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# Culture, Psychology, and Education

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## Abstract

In my view, the study of culture provides three main contributions to our understanding of human behavior and mental processes. First there is great knowledge to impart about cultural similarities and differences in behavior, and these form the basis for improving psychological theories. Second the study of culture is a prime example of critical thinking in the field, as cross-cultural research begs the question about whether our notions of truth and psychological principles are applicable to people beyond those whom were studied. Third research on intercultural adjustment provides us with clues about possible psychological constructs that may be universally necessary for adjusting to life well in a pluralistic and diverse environment. I discuss these contributions, and reframe thinking about the goals of education focusing on these skills.

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## My Introduction to Cross-Cultural Psychology

Quite frankly, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Michigan and even as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, I never imagined that studying culture would become such a major part of my career or that I would become so strongly identified as a cross-cultural psychologist. I was interested in mainstream topics like emotion, communication, and clinical psychology, but not from a cross-cultural standpoint. I never took a cross-cultural course (I don't even know if one existed) or any related course in other disciplines such as anthropology (although now I wish I had).



Although my very first study was cross-cultural, even that was a matter of coincidence. I like kids and was originally interested in how they seemingly understand the emotions of the adults around them even though they do not necessarily understand language. I designed a simple study that examined how children perceived emotion through paralinguistic cues. During the summer between my junior and senior years in college I was in Japan training in judo, which I have been doing since I was 7, and I thought that since I was going there I might collect the same data in Japan as well. (Now that I look back, that's really not a great way to think about and conduct cross-cultural research!) So I enlisted the aid of a psychologist whom I knew and together we created stimuli and collected the data in Japanese preschools. When I came back to Michigan I collected data there as well and completed my thesis, which was my first cross-cultural study (Matsumoto & Kishimoto, 1983).

Still, culture did not enter my mind when I entered the clinical psychology graduate program at UC Berkeley, as neither my coursework nor my research was centered on culture. I was a therapist-in-training completing classes in personality, psychopathology, and treatment, as well as practica. My research was centered on emotion but was not necessarily cross-cultural, as I was interested in emotion and depression, emotion and motivation, and emotion in kids. While a few of my studies were published (Matsumoto, 1983, 1987; Matsumoto & et al., 1986; Matsumoto & Sanders, 1988), they were not centered on culture.

At the end of graduate school, I decided to devote all my time to teaching and research. Part of my decision was based on my frustration with clinical work. Looking back, this frustration stemmed from several factors. For one, I really was not a very patient person, especially in the face of ambiguity or uncertainty (I hope I am a little better now!). Because clinical work is inherently ambiguous, it did not really match my personality well even though I think I had a genuine interest in helping people. Also, I was just too young to appreciate and understand people's life struggles, having gone straight to graduate school after college and having been in school all of my life. There is probably a lot to be said

about the contribution of life experiences to one's attitude and effectiveness as a therapist or counselor.

But above all, I remember being very skeptical about how this "talking stuff" could really work in helping others. I wanted to solve problems, make concrete goals and plans, and deal with objective behaviors rather than deal with psychodynamics or childhood experiences or unconscious processes. Clinical work, or at least the clinical work I was learning, just did not fit right with my worldview and way of being. It was only years later did I come to realize that this mismatch was largely culturally based as much as anything else.

### **Cross-Cultural Research on Emotion Judgments**

My interest in culture got a boost in the latter half of graduate school when I worked as a research assistant for Paul Ekman on a project examining cultural differences in attributions of intensity when judging universal facial expressions of emotion in 10 cultures (Ekman et al., 1987). This was the first study to report cultural differences as all previous studies had reported cultural similarities in emotion recognition (Ekman, 1972, 1973, 1982; Ekman & Friesen, 1971; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Ekman, Friesen, & Ellsworth, 1972; Ekman, Sorenson, & Friesen, 1969; Izard, 1971). I had decided to follow up this study for my dissertation, and to do so it was necessary to create stimuli expressed by people of visibly different cultural backgrounds. So we created the Japanese and Caucasian Facial Expressions of Emotion (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1988), a stimulus set that is widely used by many research laboratories around the world today. Using it we obtained judgments of emotion intensity from American and Japanese observers and showed that the cultural differences in intensity ratings originally reported by Ekman et al. (1987) existed regardless of the perceived race or sex of the expressor (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989). I subsequently replicated these findings across different ethnic (Matsumoto, 1993) and cultural groups as well (Biehl et al., 1997).

