CHAPTER 13: CULTURE, RELIGION, AND ETHNICITY: PROCESSES AND DIFFERENCES

Since culture is one key determinant of what it means to be a person, the systematic study of these cultural influences is an essential part of personality psychology. Modern personality psychology should draw on its rich traditions, dating back to early work by Allport and others, of cultural awareness. Cultural and ethnic influences are the subject of this chapter. The emphasis is on providing a scientific review of cultural issues that pertain to personality psychology.

Although this whole chapter is unique, also noteworthy are considerations of socioeconomic status and of language. These matters fit nicely and are major topics in related fields, but are usually overlooked in personality psychology.

Possible Lecture Outline

1. Why is there a gap in knowledge about the ethnic and cultural aspects of personality?
   1. Laboratory studies are often not conducive to cross-cultural investigations, using very homogeneous participant pools.
   2. There are relatively few professors from cultural minority groups.
   3. Students tend to become researchers who follow the academic traditions of their mentors.
   4. Multicultural research tends to be complex.
2. Why is an understanding of culture important for an understanding of personality? Because personality development is influenced by:
   1. Family
   2. Peers
   3. Societal institutions (churches, schools, government, etc.)
      1. Cultural effects: The shared behaviors and customs learned from the institutions in society
   4. Ethnicity
   5. Class
3. History of Research on Personality and Culture
   1. Mead’s studies of Samoan society, especially the transitions of adolescence
   2. Whiting and Whiting’s studies of childrearing in individualistic vs. collectivist societies
      1. Individualists emphasize autonomy and independence, whereas collectivists are more interdependent and group-focused.
   3. Linton’s influential book, *The Cultural Background of Personality*
   4. Distinction between emic (culture-specific) vs. etic (cross-cultural) approaches
4. Errors of Scientific Inference: The Case of Race
   1. Humans form groups based on many different criteria:
      1. Beliefs (such as religious or political)
      2. Cultural habits (customs) such as food, clothing, or music
      3. Physical characteristics (such as skin color or facial features)
         1. Because physical characteristics are so easy to notice, they are often overused in assessing others.
   2. The “American dilemma” describes American lip service to equality in the face of injustice based on physical characteristics.
   3. Should personality psychologists study race?
      1. Race: large groupings based on physical characteristics, such as skin color, eye shape, or height, tied to geographic origin
      2. What are the difficulties intrinsic to such a definition? How does race differ from other terms of diversity (culture, ethnicity, etc).
5. Religion as an Influence on Personality
   1. Reaction patterns are affected by religious beliefs and practices.
   2. Religions differ in their ideals of behavior.
   3. Individualism of the United States may have arisen from the Protestantism of the colonists who founded the country.
   4. Spirituality is important in human nature and influenced by religion.
   5. Consciousness as influenced by religion
6. Socioeconomic Factors
   1. SES: A measure of one’s level of education and income.
   2. The SES gradient: those at higher SES are at lower risk for disease and premature death.
   3. SES effects on personality are not well documented.
   4. The effects of economics on individual behavior have been studied (e.g., Marx and Fromm).
7. Importance of Language
   1. Language is an important aspect of one’s identity, as well as being a central and immediately identifying feature of a given culture.
      1. Native language
      2. Dialect (regional variations)
      3. Idiolect (individual variations)
   2. The importance of language is illustrated in the distinctive nature of the deaf culture—also in the passion some feel for the “English only” movement.
   3. Linguistic relativity posits that our interpretations of the world are greatly influenced by the language we use to describe the world.
      1. Language can influence our social interactions in meaningful ways (e.g., we address powerful and important people in certain ways; the importance of these language rules varies by culture).
      2. The use of masculine pronouns as a generic for all people influences how we see the world, our own capabilities, and our roles (use of gendered language in general).
   4. Bilinguals tend to have differences in their apparent personality when they change languages.
8. Culture and Testing
   1. Assumptions underlying psychological tests are sometimes biased.
   2. Test scores can be affected by many factors.
      1. Motivation
      2. Previous test-taking experience
      3. Qualities of the examiner
      4. SES
      5. Test content may not capture cultural experience or may assume experiences not present.
   3. Researchers have attempted to create “culture-free” and “culture-fair” tests; other tests attempt to take culture into account.
   4. Tests designed in one cultural context may view some characteristics as pathological even when those traits are regarded as desirable in another cultural context.
   5. When are tests culturally biased, and when do they indicate valid cultural differences?
      1. We need the framework of culture in order to appropriately interpret behavior and personality (e.g., Erikson’s studies of the South Dakota Sioux).
      2. Culture influences the roles we select and thereby behavior (e.g., the health-promoting habits of Seventh-Day Adventists); they, therefore, help us understand the relationship between personality and health.
      3. Cultural influences shape the theories we create to explain behavior and personality.
   6. Stereotype threat is discussed as a possible influence on the ability of minority ethnic groups to perform well on tests.
      1. Refers to the threat that others’ judgments or their own actions will negatively stereotype them
      2. Important to note that positive effects of stereotype threat have been identified as well. People who feel that others expect them to do well at a given task may perform at a higher level.
9. Current Research Developments
   1. The nature of the self (independent vs. cooperative, as illustrated by Western vs. Eastern thought)
   2. The interactions of people with situations as impacted by culture

Classroom Activities, Discussion Topics, and Projects

1. Have students from several different cultural groups form a panel for discussion of normative behaviors and personality in their respective cultures. Allow the rest of the students to ask questions. Discuss how norms are formed and how norms may become so deeply ingrained that they seem almost “inherited.”

