

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction: the psychology of cultural experience

---

*Holly F. Mathews and Carmella C. Moore*

The complicated relationship that obtains between psychology and culture is revealed in the lived experience of active, purposive individuals. Paradoxically, however, the past two decades have seen a constructivist view of cultural meaning and practice triumph over other approaches in the field, leading many investigators to overemphasize the magnitude and importance of cultural diversity and conclude, often on the basis of little evidence, that each culture constructs its own unique psychology (Abu-Lughod 1991, Clifford 1986, Crapanzano 1980, Kondo 1990, Lutz 1988, Rosaldo 1989, Shweder 1990, 1991, 1999). As Spiro (1999: 13) has observed, the epistemological fallout from such a thesis of cultural and psychological incommensurability is the conclusion on the part of many that a genuinely comparative psychological anthropology is impossible to achieve (see also LeVine 1999: 18).

Although constructivist theorists stress attention to individual agency, many of them are avowedly antipsychological in their approach. Thus their studies tend to describe local cultural content derived largely from analyses of public symbols and texts (see also Ingham 1996: 4–8) and to depict individuals as either passively absorbing (Bourdieu 1977, Butler 1990, Ortner 1990) or reflexively resisting (Abu-Lughod 1990, Comaroff 1985, Martin 1987, Scott 1985, Willis 1977) such cultural content (see also, Strauss 1992, Strauss and Quinn 1997: 12–44). Absent from these accounts are empirical descriptions of the ways in which active, creative individuals meet the everyday challenges of thinking, feeling, remembering, and solving problems. Yet such descriptions are vital to the development of a vigorous psychological anthropology capable of theorizing in new ways about the complex relationship that obtains between individual psychology, culture, and lived experience (Schwartz 1999: 58–59).

Rather than accept cultural and psychological incommensurability as a given, the authors represented in this volume view it as an empirical question requiring rigorous, case by case, and comparatively oriented investigation (cf. Nuckolls 1998: 42). They reject the postmodern notion of “fundamental otherness” which has led many in the larger discipline of cultural anthropology to eschew the validity of long-term ethnographic

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Holly F. Mathews and Carmella C. Moore*

fieldwork and comparative analysis (e.g., Clifford 1998). Instead, these defining chapters by established scholars demonstrate that sound scientific methodologies can yield important data about the mutually constituted nature of culture and individual experience, and they reaffirm the possibility of identifying cross-cultural universals in psychological development and mental states. In so doing, these contributors also articulate an agenda for psychological anthropology in the twenty-first century.

Instead of replicating old and oftentimes destructive divisions between variant theoretical perspectives in the wider field of anthropology (i.e., cognitive, psychoanalytic, evolutionary, constructivist, postmodern etc.), these authors emphasize the importance of forging a cooperative, multidisciplinary approach (see also, Edgerton 1999, Munroe 1999). They draw upon exciting new developments in neurobiology and cognitive science about how minds and brains work; upon recent research in developmental psychology and relational psychoanalysis about the interaction between universal windows of neurological development, intrapsychic drives, and cultural practices in shaping mental development; and upon a body of fine-grained, person-centered ethnographic research that shows how real individuals use, modify, and transmit cultural ideas as they confront the everyday challenges of life. Their findings demonstrate that far from being wholly culturally constructed, individual psychology is also partially explicable in terms of universal patterns of human biological development as well as the similar behavioral and psychological adaptations that groups make to common problems (see also Hinton 1999). As a result, these essays provide an antidote to the existential malaise that has characterized psychological anthropology in the wake of the postmodern onslaught, and they reassert the strengths of the field that pioneered the study of individual experience and its relationship to culture.<sup>1</sup>

In the first section of the volume entitled “Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study of Experience,” Westen delineates the implications of a new theoretical model of the mind for recent studies of intra-individual mental and psychological attributes and a growing body of data on daily experience as grounded in culturally and socially meaningful worlds. Authors Hollan and Ratner explore different methodological approaches to the study of culture and experience and consider the implications of the subjective, behavioral, and embodied aspects of individual experience for theories of cultural meaning and practice. In part II, authors Garro, and LeVine and Norman present detailed empirical studies of the ways in which individuals act to acquire, modify, and transmit culture in specific contexts. Part III of the volume focuses on continuity and change in cultural experience. Authors Leavitt and Brown examine how intrapsychic conflicts stemming from disjunctions in cultural values and individual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

experiences act to motivate and shape the content of social movements. In the final part, authors Danziger, and Munroe and Munroe articulate the need for a reinvigorated comparative perspective in contemporary psychological anthropology. Their data demonstrate that it is possible to be sensitive to cultural context in constructing valid categories for comparison while still embracing the search for regularities in human thought and behavior as a central anthropological goal.

