

Some Thoughts About Teaching Issues of Culture in Psychology

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What is Culture?

One of the major conceptual issues one faces as a researcher or teacher dealing with culture concerns one's definition of culture. Over the years the most common definition of culture is something like "a shared system of socially transmitted behavior that describes, defines, and guides people's ways of life, communicated from one generation to the next." I myself have based much of my work until now on such a definition (Matsumoto, 2000).

A limitation of this type of definition, however, is that it is applicable to all social animals. After all, fish swim in schools, wolves hunt in packs, lions roam in prides, bees communicate sources of food to each other, and even birds build nests and have nest eggs! Many social animals build relationships between themselves and the community; differentiate between in-groups and out-groups; negotiate issues concerning status, power, dominance, and hierarchy within groups; and distribute tasks.

Thus, culture as typically defined is not a uniquely human product. But certainly there are some things unique about human culture. I believe that the unique aspects of human culture are rooted in uniquely human abilities, which include language; the ability to know that oneself and others are intentional agents (Tomasello, 1999); and the reflective ability to know that others can make judgments of oneself, and to know that others know that you can make such judgments of them (Goffman, 1959; Tomasello). Humans also have the unique ability to continually improve on discoveries known as the ratcheting effect (Tomasello, Kruger, & Ratner, 1993).

These abilities differentiate human social and cultural life from that of animals in three important ways: complexity, differentiation, and institutionalization. Human social and cultural life is much more complex than other animals. We are members of multiple groups, each having its own purpose, hierarchy, and networking system. Human cultures evolved to help us deal with larger and more complex social groups. To deal with this complexity, humans make greater differentiations in their social lives, and institutionalize much of it. One of the functions of human culture is to give meaning to this social complexity.

Given this, I define human culture as a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, coordinate socially to achieve a viable existence, transmit social behavior, pursue happiness and well-being, and derive meaning from life (Matsumoto, in press; Matsumoto & Juang, in press). The meanings conveyed help us to meet others to procreate and produce offspring, put food on the table, provide shelter from the elements, and care for our daily biological essentials.

But human culture is much more than that. It helps us to create and maintain social systems, create beliefs about the world, and communicate the meaning system to other humans and subsequent generations (Matsumoto, in press). It allows for complex social networks and relationships, enhancing the meaning of normal, daily activities. It allows us to be creative in music, art, and drama and work; and to seek recreation, engage in sports, and organize competitions, whether in the local community little league or the Olympic Games. It allows us to search the sea and space, and to create mathematics, as well as an educational system. It allows us to go to the moon, to create a research laboratory on Antarctica, and send probes to Mars and Jupiter. Unfortunately, it also allows us to have wars, create nuclear weapons, and recruit and train terrorists.

Given this definition, culture is not race, ethnicity, or nationality. But culture gives these social constructs and others (e.g., sexual orientation, disabilities) meaning. Moreover, cultures around the world can be very similar in some respects, and very different in others. Thus, when talking about culture, it's a good idea to think about the meaning systems involved, where they come from, and similarities as well as differences with other cultures around the world.

The Complexity of Explaining Behavior Across Cultures

One of the problems we have to deal with as teachers of psychology concerns how students deal with issues of diversity. Too often, many class presentations about culture emphasize differences more than similarities. Cultures, however, help to produce both similarities and differences. Typical work on culture often also seems to imply (maybe not overtly) that "American" perspectives are the norm and other cultural perspectives are "unusual" or "outliers." Thus, it's a challenge to get students (and sometimes researchers!) to realize that they have unconscious cultural blinders that all too often lead them to make value judgments that are inappropriate.

Here's what usually happens. We observe differences in what we would normally expect in people who appear physically different than ourselves. We then typically interpret these differences as cultural differences.

Our interpretations may be correct; in fact, those differences may indeed be culture. But, our interpretations may be wrong. Incorrect interpretations occur because of biases we have when interpreting the behavior of others. For one, psychologists have a love of differences. In research, there is a bias in the political nature of publishing similarities vs. differences in psychological research; it's easier to publish differences. When researchers attribute observed differences between people of different races, nationalities, ethnic groups, or any such participant variable to culture without empirical justification, I have called this attributional bias the cultural attribution fallacy (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006).