I have continued this line of research ever since. Recently we showed that the cultural differences in intensity ratings are dependent on the type of rating obtained. Americans tend to rate the intensity of the external display greater than do Japanese, but the Japanese tend to rate the intensity of the presumed subjective experience of the expressor greater than do Americans (Matsumoto, Kasri, & Kookan, 1999). I thought this occurred because the Japanese rated subjective experience higher than external display while there was no difference between these ratings for Americans. But post-hoc analyses actually showed the opposite; there was no difference between the two rating types for the Japanese while the Americans rated external display significantly higher than presumed experience. In other words, the Japanese were not suppressing their intensity ratings as we had interpreted over the years; it was the Americans who were exaggerating their ratings of external display relative to presumed internal experience.

Recently we have also found that cultural differences in intensity ratings are dependent on the intensity of the expressions being judged (Matsumoto et al., 2002). When judging high intensity, full-face expressions the cultural differences reported above

occur. When judging low intensity expressions, however, the cultural differences are different; the Japanese rate subjective experience greater than external display while there is no difference for the Americans.

These findings suggested that when strong expressions are perceived, the Japanese felt that the situation must have been such that the expression was justified and thus made no difference between ratings of external display and internal experience. But Americans are used to seeing such strong displays and know that there are display rules to exaggerate one's expressions; thus they think that a person is actually feeling less emotion than they are showing. When weak expressions are perceived the Americans think the person is showing what they feel, but the Japanese think that the person may be feeling more emotion than they show, and thus rate internal experience higher than external display.

### **The Contributions of Cross-Cultural Research to Psychology**

Findings like these and others from my laboratory as well as those of my colleagues over the years have highlighted the importance of culture in understanding human behavior. Increasingly intrigued by culture, over a decade ago I started to review the cross-cultural literature in all areas of psychology (Matsumoto, 2000). I came to realize that culture played as basic and important a role in understanding and contributing to human behavior as did any other influence on our lives, and to gradually understand its pervasive and profound influence on psychological processes in all areas of functioning.

My review suggests that there are at least three major areas of contributions that cross-cultural research has made to psychology: contributions to knowledge, contributions to the critical thinking process, and the identification of the psychological factors underlying inter- and intracultural adjustment.

#### **Knowledge**

Findings from cross-cultural research have clearly impacted all areas of psychology. It has informed us of cultural similarities and differences in attachment, child rearing, and development; in self-concepts and personality; in thinking, perceiving, reasoning, and problem solving; in emotion, motivation, and morality; in social and organizational behavior. Indeed, cross-cultural research has contributed to knowledge in just about every other major area of psychological inquiry (Matsumoto, 2001).

These contributions are extremely important because they help create a universal psychology that is inclusive of many people of diverse backgrounds, not just people from a single culture or two who traditionally comprised the subject pools from which research participants were recruited. As cross-cultural research has flourished and new findings have gained recognition, more theories are increasingly incorporating culture. While many classic findings still remain classics to this day, such as findings on the universality of facial expressions, the relationship between language and thought, and some developmental processes, many other traditional notions of psychological processes have

been modified to include culture. Thus, we know that conceptions of self are culturally bound as are the concrete manifestations of many psychopathological states. These developments are incredibly vital to psychology, and cross-cultural research has played an immensely important role in facilitating them.

### **Critical Thinking/Scientific Philosophy**

A second contribution that cross-cultural research has made to psychology is in the area of critical thinking and scientific philosophy. To me, cross-cultural research itself is an example of critical thinking because it asks the all-important question, "is what I know to be true for one cultural group also true for another?" By asking this question and conducting studies to test it, cross-cultural research in and of itself naturally facilitates the constant challenging of and skepticism toward one's truths and knowledge. By engaging in cross-cultural research one is always engaging in critical thinking about the state of the field.

