Cultural Psychology: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

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Abstract

Cultural Psychology emerged as an interdisciplinary subfield roughly in the 1980s/1990s. With about thirty years of momentum, this discipline has grown from little more than a special interests group to a topic to which multiple institutions and journals have been dedicated. This paper presents an outline of the discipline of Cultural Psychology from an American interdisciplinary perspective. The pitfalls of General Psychology (research methodology, politicization, and an essentialist hermeneutic) and Anthropology (an epistemological gap in the four fields approach, psychophobia, and the role of the researcher in cultural change) are addressed, in turn. Cultural Psychology provides an alternative to these pitfalls by drawing on the strengths of each discipline to address both theoretical and empirical problems. Cultural Psychology urges for a critical reflection on the social structure and history of its own discipline, resulting in a broader academic canon and a more nuanced understanding of interdisciplinary relations within the human sciences.

Keywords

Anthropology, cultural psychology, history, interdisciplinary studies, pluralism

This paper presents an outline of the discipline of Cultural Psychology from an American interdisciplinary perspective. The author will begin with a brief response to the question—"What is Cultural Psychology?", then address some of the pitfalls of General Psychology and Anthropology within the American tradition. He will conclude with a survey of how Cultural Psychology provides a more robust response to theoretical problems and allows for more nuanced explanations of empirical data than either of the above disciplines can achieve on its own.

WHAT IS CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Cultural Psychology is an interdisciplinary subfield that emerged (or reemerged) roughly in the 1980s/1990s (Shweder and Sullivan 1993). With about thirty years of momentum, this discipline has grown from little more than a special interests group to a topic to which multiple institutions and journals have been dedicated.

In 1990, Richard Shweder published the following definition: "Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind self, and emotion" (Shweder 1990: 1). This statement reflects a fundamental shift in how to understand the relationship between culture and the human psyche.

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For decades, psychologists held the view that culture is little more than a variation in the outward manifestation of internal universal processes (Shweder and Sullivan 1993). Meanwhile, in a neighboring discipline, anthropologists shied away from addressing the human psyche at all.

In the Cultural Psychology model, notions such as selfhood, identity, and emotions are considered to be culturally-constituted, not universally the same. Likewise, the notion of culture itself implies different meanings depending on local ideas and understandings (Geertz 1973). Further, selfhood (or any other subject of psychological inquiry) and culture are mutually constituted; the relationship between the two is non-hierarchical and complex. One does not exist without the other; they emerge together in their unique historical and geographic contexts. Questions of correlation and causation, therefore, tend to be less important than questions of history, language, and the phenomenology of lived experiences. To study any human phenomenon through the partitioned lenses of Psychology on one hand and Anthropology on the other is to impose a fragmentation that does not necessarily exist in the worlds of those we study. To do so is a self-defeating strategy for those working in the human sciences.

Cultural Psychology represents a dialectic relationship of discourses. That is to say, it is interdisciplinary in a unique way. It posits that Anthropology and Psychology are interdependent, mutually fulfilling what each other lacks. It seeks to correct the limitations of mono-disciplinary perspectives in favor of the complexities of human existence with which all people grapple in their daily lives. Too often, such complexities are glossed over in the name of disciplinary methodology, but to do so is to inaccurately represent the lives of those we study. In order to understand how this has occurred, it is important to address the pitfalls of General Psychology and Anthropology, in turn.

PITFALLS OF GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY

The pitfalls of General Psychology tend to fall into three categories: (1) research methodology, (2) politicization, and (3) an essentialist hermeneutic.

Research Methodology

The statistical model is the most widely utilized research modality in psychology. There are some good reasons for this, and some reasons are not so good. The merits of statistical research are clear. Psychologists are tasked with coming up with interventions that can be shown to be effective across large populations and demographics. They are tasked with identifying and describing trends of disorders and abnormalities. These tasks provide a framework for understanding "normal" psychological functioning in broad brush strokes. And more advanced methods are great for understanding some of the more complex variables that impact specific subpopulations and demographics. Statistics is an appropriate tool for building this type of knowledge.

In the United States, however, the statistical model has dominated the field, leading to a few unintended side effects. Statistics is often the only research paradigm students are taught, and the teaching of statistics is often thin. That is, students often get just enough training to be able to run analyses on computer software and do not take the time to acquire a critical, reflexive understanding of statistics. In many research labs in the United States, it is common for the lead investigator of a quantitative study to outsource all of the statistics work because they simply do not know how to do it. A lack of understanding of the fine-grained mechanics of the dominant research methodology leads to a surplus of literature that is satisfied with any significant results but ceases to ask more difficult questions and engage in critical interpretation. This can often result in the assumption that prescription flows directly from description, i.e., successful description of a particular

phenomenon points directly to a generalizable cure (Watters 2010).

