

PSYCHOLOGY, CULTURE, AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANING: AN INTRODUCTION

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Culture and Psychology

Contemporary psychology offers countless theoretical and methodological studies in which the concept of culture is central. This could be seen as the belated confirmation of an insight Stuart Chase had more than half a century ago, when he wrote that the cultural concept of anthropology and sociology “is coming to be regarded as the foundation stone of the social sciences” (Chase 1948: 59). Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn cited Stuart at the very beginning of their famous analysis of the concept of culture, first published in 1952. Though more guarded, they nonetheless left no doubt that “the idea of culture, in the technical anthropological sense, is one of the key notions of contemporary American thought” (1967: 3). They saw Bronislaw Malinowski’s dictum confirmed, and along with him, regarded culture “as the most central problem of all social [and cultural] sciences” (3). They expressly included psychology among the disciplines in which this problem had appeared.

However, it took quite some time before academic psychology studied cultural realities in any notable way, and even today, it seems no more certain that the now widespread talk of ‘culture’ is more than lip service to a mode of research that barely touches the ‘deep grammar’ of psychological investigation. The fear that cultural and cross-cultural psychology will remain marginal in a discipline that again sees its future in an alliance with biology and other natural sciences is not far-fetched (Laucken 2001).

Certainly in many countries there are serious and ongoing attempts to relate psychology to cultural and especially comparative perspectives. The *cross-cultural psychology* that has been built up over the last half century, foremost in the United States, has certainly attained critical mass. Yet, the *cultural psychology* that has departed more or less deliberately from the domain of nomological thought, and is attempting to in-

stall a predominantly interpretive approach similar to that of Cultural Studies, has likewise taken shape and gained some attention. It has meanwhile clearly left its former position as a threshold phenomenon, as the work of Jerome Bruner, Ernst Boesch, and numerous other colleagues, including many present here, emphatically demonstrate (Miller 1997; Boesch and Straub 2006). The integration of culture into psychological thought is further propelled by the search for *indigenous psychologies* that aim to develop psychological theories, constructs, and methodologies that are appropriate to cultural and societal realities of the countries that have only during recent decades imported the (Euro-American) academic discipline of psychology. Despite their different background and motives, cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous psychology contribute to the development of a culture-inclusive approach that is increasingly being acknowledged by the discipline's mainstream.

Now, neither nomological cross-cultural psychology, interpretive cultural psychology, nor indigenous psychology is homogenous. These summary designations suggest a unity that does not really exist. They also suggest a competition, which is somewhat problematic. This now common distinction not only obscures commonalities, but also could discourage cooperative and complementary relations from the outset. This would be professionally regrettable. We should keep this in mind, even though we should not overlook the real differences between the aforementioned tendencies (Straub 2001, Straub and Thomas 2003). This is especially true if one has an interest in integrative efforts. A successful integration of 'the different' preserves its particularity. This presumes that the individuality of the 'elements' to be integrated has actually been precisely identified and named. Integration does not eliminate difference, but rather unifies it into a larger form in order to conceive this as the unity of oppositions.

Despite considerable debates between representatives of the nomological cross-cultural psychology and interpretive cultural psychology, we should recall that the participants display important commonalities, which even in contemporary psychology should not go unremarked.

Thus, the attempt to avoid the errors of ethnocentric or nostrocetric thought constitutes a shared central objective of *both* approaches. Criticism of ethnocentric representation of 'the other' has unanimously been directed at two points. First, the investigation and representation of the other with conceptual and methodological instruments that are clearly designed for one's own culture, for its practices and symbolic contents, fails to appropriately describe, understand, and explain different cultural realities. Research that uncritically views 'the other' in terms of its own perspectives, notions, and cognitive schemata is bound to miss scientific

epistemic objectives and is prone to succumbing to own projections. It is precisely this insight that has stimulated the search for indigenous methods, concepts, and theories. Yet, cognitive-epistemic assumptions of similarity that level empirical differences from the outset are not only intellectually dubious, but, second, also violate the practical imperatives of justice that hold the recognition of and respect for difference to be indispensable, not least of all in terms of cultural difference. The term 'culture' not only implies problems of epistemic representation, in other words problems of knowledge, but problems of justice, which require the empirically tenable representation of others and their life practices. Ethnology and cultural anthropology have most intensively taken up this question, for obvious reasons. If these disciplines did not simply follow in the wake of 'imperialist' adventures, their constitutive 'curiosity about the other' was not always harmless either since this other was of course very often conceived in the image of the self, and by 'own' descriptive and normative standards.

Such debates are well underway in cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous psychology. Basically, and in general, all areas of psychological research are supposed to increasingly respect culturally determined differences—even when, as in large areas of nomological cross-cultural psychology, the ultimate objective is not only the identification of such differences, but also, and perhaps primarily, the search for empirically valid psychological universals. It seems to us pointless to argue over which represents the more noble or 'scientific' objective. Both are possible, both are legitimate, and in certain cases, either may be more interesting or relevant. On the other hand, a further aspect of the concept of culture demands the greatest attention and the greatest effort. Here we proceed to one of the central themes of this volume.