In reality, the sources of motivation for human behavior are complex. In a recent paper, I outlined three sources of such motivation: basic human nature, which includes dispositions, cognitive abilities, and universal psychological processes we are born with; culture, including unique situational meanings, social roles, and norms; and personality and individual differences, including role identities, narratives, values, and aggregate role experiences (Matsumoto, in press). Undoubtedly there are other sources of behavior as well, and all of these contribute to producing the kinds of differences in individual and group behavior that we observe in our everyday lives or research.

We understand this level of complexity when explaining our own or our group's behaviors. Maybe this is because we have more intimate knowledge of the importance of all of these processes compared to people or groups we don't know. Or perhaps we have a bias in the way we want to interpret our own behaviors compared to others. Whatever

the reason, we often forget this complexity when we interpret the behaviors of others, and are often too quick in interpreting differences as culturally rooted.

One of the goals of understanding the relationship between culture and psychology is to understand the complexity of the sources of human motivation for any and all, and to learn how to apply that complexity when interpreting the behavior of others as well as ourselves. When students (and researchers) continue to just interpret all group differences as cultural, it may serve only to promulgate stereotypes about people, which is ironic because one of the goals of cultural psychology is to break down the power of stereotypes in describing people rigidly.

What Are We Teaching?

It's not easy to get students to delve into this complexity. The traditional approach in academia is to teach them about culture. When we do this, we should teach not solely cultural differences, but cultural similarities as well. If we understand culture from an environmental adaptational framework, then it is easy to see how there can be both cultural similarities and differences. I believe that understanding the basis of similarities among people and groups, along with differences, provides all of us with a common basis from which to understand each other.

That kind of traditional academic teaching involves knowledge-based outcomes, which are definitely important. But, research I have done over the years also suggests that another very important outcome to consider is emotion regulation (Matsumoto, Yoo, & LeRoux, in press). Emotion regulation is the ability to manage and modify one's emotional reactions in order to achieve constructive, desirable outcomes. It's clear from the research that, if individuals are to adapt and adjust well in dynamic, multicultural environments, they need a psychological engine that enables them to deal with the inevitable stresses that occur. Emotion regulation is part of that engine.

Traditional didactic courses that impart knowledge may not necessarily affect students' emotion regulation skills. Instead, emotion regulation, and other psychological skills, are probably best taught in experiential-based learning. This means that teachers who are interested in these kinds of student outcomes may need to create opportunities for students to have real-life experiences with real-life emotions. This could be achieved by incorporating role-plays, simulations, in-class activities, and out-of-class activities that expose students to differences that provoke emotional reactions. Informed faculty would then need to guide students in constructing, and reconstructing, their emotional experiences so as to get a better handle on them, which should then open the door to greater range of cognitive knowledge stores. This means, of course, that faculty need to be comfortable in doing so, which may require the same kind of development on the part of the faculty.

In any case, I believe we need to give strong consideration to bolstering our typically knowledge-based approaches to teaching culture by (a) teaching similarities as well as differences, and (b) incorporating experiential-based learning that will impact emotion regulation. The question, of course, is what do we want our students to learn, and how can we deliver?

Conclusion

Culture is one of the most important and fascinating topics to emerge in recent years in psychology, and we have only scratched the surface in terms of understanding it and its relationship with mental processes and behavior. Given that our world is increasingly pluralistic and multiculturally diverse, it's important for us to continue to be on the

cutting edge of knowledge and teaching in this area, so that our students can emerge as more informed voyagers of the world who have some practical skills in engaging with the complexity of a diverse life. Our ability to understand, appreciate, respect, and interact with people of very diverse cultures, lifestyles, and belief systems has implications not only for how we deal with our friends, neighbors, work colleagues, and strangers, but also with other countries and cultures. Dealing with culture is a major challenge not only on a local scale, but also on a global scale, and can mean the difference between war and peace. Hopefully, all of us, in our own ways, can help to make the world a better place through our teachings about culture to our students, and in our daily lives.

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