

The psychology of practice and the practice of the three psychologies

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The keynote speakers at the 2nd Asian Association for Social Psychology Meetings were asked to clarify the relationship among the three scholarly fields known as cultural psychology, indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Are they three names for the same thing? If not are they complementary or antagonistic enterprises? Does one approach subsume the other(s) or make the other(s) possible? What follows is my own general view of the “three psychologies” issue. I suggest that cultural psychology and indigenous psychology are kindred approaches, which differ in significant ways from cross-cultural psychology. A distinction is drawn between the study of “mentalities” (the proper unit of analysis for cultural and indigenous psychology) and the study of “mind” (a non-cultural phenomenon). Cultural psychology is a type of interpretive analysis of social practice which asks, “what are the ‘goals, values and pictures of the world’ with reference to which this behavior might be seen as rational?” The essay describes the assumption of rationality and the place of cultural critique in interpretive analysis. Is there any significant difference at all between cultural psychology and indigenous psychology? One aim of cultural psychology (“globalizing the local”) is premised on the view that “indigenous psychologies” may have relevance outside their points of origin. How open is the indigenous psychology movement to the idea that (e.g.) a psychology with a “Chinese soul” might illuminate the psychological functioning of members of non-Chinese populations?

Introduction: Should we put our culture into our science or filter it out?

I once had a brother-in-law who did a medical residency in the science of dermatology. He told me there are only two things you need to know to do dermatology: If it’s wet, make it dry; if it’s dry, make it wet! I once told that story to a colleague in anthropology, who responded by saying “You know Rick there are only two things you need to know to do anthropology: If someone asserts it, deny it; if someone denies it, assert it!”

So it seems appropriate, given my anthropological nature, to begin this talk by juxtaposing the apparently conflicting views of two grand masters: Professor Kuo-Shu Yang and Professor Melford Spiro. Professor Kuo-Shu Yang is a leader of the “Indigenous Psychology” movement in Taiwan. Professor Melford Spiro is a leader of the

“Psychoanalytic Anthropology” movement in the United States. Professor Kuo-Shu Yang (1997, p. 65) writes as follows:

I finally found the reason why doing Westernized psychological research with Chinese subjects was no longer satisfying or rewarding to me. When an American psychologist, for example, was engaged in research, he or she could spontaneously let his or her American cultural and philosophical orientations and ways of thinking be freely and effectively reflected in choosing a research question, defining a concept, constructing a theory and designing a method. On the other hand, when a Chinese psychologist in Taiwan was conducting research, his or her strong training by overlearning the knowledge and methodology of American psychology tended to prevent his or her Chinese values, ideas, concepts and ways of thinking from being adequately reflected in the successive stages of the research process. Research of this kind resulted in an Americanized Chinese psychology without a Chinese “soul”. Research findings in such an imposed, “soulless psychology” would not do much good in explaining, predicting and understanding Chinese behavior, simply because the imported Westernized concepts, theories, methods and tools habitually adopted by Chinese psychologists could not do justice to the complicated, unique aspects and patterns of Chinese people’s psychological and behavioral characteristics.

Professor Yang goes on to say (1997, p. 69):

I began to realize that North American psychology, the most developed in the world, was an endogenous kind of indigenous psychology (Enriquez, 1989) in the sense that its major concepts, theories, methods and findings have originally and spontaneously evolved partly from the European intellectual traditions but mainly from the cultural and social philosophical matrix of the American society.

If someone asserts it, try on the denial. The denial of Professor Yang’s assertions comes from Professor Melford Spiro, the eminent psychoanalytic anthropologist. Professor Spiro’s remarks were originally directed to Clifford Geertz, with special reference to Geertz’s attempt to spell out the “indigenous psychology” or local “cultural psychology” of the Balinese. (As you shall see in a moment I do not think there is much of a difference between indigenous psychology and cultural psychology. Except perhaps in their somewhat different estimations of the global relevance and significance of local knowledge.) But, in any case, Professor Spiro might just as well have been responding to Professor Yang. Here is what Spiro says:

I am not sure that if anthropology and psychology had arisen in Bali [read Taipei] that they would have been essentially different from what they are, given their Western origins. I am not referring to folk theories or ethno-self theories because, after all, the theories of the self in psychology and anthropology are not the Western folk theories of the self. I would think that one of the points about science is that it is about demystification – it takes these folk theories and it demystifies them. Although there might be some differences in the contours of Balinese [read Taiwanese] anthropology and psychology, I assume that they too would engage in the process of demystification. And I would like to believe that Balinese [read Taiwanese] and American psychologists and anthropologists would, qua anthropologists and psychologists, arrive at some kind of common view of the nature of human beings and the nature of culture, so that the differences between them would be no greater than the differences within “Western” anthropology and psychology. (Melford Spiro, quoted in Shweder and LeVine, 1984, p. 16).