The implication of cross-cultural research to critical thinking is related to the concept of scientific philosophy, that is, the logic underlying our science. Cross-cultural research involves a simple method change in one parameter of a study - the cultural composition of one's samples. By changing it, cross-cultural researchers recognize that knowledge, which is based on research findings, is limited to the methodologies of the studies that created them in the first place. Therefore changes to those parameters, such as in the cultural composition of the participants in the research, have the potential to change the findings and thus knowledge. Every finding that serves as the backbone to greater knowledge in psychology is bound in a strict sense to the methodological parameters of the studies that produced it. Because methodologies themselves are bound by culture every finding is culture-bound until it is formally tested in as wide and diverse an arena as possible. In fact, conducting research is itself a culture-bound enterprise, and not every culture in the world subscribes to this particular method of knowledge creation. Engaging with these issues every day is one of the ultimate examples of critical thinking.

### **Identification of the "Psychological Engine" of Adjustment**

The third major contribution of the cross-cultural approach is in elucidating the process of adjustment both between and within cultures. Cross-cultural psychologists have studied this topic for years and many important findings have emerged (Berry, Kim, & Boski, 1988; Ward, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1993, 1996; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Over the last six years my colleagues and I have been studying the factors that can predict intercultural adjustment success and the potential for that success. Using a scale called the ICAPS (Intercultural Adjustment Potential Scale) we have been able to predict the intercultural adjustment of Japanese students, businesspersons, and housewives; Americans; Swedes; Central and South Americans; and Indians using a variety of outcome measures including self-reports of subjective adjustment, peer ratings, interviewer ratings, and behavioral assessments (Matsumoto et al., 2001, 2003). The ICAPS can predict adjustment and adjustment-related behaviors above and beyond that already predicted by

personality and by emotion recognition, one of the most stable components of emotional intelligence (Matsumoto, LeRoux, Bernhard, & Gray, 2001).

Most importantly, our research has allowed us to identify what I call the "psychological engine" of adjustment. These are the psychological skills necessary to live and succeed in a diverse, multicultural environment. Factor analyses of normative data on the ICAPS involving over 2,500 individuals have given us insight concerning what those skills are:

1. Emotion regulation
2. Openness
3. Flexibility
4. Creativity
5. Critical thinking
6. Autonomy

Of these the most important is emotion regulation (ER). Empirically, ER is always the most consistent and strongest predictor of all adjustment indices measured in all of our studies. Theoretically, individuals need to be able to regulate their emotions, especially negative ones that arise because of inevitable intercultural conflict, so as to allow them to engage in creative and critical thinking about alternative ways of understanding the world. ER also allows for the incorporation of new cognitive schemas that are produced based on one's ability to accommodate to cultural differences. And most importantly, the fact that ER has been empirically shown to be the best predictor of adjustment in a wide variety of cultural samples suggests that its importance is universal.

### **Reflection - 11 September and Beyond**

Like so many of us around the world, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have had a profound effect on my work. They have made me ponder what is really important about my work, and ever since I have thought long, hard, and differently about how I approach the whole enterprise of culture and psychology.

I myself was on a plane coming home to San Francisco from Tokyo on that fateful day. I travel a lot and when I come home I always like to watch the view as we land in San Francisco because it really is a very beautiful city. That morning, however, I remember looking out the window and seeing a very different view. At first I thought that we were just taking a different approach as we sometimes do and that I just did not recognize the view. But after we landed I realized that the airport itself did not look like SFO. It was only until after we touched down that the pilot informed us that we had landed in Vancouver and that terrible things had happened on the east coast. Even the flight attendants had no idea of what had happened because I remember clearly their announcement "Welcome to San Francisco" when we landed.