Taken together, these chapters outline an important and exciting new research agenda for psychological anthropology and illustrate some methodological approaches and types of data that characterize it. The first component of the new agenda is the exploration of the interconnections that exist between the use of systematic methods for the study of individual experience and the theoretical insights that emerge from the resultant rich corpus of experience-near data gathered in a variety of cultural contexts. In particular, this agenda attempts to model a new theoretical connection between mind, psyche, and culture that helps us reconceptualize the relationships of mental models to experience. This new model of the mind shifts the underlying view of knowledge from one of sequentially stored lists of propositions to one of information, feelings, and motives stored along networks of association built up by their repeated conjunction in individual thought and experience. Because such networks of association may operate either unconsciously or implicitly, it becomes imperative for the second part of the new agenda to include the development of a battery of methodological techniques capable of uncovering and theorizing about the relations that obtain between the subjective, behavioral, and embodied aspects of individual experience. A third component of this new agenda, as these essays demonstrate, involves using such methodologically sophisticated approaches to better understand internal psychological states and the individual bases of group behavior, paving the way for a more comprehensive theory of culture change as both motivating and motivated by everyday experience. Finally, the agenda articulated by these authors outlines a way to reconcile the desire of many psychological anthropologists to combine person-centered studies with a return to the use of explicit comparative frameworks. By carefully attending to the design of relevant measures in different cultural contexts, these authors demonstrate how categories of comparison can emerge from the lived experience of the people studied and thus form the basis upon which more sophisticated cross-cultural studies can be designed. The remainder of this introduction outlines in more detail the four items of the new agenda and discusses some of the key theoretical insights and empirical findings emerging from the application of this agenda to the volume authors' recent research in psychological anthropology.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Implications of a new theoretical model of the mind**

In the first part of this volume, Drew Westen synthesizes recent developments in neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and psychoanalysis to demonstrate how a newly emergent theoretical model of the mind is capable of integrating insights about intra-individual mental processes with anthropological data on culturally and socially constructed schemas of meaning (see also Strauss and Quinn 1997: 48–84). Known in cognitive science as connectionism or parallel distributed processing, this model, Westen notes, is based on the assumption that many cognitive processes occur simultaneously and in parallel, rather than sequentially, and that the meaning of an object or concept is not contained in any single unit (Rumelhart, McClelland, and the PDP Research Group 1986, Read, Vanman, and Miller 1997, Smith 1998). Rather, he writes, “it is spread out, or *distributed*, across a network of processing units that, through experience, become activated in tandem” (p. 30). As a heuristic device, this model helps us conceptualize the relationship of mental models to experience in a new way because it shifts the underlying view of knowledge from sequentially stored lists of propositions to one of information stored along networks of association that operate unconsciously or implicitly. In general, Westen notes, the associative links between units of information are strengthened by their repeated conjunction, either in thought or in reality.

Strauss and Quinn (1997) have drawn upon this connectionist model of mind to define learned schemas as dense networks of strong associations built up from experience. Whatever co-occurs in experience, including thoughts, emotions, motivations, and the nonverbalized or preverbal, will become incorporated in a schema. Once a strong network of associations has been created, moreover, it fills in missing or ambiguous information by activating all the units in an interconnected network, even those not directly stimulated by current experience. Schemas or networks thereby come to be mediating devices through which subsequent experiences are rendered meaningful. To the extent that individuals share experiences, such as common patterns of childhood socialization, they will share schemas. Culture, from this perspective, consists of people’s shared experiences and the schemas they acquire on the basis of those experiences (Strauss and Quinn 1997: 7). Thus certain aspects of cultural experience may be more widely shared than others.