If someone denies it, assert it. Before I finish my address today, I shall try to point out what I think is right and what I think is wrong with Professor Spiro’s formulation. But first

some digressions. The keynote speakers at this conference have been asked to clarify the relationship among the three scholarly fields known as cultural psychology, indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology. Are they three names for the same thing? If not are they complementary or antagonistic enterprises? Does one approach subsume the other(s) or make the other(s) possible? For the sake of generating a good argument, here is my own general view of the “three psychologies” issue.

A triads test for the three psychologies

Indigenous psychology and cultural psychology are very similar to each other (although perhaps not identical), and both feel quite different to me from cross-cultural psychology. Now I realize, of course, that this is a hazardous claim to make, for many reasons. If one defines cross-cultural psychology very thinly, as the study of cultural influences on behavior, then we are all cross-cultural psychologists; and there is little of interest left to assert or deny.

Of course scholars who call themselves “cross-cultural psychologists” (perhaps by virtue of mentorship and intellectual descent or by happenstance or even innocently) come in many kinds. Some of them may actually practice indigenous psychology or cultural psychology and may have been doing so all their lives, in which case any discussion about the three psychologies may feel like an argument about a distinction where there is no difference.

So if I am to get anywhere comparing and contrasting the three psychologies I had better be more specific about my image of cross-cultural psychology. What are the ways in which that image differs from my image of the two kindred approaches known as indigenous psychology and cultural psychology, which with one important exception (the issue of whether local knowledge can be globalized) seem very much alike to me?

What is cultural psychology?

Allow me to start with “cultural psychology”, if for no other reason than the fact that I have been one of its proselytizers. What is the object of cultural psychology? What is its proper aim? What is its proper subject matter? In three essays entitled “Cultural psychology: What is it?” (Shweder, 1990), “Cultural psychology: Who needs it?” (Shweder & Sullivan, 1993) and “The ‘mind’ of cultural psychology” (Shweder, 1996) (see also Shweder 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1999; Shweder and Sullivan, 1990; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus and Miller, 1998) I described the discipline in all of the following ways, which I shall group into two clusters, namely statements about psychological diversity and statements about the level or unit of analysis for cultural psychology (that is to say, the nature of cultural psychology’s psychological facts).

With regard to psychological diversity:

- (1) Cultural psychology was described as a project designed to reassess the uniformitarian principle of psychic unity and aimed at a credible theory of psychological pluralism. (I should note in passing that any theory of psychological pluralism would lack credibility if it staunchly denied the existence of any and all universals. That is why a credible theory of psychological pluralism, one that honors our true, deep and significant differences cannot and does not entail the denial of all universals or of our common

- humanity. Indeed cultural psychology presupposes many universals (see Shweder *et al.*, 1998). However, the search for and the privileging of things that are uniform across all peoples and cultures is a project that goes under some other name. It is not cultural psychology, although surely cultural psychology need not be the only game in town.)
- (2) Cultural psychology was described as the study of ethnic and cultural sources of diversity in emotional and somatic functioning, self-organization, moral evaluation, social cognition and human development.
 - (3) Cultural psychology was described as any investigation that constructs a model of a culture's distinctive psychology by thickly describing the specific sources of non-equivalence and non-comparability that arise when stimulus situations are transported from one interpretive community to another.
 - (4) Cultural psychology was described as psychological anthropology without the premise of psychic unity.

So as you can see, a central claim of cultural psychology is that there may be multiple diverse psychologies, rather than a single uniform psychology. And a central problematic of the field is to make sense of that provocative claim and to do so, as one must, without denying all universals. "Universalism without the uniformity" is the slogan I like to use to characterize cultural psychology and as a way to insulate the discipline from the careless (indeed reckless) suggestion that it is a form of radical relativism.

With regard to the level or unit of analysis issue or the nature of psychological facts in cultural psychology:

- (5) Any particular cultural psychology was described as socially inherited "goals, values and pictures of the world" that have a causal relationship to, and help us understand and make sense of the choices, local action patterns and actual lives of intentional agents or rational meaning-making activists.
- (6) Cultural psychologists were described as naturalists who go searching for "mentalities," carefully describing their distribution and form. In this regard cultural psychology was defined as the study of "mentalities" rather than the study of "mind."

Distinguishing "mentalities" from "mind"

The distinction between the study of "mentalities" (the proper unit of analysis for cultural psychology) and the study of "mind" (a non-cultural phenomenon) was drawn in the following terms (Shweder, 1996), which I recapitulate here, in slight paraphrase.

I use the term "mind" to refer to the totality of actual and potential conceptual contents of human cognitive processes, where "cognitive" refers to any process that enables human beings to represent "ideas" (conceptual content) and to attain knowledge by deriving or computing the implications of those "ideas".

In contrast, I use the term "mentality" to refer to the actual cognitive functioning of a particular person or people. To describe a "mentality" (e.g., the "mentality" of Oriya Hindu Brahmins or Mandarin Chinese) is to get specific about the particular conceptual contents (the "ideas") that have actually been cognized and activated by that person or people. To describe a "mentality" is also to get specific about the particular mental processes (the particular senses, feelings, memories, desires, inferences, imaginings, etc.) that have been recruited by this or that person or people to make their cognizing and activation of "ideas" (conceptual contents) possible. As noted above, in connection with the idea of psychological

multiplicity, it is the assumption of cultural psychology that neither the conceptual content of mental processes nor the way mental processes are used to cognize conceptual content is necessarily or factually the same everywhere you go in the world.