We had to wait for Canadian Police to hand-search us, so we sat in the plane on the tarmac in Vancouver for six hours and listened to the radio. I called my wife on my cell

phone to her crying because apparently she heard some news reports that all United flights to San Francisco had been hijacked. Listening to the radio on the plane and then watching the television from my hotel room over the next few days I, like so many of us, was simply stunned. When it was clear that the attack had been organized and I realized that a terrorist may have been on my plane, too, anger, shock, and sadness made way for fear.

But beyond such raw emotions, the events of the next few days made me question my work on many different levels. As a psychologist I wondered why such things could occur and what could drive people to bring such atrocities on others. As a cross-cultural psychologist I wondered whether if I, and all of us cross-cultural psychologists, had done our jobs better we could have prevented the attacks. After all, we all work for the ultimate goal of better cross-cultural understanding for the sake of mutual welfare and benefit. And yet here it was plain as day that at least for some people in the world such understanding simply did not exist.

I spend a major portion of my life doing judo, having done it since the age of 7. As a former coaching staff member of the world championships and Olympic teams of the U.S., I know how judo is so widespread around the world. It, too, has the ultimate goal of helping individuals to strive for self-perfection, the development of character and morality with the goal of mutual welfare and benefit. So when I watched the events of that day unfold, I questioned whether or not all of us who did judo were really helping the world get along better, too.

Many other world events make me wonder about these same issues. Today, conflict in the Middle East seems as strong as ever, with Israel and Palestine at each other's throats. Unrest in the Philippines, Indonesia, and other world hot spots take center stage every day. History is replete with wars, conflicts, and struggles because of ethnic, cultural, religious, political, or even personal reasons. One need not look at major atrocities such as war but only to the injustices and conflicts we see daily on the streets among average citizens and the all-too-often cold shoulders and rudeness we perpetuate among ourselves in order to question whether things are 'okay' the way they are, and whether the status quo is acceptable for the future.

Thus, every day I find myself questioning the meaning of what I, as a cross-cultural psychologist, judo instructor, and educator am doing, and whether or not it is really making a difference in the world. That questioning led me to think long, hard, and seriously about education.

### **Rethinking the Definition and Goals of Education**

Like many of my colleagues around the world, I teach classes in which I require students to do lots of readings, research, write papers, and perform on tests. Their performance serves as the basis for my evaluation, which I then use to give grades. Because their academic performance is dependent on grades, students are keen to study for their exams and do their papers to get good grades.



When I speak to my colleagues about student learning, most believe that their students are learning something about the content that is taught in class and required on tests and papers. It seems that all of education can be summarized by what's in a syllabus and the content of the tests we administer. And certainly there is some truth to this as they will surely remember something of all the things we require.

But when you speak to students you get a different picture. When I see my students a year or two after they have taken their class with me, I often ask them what they remember having learned in the class. More often than not students have forgotten almost all of the facts I made them memorize for their tests. What they do remember often has nothing to do with the actual content of the course, but instead with the way I handled a difficult student or dealt with controversial material. It often varies, but it is often *not* related to the things I tested them on.

As I looked back and examined how we teach what we teach, I have come to the realization that no matter how important we teachers think something is to a student's learning, the degree to which a student will make an effort to remember (not necessarily learn) something is more dependent on one all-important question rather than on any priority or values we as instructors have about the material: "Will it be on the test?" And beside that, students are not interested in how much we teachers know; they just want to know that we are interested in them.

For these reasons, and through my reflection about education and my own life in the past few months, I have come to the following definition of education: *An education is what students remember after they have forgotten all of the facts we made them memorize.* It is whatever they say they learned from you when you meet them a year, or two, or five after you taught them. And if we in the educational system think more broadly about what it is that we are delivering, and if we define education as stated above, then to me the goal of education is *to help humans live uniquely as humans.* This then begs the question of what is uniquely human, and what differentiates us from non-human animals.

Recent research in biosciences has documented that there is somewhere around a 99% genetic overlap between humans and chimps (Marks, 1999). That means that we share many biological and psychological similarities. But one big difference that separates us from all other non-human animals, at least in complexity, is language. We can speak, read, and write. We have written and oral histories. We can have conversations about the past, present, and future. That language influences cognition and vice versa is an old notion (Sapir, 1956) that has received considerable support over the years. Because we have language, humans have culture, morals, and values. And, we can actively plan about the future. These abilities set us apart from other animals.