A key implication of such a connectionist view of mind is that not only do individual experiences form the basis for shared cultural beliefs and behaviors but cultural forms, in turn, act to subtly shape the perceptions and understandings of individual culture members. Stephen Leavitt’s chapter on a Christian revival movement in Papua, New Guinea, demonstrates empirically this interconnection between experience and culture. He found

that the Bumbita enthusiastically embraced a Christian revival movement out of a desire to attain consensus and social harmony. This desire for consensus derived initially from individual needs and experiences as structured by cultural conceptions of the self. For the Bumbita, Leavitt writes, self schemas set up a tension between a desire for personal autonomy and the sense that one is, in fact, defined by relations to others so that no act can be undertaken without consideration of its potential impact on relatives and associates. This tension leads the Bumbita to be guarded in their dealings with others, keeping desires and motives secret as much as possible. In such a situation, Leavitt argues, the idea of consensus becomes appealing precisely because it neutralizes this contradiction born of experience. Everyone is fostering one goal while also preserving a sense of autonomy. Thus shared desires and their formulations in cultural expectations shaped the content of the revival movement. Yet, once it was under way, individual experiences with bickering and distrust led to disillusionment with the movement's promise of consensus, contributing to its failure.

Linda Garro's chapter in this volume provides a detailed, empirical study of the ways in which cultural understandings shape even the memories of individual experiences. Among the Anishinaabe, there is a culturally accepted belief that illness and misfortune often result from the prior mistreatment of animals. In an attempt to explain why his daughter's rash was not responding to medical treatments, one of Garro's informants drew upon this shared notion of causation to search his memory and to produce an emotionally vivid account of his encounter with a snake some twenty-five years previously, which he subsequently decided was the cause of his daughter's illness. Garro notes that such strong cultural expectations serve to highlight individual experiences with animals in part because these experiences engender the emotions of fear and worry, making them more likely to be remembered in the first place. Because these experiences are more salient than are the memories of other unmarked experiences, they may also be recalled more easily when the triggering conditions of an unresolved illness are present. Cultural beliefs, then, can shape the ways that individuals attend to, remember, and then actively reconstruct memories in the process of solving concrete cultural problems.

### **New approaches to conceptualizing and studying experience**

A connectionist model of the mind, according to Westen, illuminates the need for a broader conceptualization of experience and how it is acquired and transmitted. While actual experiences may shape cultural forms, there are many factors that shape the way that such experiences themselves transpire. Implicit associational learning, for example, may occur through everyday actions and experiences while conscious beliefs may be more heavily

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

shaped through explicit teaching. Thus a variety of methodological approaches may be needed to fully explore the complicated interrelationship between culture and experience.

Doug Hollan's chapter in this volume updates Robert LeVine's (1982) review of person-centered ethnography and outlines three methodological approaches that characterize recent research on culture and experience. These three approaches focus attention either on what people say, on what people do, or on how people embody personal experience. The authors represented in this volume use these different methodological approaches; at the same time, their resultant findings extend Hollan's distinction to a theoretical level, demonstrating that a more complete understanding of personal experience is dependent upon efforts to untangle the interconnections that obtain between its subjective, behavioral, and embodied aspects.

*Analyzing the subjective aspects of individual experience*

Traditionally, Hollan writes, person-centered researchers like volume authors Garro and Leavitt have attended primarily to what people say about their subjective experiences and have examined these verbal reports for what they reveal about the relationships between such experiences and the larger cultural context. One reason this strategy is so important, Hollan notes, is because verbal report remains the only means we have of directly sampling a phenomenon like personal experience, which is very difficult to study. This approach, moreover, can reveal quite explicitly the mutually constituted nature of cultural representations and individual experience as illustrated in the examples discussed previously from the work of Leavitt and Garro.

Yet, as Hollan points out, the relationship between verbal utterance and subjective experience is an extremely complicated one that may be affected by the difficulty of expressing certain types of experiences and by the narrative conventions and social constraints guiding the purpose and scope of verbal interactions. Garro's example discussed above of the informant who attributed his daughter's illness to his own encounter with a snake demonstrates the need to attend carefully to both the social setting and the task being pursued by the individual as these comprise the social context of verbal report. As she observes, her informant's recollection was elicited during his visit to a traditional Anishinaabe healer raising the question of the extent to which his account is constructed in response to the suggestions of that healer. A further complicating factor is the degree to which this informant wishes to persuade Garro of the validity of his interpretation of his daughter's illness and thereby also validate the actions he took in response to her condition. All too often a careful consideration of social

context is lacking in experience-near approaches, which therefore privilege the study of cultural representations as revealed in discourse over the analysis of the social dynamics affecting the production of such discourse.