Culture as Construction and Structure of Meaning

The concept of 'culture' has not only the aforementioned function of bringing scholarly attention to psychologically significant cultural differences and their practical construction and significance. It does not simply make us more aware that potential differences must be accounted for and reflected on, where similarity, along with a corresponding methodological and conceptual consistency, could once have been assumed. For the methods of the empirical disciplines, there is another, at least equally exciting and very basic aspect of the concept of culture. In cross-cultural and cultural psychology today, when we speak of 'culture,' it requires a

basic hermeneutic concept—for better or for worse; completely deliberate, or completely unconscious. ‘Culture’ unavoidably comprises a specific way of conceiving the psychologically relevant facts. Psychological facts are thus *basically meaning-structured*. Meaning here is not something added to a (constructed) psychological ‘entity’—whether phenomenon, structure, process, or function—by discrete mental acts. It does not first appear *ex post facto*, in acts of interpretation. For the psyche, as cross-cultural and cultural psychology see it, it is actually constitutive. This has been shown paradigmatically for action, a concept now indispensable to psychology, and which was quite strategically conceived against the behaviorist concept of ‘mere’ reactive behavior. The point is not that we cannot differently grasp some ‘something,’ and thereby understand and treat it differently. Without meaning, however, psychological entities would have no ontological basis as far as cross-cultural and cultural psychology are concerned. Countless passages from the literature could be cited here in support of this point—including authors representing cross-cultural psychology.

Every writer starts from the assumption that the concept of culture is necessary because it represents very particular—not egological, individualistic, or in the narrower sense intentionalist—aspects of the meaning-structure of psychological ‘entities,’ and helps disclose them. Segall expresses this much in a lapidary way when he says, “human behavior is meaningful only when viewed in the socio-cultural context in which it occurs” (Segall 1979: 3). This passage, though chosen at random, is perfectly representative. The concept of culture has, even for representatives of nomological psychology, the status of a basic hermeneutic concept, which is functionally related to the interpretive analysis of psychological realities. For how else but through interpretation, i.e., through a hermeneutic praxis, could meaning be explicated? This basic insight is unavoidable, even if one has not yet confronted the detailed theoretical bases of specific interpretive perspectives or of methodologically controlled interpretation, and even if the prospect might make one uneasy.

The point is this: ‘culture’ means meaning, as a rule *expressis verbis*, and the study of culture is (or, consequently, should be), openly or surreptitiously, a hermeneutic practice. The concept of culture opens the door to efforts of interpretation. Cultural or cross-cultural research without a focus on structures of meaning would be difficult. On this basic, general point, there is surprisingly broad agreement. This is true even with respect to the basic methodological consequences.

Some of the theoretical and methodological *commonalities* are, for example, expressed in the *consistent usage of the same concepts*.

Thus, Kenneth Pike's (1954, 1967) methodologically and practically important distinction between the emic and the etic standpoint in the description of behavior are important in a nomologically oriented cross-cultural psychology *as well as* in cultural psychology. John Berry (1969, 1980, 1999) soon took up Pike's distinction, in his influential categorization of the different approaches in the domain of cross-cultural psychology, where he at the same time argued for a certain integration of the emic and the etic perspectives (see Berry et al. 1992). The discussion continues, as for example a 1999 article by Hede Helfrich in *Culture & Psychology*, and the subsequent commentaries by Chaudhary, Berry, and Lonner, as well as Baerveldt and Verheggen, show (also see Helfrich and Jahoda, in this volume).

An Outline of this Volume

These commonalities constitute the shared ground of all contributions to this volume. While authors explore the interplay of psyche and culture from different angles and toward different ends (including, e.g., theoretical, historical, methodological, and empirical perspectives) several reoccurring themes and concerns can be identified that appear as indicative of current trends and developments in the larger fields of cross-cultural and cultural psychology. These thematic orientations also serve to structure contributions to this volume.

The concept of culture and its integration into psychological theory still constitutes a topic of crucial *theoretical* concern. Traditional notions of 'culture' as discretely identifiable, integral, homogeneous, and static entities have increasingly been abandoned in favor of relational approaches, thus acknowledging the criticism of overly simple and often dichotomous concepts of culture, which was, for example, voiced by Hermans and Kempen. In their influential article (that appeared alongside a contribution by Marshall Segall, Walter Lonner, and John Berry "On the Flowering of Culture in Behavioral Research" in the October 1998 *American Psychologist*), they point to three developments of globalization that theories of culture must take into account: "(a) cultural connections leading to hybridization, (b) the emergence of a heterogeneous global system, and (c) the increasing cultural complexity" (1111). The resulting challenges for cultural and cross-cultural psychological research and theory building have become central topics of theory-oriented as well as of methodological strands of discourse. In the present volume, the first section addresses conceptual and theoretical issues when exploring 'glimpses of the past and current perspectives'.

