

Interwoven explorations: Culture and mind (in context): Introduction to the special issue

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Cultural psychologists have produced a large body of evidence documenting the profound ways in which human cognition, development and behavior are shaped by culture. One of the criticisms of cultural psychology has been that it underscores the role played by the context and the contextual constraints (i.e. resources, dispositions, systems of domination and control) in shaping social activities and behavior. In the light of this critic, it becomes relevant to ask; is it possible to put the context at the center of the analysis along with a rigorous cultural inquiry when doing cultural psychology? Why would this be necessary? Each of the contributors to this special issue propose different answers to these questions. In doing so, they contribute with more nuanced and suitable approaches to the study of the entanglements between culture, context, and mind.

The field of cultural psychology focuses on studying how cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express and shape the human psyche and how, in turn, these minds maintain and recreate the sociocultural world they inhabit. Drawing from both, ethnographic and experimental methods, cultural psychologists have produced a large body of evidence documenting the intricate and profound ways in which human cognition, development and behavior are shaped by culture. Following the guiding principle of “one mind, many mentalities”, cultural psychologists argue that observed differences in human cognition across cultures are not reducible to variations in the content of thought (e.g. beliefs or ideas) but grounded in differences in the structure and process of thought (e.g. rationality, cognitive stages, decision making processes, etc.) (Jensen, 2011). There are relatively few components in the human mind that are so fundamental or fixed that can't be shaped through socialization and cultural participation (Shweder et al., 2007). Therefore, the main changes proposed by this field is the switch to a meaning-centered approach to psychology (Bruner, 1990), and a call for careful revision of the concepts used to study psychological phenomena across cultures. The notions of independent and interdependent construals of the self (Hazel R. Markus & Kitayama, 1991), or the tripartite distinction between the ethics of autonomy, community and divinity (Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 2003) are some of the key contributions of this field.

One of the criticisms of cultural psychology has been that it underscores the role played by the context and contextual constraints (i.e. resources, dispositions, systems of domination and control) in shaping social activities and behavior. While it is true that the interactional, social, and cultural worlds are eminently symbolic, the overreliance on meaning making only allows a peripheral analysis of the context, the restraints, and conditions in which many people live including economic disadvantage, violence in its various forms, political conflict, among other social maladies. As it is argued in the sections below, this critic is

warranted only in some aspects. For instance, it is important to say that context, constraints, and power are addressed by the cultural approach to psychology in at least two different ways. The context is taken into account in the form of norms, institutions, and settings where formal and informal learning processes develop. In this sense, power is accounted for, although not in its coercive dimension. For example, the socialization of the young requires the exercise of power by adults in the form of asymmetric relationships that allows adults to delineate what is deemed right, normal, valuable or desirable, and what is not. The process of cultural transmission and the internal organization of the society require the exercise of power. Moreover, one particular contribution of the field of cultural psychology has been to problematize the assumption in psychological theory that reciprocal, egalitarian social relations are more positive than non-reciprocal and hierarchical ways of relating. For instance, while the former fosters self-expression, creativity, and innovation, the latter is grounded in imitation and maintains tradition, which has specific implications in developmental theory (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1976; Piaget, 1932). Research in cultural psychology has demonstrated that this valuation does not reflect a universal truth but has its roots in particular values prevalent in western liberal democracies (R. Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987; Vidal, 1989).

The issue of contextual constraints has been addressed to some extent by cultural psychologists. To name one example, a comparative study focusing on family sleeping preferences among Indian and American participants (Shweder & Jensen, 1995), demonstrated that, despite being exposed to identical contextual constraints (i.e. a restricted amount of rooms to fit the members of the family), it was the effect of culturally shaped moral convictions, and not only the actual space availability, what determined who should sleep by whom. A main contribution of this work was to show that psychological variability across different groups of people (variations in moral development in this particular example) is not *sufficiently* explained by contextual constraints, may these be those of physical space, monetary, educational, etc. In a way, the cultural approach to psychology takes for granted the existence of contextual constraints, but focuses on the study of each particular intentional world despite and beyond such constraints.

