

## The cultural context of psychology

Every culture includes a system of rules, passed from one generation to another, for just about everything in the human-made environment: for getting along with people, for raising children, for making decisions, and for using artefacts and symbols.

Cultural psychologists study the many ways in which people are affected by rules of the culture in which they live; for example, they might study how American cultural values such as independence or youthfulness affect people's behaviour, beliefs, and self-esteem. Cross-cultural psychologists compare different societies, searching for both their commonalities and their distinctive cultural differences (Berry et al. 1997). For example, they might compare cultural attitudes towards math ability in Japan and the United States or a specific psychological theory like Piaget's theory of cognitive development to see if it is universal. Both of these fields overlap somewhat with cultural anthropology, the study of customs within and across human cultures. However, anthropologists tend to study the economy and customs of a cultural unit as a whole, whereas cultural psychologists are more interested in how culture affects individual psychological processes such as reasoning abilities, child development, or motivation. According to Lonner (1995) a cross-cultural psychologist, culture can be defined as

1. A program of shared rules that govern the behaviour of members of a community or society
2. A set of values, beliefs, and attitudes shared by most members of that community.

Until recently, most Western psychologists were uninterested in the influence of culture on individuals. In contrast to biology, which they treated as real and tangible, they regarded culture as merely a light layer on human behaviour, or perhaps a source of information for tourist travel, like for example, that in Spain, people normally eat dinner at 10 p.m. As a result, students knew little about the psychological characteristics of people living in other societies, and they assumed that they could generalise from studies of people in their own culture to people everywhere. (Berry et al, 1997; Matsumoto, 1996).

Today, most psychologists recognise that culture is just as powerful an influence on human behaviour as in any biological process. In fact, culture affects biological processes. Everyone needs to eat, but culture affects how often people eat, what they eat, how they eat, and with whom they eat. Depending on your culture, you might eat lots of little meals throughout the day or only one large meal. You will eat food that your culture calls delicious –whale meat in Inuit communities, lizards in South America, horses in France, dogs in Asia- and you are likely to find everyone else's food preferences disgusting. You won't eat food that your culture calls taboo: pigs among Muslims and orthodox Jews, cows in India, horses in America, deer among the Tapirapé (Harris, 1985). And your culture affects your choice of dining companions. People don't eat with those they consider their social inferiors, which in various cultures includes servants, employees, women, or children.

These cultural influences on a process as essential as eating can cause people to eat when they are not hungry (to be sociable) or not eat when they are hungry (because the company or the food is culturally 'unappetising'). Sometimes, cultural pressures conflict directly with biological dispositions. Evolution has programmed women to

maintain a reserve of fat necessary for healthy childbearing, nursing, and after menopause, the production and storage of the hormone oestrogen. Genes influence shape of the body and weight. Yet the contemporary culture ideal for many American women is a boyishly slim body, an ideal that is by no means universal across cultures or across historical epochs. The result of the battle between biological design and cultural standards is that many women are obsessed with weight, continually dieting, excessively exercising, or suffering from eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa (self-starvation) or bulimia (bingeing and vomiting) ( Silverstein and Perlick 1995). If culture can so powerfully affect a person's beliefs about what is proper behaviour, it's easy to understand why misunderstandings between cultures are so frequent. An anthropologist expresses the problem like this: 'Many people think that if they could only get to know people in another culture, they would realise how alike they are, but the truth is that the more you get to know people from another culture, the more you realise how different they are (Hall in Tavis 1987).

### **The Study of Culture.**

The study of culture is challenging for methodological and psychological reasons. Van de Vijer and Leung (1996) outline some problems

1. **The problems of methods and samples.** If you study people in another culture, you have problems with the language. In questionnaires and interviews it's important to convey the same meaning in the target language, but it can be extremely difficult to translate the right meaning. Also, selecting samples within a culture poses problems because of representativeness, attitudes to a specific problem etc.
2. **The problem of interpreting results.** It's important to interpret results in the light of the target culture; for example, a custom may not have the same meaning or purpose in different cultures. Circumcision of male babies has a religious purpose among Jews and serves to strengthen identification with the group. The same practice, however, became widespread in Europe and America during the Victorian era for a very different reason: it was believed that circumcised boys would not masturbate (Paige and Paige, 1981). The custom persists in North America for hygienic reasons but not in Europe.
3. **The problem of stereotyping.** It's difficult to describe average differences across societies without stereotyping. The study of culture does not rest on specific assumptions that 'Japanese are like this' (meaning all Japanese) because individuals vary according to their temperaments, beliefs, and learning histories, and this variation occurs within every culture. Just as people play their social roles differently, they read their cultural scripts differently, but this does not negate the existence of cultural rules, that, on the average, make Danes different from Cambodians or Italians. However, if researchers bring these pre-existing stereotypes to their studies, they might find what they expect.
4. **The reification of culture.** Reify means to regard an intangible process, such as a feeling, as if it were a literal object. In the study of culture, reification must be avoided, that is, you should not regard culture as an explanation without identifying the specific mechanisms or aspects of culture that influence behaviour. To say 'the Japanese work hard because of their culture' shows circular reasoning. Using a label as an explanation is like telling a man with a leg injury that he can't walk because he is lame (Lonner and Malpass, 1994). We may observe that

culture A is more aggressive than culture B, but we must not say that culture A frequently attacks its neighbours because it is a warlike culture. Instead, we need to study what is going on in culture A that is different.

### **The Rules of Culture**

People learn their culture's rules just as effortlessly as they learn its language. Most people follow their culture's prescription without being consciously aware of them, for example in how they behave and communicate in certain contexts, their relationship with time and the individual towards the culture: **The self and self-identity**

One of the most important ways in which cultures differ has to do with whether the individual or the group is given the greater emphasis (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Individualist cultures emphasise the independent individual over the needs of the group, and the 'self' is defined as a collection of stable personality traits. (I'm ambitious, outgoing etc.). Collectivist cultures emphasise the harmony of the group over the wishes of the individual, and the 'self' is defined in the context of relationships and the larger community (I'm descended from three generations of storytellers on the side of my mother...). If you ask the question 'Who are you?', you are likely to get different answers in a collectivist culture and in an individualist culture, then.

In a revealing study comparing Japanese and Americans, the Americans reported that their sense of self changes only 5 to 10 % in different situations, whereas the Japanese said that 90 to 99% of their sense of self changes (de Rivera 1989). For the Japanese, it is important to enact *tachiba*, to perform one's social roles correctly so that there will be harmony with others. People from collectivist cultures typically respond to the 'I am...' cue in terms of family (e.g. I am an uncle, a cousin, a son etc.) or ethnic group, whereas people from individualist cultures tend to answer in terms of personality traits or occupation (Triandis, 1996). The way that people define the self affects many aspects of individual psychology, including which personality traits are valued, how emotions are expressed, and how much value people place on having relationships or individual freedom (Campbell et al. 1996).

In collectivist cultures, the strongest human bond is usually not between husband and wife, but between parent and child or among siblings (Triandis, 1995). In China, the most valued and celebrated relationship is the father-son bond; in India, Mexico, Ireland, and Greece, it is mother-son; in parts of Africa, it is older brother-younger brother. In individualist cultures, child rearing is considered a private parental matter, and neighbours and friends intervene at their peril. But child rearing in collectivist cultures is a communal matter; everyone has a say in correcting the child's behaviour (a value expressed in the African proverb, 'It takes a whole village to raise a child'). The idea of privacy for children is unknown, and the goal is to raise children who are obedient, hardworking, and dutiful towards their parents.

Differences between individualist and collectivist cultures:

**Individualist**

Defines the self as autonomous

Priority to personal goals

Value independence, self-fulfilment

**Collectivist**

Defines the self as interdependent of the group

Priority to goals of the group

Value harmony, duty, obligation

Everyone develops a **personal identity** – a sense of whom they are- based on their particular traits and unique history. But people also develop **social identities** based on their nationality, ethnicity, religion and social roles (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Social identities are important, because they give people a feeling of place and position in the world. The social identity that comes from belonging to a distinctive group satisfies two important motives: the individual's need for inclusion in a larger collective, and the individual's need to feel different from others (Brewer, Manzi and Shaw 1993). In modern societies, many identities are possible. People face the dilemma of balancing an **ethnic identity**, a close identification with their own religious or ethnic group, with acculturation, identifying with and feeling part of the dominant culture. Ethnic-identity formation and acculturation are separate processes. *Based on Wade and Tavris (1998) Psychology*