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# Introduction

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The field of cross-cultural psychology can be briefly described as the study of the relationships between cultural context and human behavior. The latter includes both overt behavior (observable actions and responses) and covert behavior (thoughts, beliefs, meanings). As we shall discuss later in more detail, there are rather different interpretations even of this broad description, associated with different schools of scientific research. Most researchers studying behavior across cultures argue that differences in

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overt and covert behavior should be seen as culturally shaped reflections of common psychological functions and processes. In other words, they are postulating a “psychic unity” of the human species (e.g., Jahoda, 1992). This is the position adopted by the authors of this text. Other researchers, often belonging to a school referred to as cultural psychology, emphasize that psychological functioning is essentially different across cultural regions of the world. For example, Kitayama, Duffy and Uchida (2007, p. 139) argue that different “modes of being” are found in various cultures. Sometimes the two approaches are even presented as two distinct fields of science.

In this book we use the label “cross-cultural psychology” as the overarching name for the field. More specific terms, such as cultural psychology, culture-comparative psychology and indigenous psychology will be used when it is necessary to distinguish orientations within this broader field. The common designation is justified by the shared assumption that culture is an important contributor to the development and display of human behavior. All those involved in the field believe that research in psychology has to be “culture-informed”; they share the idea that human behavior cannot exist in a cultural vacuum and that all psychological research has to take this principle into account.

In order to understand divergent interpretations and to form your own opinion, it is necessary to learn about the background of debates in cross-cultural psychology. This introductory chapter is meant to provide an overview of major theoretical perspectives, and to draw attention to some important methodological issues. It should facilitate the reading of subsequent chapters that deal with cross-cultural research in various domains of psychology and in which similar issues of theory and method tend to occur time and again. The first three sections of this chapter provide an overview of the most important theoretical debates that influence how researchers approach cross-cultural studies. The fourth and the fifth sections briefly discuss methodological issues that are recurrent in debates about cross-cultural similarities and differences.

In the first section we present a few definitions of the field, in order to highlight some of the emphases found in the literature. We conclude with our own definition, which we see as rather comprehensive. It reflects our intention to write a textbook that covers more or less the full range of topics and approaches found in cross-cultural psychology. We also refer to another characteristic, namely the goals of cross-cultural psychology, a topic discussed on the Internet (Additional Topics, Chapter 1).



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In the second section we present three recurrent themes of theoretical debate in the contemporary literature on behavior and culture. The first of these themes is on the question of whether culture should be seen as something that is part of the person, or as the set of external conditions in which a person is developing and operating. The second theme concerns the question of how far behavior should be seen as culture-specific

(or culture-relative) versus how far it should be seen as culture-general (or universal). The third theme of debate is how in psychological terms cultural differences are organized. Here the issue is whether cultural differences form meaningful patterns that allow for broad categorizations (e.g., individualist and collectivist cultures) or whether instead observed differences are quite unrelated (e.g., driving on the left/right hand side of the road presumably has nothing to do with a stronger or weaker preference for hierarchy in interpersonal relationships). We also explicate our own position on these three themes. In later chapters this should help the reader to evaluate where our orientation may have biased our presentation.

In the third section we briefly describe “interpretive positions” on the three themes as they have coalesced into “perspectives” on cross-cultural psychology. We present three such perspectives, labeled culture-comparative psychology, cultural psychology and indigenous psychology. In additional text placed on the Internet (Additional Topics, Chapter 1) we elaborate on the ethnocentrism of the dominant (western) mainstream in psychology and how it necessitates the development of psychology in local contexts.

In the fourth section we turn to issues of method that tend to be more salient in cross-cultural psychology than in other fields of psychology. We first address the question of on what basis separate cultures are being distinguished in cross-cultural research and how cultures are sampled. Thereafter, we describe the main methodological distinction in design and analysis, between qualitative approaches and quantitative approaches.

The fifth section deals with threats to interpretation of data. We mention three such threats: possible lack of equivalence and bias in data, overgeneralization of results, and insufficient distinction between culture-level and individual-level variance.



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## Definitions: What is cross-cultural psychology?