Nevertheless, a large amount of research studying psychological functioning in different cultures takes place under circumstances that require from the researcher the same amount of attention and analytical work to address both, culture and context. Settings with high levels of poverty, violence, or political instability demand a more central analysis of the context in order to meet the complexity of the phenomena under study. But, is it possible to put the context at the center of the analysis along with a rigorous cultural inquiry when doing cultural psychology? Is it even necessary? While there may be some controversy around these questions, perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to give this possibility a try is the evidence coming from other fields in the social sciences that seem to indicate that socioeconomic realities correlate with “cultural ways of being” (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993; H.R. Markus & Conner, 2013a). For instance, individuals in low or middle income countries tend to function within the logic of the interdependent construal of the self and/or community oriented cultures, showing a marked responsiveness to the context and a sense of belonging to a larger social structure. To be sure, it would be inaccurate to think that all community oriented cultures are the same, and that the

psychological functioning of individuals in China is equivalent to that of people in India or Brazil. Yet, it is known that across countries, low income people tend to use the ethics of community more frequently (Haidt et al., 1993), while studies in high income countries show that, generally, people are more autonomy oriented. At the same time, it is well documented that things are not as clear cut even within high income countries. For instance, regional cultures have been described in the U.S. (Markus & Conner, 2013b), with North-South cultural differences described in terms of interdependent and independent cultural clashes. The variability in psychological functioning between and within cultural groups, and the correlation with contextual differences touch on some cardinal issues for cultural psychologists. For instance, are the analyses of the cultural and contextual dimensions mutually exclusive? If they are not, is it possible to address both dimensions simultaneously in a rigorous manner? Such questions are relevant to cultural psychologists as scientists aiming to understand and meaningfully compare psychological functioning in different socio-cultural contexts.

While there is a large degree of consensus among researches regarding the important role of the context in shaping social behavior and social life in general, studies assessing precisely what is meant by context itself are surprisingly rare. For the purpose of clarity, the definition of context in this work is “both the immediate situation where things happen (i.e. who, where, when, with, what, how, etc.) and situation transcending phenomena such as representations, and identities. The immediate situation of action entails the material context (physical objects and physical environment) and the social environment that influences and co-constructs behavior” (p.367) (Howarth et al., 2013).

It can be very productive to consider the multiple ways in which context and culture are related while keeping in mind that situational and cultural factors are different analytical concepts. At its most basic level, culture is an adaptation to the environment and its challenges. Yet, culture entails more than that. A framework is needed to start thinking about the intersections between the environment, the context, and culture; between constraints and culture; between power and meaning making processes. These elements are not easily disentangled, yet they offer new possibilities for a more nuanced approach to our understanding of the human psychology. In a way, the intentional worlds at the center of the analysis in cultural psychology arise from contexts defined by specific social structures, particular levels of poverty, and unique constellations of contextual constraints and power dynamics. The particular contribution of cultural psychology, as a symbolically grounded approach, has been to think about the context not as an “objective” entity but as a medium for human development, where artifacts and practices mediate our experience and participation in the world (Miller, 2008).

This special volume of *Psychology & Society* aims to contribute to this discussion by exploring different possible answers to the questions above. Contrary to the accusation of a field that is disengaged from the study of the context in favor of the cultural analysis, the collection of papers in this volume show an increasing and dynamic body of research focusing on this topic. The integration of these dimensions is both a challenge and an opportunity, and the manuscripts reflect an exciting and ongoing scholarly discussion. Each of the authors in this volume propose their answers to the question of how to advance the

study of culture and mind while addressing the context. In doing so, they contribute with more nuanced and suitable approaches to the study of the entanglements between culture, context, and mind.

CULTURE AND POWER

The complex relationship between culture and power has been the topic of intense debate and scholarly production in the social sciences. Scholars from different disciplines have put forward arguments grounded in various perspectives and scholarly traditions. Cultural psychologists are not oblivious to such debates. Indeed, the theoretical positioning of the field provides the opportunity to contribute to the discussion from unique perspectives.

It has been already said that power is taken as a given by the meaning-centered approach to psychology. Power plays an important role in the processes of cultural transmission, enculturation, and identity formation. In other words, power is seen as an element that allows societies and cultures to organize internally and maintain the social and moral order. In this sense, the role of power in society is taken into account, but the analysis is not restricted to issues of harm, rights, and justice in relation to power. Yet, researchers often encounter socio-cultural contexts where issues of harm, rights and justice are prominent, and a deeper, more central consideration of the issue of power becomes necessary. This becomes an opportunity to understand how power dynamics may shape the individual experience in different systems of meaning.