It follows from this way of defining things that there is only one “mind” and it is a universal mind, but it is universal in a very special way and it is *not* the subject matter of cultural psychology. There can be a Taiwanese or Balinese “mentality” but not a Taiwanese or Balinese “mind”. This is because by “mind” I mean all the conceptual content that any human being might ever cognize and activate or represent. Everything that has ever and could ever be thought is there in that universal “mind”. It is universal not in the sense that it is found here and there and everywhere one looks in the world but because it is broader and more encompassing than any one person or people’s actual mentality. In its universality it is not the kind of thing that can be located in space (e.g., in the East or the West) or in time (e.g., premodern versus modern). In contrast, a “mentality” is that cognized and activated subset of “mind” that has become the property of, and has been invested in, by some designated person or people. “Mentalities” do exist in time and space, and as a matter of empirical fact they are not uniform in their characteristics or in their spatial or temporal distributions.

Cultural psychology is the study of “mentalities,” of which there are and always have been and always will be many on the face of the earth.

This linking of the idea of multiple psychologies with the idea of a “mentality” has a long history, traceable at least to the premise of the eighteenth-century German Romantic philosopher Johann Herder. Herder’s premise was that “to be a member of a group is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of particular goals, values and pictures of the world; and to think and act so is to belong to a group” (Berlin (1976) on Herder). Perhaps this is what Professor Yang meant by the “Chinese soul.” In this version of cultural psychology the idea of “goals” includes wants, preferences and motives of various kinds. The idea of “values” includes emotional reactions as well as “goods” and “ends” that are thought to be “preference-worthy” or morally desirable. The idea of “pictures of the world” includes local definitions and categorizations, beliefs about means–ends connections and causal connections and metaphysical and existential premises of various kinds.

What is indigenous psychology?

This dual emphasis in cultural psychology on conceptual content (“goals, values and pictures of the world”) as a central unit for psychological analysis and on the multiplicity of mentalities in the world strikes me as very similar to the aims of indigenous psychology. For example, compare what I have just said to Kuo-shu Yang’s list of ways to “indigenize” psychological research. Here are four of Professor Yang’s virtues for the aspiring indigenous psychologist of China.

- (1) “Give priority to the study of culturally unique psychological and behavioral phenomena or characteristics of the Chinese people.”
- (2) “Investigate both the specific content and the involved process of the phenomenon.”
- (3) Make it a rule to begin any research with a thorough immersion into the natural, concrete details of the phenomenon to be studied.
- (4) Let research be based upon the Chinese intellectual tradition rather than the Western intellectual tradition.

That sounds like “cultural psychology” to me. It does not sound at all like my image of cross-cultural psychology.

What is cross-cultural psychology?

What is my image of cross-cultural psychology? Well, I think “cross-cultural psychology” is more full-bodied and has a far more distinctive character than simply a general interest in cultural influences on behavior. Some of the ultimate goals of cross-cultural psychology have been described in a recent *American Psychologist* essay by Segall, Lonner and Berry (1998). One goal is “to generate more nearly universal psychology, one that has pan-human validity” and to attain “a universally applicable psychological theory.” A second closely related goal is to “keep peeling away at the onion skin of culture so as to reveal the psychic unity of mankind at its core.” Whether those are good goals or bad goals I am not prepared to say, but surely they are not the goals of either indigenous psychology or cultural psychology. Those goals do however give a distinctive character to cross-cultural psychology, and they help explain why I associate all of the following kinds of activities with research by cross-cultural psychologists.

When I think of cross-cultural psychology I think of research trying to determine the boundary conditions for generalizations generated in Western labs with Western (mostly college student) subjects, generalizations which, prior to critical examination by cross-cultural psychologists, have been presumptively interpreted as fundamental or “natural” and universalized to the whole world. It is important to notice in this regard that the aim there for the cross-cultural psychologist is not to characterize the indigenous psychology of other people. Rather it is to make sure that the hoped-for universal psychology is truly universal and to throw out any claim that only holds in the Anglo-American world. This is an extremely useful corrective for the tendency of Western psychologists to over-generalize their findings, but it is not the same as undertaking a project in indigenous or cultural psychology.

When I think of cross-cultural psychology I also think of research trying to establish comparability or equivalence for measuring instruments across different populations. Often the goal there is to try to show that people in different cultures really are alike (have psychic unity) and that any reported differences in performance were due to noise or inappropriate measuring instruments or bad translations or misunderstandings about the way to ask and answer questions. (I would note that the instincts of a cultural psychologist run in quite a different direction because for a cultural psychologist the “noise” is interpreted as a signal about true differences in cultural “mentalities” and not as something to eliminate or overcome. And, of course, there is always the worry that if one’s measuring instruments travel easily and well from university classroom to university classroom around the world and display the same psychometric properties here and there, that is precisely because one has not really landed in a truly different culture at all.)