Politicization

The statistical research paradigm in the United States reflects the political and economic structures that dictate what types of research and treatments receive funding. When funding for our work becomes a salient issue, we must begin thinking critically about our discipline as a form of labor in relation to the social whole. This brings up some difficult questions. Is the form of labor we build through our research, writing, and practices contributing to a political situation which reinforces the problems we are supposedly trying to resolve (Cushman 1995)? Does our work provide a benefit to those beyond our own social class (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010)? Do our fees and/or salaries make us complicit in unjust distributions of wealth (Safran 2015)? It is easy to ignore such questions, and many do.

The result is a number of psychologists who assume that political realities are stable, unchanging, and have little or no impact on the human psyche. This has led to an emphasis on efficiency, the mainstreaming of therapeutic techniques, and the exporting of American understandings of psychopathology to other cultural contexts. Journalist Ethan Watters, for example, has written extensively on this topic, documenting such events as the imposition of American models of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in Sri Lanka and schizophrenia in Zanzibar.

Essentialist Hermeneutic

Another critique often levied at General Psychology is the presence of an essentialist hermeneutic (Wittgenstein 1981). This is the opposite of an existential hermeneutic. For example, European existentialists in the mid-twentieth century followed the tradition of Aristotle claiming that "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 1956). In other words, there

is no universal innate meaning that can be discovered and imposed on the world (Heidegger 1962). There is no universal human nature that can be written in a dictionary or modeled in a computer software program. The mystery of being human can only be understood through the particular histories of particular peoples.

What often results from an essentialist hermeneutic is a thin view of culture. Instead of culture being the "universe of discourse" for a group of people, it is conceptualized as something that can be described numerically—that the essence of culture can be captured by items on a questionnaire (Geertz 1973).

PITFALLS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

The pitfalls of Anthropology, likewise, tend to fall into three categories: (1) an epistemological gap in the four fields approach, (2) psychophobia, and (3) the role of the researcher in cultural change.

A Gap in the Four Fields Approach

In the early twentieth century, American universities adopted what is known as the "four fields approach" to Anthropology (Hicks 2013). This is an arrangement of four distinct disciplines under the umbrella of Anthropology. Those four disciplines are Archaeology, Linguistics, Cultural Anthropology, and Physical (or Biological) Anthropology. The benefits of housing these disciplines in the same department across universities resulted in the ability to discuss the historical emergence of these disciplines and the epistemological and methodological boundaries of interdisciplinary relations. The idea was that anthropologists would receive training in all four fields and specialize in one or two. The goal was that Anthropology would be a holistic study of humanity.

Despite the emphasis on holism, there was an epistemological gap in the four fields approach (Thornton 1988). In 1940, American anthropologist Franz Boas addressed the boundary between

Anthropology and Psychology, arguing that they are both important in the study of humanity. In that spirit, anthropologists tend to take great care to respect the boundary between the two disciplines, typically assumed whenever issues of emotion, abnormalities, the unconscious, and the like become salient topics.

Psychophobia

What has emerged then is what Richard Shweder refers to as psychophobia in Anthropology. This is the tendency for anthropologists to draw the line of their discipline at any hint of the psychologist's domain. From the anthropologist's perspective, the reason for this is twofold. It is an attempt not to tread where they have not been trained, and it is an attempt to keep their discipline empirical. Emotions, abnormalities, and the unconscious are often far too complex and subjective to be treated with analytical tools of the cultural anthropologist.

Anthropologists tend to approach their subjects only after a thorough historical, theoretical, and epistemological review, giving clear and concrete outlines to their methodology, historical precedents, unique problems presented by their current topic, etc. This can seem at times to border on the extreme, where each time an ethnography is written, the entire history of Anthropology must come under a hyper-critical lens, a clear definition of culture is deliberated upon, and positive statements are made only after retracing the lines of the discourse from incipiency to present day. It is as though each ethnographer is deciding from scratch what the discipline of Anthropology ought to be. So far, the line tends to be drawn at the slightest hint of psychological issues.

The Role of the Researcher in Cultural Change

Another limitation of Anthropology is the role of the researcher in the phenomenon of cultural change. A more traditional boundary would say that Anthropology is a descriptive discipline as opposed to

the prescriptive disciplines of Sociology and Psychology (Boas 1940). In more recent years, however, anthropologists have been less shy about bringing their political agendas into their work and engaging in activism. By and large, however, students are trained not to actively initiate social and cultural change. Anthropology grew up in the wake of, and as a critique against, Christian missionary activity and European-American colonialism, so most anthropologists only feel comfortable as defining their role as participant-observer engaged in descriptive analysis (Appadurai 2001; Said 1978). Caveats are typically granted that acknowledge that their very presence changes the culture, but the preference to lean toward a hands-off approach to cultural change is still dominant (Turner 1979).

Anthropologists Tom Boellstorff (2005) and Joel Robbins (2007) have addressed this topic in interesting ways. Boellstorff is an advocate for gay rights and has often participated in political activism in the countries where he has been engaged in study. Joel Robbins has argued that even though anthropologists maintain a guise of non-prescription, there has always been an implicit hope that their work will initiate change. By and large, however, anthropologists tend to proclaim a descriptive stance toward their subject as opposed to the active (and perhaps more honest) role that psychologists and sociologists take.