In this line of inquiry Bruce (2015), in this volume, asks “how can cultural psychology explain, and not just from the periphery, different social phenomena and their exercise of power over individuals?” (p.2). In order to answer this question, he presents an integrated model of moral thought and action, and proceeds to make a conceptual differentiation between relational, discursive and performative power. The proposed framework provides a more *refined* theory of power to analyze culturally constituted worldviews, which is then applied to analyze the issue of economic inequality in the United States. By using this example, the author is able to show different worldviews at work, shaping opinions on how people should relate to one another and how resources should be distributed. The manuscript illustrates new avenues of inquiry that lie in the intersection between sociology and cultural psychology, being an excellent example of how cultural psychology can inform other disciplines and can provide powerful explanations to the question of power and its influence on individuals.

Perhaps the most prolific way in which cultural psychologists have engaged with the issue of culture and power has been by being fierce critics of the power dynamics at work in mainstream psychology; in how the field describes, explains, and values differences in cognition, development, and moral systems grounded in cultural differences. Cultural psychologists have been bold in calling for a reassessment of core psychological concepts, and for a careful consideration of the validity of such concepts across cultures. They are suspicious of “universalist” theories that approach the study of the human mind as natural facts or expressions of universal human condition (Jensen, 2011; R. Shweder, 1985)

because these tend to implicitly reduce observed differences in human psychology to products of irrational or under-developed modes of psychological functioning.

Two of the papers in this special issue address this particular problem. In the first one (Kurtis & Adams, 2015), the authors identify an inconsistency in how the notion of interdependent construal of the self is used in cross-cultural studies versus studies on gender differences. When studying differences across cultures, the interdependent construal of the self is associated with a guarded restraint to maintain harmony and with a relatively low emphasis on emotional intimacy and self-disclosure. At the same time, studies on gender associate the interdependent self with openness and emotional intimacy (often used to describe the feminine psychological makeup). Using a simple experiment, the authors manipulate the experience of interdependence among Ghanaian and American subjects, and measure their willingness to disclose information about themselves to romantic partners and their level of satisfaction with their romantic relationships. They brilliantly demonstrate the need to differentiate between the concept of “interdependent construal of the self” and that of “affective individualism”. The former is well suited to capture differences in relationality across cultures, while the latter is best used to study relationality in Western societies, particularly among women. The research presents a powerful argument questioning whether affective individualism and growth-oriented relationality should be held as normative standards of psychological theory, especially when studying the psychological functioning of individuals that not belong to the Western cultural tradition.

In the same vein, Goyal and colleagues (Goyal, Wice, Adams, Chauhan, & Miller, 2015) contribute to this volume with a cross-cultural investigation conducted in India and the United States. They study the perceptions of marital transgressions among husbands and wives in each of the two cultural contexts as a strategy to gain a better understanding of the gender norms in each culture, and the relative importance attributed to egalitarian versus hierarchical concerns within marital relations. After analyzing interviews with eighty participants, they show that Americans perceive and explain marital transgressions in terms of inequalities within the couple, with participants expressing “egalitarian concerns”. Yet, Indians perceive marital transgressions to happen when their partner neglects or violates role-related duties. This implies that marital transgressions are determined by the moral order in each specific community, and that these are perceived and expressed in these same terms by the married couples. In the Indian community under investigation, both men and women are expected to comply with duty related responsibilities dictated by the marital relationship. Marriages in the community under study in the United States emphasize egalitarian relationships valuing their autonomy above and beyond their roles as husband or wife. Men and women within each cultural group agree in their moral assessments. The study offers strong evidence challenging the assumption in mainstream psychology that “gender hierarchies necessarily imply an asymmetric allocation of rights and responsibilities between “subordinates” and “superiors” (p.10) because they show that partners in India have a shared understanding of *reciprocal* duties in a hierarchical family setting.