Finally, when I think of cross-cultural psychology, I think of research on those “independent variables” of the cultural environment (e.g., hunting and gathering versus agriculture, nucleation of the family, literacy versus non-literacy) that are thought to either promote or retard psychological development. In such research “development” is almost always defined in terms of universal norms for cognitive, emotional or social functioning (e.g., Piaget’s notion of “formal operational” thinking or Ainsworth’s notion of healthy “attachment”). None of those activities comes to mind when I think of indigenous psychology or cultural psychology.

So as to avoid misunderstandings, let me be clear that I do not think that the search for multiple psychologies and the focus on what I have called “mentalities” as a central unit of psychological analysis is the only legitimate game in town. What I have said does not imply

that there is no such thing as human nature or that the idea of human nature is worthless. If you want to search for psychological uniformities across all populations you can do that and you may even find a few. It is just that this is not what cultural psychology or indigenous psychology is about. Cultural psychology does not look through cultural variations for the common psychic core. Its focus is on differences in the way members of different communities perceive, categorize, feel, want, choose, evaluate and communicate that can be traced to differences in salient community-based “goals, values and pictures of the world.”

So if you ask me “which one is most different from the other two”? I would have to say “cross-cultural psychology.” No stigma or dispraise is intended by this observation. It is simply an acknowledgment of differences in the object of the three enterprises and the means for achieving their ends. How many cross-cultural psychology research projects start with “a thorough immersion into the natural concrete details of the phenomenon to be studied”? As far as I can tell they usually start with a published finding from some Western lab, which is then subjected to critical examination by means of various attempts at replication with populations from other societies.

Rationalizations, irrationalizations and the psychology of practice

I would now like to deepen my characterization of cultural psychology by considering one of the favorite, longest standing “I assert it, you deny it; you deny it, I assert it” contests in the history of anthropology. Namely the dispute over the question “What is the best way to understand the thoughts and actions, beliefs and practices of ‘others’”? In that question the word “others” refers to peoples whose thoughts and actions, beliefs and practices are not only different from one’s own but also seem very strange (even outrageous, barbaric, criminal or disgusting, or at the very least inefficient).

I am raising this issue because in our cosmopolitan multicultural world where majority and minority populations bump into each other with some friction and into each other’s beliefs and practices with some antagonism, cultural psychologists are increasingly called upon not only to describe cultural differences but to judge them. Thus one cannot avoid engagement with the project of cultural critique. Family life practices (discipline, sex-role differentiation, sleeping arrangements, coming of age ceremonies, etc.) are at the heart of recent controversies about the limits of tolerance in modern “multicultural” societies. So I am asking: How should cultural psychologists, indigenous psychologists and cross-cultural psychologists who study family life in diverse cultural settings react (for example) to a Somali mother living in Seattle who believes that sons and daughters should be treated equally and both circumcised? How should they react to a West African father living in England who cuts tribal identity markings on the face of his 9-year-old son? To the Mexican women living in Houston, Texas, who finds it perfectly natural to leave her 3-year-old at home in the care of an older preadolescent sibling? To a South Asian father living in Chicago who habitually grabs his disobedient son by his ear and drags him out of a store, thereby prompting some upper-middle-class Anglo-American shopper to call the police and accuse him of “child abuse”?

Now in the history of anthropology (and in the social and psychological sciences more broadly) there have been two types of answers to the question “How are we to interpret the beliefs and actions of ‘others’”?

The first type of answer is that the best way to understand “others” and their strange beliefs and practices is by means of “rationalizations” and that one of the aims of a social

scientist is to produce them. A “rationalization” is an explanation that justifies other people’s actions and beliefs by showing that this is the kind of thing that a person who does things for good reasons might do or believe.

The second type of answer is that the best way to make sense of the strange beliefs and practices of “others” is by means of what I shall call “irrationalizations.” An “irrationalization” is an explanation that in a sense excuses other people’s actions and beliefs. It does this by showing that the action or belief is controlled by some causal factor (such as an Oedipal complex, or an authoritarian personality trait, or a neurological problem, or an unconscious wish, or patriarchal domination, or a fear-based, brainwashed, indoctrinated belief) that is not, in and of itself, a good reason or justification for action and belief, but merely its cause.

I say merely its cause because “rationalizations” (the “good reasons” for doing something) are also causal explanations for action and belief but they are not only causal explanations. “Rationalizations” are also justifications for actions and beliefs. Rational acts can be both justified and explained. Irrational acts can only be explained, not justified. An “irrationalization” (e.g., “she killed him because the glucose level in her bloodstream was very high) may mitigate responsibility for an action or serve as an excuse but it can never justify action, because it never engages the “other” as a rational person. In my image of cultural psychology the “subject” is an intentional agent, and the agenda for the exegesis of his or her psychology must begin with the assumption of rationality. Where do indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology come out on this key issue?