2. Divide students into small groups to engage in conversations on a particular topic, but with language restrictions. For instance, you might ask them to talk about their romantic relationships without using any words related to feelings or emotions. This is useful for illustrating the importance of language in both communication and thought.

3. Discuss stereotypes related to the personalities of different cultural groups. Discuss the self-perpetuating nature of such stereotypes. What environmental factors might work to create such stereotypes in the first place?

4. Ask students to come up with three ways that their culture has influenced who they are. Even students who consider themselves “American” or “Euro-American” can participate in this activity. How has students’ cultural socialization shaped their attitudes, values, and behaviors? Responses may include everything from religious preferences and choice of friends to food preferences.

5. Have students complete a measure to determine whether they maintain individualist or collectivist values. Refer to: Freeman, A. & Bordia, P. (2001). Assessing alternative models of individualism and collectivism: A confirmatory factor analysis. *European Journal of Personality, 15*(2), 105–121 for relevant items.

6. Have students read more about the relation between language and thought, and discuss the relevance of language to personality. An example of a provocative reading is George Orwell’s *1984* (1949). Note that Orwell’s *1984* reflects his opposition to totalitarianism. How does he use language to create a new culture in *1984*?

Recommended Outside Readings

Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Benet-Martínez, V., & Oishi, S. (2008). Culture and personality. In O. P. John, R. W. Robins, & L. A. Pervin (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.

Dana, R. H. (Ed.). (2000). *Handbook of cross-cultural and multicultural personality assessment*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Heine, S. J., & Buchtel, E. E. (2009). Personality: The universal and the culturally specific. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *60*, 369–394.

Jones, J. M. (1991). The politics of personality: Being black in America. In Reginald L. Jones, (Ed.), *Black psychology* (3rd ed.) (pp. 305-318). Berkeley, CA: Cobb & Henry Publishers,

Lonner, W. J., & Berry, J. W. (Eds.). (1986). *Field methods in cross-cultural research*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Matsumoto, D. R. (1996). *Culture and psychology*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Mead, M. (1963). *Sex and temperament in three primitive societies*. New York: Morrow. (Originally published in 1935.)

Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The geography of thought*. New York: Free Press.

Stigler, J. W., Shweder, R. A., & Herdt, G. (Eds.). (1990). *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tannen, D. T. (1986). *That’s not what I meant: Language, culture, and meaning*. New York: William Morrow & Co.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Triandis, H. C., & Suh, E. M. (2002). Cultural influences on personality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *53*, 133–160.

Films / Videos

Childhood Rivalry in Bali and New Guinea. Directed by Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. (1952). 17 minutes. <http://mediasales.psu.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=24638> Libraries holding this title can be found at <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/796916930>. This video shows sibling rivalry in two cultures, and how different behaviors by the mothers in these cultures promote different attitudes and interpersonal interactions between these siblings

*Communicating Between Cultures*. (2004). 23 minutes. Insight Media 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Illuminates how differing cultural expectations can complicate and interfere with intercultural communication.

*Culture, Identity, and Behavior*. (2003). 35 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Explores the relationships among culture, identity, and behavior from both psychological and anthropological approaches.

*Prejudice: Eye of the Storm*. (1970). 25 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Takes a look at a third-grade classroom (documentary) in which prejudice comes to life as students are divided into two groups: “brown eyes” and “blue eyes.” Illustrates the problems that arise when too much value is placed on observable physical differences.

*Higher Learning*. (1995). 126 minutes. Columbia Pictures. Story of a group of freshman students who struggle with issues of ethnic diversity, identity, and sexuality.

*In My Country: An International Perspective on Gender*. (1993). 91 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). This is a two-part series which addresses cross-cultural norms for household chores, discipline for boys vs. girls, marriage, control of money, care of the elderly, and views of homosexuality. Interviews individuals from Mexico, Fiji, China, India, Japan, Lebanon, England, Taiwan, Sweden, Zaire, El Salvador, and St. Vincent.

*The New Preschool in Three Cultures*. (2004). 1,100 minutes. Originally published by Yale University Press, now available for purchase from author Joseph Tobin (<http://joetobin.net/videos.html>). Looks at an ordinary day in preschools in Japan, China, and the U.S. Shows early socialization into culture through style and content of teaching, conflict resolutions, lesson objectives, lunch, options, and structure.

*Valuing Diversity: Multicultural Communication* (1994). 19 minutes. Insight Media: 800-233-9910; [www.insight-media.com](http://www.insight-media.com). Looks at how cultural differences get in the way of communication. Shows how body language contributes to communication, and how different cultures have different body language norms. Addresses the dangers of stereotyping.