Like other fields of study, cross-cultural psychology can be defined in various ways. Such definitions are often carefully formulated to represent what their authors wish to convey as essential. We mention five examples:

1. “Cross-cultural research in psychology is the explicit, systematic comparison of psychological variables under different cultural conditions in order to specify the antecedents and processes that mediate the emergence of behaviour differences” (Eckensberger, 1972, p. 100).
2. “Cross-cultural psychology is the empirical study of members of various culture groups who have had different experiences that lead to predictable and significant differences in behavior. In the majority of such studies, the groups under

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study speak different languages and are governed by different political units” (Brislin, Lonner and Thorndike, 1973, p. 5).

3. “Cross-cultural research is any type of research on human behavior that compares behavior of interest across two or more cultures” (Matsumoto, 1996, p. 5).
4. “Cultural psychology [is] the study of the culture’s role in the mental life of human beings” (Cole, 1996, p. 1).
5. Cultural psychology “has a distinctive subject matter (psychological diversity, rather than psychological uniformity); it aims to reassess the uniformitarian principle of psychic unity and develop a credible theory of psychological pluralism” (Shweder, 2007, p. 827).

In most of these definitions, the term **culture** appears, referring to cultural conditions or cultural groups. For the time being, we can define culture as “the shared way of life of a group of people”; in Chapter 10, we will consider more elaborate meanings of the term.

Each of the five definitions highlights a particular feature of culture. In the first, the key idea is that of identifying cause and effect relationships between culture and behavior (“... specify the antecedents and processes that mediate...”); the second is more concerned with identifying the kinds of cultural experiences (“... speak different languages” etc.) that may be factors in promoting human behavioral diversity across cultures. The third definition emphasizes that cross-cultural research is culture-comparative research. In the last two definitions, the adjective “cross-cultural” is replaced by “cultural”; this single change signifies an important shift from the first three definitions. The core issue is whether or not it makes sense to consider “culture” and “behavior” as distinct entities. In the “cultural” approach to the field, there is an emphasis on the mutual, interactive relationship between cultural and behavioral phenomena.

In the culture-comparative approach, which is represented by the first three definitions, cultural conditions are seen as existing independently of particular individuals. These conditions are related to differences in behavior patterns, without necessarily implying that there are differences in underlying functions and processes. In the last two definitions, behavior differences across cultural groups are taken also to imply differences in psychological functions and processes. This is particularly strong in the last definition, which makes it a goal of the field to challenge the concept of the “psychic unity” of humankind. This last definition appears to postulate the existence of different psychologies in different cultures – a position that is similar to that implied by the “indigenous psychology” approach (see below). In our view, the field of cross-cultural psychology incorporates both perspectives represented in these definitions (Berry, 1997, 2000; Poortinga, 1997; see also Chapter 12).

Limited attention is given in these five definitions to some other interests. For example, cross-cultural psychology is concerned not only with diversity, but also

with uniformity: what is there that might be psychologically common to a range of cultures, or even universally to the human species (Brown, 1991; Lonner, 1980)? This brings us to the question of how far proximal biological variables, including, for example, dietary habits, nutritional deficiencies and distal biological variables, including the phylogenetic roots of the human capacity to develop culture, should be included in cross-cultural psychology (see Chapter 11). Related to this evolutionary view of culture as human adaptation to the environment, there are other kinds of contextual variables (not always included in the conception of culture) that have been considered to be part of the cross-cultural enterprise. These include ecological variables (Berry, 1976), which become prominent when human populations are seen as being in a constant process of adaptation to their natural environment, and which emphasize factors such as economic activity (hunting, gathering, farming, etc.) and population density. This “ecocultural” perspective will be considered later in this chapter.

Also not included in the five definitions cited is the study of various ethnocultural groups within a single nation state who interact and change as they adapt to living together. The justification for such an ethnic psychology being included in cross-cultural psychology is that most ethnocultural groups maintain distinctive cultural features, sometimes for several generations after contact or migration. This suggests that a comprehensive definition should also signal cultural change (which often results from contact between cultures), an aspect that will be considered more fully in Chapter 13.