The mark of rationality in actions, practices and persons

In order to clarify the assumption of “rationality” in cultural psychology I must draw some distinctions between (1) rational actions, (2) rational practices and (3) rational persons. This is one way to clarify my conception of cultural psychology, by linking cultural psychology to the issue of “justification” and by defining it in part as the study of the rational psychology of a way of life or set of customary social practices.

In a sense, cultural psychology is a type of interpretive analysis of customs and social practices, which asks of some traditional way of doing things, “Is that the way someone might behave if they were acting rationally?” Or alternatively it asks, what are the “goals, values and pictures of the world” with reference to which this social practice might be seen as rational? I will give two examples of the “rationalization” of the practices of “others” in a moment, but first some necessary definitions and distinctions.

An *action* is rational to the extent that there is a good reason that caused it to happen, which can then also serve as its justification. Hence a rational action can both be explained and justified within the terms of a single frame of reference (the reason that both caused it and justifies it).

A *practice* is rational to the extent that it is the kind of practice that a person whose actions are caused by good reasons might do. Notice that for a practice to be rational it is not necessary that those who actually engage in the practice do so for good reasons. For a practice to be rational all that is required is that it be the kind of practice that someone who does things for good reasons *might* do. People can do the rational thing for the wrong reasons or for “bad” reasons but that does not make the practice less rational. It just means that rational practices can be caused or motivated by other than rational reasons and that the terms of reference for explaining why people engage in the practice may be different from the terms of reference for justifying the practice. For example, it is presumably a rational

practice to wear a seat-belt when driving in a car, regardless of the reasons (e.g., fear of a traffic ticket or other forms of punishment) people have for doing it.

Finally, a *person* is rational to the extent they are capable of and are motivated to have good reasons for what they believe, value and do. In saying this I am following Nicholas Rescher (1988), and many other philosophers, in defining rationality as “the intelligent pursuit of appropriate ends” and in suggesting that rationality be based on at least three types of reasoning: (1) scientific reasoning about what is true; (2) instrumental or means–ends reasoning about what is economical or efficient; and (3) axiological or evaluative reasoning about what is desirable or good (which ends are worthy to pursue?; the “rationality of ends”).

The idea of culture as “goals, values and pictures of the world” made manifest in practice is an extension of this conception of rationality. And the imagined (and typically imaginary) ideal subject or agent of cultural analysis is that fully cultured person who does the right thing for the right reasons. Of course many, perhaps most, members of any actual and particular cultural community may do the right thing for other than rational reasons (their acts may not be rationally motivated or caused but the practices they support may be rational), which is why the study of social control and social motivation is a critical part of any analysis of the cultural psychology of a community.

As you can see, “rationality” has a lot to do with the relationship between subjective judgments and the objective world, between mental states and the world they represent. The idea of “rationality” is about the relationship between what you believe to be true (a subjective judgment or mental state) and what is true (a feature of the objective world), the relationship between what you want or desire (a subjective judgment or mental state) and what is good or desirable (a feature of the objective world), and the relationship between means and ends. Is it true? Is it good? Is it effective? Those are the questions a rational person asks, answers and acts upon. As the sociologist Raymond Boudon has remarked, rational agents are motivated to do things and believe things because of a justified sense of reality (that’s true, that’s just, that’s cost-effective) and not because they are compelled to do things by causal forces that are not reasons or justifications at all. I hit him because I was in an irritable mood is not a justification for the act, at least not in the subcultures I know best, although it might be used as an excuse.

What about irrationality?

What about “irrationality”? I want to say that an ‘irrational’ person is a person who has lost the capacity or motivation to examine or criticize his or her “goals, values and pictures of the world” or to get his or her actions under the influence and control of good reasons. Such a person may not be able to act on his or her preferences. They may not be able to recognize the difference between worthy and unworthy preferences. They may not be able to distinguish subjectivity from objectivity in some domain. They may not be able or care to make use of information they know to be relevant to some issue at hand.

“Irrational” is thus a word for breakdowns of rationality of various sorts, which one could probably classify into types: for example, (1) breakdowns in voluntary control (e.g., compulsive/obsessive disorders); (2) breakdowns in subject/object relations (e.g., hallucinations and reality-testing disorders); (3) breakdowns in means–ends thinking (including, for example, “phobic” disorders); and (4) breakdowns in impulse management.

In any case, whatever the classification of types of irrational action and thoughts, the very idea of rationality (and irrationality) only applies to intentional agents or “persons.”

The idea does not apply to inherently non-rational entities, such as a micro-organism, or a mechanism, or any other thing categorized by some interpretive community as a mere “thing.” Such entities lack the intellectual and conceptual capacity to do things for reasons. They are unable to promote some idea of the good or imagine the future or have a conception of the long-term consequences of their actions. Such entities are not even potentially able to criticize themselves or ruminate over their transgressions or care about being justified in what they do. Thus such entities do not have irrational (or rational) thoughts or engage in irrational (or rational) actions, except metaphorically. They are irrational (or rational) in their actions only in the sense that clouds are “generous” when they give rain to the earth, or that willows “weep,” or that a clock “knows” the time of day. That is to say, not at all. It is best not to use the language of rationality or irrationality for explaining the actions of such things, for they are not intentional agents, although if they are properly designed or evolved their behavior may appear intelligent or rational (or even moral), and it may be possible to predict their behavior by pretending that they are rational agents, more or less like us.