The last two papers exemplify the privileged positioning of the field of cultural psychology to identify the power asymmetries between Western and non-western worldviews, and challenge their reification in society by mainstream psychological science. Some examples include the tacit assumption that choice and personal freedom should take precedence over social roles required by one's social group, or that self-expression and self-growth is more important than maintaining the harmony of the social group. It can be argued that the cultural psychology approach addresses in a direct manner the issue of power and culture, in the sense that it levels the floor between divergent cultural accounts of what is considered a healthy, normal, and adaptive psychological functioning. By encouraging a dialogue rather than a monologue, cultural psychologists contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological functioning and its variations across cultures, addressing each cultural system in its own right. Yet, as the authors in this issue demonstrate, a more central consideration of the role of power *within* and *between* cultural groups is both needed and useful, as it offers challenging and exciting avenues for further research.

PRECARIOUS CONTEXTS, VULNERABILITY, AND CULTURE

Contexts characterized by scarceness or violence create specific challenges to the meaning-centered approach employed by cultural psychologists to study the human experience. This is because such precarious contexts become constant reminders that the lived experience is both social and corporeal. In this kind of contexts, discounting the *physicality* of the human experience does not seem to be the best theoretical or methodological choice. In the face of deeply disruptive experiences such as pain, hunger, or fear, the question of the viability of a meaning-centered approach needs to be asked. Is it possible to conduct research in culture psychology in its own right under such circumstances? If so, what is the best way to integrate these elements and the meaning-centered analysis?

Psychological research approaches the problem of precarious contexts using the notion of developmental vulnerability and focuses on understanding how the context may shape the development process and identity formation of the individuals (Curtin, Madden, Staines, & Perry, 2013; Engle, Castle, & Menon, 1996). Further, in the past years there has been a large increase in studies looking at biomarkers, and how they correlate with development in impoverished or violent contexts (Evans & Schamberg, 2009; Juster, McEwen, & Lupien, 2010). While these studies provide useful information on the problem of vulnerability and development, most of the time these approaches utterly discount the symbolic dimension. The experience of vulnerability, even if solely physical, includes assaults to the self, identity, and the sense of value of the individuals. It is the social and cultural dimension of this experience what gives it power and meaning. Putting this argument forward becomes all the more important when considering that these precarious contexts are increasingly being studied as forces shaping the institutional, social, and cultural environments where a considerable proportion of human beings develop.

The experience of vulnerability may it be of the physical body, developmental, or that of the social subject, opens a door to study in more depth the interconnections between precarious contexts, experience, and the symbolic system of meaning. In other words, while

it is true that the experience of vulnerability often encompasses very basic sensations like hunger, pain, sleep deprivation, or fear, it is also true that the very notion of the experience of vulnerability implies that there is a subject interpreting the experience. This same subject is embedded in a particular socio-cultural world. The authors in this special issue concern themselves with these questions. Soerens (2015) argues that these kind of experiences “can’t be abstracted from their physicality as much as they cannot be understood outside of the social narratives that engender such social contexts” (pp. 7). Indeed, social scientists are in a privileged position to address these questions, by examining how cultures, social structures, and ideologies shape the experience of precarity (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004).

The challenge for cultural psychologist working on these topics resides in building theoretical frameworks to address the more basic, corporeal level of being vulnerable, while maintaining a meaningful analysis of the socio-cultural context. The theory of the ecology of mind (Bateson, 1972; Hutchins, 2010) proposes that an understanding of cognitive phenomena must address the (socio-cultural) environments in which cognitive processes develop and operate. Yet, the theory is not clear in explaining how co-occurring and interacting aspects of a complex stream of behavior can be studied. One of the downsides of not allowing space for a meaning-centered analysis in precarious contexts is that researchers are left with no analytical concepts to produce a thick description of the experience of vulnerability and therefore risk producing homogenizing accounts of such an experience. Yet, neither vulnerability nor suffering can be appropriately studied if extracted from the social and the moral world (Shweder, 1988).

The aforementioned tensions offer methodological opportunities for cultural psychologists. The value of a meaning-centered approach relies somewhere in-between “thick description, eye-witnessing, and radical juxtaposition based on cross cultural insight” (p. 26) (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004). Cultural psychologists can certainly contribute to the study of vulnerability from this angle, but in order to do so, careful attention should be paid to their positioning in relation to the phenomena under study. If the researcher gets too involved, he won’t be able to reflect upon what he is seeing. If he distances himself too much, he risks objectifying the suffering of the other. Therefore, it is this instrumental capacity to set an analytical distance what facilitates a thick description of the experience of vulnerability. Such descriptions are rarely done in psychological studies. Cultural psychologists can further contribute to the study of vulnerability by making a genuine effort to understand the situation and suffering of the “other” in his own terms, in the context of a given interpretive community. This, again, is not often done in psychological research, but it is instrumental in avoiding what other researchers have called “imperial liberalism” (Shweder, 2002), or the well-intentioned but misleading imposition of one’s own western moral standards to interpret the suffering of the other.