We are now in a position to propose a general **definition of cross-cultural psychology** that will be used in this book:

Cross-cultural psychology is the study: of similarities and differences in individual psychological functioning in various cultural and ethnocultural groups; of ongoing changes in variables reflecting such functioning; and of the relationships of psychological variables with sociocultural, ecological and biological variables.

A field of science is not only characterized by its definition; also of importance are the aims and goals. You can find a brief discussion on the Internet (Additional Topics, Chapter 1), including a statement of our own perspective, to make clear to the reader where we stand.



## Themes of debate

### Theme 1: Culture as internal or external to the person

To what extent should culture be conceptualized as part of the person (**internal culture**), and to what extent as a set of conditions outside of the person

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(**external culture**)? When we talk about European culture or Indian culture, we can refer to the mode of subsistence (how people make a living), the political organization of society and/or other aspects of the ecological and social context; this is external culture. We can also refer to the ideas, philosophies, beliefs, etc. of the members of a culture; this is culture internal to the person. Much of the language, religion, knowledge and beliefs of a person's social environment become internalized; the pre-existing features of one's culture become part of oneself in the processes of enculturation and socialization. External conditions include factors such as climate, mode of economic existence and poverty as opposed to affluence, social institutions and practices, formal education, and influences resulting from contact with a new society, as in the case of migration. For example, there has been extensive research into happiness as a function of material affluence, with the latter including not only personal wealth, but also the Gross National Product of the society (Diener, Diener and Diener, 1995; Veenhoven, 1999).

For a long time, both cultural anthropologists and cross-cultural psychologists studied behavior mainly as the outcome of the physical and social environment in which people are living; these conditions were seen as antecedent factors to psychological functioning. A major shift occurred among anthropologists when culture came to be defined in terms of subjective meanings (Geertz, 1973). As a result of this shift, attempts to understand the behavior patterns characteristic of people in a particular culture in terms of prevailing external conditions were largely replaced by an approach to culture as the shared meanings that are constructed by its members in the course of their interactions. A similar shift can be found in cross-cultural psychology. In such research studying cross-cultural differences in modes of cognition (Peng and Nisbett, 1999) or the experiencing of emotions (Feldman-Barrett *et al.*, 2007) external conditions receive little emphasis.

When asked for an opinion a large majority of cross-cultural psychologists will acknowledge that culture should be both "out there," and "in here." However, in actual studies researchers tend to ignore either the external or the internal aspect of culture, emphasizing only one side in the type of data that are being collected and analyzed.

## Theme 2: Relativism–universalism

To what extent are psychological functions and processes common to humankind (**universalism**), and to what extent are they unique to specific cultural groups (**relativism**)? This question is perhaps the most debated issue in cross-cultural psychology and central to many of the theoretical distinctions that can be found throughout this book. It is also one of the most tenacious questions, with proponents of both positions being able to present data to support their views. To give just one example, take the interaction between language and thought.

Most people's thinking involves mainly language. So, it is a plausible idea that thoughts are different when languages are different. This has become known as Whorf's hypothesis (1956). Color vocabulary became a testing ground for Whorf's theory, because the number of major color categories (indicated in English with names like *red*, *yellow*, *green* and *blue*) varies widely across languages, while at the same time these color names can be linked to physical properties of objects (such as wavelength). There is empirical evidence to the effect that color categories are common, cross-culturally invariant, properties of the perceptual apparatus. However, there are also studies that show that color names can have subtle effects on the categorization of specific hues. Proponents of relativism see the latter findings as support for Whorf's hypothesis whereas proponents of universalism point to the broader picture of universal similarities in color perception (see Chapters 6 and 8 for further information).

For a long time universalism and relativism have been presented as a dichotomy, with universalism postulating the importance of the human organism as a biological and psychological entity, largely invariant across cultures. In contrast relativism asserted the importance of culture (Jahoda and Krewer, 1997). In universalism the focus is on how different ecological and sociocultural environments impact on shared human psychological functions and processes and lead to differences in behavior repertoires. In relativism the focus is on how the functions and processes themselves are the outcome of interactions between organism and context; they are inherently cultural.