*Analyzing the behavioral aspects of individual experience*

As Hollan points out, a number of person-centered ethnographers currently emphasize the importance of grounding discussions of human experience in the compelling concerns of people's everyday lives by returning to fine-grained, participatory ethnographic work. Volume authors LeVine and Norman, Leavitt, and Brown base their interpretive chapters on long-term fieldwork that includes systematic observation and attends to the intersection of lived experience and verbal report. As a result, their data provide the basis for more complex conceptualizations of implicit learning.

Authors LeVine and Norman, for example, analyze the ways in which the concrete practices of German mothers affect the implicit associational learning of their infants, and then go further to explore the motivational sources of these mothers' behaviors. German infants, the authors contend, develop a strong sense of self-reliance from an early age because of their mothers' socialization practices. These mothers, for example, often let their young infants cry in their cribs for an hour or more in the morning before attending to them, and they leave the infants at home alone while they are out shopping and visiting. When they are home, moreover, they frequently ignore the demands of infants, especially when these are considered to be excessive cries for attention. As a result, the authors argue, these infants develop an implicit disposition toward self-reliance from actual experience and this disposition, in turn, shapes the infants' subsequent behavioral responses to caregivers.

Yet this documentation of implicit learning only provides a partial glimpse into the complex relationship that obtains between culture and experience, the authors contend, because the socialization environment itself is constructed largely by parents who are motivated to rear children in a certain way. Specifically, the authors argue that a model stressing the need for parents to promote virtue by bringing up a child to be "fit for life" combined with shared German cultural values emphasizing self-reliance and the love of order, shape maternal ideas and caretaking behaviors. Thus while regularities in the socialization environment of these German infants may determine the precocious dispositions they acquire, these regularities of pattern are themselves generated out of the conscious, intentional acts of mothers who are motivated by both explicitly taught and implicitly acquired German cultural values and patterns of caretaking.

In another chapter, Carl Ratner critiques behavioral studies that focus

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)

exclusively on global experience without attending to particular tasks and the environments in which these are performed. He proposes an alternative perspective, activity theory, for gaining a broader understanding of the relation of experience to culture. Activity theorists contend that culture consists fundamentally of socially organized practical activity, and that the specific activities individuals pursue are likely to influence the aspects of the cultural pattern they attend to and absorb. Ratner follows Bourdieu (1984) in noting that the activities individuals find meaningful and choose to pursue are themselves a product of a concrete socioeconomic system grounded in a particular historical epoch. It is the social organization of an activity and the cultural instruments used to carry it out, moreover, that activity theorists assume stimulate and organize psychological phenomena. Thus, Ratner, echoing the ecological theory of an earlier generation of anthropologists like Kardiner (1945) and the Whittings (1975), argues that changes in the social environment may subtly alter the nature of specific activities and the groups of people who perform them, thereby transforming the implicitly acquired psychological dispositions of individual culture members. A key theoretical insight emerging from studies of concrete individual activities, Ratner maintains, is the demonstration that individual psychological change is tied to societal change. Since concepts and psychological phenomena are shaped by practical activities which are grounded in concrete social patterns, significant psychological change requires corresponding changes in the organization of social life.

While the theoretical perspectives articulated by Ratner and by LeVine and Norman differ in some important respects, they complement each other. Clearly, LeVine and Norman's research findings demonstrate the importance of the concrete activities of German mothers in shaping the behavioral responses and implicit psychological dispositions of their infants. However, LeVine and Norman go beyond activity theory to explore the importance of a shared cultural ideology in shaping specific maternal ideas and in determining the common behavioral strategies that structure the infants' environment. In so doing, they challenge Ratner's unidirectional direction of change and emphasize, instead, the reciprocal feedback that continually occurs between cultural ideals, individual motivations, and the social environment in which concrete activities take place.

On the other hand, LeVine and Norman's review of the historical evolution of child-rearing attitudes and practices in the United States clearly illustrates the importance of Ratner's insight that individual psychological change is tied ultimately to changes in the larger social environment as mediated through shifts in patterns of activity. LeVine and Norman report, for example, that child-rearing during the early part of this century was "medicalized" as a response to the threat of infectious disease, and that

pediatricians advised mothers to maintain a hygienic environment for infants, which included keeping them on inflexible routines for feeding, sleeping and bodily contact. These activities subsequently cultivated a psychological disposition toward self-reliance in American infants similar to that seen in German infants today.