Anyone interested in the meaning-structures of cultural realities and culturally mediated actions (cognitions, emotions, motives, etc.), will have to reassess psychology not only with respect to its object, but also to its *methodology*. Following the insight that culture is more than objective or reifiable cultural facts, the search for a different (mostly qualitative) methodology is another prominent issue (Ratner 1997; for a discussion of Ratner's approach see Kölbl and Straub 2001). Acts of description and comparison of cultural realities require alternative, yet precisely defined scientific operations that ensure, for example, appropriate sampling procedures, controlled cross-cultural comparisons, and adequate data interpretation. Psychological-hermeneutic approaches have progressed and increasingly provide an exact methodology that explicates the nature and validation of its their core activity: interpretation. The second section of this book is thus devoted to issues of 'methodology and comparison'.

Building on a general interpretive research framework, section three focuses on different 'methods and instruments' in the field of cultural and cross-cultural psychology. Heterogeneity of approaches indicates a high level of methodical creativity that draws equally on historical traditions, interdisciplinary cooperation, and mainstream psychological methods. The presentation of empirical research designs and results is not restricted to this section but also extends to other contributions that have been grouped under different headings.

Neither cross-cultural nor cultural psychology relies on or may be defined by the choice of distinct topics, concepts and methods. Both have approached a broad range of topics and thus proven the potentials of a culture-inclusive psychology, not as a subdiscipline, but as an alternative approach of psychological research and analysis. They have significantly contributed to an understanding of 'self and development' (see section four), yet have also taken up topics that are usually ignored by the mainstream, such as music or religion.

The meaning of a behavior depends not only on its cultural context, but also on what we, in our hermeneutic exertions, deduce to be and finally identify as culture. Such work is in principle never conclusive. Particular persons start this work, in concrete situations, and may interrupt it for various pragmatic reasons. All this means that meaning is always provisional, and can never be completely purified of traces of contingent interpretations. There is, therefore, never an unequivocal meaning to some behavior, nor for any other object of study.

Outlook

It is evident that ‘culture’ in this sense can no longer be conceptualized as a structure of causality, but as a frame, a medium (Cole) or field (Boesch) of human action.

“Culture is a field of action, whose contents range from objects made and used by human beings to institutions, ideas and myths. Being an action field, culture offers possibilities of, but by the same token stipulates conditions for, action; it circumscribes the goals that can be reached by certain means, but establishes limits, too, for correct, possible and deviant action. The relationship between the different material as well as ideational contents of the cultural field of action is a systemic one; i.e., transformations in one part of the system can have an impact in any other part. As an action field, culture not only includes and controls action, but is also continuously transformed by it; therefore, culture is as much a process as a structure” (Boesch 1991: 29).

Boesch’s social constructivist and formal definition of culture can serve as a point of departure; however, here we extend on it. Like many other suggestions, it is a meaning-oriented definition in that ‘technical anthropological sense’ that Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (and some others) brought into play. Such a concept of culture is, incidentally, not reserved for cultures that, like so-called high cultures, have extremely strong claims of continuity and coherence, and are often geographically extensive; it serves equally well for the analysis of partial, local, regional, and ephemeral cultural and subcultural forms. It can also be said of it that it directs our attention to the ceremonies as well as the everyday of a life world, to the deliberate, memorial, monumentalized, and ritualized specificities as well as the normal and conventional ones. It is distinctive and not normative; it does not distinguish between worthy and worthless cultures, nor between what is valuable and what is worthless within culture, between the refined and the popular, the high and the low (Straub 2003).

We may believe that psychology can in the future profitably work with such a concept of culture, but we should guard against excessive illusions or optimism. We do not mean simply that we should resist making larger claims than the current state of the art can hardly fulfill. The question we have been leading up to is more than just obstinate: Will this concept of culture be more than just a palliative against the stifling pressure of an overall biologization of psychology (Laucken 2001)? Why should culture not necessarily end up in the same role as the concept of society, which remained a guest in the territory of academic psychology,

an unwelcome guest or interloper, as a rule, rather than one welcome for its challenges and contributions? (The relationship between these concepts, as it has been most often in the historical sciences, but certainly in psychology as well, ought to be analyzed far more precisely than it has been for culture). It might here and there have found a niche, but one from which it could of course cause little provocation, let alone change. Perhaps the present volume will contribute to theoretical, methodological, and practical advances in cultural and cross-cultural psychology; perhaps we will not find ourselves already in such a niche tomorrow. The future of cultural and cross-cultural psychology has just begun—it is, as every future, dependent on what we are willing and able to do today.

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