With the explicit recognition by virtually all researchers that human phylogenetic history imposes constraints on human behavior (see, e.g., Keller, 2007; Markus and Hamedani, 2007), the earlier dichotomy has lost some of its conceptual distinctiveness and importance. It now makes more sense to postulate a dimension with various positions ranging from exclusive relativism to exclusive universalism. In the former, what is common in human behavior across all cultures is left out of the discussion. In the latter, the role of culture is reduced to the psychologically trivial; that is, human behavior can be studied without attributing any essential role to culture.

To illustrate the range of the continuum we distinguish four positions: extreme relativism, moderate relativism, moderate universalism and extreme universalism. In extreme forms of relativism, all psychological reality is dependent on our own understanding or interpretation (e.g., Gergen and Gergen, 2000). From this perspective, so-called "facts" deriving from research are constructions that cannot reveal an objective reality outside of us; our understanding and interpretation always lead to essential distortions. This position on the relativism–universalism dimension is only marginally present in cross-cultural psychology and will only be touched upon occasionally in this book. The majority of researchers in psychology accept the view that there are observable regularities in human behavior and

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that their interpretation is not entirely subjective. The rationale for this has been argued, among others, by Jahoda (1986) and by Munroe and Munroe (1997).

The second position – moderate relativism – can be described with the following citation: “Humans are born with the capacity to function in any culture, but as they mature they develop psyches that are organized to function in one specific culture” (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus and Nisbett, 1998, p. 916). This form of relativism emphasizes that psychological functions and processes are the outcome of interactions between organism and sociocultural contexts. One of the more important distinctions reported in the literature is between societies where individuals are characterized by an independent construal of the self, and societies where individuals have an interdependent construal of the self. The former kind of construal implies that a person sees himself/herself as an autonomous individual separate from others; the latter characterizes a person who defines herself/himself as embedded in one’s social network (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

The third position is that of a moderate universalism. It emphasizes that there exist both differences and similarities in behavior across cultures and that psychological research and practice should be informed by both. However, in this approach manifestations of cultural differences in behavior do not automatically imply the need for postulating different psychological functions and processes. A much quoted statement by Przeworski and Teune (1970, p. 92) reads: “For a specific observation a belch is a belch and nepotism is nepotism. But within an inferential framework, a belch is an ‘insult’ or a ‘compliment’ and nepotism is ‘corruption’ or ‘responsibility.’” This comment illustrates that the meaning of behavior is dependent on the cultural context in which it occurs, while at the same time it asserts that such meaning can be understood in common terms (i.e., insult, compliment, corruption and responsibility).

Finally, there is the position of extreme universalism, which in the previous edition of this book was referred to as **absolutism** (Berry, Poortinga, Segall and Dasen, 2002). It describes a theoretical orientation that sees behavior as not influenced in any important way by cultural factors. In our opinion such behaviors exist, but are rare and limited to elementary sensory and motor processes. Responses on some of the items of the Ishihara test for color blindness (e.g., Birch, 1997) may be an example. With these items an individual is asked to trace a line that is visible to the non-colorblind, but invisible for those suffering from a certain type of color blindness. The Ishihara test would appear to assess color blindness in all cultural contexts. However, for most psychological tests and scales the cross-cultural comparison of scores at face value can lead to serious misinterpretation.

### Theme 3: Psychological organization of cultural differences

Differences in behavior patterns between cultural groups (including responses to tests and questionnaires) usually are not of interest in their own right, but because

they are seen as indices of broader aspects of behavior or psychological functioning. Interpretations can be broad and inclusive or they can be more narrow and limited. In this book we shall distinguish between various levels of **inference**, or levels of **generalization**, which are derived from psychological data. We shall come across notions such as cultural conventions or practices, behavior domains, attitudes, traits and abilities, styles, cultural dimensions or syndromes, and culture-as-a-system. This third theme may seem to belong to the universalism–relativism debate, but this is only partly so. Universalism–relativism is about the extent to which psychological processes are similar or different across cultures. The organization of cultural differences is about the extent to which various differences in behavior between two cultures should be seen as related to each other or as independent from each other.

The most far-reaching generalizations are in terms of a **culture-as-a-system**. Such a notion can be very useful if there is a comprehensive set of parameters in terms of which the system can be described or depicted (e.g., a flow diagram or organizational chart), so that it becomes clear what belongs and what does not belong to the system. Inferences made in the past, such as the concepts of “modal personality” (i.e., the dominant features of the typical person belonging to a cultural group, Bock, 1999), and “national character” (a set of personality traits frequently found in a society, Peabody, 1985), belong to this category of inferences. They were vague and have been largely dismissed. There are more recent concepts of similar scope (e.g., the notion of mentality, Fiske *et al.*, 1998); and the notion of “habitus” (lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, Bourdieu, 1998), but in our view cross-cultural psychologists have never produced a system description of culture that is comprehensive and at the same time lends itself to critical examination with empirical data.

Somewhat less abstract and comprehensive are interpretations in terms of broad cultural dimensions, of which **individualism–collectivism** and **interdependent self** versus **independent self** are the most prominent current examples. Some authors argue that this leads to an oversimplified picture (e.g., Medin, Unsworth and Hirschfeld, 2007). Another concern is with the validity of such high-level generalizations that are difficult to validate properly and virtually impossible to falsify as we shall see when we discuss the psychological organization of cross-cultural differences in Chapter 12.

Less far reaching are generalizations in terms of “styles,” a concept used to describe patterns of cognitive abilities; that is, how peoples in certain cultures tend to approach cognitive problems (see the section on cognitive styles in Chapter 6). Styles, attitudes, cognitive abilities and personality traits are concepts from various areas of psychology that are used with a similar meaning in cross-cultural psychology. The construct validity of such concepts, and of interpretations of cross-cultural differences in behavior, is less difficult to establish than for the more comprehensive

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cultural dimensions noted above. This is because the inferential distance from actual behavior to the underlying concept is smaller and more open to critical appraisal.

With the concept of behavior domains (i.e., categories of situations)<sup>1</sup> the principle of generalization is not applied to psychological functions or processes, but to fields of behavior organized in terms of skills and knowledge of procedures (Cole, 1996). Behavior domains are more descriptive and less inferential than, for example, cognitive styles and personality traits. Finally, customs, practices and conventions are descriptive terms that usually stay close to direct observation of daily life in a particular culture; here the validity of inferences is most open to unambiguous empirical examination.

Explanations that are less comprehensive tend to allow critical empirical scrutiny; as mentioned, they stay closer to the data. The attractiveness of more comprehensive and abstract concepts is that they explain a wider array of cross-cultural differences. This makes the search for more inclusive explanations worthwhile. As we shall see in various chapters, there is a trade-off between the precision of inferences (based on their specificity) and their scope (when seeking broad generalizations).

### A few caveats

The three themes that we have discussed in this section represent issues that we will come across frequently in later chapters. Are they the most important themes of debate? A reader with prior knowledge of cross-cultural psychology may be surprised to find that the dichotomy between nature and nurture is not mentioned as one of the themes. There is certainly much debate on theories addressing the extent to which psychological functioning is constrained by our genetic constitution, and how variation can emerge in the course of developmental processes. However, the arguments about nature–nurture have shifted to specific models and theories; the old dichotomy of body and soul, or genetic versus environmental as separate sources of variance largely has been left behind. Cross-cultural researchers have moved from a dualism between psyche and body to a monism where psychological functioning is so much part of the organism that it cannot be defined as a separate principle of existence.

Before concluding this section, we think we should make explicit our own position in respect to each of the three themes mentioned. On the first theme (culture as internal or external), we take the position that culture includes both. It refers to a set of external conditions within which humans develop and act, as well as to constructed psychological meanings. There are meanings and overt behaviors where the relationship with external conditions is unclear, if such a relationship exists at all. However, we also hold the viewpoint that psychological variables and external conditions can be linked closely; sometimes such relationships go back in

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “trait” to refer to a characteristic of persons (as in personality traits), and the term “domain” to refer to a class of situations that evoke similar behavior (e.g., situations that evoke a fear reaction, or situations belonging to a field of activity).