**Culture and psychology: Understanding the intersection, and trying to teach it.**

In their seminal book *Culture and Thought* (1974), Michael Cole and Sylvia Scribner state that the “idea of employing variations in cultural experience to decide basic questions about the nature of human nature is very attractive. But scholars have failed to arrive at any general consensus about how to proceed” (p. 8). More than four decades later, the conjoint fields of “cultural psychology” and “cross-cultural psychology” have grown in interest and research, but the main problem of how to understand the psychology of difference remains a challenge at the very heart of psychological science—and to the effective teaching of psychology in a world that is increasingly connected and diverse.

It is with considerable appreciation, therefore, that there has appeared a guide for teachers who struggle with how to present, describe, and dissect psychology for the students of today’s more globalized world. Kenneth Keith, the editor of this volume and a long-standing scholar in the domain, has pulled together a wide array of specialists in this latest installment in the “Culture and Psychology” series by Cambridge University Press. *Culture Across the Curriculum: A Psychology Teacher’s Handbook* advocates for a globally-oriented psychology curriculum that is at once culturally competent and pedagogically innovative.

The book is comprised of 26 chapters. After a short prologue outlining the book’s mission to expand the role of culture in the teaching of various psychology subfields, the book launches into four chapters that delineate a rationale and conceptual framework for a contextualized global psychology education and posit a working model for cultural competence. Keith himself writes two of these initial chapters in which he deftly traces the history of culture in psychology, offering sample questions for integrating culture into any Psychology 101 course. In a manner similar to the Cole-Scribner citation above, Keith asks key questions endemic in the field, such as: Are psychologists necessarily biased by their own cultural upbringing? Are research instruments equivalent for different populations? How might classic psychological theories and models be applied and modified across different cultures? And so forth. Such questions, and others like them, have not only fed psychologists’ research interests for decades but have also sparked discussions in psychology classrooms around the world. Culture poses a conundrum for teachers of psychology largely because of how heavily psychological science depends on what Keith calls a “Euro-American discipline” and what others critique as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations (after Heinrich et al., 2010). As such, Keith asks a fundamental question for the teaching of psychology: Whose psychology is it? If it is a global social science, why is psychological research based on less than 5% of humanity (Arnett, 2008)?

In the 22 chapters that follow, specialists from a multitude of sub-disciplines try to answer these questions. The chapters are collected into subsections including: Research and Statistics, Biological Connections, Development, Cognition, Social Psychology, Health and Well-Being, and Personality, Disability, and Disorders. Most
provide both a description of the central paradigmatic issues that are endemic in the domain, and—very helpfully for the classroom teacher—practical instructional examples with tangible materials and resources for further implementation. Among these, Chapter 6 on culture-oriented research and teaching, Chapter 7 on psychological measurement, Chapter 15 on language, and Chapter 26 on clinical psychology seem particularly well-balanced and helpful. Furthermore, while it is not possible to review in detail here each of the more than two dozen contributions, a few stand out, some for what they are able to effectively achieve, and others because they raise more questions than their respective authors resolve.

In Chapter 5 on teaching statistics, Susan Nolan and Andrew Simon raise the question of why one should include “culture” in a statistics course. Good question. When Wagner (the senior author of this review) was in graduate school, statistics courses used agricultural yields as databases and the issue of culture was never—ever—raised. It was assumed, further, that the ubiquitous college sophomore “subjects” in university experiments were invariable: no need to mention the age, gender, race, language, or ethnicity of the individuals tested. Times have indeed changed, so that even if population samples are still biased toward the West (and skewed by WEIRD sampling as noted above), there is much more effort to identify who actually goes into the population sampling mix. Furthermore, as the authors astutely point out, it is not enough now to simply note a statistically significant difference between two observed samples; “effect sizes” are now de rigueur in research in order to measure the size of the differences, especially in cases where the populations themselves are not fully understood.

In Chapter 14 on educational psychology, Noriyuki Inoue offers a case study of a teacher education program actively infused with cross-cultural content, with particular emphasis on detailing a global study course that included a learning trip to Japan. Inoue details the conception and execution of the course, concluding, in part, that international collaboration grounds and deepens student learning. The chapter is an excellent example of cross-cultural psychology as practice, and details of the global study course are insightful and interesting. Even so, the chapter leaves the reader with questions about generalization and broader trends in educational psychology both in other countries and on key topics such as leadership, policy, and classroom pedagogy. In Chapter 15 on language and culture, David Kreiner provides an excellent synthesis of core ideas, ongoing debates, cultural concerns, pedagogical rationales, examples of teaching/learning activities, and an annotated list of further resources/materials. Kreiner’s guiding thesis of language as deeply intertwined with culture and its centrality in modern psychology is trenchant and effective. In Chapter 16 on social behavior, Richard Miller and Tyler Collette likewise offer a good chapter that touches upon central concepts of social psychology such as social cognition, self, identity, as well as major issues such as conformity, persuasion, and aggression. Still, the chapter is an example of how cultural differences remain framed as “West vs. East” overall, while the prevalent work of social psychologists on cultural differences within America (such as those related to prejudice and bias) are simply ignored.

