western samples. In addition, Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, and Harackiewicz (2010) found in their metaanalysis that performance avoidance goals are positively related to performance outcome in Asian samples, but negatively related in North American samples (King, 2015). Exceptions were also found in the study by Meissel and Rubie-Davies regarding the way self-efficacy predicts achievement across various cultural groups in a given country (New Zealand). Moreover, King and Ganotice (2015) noted that the relation between family obligation and motivation is higher when students have an interdependent self-construal (i.e., others are important in defining the person's sense of self). So, we are definitely in need of a better portrayal of which motivational resources could be moderated by the cultural context and of those which could not.

Next steps

Articles in this issue contribute to the growing body of literature on the importance of culture in students' motivation at school. They also highlight some key contextual factors that might produce higher levels of motivation at school (as well as better types of motivation), including personal best goal structure, and vicarious experiences through parents and teachers. What are the next steps in advancing our understanding of the role of culture in students' motivation? Below, I outline two potential avenues for future research. First, the more we conduct research among various cultural groups using different methods and motivational constructs, the more we will be confident about the role that culture plays in shaping motivation. In this endeavour, it is important to use rigorous research designs (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal designs with multiple waves over years, and multitrait multimethod approaches) that will make it possible to gather empirical data that will provide stringent evidence on the processes at play. For example, a researcher may want to know whether a given motivational intervention conducted in a given school area will achieve its benefits for students from various cultural backgrounds. To investigate this research question, a sophisticated methodological design would comprise: A control

group, pre-test and post-test measurements, low attrition rate, multiple methods for measuring key constructs, rigorous control for confounding variables (e.g., degree of acculturation), and an analytic framework controlling for measurement error. Of course, this research endeavour should not be performed at the expense of methodological diversity and should include stringent qualitative studies. The combination of quantitative and qualitative designs will be very informative to document the complex interplay between culture and motivation at school. Second, it would be important to further investigate cultural variations in a research design combining within-country and between-countries cultural variations. Such a design would make it possible to learn whether some of the cultural variations observed between students living in different countries are reproduced when we study student immigrants from these countries. For example, a researcher might want to compare motivational processes among students living in Asia, North Africa, North America, and Central America as well as across students who have recently immigrated to a given country (e.g., Canada). This general framework to test hypotheses could also be enriched by adding other countries who welcome immigrants. That way, researchers could compare variations between students of a given cultural group across various countries who have welcomed them. A structural equation modelling framework would be particularly suitable for untangling variance at the between-country and within-countries levels.

Conclusion

Culture is an issue that could be the subject of passionate debates. To this end, it is important to answer research questions without any resistance to knowledge (Mclntyre, 1996). Any a priori beliefs (political, religious) should be put aside when analysing research data. Results that challenge our views on students' motivation should be analysed in the light of the results themselves, not on the basis of our political or religious ideologies (see McIntyre, 2006, for some examples). By conducting research along these lines, we might find counterintuitive patterns of results that make important and valuable contributions to the field. In sum, this special issue on culture and motivation presents a collection of groundbreaking research ideas that advance our knowledge on howmotivationis shaped by the cultural context and how motivation processes are affected by the cultural milieu. Hopefully, the publication of this special issue will stimulate new research that will advance our understanding of motivation at school.

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