The “mutual yuck!” response: a place for moral justification in cultural psychology

I want to give two examples of the rationalization of the practices of “others.” One of the reasons I believe in the importance of cultural psychology is because we live in a multicultural world in which morally decent and fully rational members of different cultural traditions look at each other and at each other’s practices and go “Yuck!” I call that the “mutual yuck!” response. Because we live in a migratory and multicultural world in which members of different communities with different beliefs and practices can’t avoid (or refuse to avoid) each other there is plenty of “mutual yucking” going on around the globe. It is hard to read a newspaper or magazine or listen to the news these days without being confronted with some representation of “others” (their gender ideals, their disciplinary practices, their marriage customs, their sexual mores or work habits) that invites you to say “yuck.” Circumcising and non-circumcising peoples, for example, often have a “mutual yuck” response to each other. There is much “mutual yucking” between pro-life and pro-choice advocates, as well as between those men and women who favor population control and want women out of the home and into the workplace versus those men and women who favor social reproduction, want lots of children and think it is refined and proper for women to be guardians of the home.

With regard to the “mutual yuck response” my version of cultural psychology fully acknowledges that there is no way to avoid making critical judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, efficient and inefficient. According to that version of cultural psychology any genuine culture, any culture deserving of respect, must be defensible in the face of criticism from “outside.” Indeed, in my view one of the distinctive features of cultural psychology is that it is willing to try to make that defense, representing the “inside” point of view in such a way that it can be understood, perhaps appreciated, or at the very least tolerated from an “outside” point of view.

Inevitably this type of project takes us beyond merely describing regularities in behavior and belief. If human beings have the potential for rational agency, and if many of the practices they produce and uphold bear the mark of rationality, then many of the things we as anthropologists and cultural psychologists observe and try to describe are not going to be

comprehensible without some reference to some of the good reasons that might motivate local practice and sustain local belief. In other words, cultural psychology takes up the challenge of “justification” that is entailed by the idea of rationality. “Show me how that is true, good or efficient” one asks, *qua* cultural psychologist, of “others,” and of oneself.

This project of seeing whether it is possible to represent the practices and beliefs of apparently strange “others” in such a way that they can be understood to be morally decent and rational may not always succeed. Not all cultures are genuine cultures in the relevant sense. Not everything that is, is OK. And even when the project of rationalizing or morally justifying the apparently loathsome practices of “others” deserves to succeed it is still bound to provoke debate and controversy, because its very aim is to counter various modern forms of ethnocentrism, cultural chauvinism and moral arrogance to which we are all prone. At the very least one of cultural psychology’s several missions is to help us avoid or at least overcome certain kinds of mistaken and sometimes harmful judgments about the beliefs and practices of “others,” including the judgment that others are abusive, barbaric, mutilators of their children, or otherwise immoral, misguided, irrational, disgusting or bad. Here are two examples of what I have in mind.

An Afghan in Maine

My first example comes from a legal case in the state of Maine. In a multicultural, law and order society such as the United States (but also in most multicultural nation states) the law of the land often presupposes and codifies the substantive beliefs, values, emotional reactions, aesthetic standards and pictures of the world peculiar to those cultural groups who are “mainstream” and who have the most power. This can be hazardous for members of immigrant minority groups, as was the case in 1985 when the state legislature of Maine wrote a law making criminal any sexual act with a minor (non-spouse) under the age of 14. Those who wrote the law went on, in their wisdom, to define a sexual act as, among other things, “direct physical contact between the genitals of one and the mouth . . . of another.”

Thus in 1993, when Mohammad Kargar, an Afghani refugee who had been residing in the USA for three years, was seen kissing the penis of his 18-month-old son, he found the police descending on his home. He was arrested, convicted of gross sexual assault in Superior Court and prohibited from seeing his family while the case was appealed. Three years later his conviction was overturned by the State Supreme Court, which relied heavily on cultural analysis (see *State of Maine v. Mohammed Kargar*, 679 A.2d 81).

As it turns out, kissing the penis of a young child is commonplace in Mr Kargar’s cultural community and is viewed there as a sign of love and affection. It is precisely the father’s willingness to kiss what is viewed as an unclean or unholy part of the body (a place where urination takes place) that makes the act such a powerful display of love. The gesture is so “normal” that pictures representing that type of show of affection are proudly displayed in family photo albums in the Afghan community. After taking testimonies from members of the relevant local community and expert witnesses it was possible for the Supreme Court to construct an alternative understanding of the meaning of Mr Kargar’s act. Although the Supreme Court of Maine ultimately vindicated Mohammad Kargar it was at great cost to the defendant. The court made no suggestion that the law should be amended so as to make room for alternative cultural understandings of sexuality and touching, and gave no assurance that other Afghani residents of Maine will not have the police knocking on their doors.