By contrast, some chapters are more problematic for other reasons such as over reliance on classic (but now largely refuted) studies, narrow cross-cultural comparisons, or very restricted research scope. For example, in Chapter 9 on perception, William Phillips claims—uncritically—that the well-known but dubious carpentered world hypothesis (Segall et al., 1966) represents the kind of example that should be taught today, but that is highly problematic (see long-ago critique in
Wagner, 1977). In Chapter 12 on cognitive psychology, Aaron Richmond cites what looks like a Googled collection of studies on “culture and cognition” without noting in any way their importance for science or in the classroom, while also citing (and strangely misrepresenting) a paper on facial recognition of “Hebrew” men, as if the latter is a racial category (which the authors of the original study do not assert; see Zwebner et al., 2017). In Chapter 13 on memory, Qi Wang begins with a classic and useful historical example of culture and memory in Africa by Sir Frederic Bartlett, but then does a deep dive into mainly her own work on autobiographical memory in what she calls “East-West.” This singular account of one’s own research, while detailed, ignores the wide variety of studies that are relevant to this fascinating and important area of work (including by one of us: see Wagner, 1980).

Criticisms of psychological research across cultures have been around since the inception of psychology, as Keith notes in his useful discussion of Wilhelm Wundt’s (1916) massive global work on “folk psychology” in the late 19th century. Still, we must take a moment to ask whether the value of this cross-cultural research is of similar value to those in “other” countries as it is for the West. Of the many issues described in the book—from memory and perception to personality and psychological disorders, how many of these would be of near-term value to those living in developing countries (where much of the cross-cultural examples come from)? Returning to the work of Cole and Scribner, the same scholars published later a major book on the impact of literacy on cognition in Liberia (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Until their work, it was often claimed that literacy changed very broadly the way people think, a view that was widely accepted (with little evidence) by scholars over the decades. Their research solidly drew an important distinction between macro-variables such as literacy, and more functional variables like the script and the manner in which children learn to read. Yet, in hindsight, as important as this work was for a cultural psychological science (though oddly disregarded in the book under review), there was almost no impact on the international agencies and national education ministries whose day jobs were to help children learn better in Liberia and in other developing countries.

In other words, we can advance empirical science in many ways, and one of those ways is to engage in science both universally and globally while maintaining the kind of care needed to better understand nuanced cultural differences. We advance psychological science at our peril if we don’t understand the opportunity costs of focusing on issues that may be irrelevant to the peoples we invest substantial time, energy, and resources to study. Since the early work of Cole and Scribner four decades ago, relatively few cross-cultural psychologists have bothered to understand the real and practical needs of children, youth, and adults growing up in the most disadvantaged communities worldwide (for a counterexample, see Wagner, 2018). As a Handbook of ideas and resources aimed at training new generations of scholars and practitioners, Keith and colleagues have missed an important opportunity for making advances that could help students move from research to policy to practice with a truly global perspective. Hopefully, the next Handbook will do better on this account.

For teachers of psychology, this Handbook is nonetheless both approachable and pragmatic. Many content examples and learning activities are explicit and detailed, and the suggested resources are plentiful and pertinent. The Handbook succeeds in providing materials and practices that will help teachers foster critical thinking in students, especially those with cultural interests. For example, in Chapter 19, entitled “Cross-Cultural Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities,” Mary Kite and
colleagues provide as set of teaching activities that require students to access data from the World Values Survey Association and develop self-reflective essays and policy recommendations. As such, students will learn how to interpret theories, concepts, and research results and to examine how well they might map onto other cultures and contexts. However well they may cultivate intercultural sensitivity and awareness, students still have much to do to pay attention to their own biases. Another major asset of the Handbook is its dedication to covering the breadth of subfields commonly studied by all psychology students (thinking truly across the psychology curriculum), including those subfields that seem, at first glance, to be universal rather than culturally-specific (such as statistics, biological psychology, etc.). Careful perusal of this volume will push the reader/teachers/students to interrogate how definitions of “culture” and “psychology” are negotiated in relation to one another across the subdisciplines.

Today, psychology and neuroscience seem to be battling for supremacy in both the public’s mind and the interests of students. Evolutionary biology is also making inroads on territory that was once thought to be explainable by culture and context alone. At the same time, in countries the world over, the rise of identity politics—by race, gender, language, and so forth—has given greater impetus to trying to understand the knowledge, attitudes, values, and motivations of those who see themselves as different from others. At times, reading the daily newspaper is to read about cultural diversity, and the feeling that others are abiding by principles that may be quite variant from “our own.” From this perspective, in terms not only of social science but also in daily life, there are few topics that are more salient in today’s globalizing societies.

At their core, the intersections of psychology and culture share similar concerns to those embedded in the classic debate of nature vs. nurture. Essentially, the question boils down to: What about human psychology is global and universal, and what is local and individual? Nearly a century has gone by since John B. Watson (1930) famously declared: “Give me a dozen healthy infants, well-formed, and my own specified world to bring them up in and I’ll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchant, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors.” How we interpret this quote depends on how the terms cultural and cross-cultural psychology are used today to account for variability.

Kenneth Keith and his co-authors have provided us with a much-needed window into helping our students examine Watson’s claim. How might we understand and account for diversity and distinctiveness, of both lived and shared human experiences and approaches toward understanding and studying them? And more importantly, what might we do with these insights? This topic is not an easy one, and if anything, the variability in approaches proposed by the contributors of the volume demonstrate just how diverse psychology is today—and how much more research is needed. As such, Culture Across the Curriculum serves as a welcome contribution toward understanding the multiple relationships between psychology and culture.

References:


