

Introduction to Culture and Psychology Program Transcript

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NARRATOR: What is culture? In what ways does it shape people's experiences? How do individuals transform culture? In this video program, leading experts share initial thoughts about the relationship between culture and psychology, and the importance of cross-cultural research.

DAVID MATSUMOTO: I think this area is one of the most fascinating areas of study in psychology, because finding cultural differences leads you to really interesting questions. And it's thinking about the answers to those questions that is really interesting and exciting to me. And those answers are not easy. I have to struggle with those potential answers all the time, as many of us do in this field. And being part of that struggle is one of the great things about being in cultural psychology today.

When you study the relationship between culture and psychology, you run across terms known as cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology. And to tell you the truth, in the past there have been differences in the definitions of these various terms. I think where we are right now is that we can think of cultural psychology as a branch of psychology that recognizes the importance of culture, and it incorporates culture as a very important variable in theories and in research.

Cross-cultural psychology is a method. So when we compare cultures against each other, then we can find out something about cultures, and we can incorporate that knowledge into our cultural theories. So cross-cultural psychology can be thought of as a method used by cultural psychologists to inform cultural psychology.

STEVEN HEINE: I'm interested in researching how culture shapes our motivations-- the things that we want and the ways that we want to view ourselves. And I first got interested in the idea that culture can shape the ways that we think and the things that we want when, right after I graduated from university, I had a job teaching English in a very small town in Japan. I was actually the first foreigner to ever live in this town. And I went there fresh with my psychology degree, and I quickly realized that all I had learned in my psychology classes in Canada didn't seem to work so well for explaining the behavior of my new group of friends that I had. And this made me realize just how deeply culture penetrates the mind and the way that we think.

I think it's important for psychologists to study culture. For one reason of a historical quirk, that compared with all the other sciences, psychology is dominated by American research. And American research conducted with

American undergrads, which I think in itself is an interesting psychological question, is why are Americans so interested in psychology? But so the majority of research on how the mind works has been conducted with American undergrads. And so really, this tells us quite well how American undergrads think. But it raises the question of how well do our theories generalise to other people in other parts of the world?

And the research has targeted American undergrads because it's been guided by this assumption that we can understand the mind by just focusing on the person, focusing on the brain. And people's brains are the same everywhere, so you might as well study the most convenient ones. Study the ones in your classes, rather than going out to track in the hills of Papua, New Guinea.

And I think what recent culture psychological research has revealed is that these ways of thinking that we've seen in our studies conducted in the US with college students don't always yield the same pattern of results when we study them elsewhere. Some basic processes, what we think is human nature, don't replicate so well in other cultural contexts. I think this underscores how important it is for psychology to be international, for us to go out and conduct studies in cultures around the world. And much of this work still remains to be done.

SHINOBU KITAYAMA: I'm originally from Japan. And I came to the United States to attend the graduate school. And I experienced a variety of extremely interesting cultural experiences. And around that time, one prominent anthropologist by the name of Rick Shweder, at the University of Chicago, said that culture and the psyche make each other up. And I thought this phrase is just great, and just speaking to the very issue of the role of culture in human psychology. That is, our ways of thinking, and our ways of feeling into ourself, making the self and so on, may be a very important part of culture. And culture can shape all those psychological processes. And at the same time, those processes can shape up the culture.

So cultural context we have outside, consisting of many artifacts, symbolic resources, mass media, and all sorts of patterns of behaviors made possible by those human behaviors. But at the same time, each individual participates in those collective patterns, merely in different ways-- very, very idiosyncratic.

So if I'm a man from Asian country, I do it in some way. If you're a woman, and if you are from other ethnic groups, including white American group-- that's an ethnic group as well-- you do participate in that collective cultural context in some unique way. So we became very interested in this dynamic process of mutual constitution, how culture can create human psychology. At the same time, culture is constantly created, reproduced and changed by the collective pattern of human behaviors.

HAZEL MARKUS: In studying cultural psychology, we are looking for patterns, generalizations about if you are in middle class American context, you're likely to think highly of yourself, or focus on yourself. But of course, because culture is about change, and people have a lot of agency, they can decide whether or not they're going to pick up these particular ideas or patterns, and focus on them and pay attention. So for example, in an independent American context, there may be some people that say, no, I don't like that idea. I'm going to live in a very interdependent way. I'm going to raise my children very interdependently, I'm just going to resist those ideas. And of course, that's what's amazing about individuals. They have a lot of agency, control for what they do.

So we will all be influenced by the patterns that are there in the world, but we won't all be influenced in the same way. So we can see both a lot of similarity, but we can also see lots of variability, as well. Lots of differences within a given cultural context. And I think it's important when we're studying culture to emphasize that, because very often it can sound like what we're doing when we're talking about American contexts, or Mexican contexts, or Guinean contexts, is stereotyping people.

What we're talking about are patterns that may be true for people, some people, if they engage in particular ways. But we also expect to find lots of variability there as well. And it's also important to point out, I think, at that point, that we talk a lot about national origin as the powerful context. But when we're taking a cultural approach, we could think about those other significant cultural contexts. Well so, your ethnicity, your religion, your neighborhood, your family. All of these are contexts that have with them their own ideas, and practices, and ways of doing things that influence people. And then the individual gets to be the one that synthesizes this, to make the different individuals we become.

DAVID MATSUMOTO: Many students come to culture and psychology thinking that they're going to learn all about exotic cultural differences. One of the things I want to really impart to the students is that learning about culture and its influence on psychology is about learning about similarities as well as differences. And what we want to do is learn as much about how people of different cultures are similar in many ways, as well as different.

One piece of advice I'd like to give to the students is to throw out every preconceived notion about culture and cultural differences you've ever had. Because when you engage with this kind of material with those preconceived notions, it's very difficult to be open and flexible about learning about it. But if you throw out some preconceived notions that you might have, it's much easier to learn the material and to understand the influence, the vast influence, that culture has on psychological processes.

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