*Analyzing the embodied aspects of individual experience*

As Hollan notes in his chapter, person-centered ethnographers have begun to pay increasing attention to the ways in which subjective experience is “embodied,” that is, to “how the senses and perceptions of the body are culturally elaborated into the experience of self and other” (p. 56). This area has long been neglected by traditional ethnographers who have focused, instead, Hollan reports, on talk and on linear, discursive, and cognized forms of data collection and analysis. As a consequence, anthropology has neglected other potentially important aspects of personal experience that are more tacit, visceral, imaginal, and “preobjective” (p. 57).

While researchers interested in the study of embodiment generally agree that minds cannot be studied independently of the bodies that they occupy, the difficulty of apprehending and representing embodied forms of experience is a considerable methodological obstacle. Hollan reports that person-centered ethnographers have generally pursued three approaches to the study of embodied experience. These include formal phenomenological studies of how perception and consciousness are created and maintained, more qualitative studies of how bodily senses become culturally elaborated in different ways, and studies in which bodies are used as a way of gaining privileged access to aspects of subjective experience that are otherwise unknowable or unspoken.

Westen contends that connectionist models of the mind are particularly well suited to theorizing about the creation and maintenance of perception and consciousness because they have the potential to integrate psychoanalytic insights about affect and motivation with cognitive insights into the acquisition and organization of knowledge. He cites examples of recent experiments demonstrating the existence of implicit or unconscious affective and motivational processes and argues that because feelings, wishes, and fears are associated with representations of people, situations, and abstract concepts, they will be activated unconsciously along with other forms of information when an associative neural network is stimulated by something in the person’s environment.

Theorists have often disagreed, however, about the conditions that bring information stored in networks of association into consciousness. While cognitive theorists assume that information becomes conscious when its

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80319-9 - The Psychology of Cultural Experience

Edited by Carmella C. Moore and Holly F. Mathews

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Holly F. Mathews and Carmella C. Moore*

activation exceeds some threshold, psychoanalytic theorists, Westen writes, contend that important or significant information is more likely to become conscious (except when it is emotionally threatening). For Westen, then, consciousness is a joint function of level of cognitive activation, level of emotional significance, and affective quality that can either excite or inhibit representations from becoming conscious. The implication of his view is that affects are not only associatively *linked* to ideas but also *shape* them. Thus, for Garro's Anishinaabe informant discussed previously, the stress and despair arising from an unresolved illness activated the memory of an associationally linked experience with a snake that was itself marked in memory because of the fear and anxiety the individual experienced twenty-five years previously.

An emerging area of interest in studies of embodiment is how the senses and perceptions of the body affect and are affected by culturally mediated experiences. In a 1992 review article on the relationship of biological to psychological anthropology, Worthman argues that "physical states may mediate effects exerted by experience; social construction of experience may be designed to enhance these effects" (1992: 158). The implication, Worthman suggests, is that the timing of experience relative to physical development will have important effects on cognition, affect, and behavior. Thus, critical or sensitive periods, she writes, "open windows of differential sensitivity or developmental vulnerability to environmental inputs" (1992: 159). While LeVine and Norman do not deal directly with the embodied aspects of infant experiences in Germany, Worthman's contention is suggestive about the importance of timing and the physical aspects of the socialization practices of German mothers. Attempts to instill self-reliance begin in infancy, when German mothers selectively both offer and withhold bodily contact and comfort to babies. Thus the precocious self-reliance in the infant is grounded in embodied experiences which serve to link affective responses to the caretaker with a developing sense of self-awareness. This complex of preverbal experiences, in turn, forms the basis from which these children later interpret and respond to environmental stimuli, including the Strange Situation psychological test reported on by LeVine and Norman.

As Hollan notes, one of the key problems in the study of the embodied aspects of experience is ascertaining how we know that the senses, perceptions, and bodily experiences that we have discovered are really those of our subjects and not of ourselves – that is, how do we ensure that our findings are not really our own perceptual projections or preoccupations? This can be particularly difficult because, as Worthman (1992: 152) documents, the body has long been considered by psychological researchers as a significant source of primary metaphors in thought and hence is often assumed by