Three papers in this volume offer different theoretical and methodological insights to the problem of culture in relation to vulnerability and suffering. Soerens (2015) argues for the importance of incorporating the socio-cultural and political contexts into the analysis of the experience of migrant, vulnerable women. The author focuses on the experience of undocumented migrant women victims of intimate partner violence (IPV) in the United

States and proposes the dialogical self theory as a way to connect the study of IPV with cultural psychology. In doing this, she remarks three points: First, she reminds the readers that selfhood and culture are never split but co-constructed. The recognition of this is all the more important when studying the experience of abused immigrant women. Second, in the case of immigrants, the selfhood is situated in a transnational space where local and global understandings of phenomena converge in the self. This opens up new avenues of inquiry, and opportunities to revise and expand traditional definitions of the concept of selfhood. Third, the power dynamics in the transnational space shape the identity development, transformation, and expression of these women as victims of IPV. This is an aspect that has gone understudied, but is well suited to be approached by cultural psychologists. Using sound arguments the author shows that, because selfhood emerges out of dialogical relationships within particular contexts, the analysis of different I-positions offers unique advantages to address the subjective experience, and its *embeddedness* in particular sociocultural and political environments.

Drawing from her work with internally displaced Colombian young adults, Dedios-Sanguineti (2015) explores the relationship between moral reasoning and chronic experiences of violence. The author makes use of two theories in cultural psychology; the big three of morality (Shweder et al., 2003) and the social representations theory (Duveen, 2007; Gerard Duveen & Lloyd, 1990). The big three of morality approach allows an assessment of the ethical discourse of people, paying close attention to motivations, emotions, judgments and actions in order to understand the “good reasons” individuals provide to “fill in” the gap between abstract moral standards and concrete, situated action (Shweder, 2003). This model is used to determine whether people in a given socio-cultural context embrace a rights-based moral code, a duty-based moral code, or a sanctity/natural order moral code. These three moral templates have been proposed to encompass all possible moral systems across cultures. At the same time, the study of social representations allows both an in-depth understanding of the systems of values, ideas, and practices prevalent in a community, as well as grasping how people name and classify aspects of their social world, including the individual and group history. In the case of the displaced young adults in this study, the social representations allowed a proximal examination of the violent context and the experience of vulnerability. By combining the two theories, the author is able to analyze a more immediate social dimension and the moral code embraced by the cultural group under study. She finds that these internally displaced young adults tend to reason within the ethics of autonomy. Importantly, the social representation of “God the avenger” emerged from the participants’ discourse. This representation is developed and maintained in a context that limits the autonomy of the individuals to a large extent by violent means, and often prevents them from seeking justice. The study contributes to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of vulnerability and violence, as these unfold in interaction and get assimilated into the moral system in this particularly challenging socio-cultural context.

Using a phenomenological variant of the ecological systems theory, Mandviwala (2015) studies the experiences of second generation Muslim-American adolescents in the post 9/11 U.S. She examines the particular vulnerabilities experienced by this group, how these shape their development and identity, and the adaptation strategies used by the

adolescents in different contexts. The author focuses on two case studies and brings to attention the fact that often times, individuals who grow up in heterogeneous societies shift back and forth between cultural contexts in their daily life. Importantly, their perception of their experiences in different socio-cultural contexts shapes how they perceive themselves (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). By bringing to the front the existence of *concurrent* contexts, each entailing different risks, vulnerabilities and therefore different adaptive strategies, the author points at a particular challenge to be addressed by researchers working on culturally diverse contexts. The field of cultural psychology is especially suited to shed light on these processes.

I hope that you find the collection of papers presented in this volume exciting and challenging, and that it promotes further discussion among the readers of the journal. As all of the papers in this volume show, the complexity and diversity of the contexts where human beings develop requires to bridge universal and cultural theories in order to address crucial questions related to the natural entanglements between culture, context, and mind.

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