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978-0-521-88043-5 - Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects

Edited by Ute Schonpflug

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CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Cultural Transmission discusses psychological, developmental, social, and methodological research on how cultural information is socially transmitted from one generation to the next within families. Studying processes of cultural transmission may help analyze the continuity or change of cultures, including those that have to cope with migration or the collapse of a political system. An evolutionary perspective is elaborated in the first part of the book; the second part takes a cross-cultural perspective by presenting international research on development and intergenerational relations in the family; and the third part provides intracultural analyses of mechanisms and methodological aspects of cultural transmission. Consisting of contributions by experts in the field, this state-of-the-art source book is intended for anyone with interests in cultural maintenance and change – especially researchers and teachers in disciplines such as psychology, social and behavioral sciences, and education – and for applied professionals in culture management and family counseling, as well as professionals involved with migrants.

Ute Schönplflug teaches at Free University of Berlin's Department of Psychology and is an adjunct member of the Institute of Cognitive Science at the University of Colorado. She is also Associate Editor of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* and author and co-author of several textbooks on psychology.

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FOREWORD

Although cross-cultural studies in psychology have existed for more than 100 years, it has only been in the past decade or two that contemporary, mainstream psychology has embraced the importance of culture as a significant influence on psychological processes. In the past two decades, we have gained much knowledge and improved our understanding of the nature, contents, and functions of culture as a macrosocial variable and of its relationship to behavior on the individual level. At a time when more and more of psychology is looking inward and at the micro-level building blocks of behavior in neurons, neurochemicals, and brain processes, the study of culture and its relationship with psychology is refreshing as it looks outward, beyond the individual, into groups and contexts to find frameworks and platforms for understanding human behavior.

This work is still in process, however, and one of the major problems that psychologists doing work involving cultures face entails how to link individual-level human behavior with cultural-level phenomena. Indeed, the field is still plagued by studies dominated by quasi-experimental designs, in which differences are observed across supposed cultural groups and researchers interpret the source of these differences as cultural with little or no empirical justification (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006). In fact, many researchers go beyond making these ecological fallacies (Campbell, 1961) and even attribute causal mechanisms to culture from such data, interpreting that culture “caused” the differences observed or that their data highlighted “cultural influences on” psychological processes. (Matsumoto and Yoo [2006] called these kinds of mistaken attributions “cultural attribution fallacies.”)

It is in this important gap in our theoretical conceptualizations and empirical approaches that work on cultural transmission makes a strong contribution. Examining the ways in which the contents of culture – explicit and implicit, objective and subjective – are transmitted to members of a cultural group, studies of cultural transmission ultimately aim to forge those linkages between culture as a macro-level, social construct and individual-level psychological processes

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that many researchers take for granted or blatantly ignore. By understanding those linkages, cultural-transmission researchers are able to highlight how the contents of culture are translated and communicated, highlighting the close bonds that are formed between individuals and the societies and cultures in which they live.

This edited book, *Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects*, is the first volume published in the series titled “Psychology and Culture.” The focus of this series is the impact of culture on a wide variety of psychological processes. This book highlights the major contributions that this effort has made to date. Schönplflug has assembled the world’s foremost researchers in the area of cultural transmission, each of whom has brought to bear the state-of-the-art thinking and research in his or her respective area. Collectively, this volume amasses the amazing amount of work that has been accomplished in the field and highlights many of the significant contributions to our understanding of this important topic to date. This work describes the contents and processes of culture as a uniquely human product; the direction in which transmission occurs – vertically, horizontally, and obliquely; and its manifold ways of spreading out. Because of this work, we can discard primitive notions of cultural transmission as being primarily vertical and unidirectional (e.g., parent to child) and understand transmission as occurring within families, peers, and institutions – and going in both directions.

The work in this volume also shows that cultural transmission is selective: not all of the contents of culture are transmitted to all cultural members. This important concept provides the basis for understanding individual differences as well as cultural fluidity, both clearly important topics in the study of culture and psychology. The work emphasizes not only what is being transmitted but also how and why – that is, allowing for survival mechanisms and ways of being to “ratchet up” in each successive generation, ensuring not only the survival of the human species but also its flourishing.

By presenting the major contributions that this work on cultural transmission has made to psychology in recent years, the volume also takes a thorough, objective look at what is missing – the gaps in our knowledge – and the limitations in current research approaches to transmission. The final chapter provides readers with a road map of the future, one that should forge new ways to understand transmission as well as new ways to study it.

In my opinion, no serious student of culture and its relationship with psychological processes should be without a strong, solid foundation in understanding the nature of cultural transmission, because this is precisely the work that allows us to make those precious links between culture and psychology. Without those links, our understanding of the relationship between culture and psychology is doomed to be confined by the inherent limitations of doing research without incorporating cultural-context variables (Poortinga, 1990) or understanding the

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nature, processes, and mechanisms of cultural transmission. This volume should be read by all serious students of culture.

David Matsumoto
San Francisco, CA, USA
July 2008

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