Having a goal to help humans live as uniquely human means that we should help facilitate their learning of culture, morals, and values. In the realm of culture and psychology, these can translate into the development of concepts such as ethnocentrism and intercultural sensitivity. We can help people develop as voyagers of the world who welcome challenges and are constantly engaging with diversity and growing from it. This is contrasted with so many in our world today who spend so much time and effort vindicating their limited worldviews because they cannot deal with diversity and differences well or in a

constructive manner. The newspapers and television news reports are replete with the consequences of such vindication.

Students all around the world today spend a major portion of their lives in an educational system. Those of us in the universities represent the last line in this collective effort in creating tomorrow's citizens and societies. While the goals we are discussing here are worthwhile to attain throughout the lifespan, it seems to me that we in the universities play a major role in helping to achieve or hinder those goals that are so important for our futures. For many of our students, adolescence and young adulthood are crucial times within which such changes can occur. We ought to deliver them.

### **Values-Based Education**

How can we translate some of these lofty ideas into practical application? We might stop to consider whether imparting knowledge alone is sufficient in cross-cultural (or other) psychology classes today. The research described earlier on intercultural adjustment potential identifies clearly what kinds of psychological skills are needed to live, work, function, and play successfully in today's and tomorrow's multicultural, pluralistic, and diverse societies. We need to consider that one of the most important student outcomes that we may want to incorporate in education is that of increased emotion regulation (ER), openness, flexibility, and all the other skills of the psychological engine of adjustment that will help them negotiate life better than now.

What we are discussing is values-based education. This is not a popular topic among many. But there is no such thing as a value-free education (or value-free research, for that matter). A value-free education is one that supposedly does not focus on the imparting of any values to students. Is this pragmatic or even possible? I think not. How can teachers, regardless of how much they try to focus solely on content, possibly be totally void of their values when teaching and interacting with students? Even in such situations we impart values; it is the value to ignore one's values. Is this the message we want to deliver?

Take stock for a moment and consider the possibility of adopting as concrete and specific teaching goals the improvement of students in their psychological skills related to adjustment and living in a diverse world. The improvement of such skills, especially ER, can help facilitate respect and appreciation for cultural differences and other diversities, and tolerance for those differences that are incongruent with one's own values and behaviors. If we believe that these values and psychological outcomes are important enough to make the necessary changes to methodology, pedagogy, and administration, then we can say that psychology has made a conscious effort to improve the social condition through its rigorous training of its students. And cross-cultural research will have served as the major impetus for this social and educational change.

### **Training in Our Classes**

How can we achieve these goals? The development of the ICAPS (described above) is important to the field not only because it allows for the identification of the key psychological skills that are crucial to adjustment, but also because it provides researchers and educators with a useful tool with which to assess the efficacy of their training programs.

I have administered ICAPS a number of times in a simple pre-post design in order to examine the degree to which a variety of cross-cultural experiences actually improve students' or trainees' scores. Unfortunately, however, whenever I have administered ICAPS pre-post in cross-cultural psychology courses taught by myself and others, I have found that scores do not improve (Matsumoto, 2001, July). (Fortunately, they don't decrease, either.) This was shocking and disturbing to me, as it usually is to most cross-cultural psychologists to whom I report these data.

When I have administered ICAPS pre-post to intercultural training seminars that are designed to help people adjust to life in a different culture, however, upwards of 80% of the participants increase in their scores (Matsumoto et al., 2001, 2003). One of the biggest differences between traditional courses in which scores do not increase and training seminars in which we have documented increases in scores is that the former are generally didactic and one-way, based mostly on lectures. The latter are experientially based with role-plays, simulations, and other such exercises built in as part of the training program.