WHAT CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY CAN OFFER

Cultural Psychology provides an alternative to these pitfalls. It affirms quantitative studies in their proper contexts alongside other forms of inquiry such as ethnography, historiography, and indigenous philosophy/psychological research (Kitayama and Cohen 2007). Cultural Psychology urges for a critical reflection of the social structure and privileges of the discipline itself, and it seeks to destabilize the political

power that has been garnered through essentializing other cultures and peoples (Bourdieu 1977).

THEORETICAL PROBLEMS

Many of the current problems that cultural psychologists are working on are side effects (artifacts) of the organization of the disciplines of the human sciences and their historical contexts (Foucault 1970). Like political boundaries overlaid on a geographic map, these disciplinary boundaries are social constructs. Cultural Psychology represents a critical approach to this dilemma and seeks to recognize that a human subject is an integrated whole that should not necessarily be analyzed (or dissected) according to modern philosophical categories. A person's culture often functions to provide an integrated sense of reality in the midst of ideological fragmentation. When this is the case, culture cannot be addressed as an additional variable on a questionnaire. Culture runs deep, defining in local terms those components that we often understand to be selfhood, identity, and emotions. In this sense, an individual "self" does not exist outside of his or her culture.

The act of psychological research, itself, is an example of cultural pluralism. The researcher's culture of origin intersects with academic culture and the cultures of his or her subject. This notion becomes even trickier when we realize that there are multiple ways of defining the concept of culture. For example, culture can be understood as a semiotic field (Geertz 1973). That is to say, it takes on the characteristics of language. Culture can also be understood as a repository of emotional knowledge (Sundararajan 2015). Others prefer a notion of culture that emphasizes customs, traditions, technologies, institutions, etc. (Tylor 1958). Cultural psychologists recognize that cultural pluralism exists at every turn. As a result, universalizing research paradigms is less helpful than particular histories and thick descriptions of local problems.

Cultural psychologists, therefore, must engage with a broader canon of literature. It is not enough to study the history of theoretical and experimental psychology. The discipline of Psychology did not emerge in a historical vacuum. It grew up alongside, and often in reaction to, other disciplines of the human sciences such as Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, and Political Science. This expansion of a literary base is precisely what one finds in Cultural Psychology (Shweder and Sullivan 1993).

EMPIRICAL PROBLEMS

General Psychology has a history of over-generalizing studies that were conducted with middle class Euro-American college students and exporting those findings to other countries and cultures. Recent achievements by cultural psychologists offer an alternative to those practices. The creation of indigenous scales, for example, provide better explanations of local responses to psychological stressors (Wang 2010). A fine example of this is Gaithri Fernando (2008) who was working in Sri Lanka after the tsunami in 2004 and created her own measure of trauma symptoms in order to account for the unique symptom clusters she saw there (Watters 2010).

Attachment theories have long been the hallmark of personality and family studies. However, the patterns that were studied in the United States by Ainsworth and Bowlby (1991) are unique to a particular historical and geographical location (Takahashi 1990). The subsequent generalization of those findings with its accompanying moral implications does not fit well with child-rearing practices in other cultures (Rothbaum et al. 2007). Several studies have been done to address the limitations of American models of attachment cross cultural settings, but much work still needs to be done in the development of indigenous attachment models (Dueck and Hong 2015).

Another common problem for many studies is the translation of conventional understandings of emotion. Emotional experiences are not simply cognitive reflections of biological processes (Demasio 1994). Personal and group histories, languages, scripts, and narratives play a role in how a person emotes and how higher order reflections on those emotions are understood. Louise Sundararajan (2015) has completed an in-depth study of emotions in Chinese culture with the argument that culture is a repository of emotional knowledge. Complex emotional grammars such as those addressed in her study complicate the use of universal measures and diagnostic manuals. Instead the emotional world of each population must be clarified in its own terms, in its own particular cultural contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural Psychology is a response to the fragmentation and isolation of individual disciplinary perspectives. It represents a historical-theoretical stance as well as a methodological-interpretive lens. It calls for a critical reflection on the activity of the human sciences and seeks to create dialogue between etic and emic perspectives. The interdisciplinary nature of Cultural Psychology requires a careful reading of history and theory and a critical approach to the canon of psychological and anthropological research.

Given the emphasis on history throughout this paper, it seems appropriate to borrow the concluding remarks from Shweder and Sullivan's 1993 article, *Cultural Psychology—Who Needs It?*:

> For a variety of compelling reasons—disciplinary, historical, institutional, theoretical, and empirical—a science concerned with diversity in health, human development, and psychological functioning has reemerged at the interface of anthropology and psychology under the banner of "cultural psychology"... (It is important that) anthropologists and psychologists (and linguists and philosophers) unite to deepen our understanding of the varieties of normal human consciousness. (Shweder and Sullivan 1993: 517)

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