By the way, this practice of physical contact between the genitals of a very young child and the mouth of an adult relative may be more common than we suppose. Years ago I was

told the following story about an Iranian psychiatrist who had moved to the United States and married a Jewish American woman. When a son was born the man's mother visited from Iran. She walked into the infant's bedroom and immediately stroked his genitals and kissed his penis. The Jewish American mother of the child was shocked. "What are you doing? Stop that!" she said. Her mother-in-law was equally astonished and said: "What do you mean? I am stimulating his growth so one day he will be a man." "Never do that again in my house!" the by then nearly hysterical daughter-in-law replied. "Look", said her Iranian mother-in-law calmly, "I did that to your husband when he was a child and he turned out all right."

Perhaps this case seems exotic to you. Perhaps it makes you nervous, given your own local cultural sensibilities. Perhaps you feel like saying "Yuck!" Unfortunately for minority groups this type of feeling-laden ethnocentric misreading of the intentions and meanings of others is less exotic and far more common than one supposes, and the consequences can be devastating, especially for minority groups. I invoke it to illustrate why I think cultural psychology's pluralistic conception of culture ought to be in play (and to some extent already is in play) in our public policy debates.

Evaluating moral transgressions in India and the United States

One of the aims of cultural psychology is to give substance to the pluralistic claim that not all differences between cultures are developmental in nature; that not all differences are matters of better or worse. Here is an example of how cultural psychological research and its pluralistic conception of culture can make it possible to see moral decency in "others" even when their judgments of right and wrong are very different from our own.

Consider the following two incidents. Which is the more serious moral transgression? (1) A poor man went to a hospital after being seriously hurt in an accident. At the hospital they refused to treat him because he was too poor to pay; or (2) The day after his father's death the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken.

Most middle-class Americans think the first incident is a very serious moral breach, while they see nothing wrong with the second. Most Hindu Brahmans in the temple of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India, where I have conducted research on moral reasoning (see Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller, 1990; also Shweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park, 1997), think it is the second incident that is the far more serious breach. Is this an example of an impoverished Indian culture (or perhaps a "culture of poverty") and of a failure of moral development in a South Asian rural population? I think not.

Why do Hindu Brahmans in Bhubaneswar think it is so egregiously wrong for the eldest son to eat chicken and get a haircut the day after his father's death? Because they think the son's behavior is a harmful, uncaring, ungrateful, disrespectful and selfish disregard of a customary funeral practice that is designed to promote some mighty moral ends. They reason as follows, revealing their "Brahmanical Hindu soul", their cultural "mentality", their "goals, values and pictures of the world."

The immortal soul of the dead father, they say, is ready to go on its transmigration but it is trapped in the dead body. It is held back by the "death pollution" of the corpse. Thus for twelve days the family members of the deceased (especially the eldest son) should assist the father's soul and help it detach from the material world by sucking the death pollution into their own bodies. Although this is a technical operation, which can result in great harm to the soul of the deceased should it fail, it also a moral duty. It is an act of beneficence. It is a form of reciprocity. It is a show of love and respect. The father is totally reliant on his children and has put his fate in their hands.

The technical operation is understood in the following way. For twelve days the family members turn their own bodies into efficient receptacles for the death pollution by fasting (avoiding all “hot” foods, including fish and meat), abstaining from sex and staying at home. The death pollution they suck into their own bodies is believed to migrate to the extremities of the body, especially to the tips of the fingers (under the nails) and to the top of the head (in the hair). At the end of twelve days family members cleanse themselves and return to everyday life by shaving off all their hair, cutting their fingernails and taking a ritual bath.

No wonder that Hindu Brahmans in Bhubaneswar are morally appalled by the eldest son who gets a haircut and eats chicken the day after his father’s death, for they understand the son’s act as a renunciation of any concern whatsoever for the fate of his father’s soul!

Notice that many moral universals arise in connection with this incident, including notions of harm, reciprocity, beneficence, care, respect, love, duty and trust. My associates and I have argued that it is possible to reduce a base-set of universal moral concepts to a “big three,” which we call the ethics of autonomy, the ethics of community and the ethics of divinity (Shweder *et al.*, 1997). Notice too that the existence of these moral universals is insufficient to produce agreement between middle-class Americans and rural Hindus in India about which of the two incidents (above) is a more serious moral breach. This is not because Hindu Brahmans in rural India are morally underdeveloped or culturally impoverished. It is because they live in a different culturally constituted world founded on somewhat different beliefs about what is true (those reincarnating souls) and efficient (fasting to suck in the death pollution), which make a difference in the moral evaluation of specific cases. They live in a different culturally constituted world founded on somewhat different views concerning which of the many universal moral concepts is entitled to the greatest respect. The pluralistic conception of culture associated with cultural psychology helps us appreciate the truth that there are things about which even the gods may disagree.

I have discussed these two examples to suggest that cultural psychology is both a normative and a descriptive enterprise, and that the problem of rationality and the issue of justification are central to its intellectual mission. Is this true of indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology as well? Surely not everyone will agree on which particular moral or normative conclusions ought to be drawn from the types of cases discussed above. Nevertheless, whatever the conclusions drawn, any respectable science of cultural psychology must one way or the other engage in cultural critique and ultimately in public policy debate. How do indigenous psychology and cross-cultural psychology come to terms with this kind of challenge?