If we understand teaching as an example of training and view it within a typical training model (which many of us don't), one conclusion that may become apparent is that our methodologies and curricula just do not facilitate the kind of changes on the individual, psychological level that we may want. The data described here strongly suggest that we in the universities teaching classes the old-fashioned way should reconsider what we are doing and reassess whether or not that format facilitates the types of psychological outcomes we want to occur in our students. The data I have obtained so far indicate they do not.

### **The World is Getting Smaller**

Many countries today are witness to an increasing diversity in their societies. Here in the U.S. we come in contact with people from all around the world and all walks of life, and we need to get along in order to live, work, and play. Television, movies, and other outlets of the mass media bring people together like never before. Improvements in communication technologies such as the cell phone, internet and email all bring us closer more quickly, too. Social penetration is easier, more affordable, and more frequent in today's society than ever before.

These changes only promise to increase even further in the future. The first commercial flight from the U.S. west coast to Hawaii took 21-1/2 hours, on which passengers lounged in sleeper cabins and beds. Today that same trip takes about 4-1/2

hours. Today it takes 10-1/2 hours to go from my hometown of San Francisco to Tokyo, Japan. But we know that the engine technology currently exists to make that trip in one hour, thanks to the space shuttle program. One day this technology will be available on commercial flights.

Cross-cultural research itself will need to evolve in the future in order to keep up with these changes. Its continued contribution to psychology will be determined not only by our ability to be flexible enough to incorporate alternative teaching methods in order to achieve alternative educational goals, but also by our ability to incorporate alternative research methods in studying the interaction of culture and psychology. Much of cross-cultural research today is not as much about what people do as much as it is about people's perceptions and attitudes about what they do and how they behave. This is because it is so easy to administer questionnaires in different cultures and get a finding. Because we know that self-report really only accounts for a small proportion of variance in actual behaviors, cross-cultural researchers will need to incorporate methods of studying real lives in real contexts and not solely rely on questionnaires administered in different countries. Of course this is hard work, but the importance of the topic and the possible ramifications of doing it well, or not so well, are profound.

Everywhere we look people from different countries, backgrounds - cultures - are being thrust together like never before. Dealing with, managing, and taking advantage of this increased diversity remains one of our biggest challenges in the future. Psychology, informed by cross-cultural research, is uniquely positioned to help create a better world by continuing its study of people of different cultures, its improvements to knowledge of psychological processes, and in guiding future educational systems and processes so that people are better equipped with the psychological skills necessary to live within this increased diversity. Identifying psychological skills such as ER and others, and finding ways of improving them in our students can be one of the biggest legacies of the cross-cultural approach. Mutual welfare and benefit, borne of a values-based, educational platform of respect, appreciation, and tolerance, with the development of the psychological engine of adjustment at its core, seems to me to be a fitting goal of our careers, and a pretty uniquely human thing to do.

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### **Questions for Discussion**

1. How has the study of culture impacted on knowledge and theory creation in psychology?
2. What kinds of theories do you know about that include culture? What theories do not? Should they?
3. Should the improvement of psychological skills like emotion regulation be a goal of education? In what manner?
4. How can the contribution of the study of culture to psychology be improved and expanded even more in the future?
5. How much content do you remember from a course you took a year ago?

### **About the Author**

David Matsumoto is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Culture and Emotion Research Laboratory at San Francisco State University. He earned his B.A. from the University of Michigan and M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. He has studied emotion and culture for over 20 years, and is the author of over 250 works including original research articles, paper presentations, books, book chapters, videos, and assessment instruments. He has made invited addresses to professional and scientific groups in the U.S. and internationally and serves as a consultant to various domestic and international businesses. Dr. Matsumoto is also very active in the world of Olympic sport Judo. He is the Head Instructor of the East Bay Judo Institute in El Cerrito, CA, Chairman of the Development Committee of the United States Judo Federation, and an Official Researcher of the International Judo Federation. He has coached and managed many senior and junior Judo teams representing the United States in international competition and training including the 1995 World Championships (Chiba, Japan), the 1996 Olympic Games (Atlanta), the 1997 World Championships (Paris, France), and the 1999 World Championships (Birmingham, England). He was also a Technical Official at the 2000 Jr. World Championships, and the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia.