Culture and psychology

- Psychologists have been increasing attention to the ways construals of reality vary—across individuals and also across cultures
- Amae—"sweet"—In a family context means both indulgence and dependence that may exist between a parent and child through to adulthood
- Personality psych focuses on psychological differences between individuals
- Culture relates for 2 reasons
  1. Individuals may differ from each other to some extent b/c they belong to different cultural groups—difference between
     - i.e. People in China tend to be more emotionally reserved, introverted, fond of tranquility, and considerate than Americans
  2. Members of some groups may vary relative to each other differently than members of other groups—difference within
     - i.e. A patient in China may describe themselves not as "amae" as should be—not likely to hear from an American patient

Cross-cultural universals vs. specificity

- To what extent are people from different cultures psychologically similar or different?
- Is there a basic and common core to human nature ("universal human nature")? Or are people from different cultures fundamentally different from each other, perhaps so much so that they can’t even be meaningfully compared ("cultural specificity")?
- Similar to the nature-nurture debate or the consistency (person-situation) debate

What is culture?

- Psychological attributes of groups including, "customs, habits, beliefs, and values that shape emotions, behavior, and life pattern"
- May include language, modes of thinking, and possibly even fundamental views of reality
- All of this is learned, not innate
- Genetics can’t be a major basis of cross-cultural differences b/c, according to recent DNA analyses, individuals w/in a given ethnic or racial group are as genetically different from one another as are members of different groups
- Enculturation
  - A child picks up the culture wherever they are born
- Acculturation
  - A person who moves from one country to another may gradually pick up the culture of their new place of residence
- Any group of people that is identifiably, psychologically different from another group can be a candidate for cultural comparison
  - Usually ethnic and linguistic, but can be found within national and linguistic borders as well as across them
- It’s important to always remember that psychologists are cultural members too and that influences their outlook

The importance of cross-cultural differences

- 3 good reasons for interest in cross-cultural differences
  1. Possible limits on generalizability
     - Freud’s view of humanity may have been skewed by his focus on his own introspections and treating upper-middle-class, hysterical women who lived in turn-of-the-century Vienna
     - Evidence now indicates that people in different cultures have importantly different personality characteristics and processes
  2. Cross-cultural conflict
     - The different attitudes, values, and behavioral styles of members of different cultures frequently causes misunderstandings—rival to serious
     - i.e. American teens caned in Singapore for vandalism
     - British police arrest all racial activities that are allowed in the US
     - Cross-cultural conflict leading to cultural violence in Pakistan, Israel, and West Bank
  3. Varieties of human experience
     - The degree to which being alive, aware, and human is the same/different across cultures
     - The way we see and construe the world around us is a product of our experience and cultural background
     - Does the human experience of life vary fundamentally across cultures? Do people raised and living in different cultural environments see the same colors, feel the same emotions, desire the same goals, or organize their thoughts in comparable ways?
     - "Experience-near construct"—a set of traits for seeing the world
     - If this description is valid, then the next question is, how different are these lenses?
     - We can never know for sure, however, based on Funder’s 3rd law, something is better than nothing
Cultural comparison

- How can one culture be compared to another? Or, should it be?
- Deconstructionism
  - Anthropological view that cultures are so different that they can't be compared b/c no independent or common frame of reference exists
  - Nothing in the world has any meaning apart from the interpretations invented or "constructed" for it by each observer
  - There is no lens-free way to look at any culture, and that each culture's view of reality is entire in itself and isn't judgeable from any other culture.

Cultural comparison (cont.)

- How can one culture be compared to another? Or, should it be?
- The semiotic subject
  - People who don't have traits, mental states, or psychological processes that are independent from culture
  - The human capacity to invent and use symbol systems such as a language
  - As language and other symbols change across cultures, so too does human experience
  - What can cross-cultural researchers do under this set of assumptions?
    1. Travel among foreign cultures and come back with "thick," detailed reports of how other people interpret and symbolize reality
    - How members of different cultures have/don't have a sense of self, how they experience emotions, whether they believe that individuals personalities exist separately from society
  2. Spend some energy berating the rest of psychology for any attempt to understand the whole world through a common set of categories

Characteristics of cultures

- The basic assumptions of cultural comparison is that any idea or concept has aspects that are the same (etics) across cultures and aspects that are particular (emics) to a specific culture
- Cultures vary along 3 basic dimensions
  1. Complexity
  2. Tightness vs. looseness
  3. Collectivism vs. individualism
Characteristics of cultures

1. Complexity
   • Difference between “modern, industrial, affluent cultures” and “simpler cultures such as hunters and gatherers or the residents of a monastery”
   • Must be careful b/c how do we know that modern industrial society is more complex than hunter-gatherer cultures?
   • May not be visible to an outsider, but such cultures may have their own patterns of interpersonal relationships and political struggles

2. Tightness vs. looseness
   • Very little deviation from proper behavior is tolerated (“tight” cultures) with those that fairly large deviations from cultural norms are allowed (“loose” cultures)
   • Ethnically homogenous and densely populated societies tend to be tighter than societies that are more diverse or where people are more spread out
     – i.e. Japan and contained facial expressions and emotions
     – The US is an example of a “loose” culture, however, there are variances within
   • Tightness and looseness can vary by block in Boston

3. Collectivism vs. individualism
   • In collectivist cultures, such as Japan, the needs of the group or “collective” are seen as more important than the rights of individuals
     – “the nail that stands out gets pounded down”
   • In individualistic cultures, such as the US, the single person is more important
     – People are viewed as separate from each other, and independence and individual prominence are important virtues
     • “the squeaky wheel gets the grease”

Cultural assessment and personality assessment

• The complexity dimension of culture is analogous to the personality trait of cognitive complexity
• Cultural tightness resembles the traits of conscientiousness and intolerance for ambiguity
• Collectivist vs. individualistic is analogous to *idiocentrism vs. allocentrism* (a dimension of personal values that focuses on whether one believes that the individual is more important than the group or vice versa)
Personality traits

- All languages have terms for traits like talkative, timid, and diligent, but they differ in how many different terms.
- Cross-cultural psych has tried to:
  1. Address the degree to which members of different cultures vary, on average, across various personality traits.
  2. Dive more deeply into the cultures being compared by assessing the degree to which the same traits that characterize people in one culture can meaningfully characterize people in another.
  - Examined gender difference by administering the NEO-PI or translations of it in 26 cultures to 23,631 individuals.
    * Found that in almost all cultures women scored higher than men on neuroticism, agreeableness, warmth, and openness to feelings.
    * Men scored higher than women in assertiveness and openness to ideas.
  - These studies assume that the same traits are valid for describing people in different cultures—i.e., Americans and Chinese on dimension of “self-restraint”

Thinking

- One of the most challenging questions facing cross-cultural psych is the degree to which people from different cultures think differently.
  - On the one hand, behavioral traits differ across cultures so maybe thinking does as well.
  - On the other hand, it’s difficult to specify the exact ways in which thought processes in one culture may differ from those in another.

The self

- Different cultures appear to have fundamentally different views of the individual or “self.”
- Individualistic cultures assume the self to have an independent and separate existence.
- Collectivist cultures view the self as imbedded in a larger social context of obligations and relationships.
  - This relates to modern research in 2 ways.
    1. Anthropological analysis suspects that the “self” is actually a Western cultural artifact that has no meaning in other cultures.
    2. Addresses the way the self and its implications differ across cultural contexts.

Is the self a cultural artifact?

- From the point of view of psychological anthropologists, much of psychology imposes the Western view of self on members of other cultures.
- The concept of self is very important.
  - The assumption is that of individuals as being separate from each other and from the society they’re a part of.
  - Personality psych assumes that these individuals have traits, learning patterns, or mental structures that belong to or characterize each of them.
  - If this idea is a cultural artifact of Western culture, then all of Western personality psych may be just an arbitrary social construction.
    * This would mean that many ideas that have been assumed for years would need to be discarded or revised.
Individualist and collectivist selves

- Rather than rejecting the idea of the self entirely, a less extreme approach is to study how the nature of the self and its implications differ across cultures
  - The Western self as a separate entity—individualism
  - The Eastern self as more integrated into the social and cultural context—collectivism
- Self-regard
  - The individualist’s need for self-regard may be felt less acutely by a member of a collectivist culture
- Consistency (person-situation)
  - “Self-determination”
  - The ind view of the self assumes that the root cause of behavior lies within the person so behavior would be expected to be consistent from situation to situation
  - The behavior of a member of a collect culture might be expected to be more a function of the particular situation that they’re in
- The Buddhist self
  - The existential focus on individual isolation, mortality, and the meaning of life is European, Western, and individualistic and all else is illusion
  - Buddist self is a composite of many things—physiology, environment, social setting, and society—all of which are changing

Values
- Styles of moral reasoning are different in ind and coll cultures
  - Ind focus on “liberty,” “freedom of choice,” “my rights,” and “my needs”
  - Coll focus obligations, reciprocity, and one’s duties to the group
  - Even though ind is seen as a Western cultural attribute, the Catholic church is collectivist—SE Europe
  - Ind is a protestant, NW European idea

The question of origin

- Where do these difference come from?
  - The chicken-or-the-egg problem
- The deconstructionist dodge
  - Really can’t be known apart from culturally determined perceptions or constructions of it
  - One’s view of reality must always follow culture
- The ecological approach
  - Ecology->culture->socialization->personality->behavior
  - Behavior comes from personality which has been taught explicitly and implicitly during upbringing (socialization)
  - Truk and Tahiti on fishing and gender role/агgressive behavior patterns
    - In Truk, fish can only be caught by those willing to go out to sea—dangerous—men who do this learn to be brave, violent, and physical and dominate women
    - In Tahiti, fish can be easily caught in the lagoon which isn’t dangerous—men in this culture tend to be gentle, ignore insults, be slow to fight, and respectful of women
- Cross-cultural interpretations should be taken with a grain of salt b/c there aren’t experiments to prove them right or wrong

Issues and challenges of cross-cultural research

- Ethnocentrism
  - Any observation made of another culture will be colored by the observer’s own cultural background regardless of how hard they try to avoid it
- Outgroup homogeneity bias
  - Assume that all members of a given culture are alike
  - A group to which one belongs naturally seems to contain individuals who differ widely from each other, but the members of those groups to which one doesn’t belong seem to be “all the same”
  - Westerns culture contains both ends and cols
  - Variations between individuals w/in a culture are as important as variations between cultures
  - Variations between individuals w/in a culture are imp to an ind view
  - Variations between cultures are imp to a coll view

Issues and challenges of cross-cultural research (cont.)

- Cultures and values
  - Cultural psych can lead to cultural relativism
    - All cultural views of reality are equally valid, and that it’s impossible and presumptuous to judge any of them as good or bad, b/c any judgment would be ethnocentric
  - Being a misfit in one’s culture isn’t always a bad thing
- Subcultures and multiculturalism
  - A simplified grouping of East and West is coll and ind
  - Other groupings can be physical geography
    - One’s continent of residence, language, or political boundaries
  - These are imprecise and arbitrary since people can be members of the same group by one definition and other groups by another definition
  - Cultural groups often contain distinct, identifiable, and important subgroups
    - I.e. northern US vs. southern US
- Challenges for the future
  - Will need to seek to understand and appreciate different value systems of different cultures w/o imposing on their analysis the “value of valuelessness”
The universal human condition

- Sartre
  - There are other reasons to wonder how different people really are, deep down, from one culture to the next
  - May appear different when the 2 are really the same underneath
  - The same sensations of Americans as "emotional feelings" are interpreted by members of many other cultures in a more physiological way for the same experience