A concluding remark: Can we globalize the local?

Allow me to conclude by trying to find at least one point of difference between cultural psychology and indigenous psychology. If there is such a difference I think it will turn on the degree to which one is prepared to subscribe to the central principle of a philosophy of life, which I have called “confusionism.” A “confusionist” (not to be confused with a Confucianist) is someone who believes that the knowable world is incomplete if seen from any one point of view, incoherent if seen from all points of view at once, and empty if seen from “nowhere in particular.” Given the choice between incompleteness, incoherence and emptiness a “confusionist” opts for incompleteness, while trying to get beyond such limitations by staying on the move between different ways of seeing and valuing things in the world.

In addition to being a “confusionist” I am also a “neo-antiquarian.” I think this inclination is implied by cultural psychology, but just to be safe let me emphasize that not every cultural psychologist may agree with this and I can only speak for myself. A “neo-antiquarian” is someone who rejects the idea that the world woke up, emerged from darkness and became good for the first time yesterday or 300 years ago in the West in Northern Europe. A neo-antiquarian does not think that newness is necessarily a measure of progress. That means that when I stay on the move, I do so by revaluing things from out of the past (including premodern notions of community) and by searching for the corrosive irony latent within every fixed and totalistic point of view. I am suspicious of fixed and totalizing points of view, whether articulated from the “left” or from the “right,” whether articulated in China or in the United States. In this regard, cultural psychology has the feel of a “postmodern” discipline.

For example, I would suggest that in the contemporary world the distinction and opposition between left-wing versus right-wing political convictions has lost much of its meaning and most of its appeal. I remember the political scene some years ago when the so-called left-wing government of Angola employed Cuban troops to defend oilfields owned by American corporations against a Maoist revolutionary supported by the Reagan administration. It is hard to have much confidence in the left/right distinction when the world starts looking like a Monty Python Flying Circus show.

Moreover the demand to be either left-wing or right-wing has begun to feel both morally and intellectually incapacitating. Perhaps that is why Bill Clinton has been able to be so resilient and popular in the United States, because of his ability to adapt to the times and combine social liberalism with fiscal conservatism. I recognize, of course, the existence of essentializing and stereotyped left-wing virtues, such as equality, individual rights and ecumenism (everybody bleeds, everybody feels pain, “everybody loves Saturday night”). And yes, there are those essentializing and stereotyped right-wing virtues, such as sacrifice, loyalty to members of one’s group, ancestor worship, the sacredness of an oath, and respect for elders. Nevertheless as far as I can tell it takes two wings to create something that can fly.

The same can be said for Chinese indigenous psychology versus Anglo-American indigenous psychology. The spirit of cultural psychology is the spirit of “confusionism,” which is about the partial illumination cast by every “genuine” cultural tradition and the relevance of that illumination for everyone else.

Consider, for example, the logic of filial piety, or the logic of benevolence, or the reality of the social motivation for achievement, all of which are salient and highly elaborated aspects of Chinese indigenous psychology. Or consider the logic of respectful restraint, or the logic of “aviman” (sulking in response to an offense to one’s sense of dignity), or the reality of patron–client relationships, kinship avoidance and *purdah*, all of which are salient and highly elaborated aspects of South Asian indigenous psychology. Isn’t knowledge of those “logics” and processes helpful in understanding at least some aspects of Anglo-American psychology, even if the aspects of Anglo-American psychology that they illuminate are under-theorized, less commented upon, less conscious, less institutionalized or less valued in Western indigenous psychology?

And isn’t the same true of “Western” indigenous psychological concepts such as self-interest or intimacy or personal control? Can’t those concepts be used to illuminate at least some (perhaps under-theorized, hidden or unconscious) aspects of the “Chinese soul”?

“Thinking through others” is a central aim of cultural psychology, which implies that local knowledge and indigenous psychologies may have global relevance. If the indigenous

psychology movement is committed to the idea that indigenous Chinese psychology might be helpful for our understanding of Western subjects then cultural psychology and indigenous psychology are on exactly the same page. If not, this is a point of difference that needs to be explored.

Finally, there is Professor Melford Spiro's idea that we should take the "ethno" out of all psychologies (Spiro, 1984). Professor Spiro believes that in our universal role as scientists (*qua* psychologists or anthropologists) we should transcend our cultures, demystify our local traditions, customs and folk beliefs and arrive at a single vision of what the psyche is all about. Speaking here as an anthropologist and cultural psychologist I do wholeheartedly agree with Mel Spiro that science or rigorous systematic inquiry can lift us out of error, ignorance and mystification but I do not believe that error, ignorance and mystification are proper synonyms for local folk beliefs. Indeed, I believe that if we stick to the study of what I have called cultural "mentalities" then it is precisely in our roles as anthropologists and psychologists (whether Chinese or American) that we will all come to the common understanding that there are multiple psychologies, not just one.

Author note

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