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Perception of Interpersonal Behaviors Across Cultures

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Abstract

Cross-cultural psychology has played a very important role in identifying, describing, and even explaining psychological structures that are involved in the perception of interpersonal behavior. This chapter reviews work based on the research paradigm of subjective culture, which establishes that at least three interpersonal dimensions have been identified across cultures and historical periods: Association-Dissociation, Superordination-Subordination, and Intimacy-Formality. These three dimensions are often conceptualized as psychological universals, a notion that raises the question of the origins of the dimensions. By starting with the fundamental assumption that all social behavior is based on resource exchange, the chapter reviews a framework that attempts to account for the emergence of social meanings through time.

Introduction

The investigation of the structure and meaning of interpersonal behavior in different cultures has been an important component of cross-cultural research in psychology for many years. The reason for the centrality of this topic is fairly obvious: interpersonal behavior forms the core of human daily activity, and, thus, it seems inevitable that culture will influence it greatly. In fact, we can safely assume that culture and interpersonal behavior constitute each other in that it is hard to think of one without referring to the other.

Subjective Culture and the Search for Psychological Universals

Triandis (1972) pioneered the exploration of the perceived structure or cognitive organization of interpersonal behavior across cultures using a research paradigm known as "subjective culture," which he defined as a group's characteristic way of perceiving its social environment. Subjective culture includes the meaning and belief systems, interpersonal relationships, norms, values, and attitudes that account for the interaction of people in various social contexts. The goal of research based on this paradigm was to explore the psychological determinants or causes of interpersonal behavior by identifying variables and processes that were either specific to particular cultures or were culture-general (for a general description of this research paradigm see Adamopoulos & Kashima, 1999).

Variables that are found across a variety of cultures are often referred to as psychological universals (e.g., Lonner & Adamopoulos, 1997; Lonner, 1980). For example, a psychological theory may propose that in all cultures thoughtful decisions or self-instructions to act in particular ways are a function of the attitudes one holds and of the prevailing social norms (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Triandis, 1977). Such a theory posits a universal process to explain the production of human behavior. However, the particular norms or attitudes involved may well be specific to a certain culture, and may have little in common with what happens in another place or time.

The Structure of Interpersonal Behavior

Over the past thirty years, Triandis and his colleagues have investigated, among other aspects of subjective culture, the manner in which people perceive and ascribe meaning to interpersonal behavior (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1988; Triandis, 1972, 1994). The core problem in this research program was the identification and description of the psychological structures involved in the way in which people understand the social behavior they experience in their environment. By "psychological structure" I mean the dimensions of meaning along which interpersonal behavior can vary. For example, consider the bipolar dimension "rational-irrational." Any specific behavior could possibly be placed somewhere along this dimension. Thus, the behavior "discuss a problem with my friend" might be placed somewhere along the "rational" side of the dimension, whereas the behavior " strike a person at random on the street" might be placed somewhere along the "irrational"

side. The question here is: what, if any, dimensions do people use in understanding interpersonal behavior? An extension of this research explored the possibility that any obtained dimensions are psychological universals – in other words, that they are shared by people of differing cultural backgrounds, even when specific social behaviors may mean very different things to them.

The methods used in these investigations varied over time. However, the most common approach relied on variants of an instrument that Triandis (1972) called the "behavioral differential." This instrument consisted of large numbers of social behaviors – selected so that they were a representative sample of the vast range of human social activity – occurring in the context of various social situations that were rated by research participants on a 7-point scale ranging from "extremely unlikely" to "extremely likely." In other words, the ratings were based on people's own assumptions and impressions about how frequently each behavior occurs in the social environment. Typically, the data were subjected to factor analytic and other data-reduction techniques in order to derive an underlying set of a few dimensions descriptive of the relationships that respondents perceived among the various behaviors.

After a large number of investigations along the lines described above in many cultures around the world, Triandis (1978, 1994; see also Adamopoulos, 1988, 1991) concluded that there exist at least three universal dimensions used to interpret interpersonal (2) Superordination-Subordination (Dominance); and (3) Intimacy-Formality. Naturally, this does not mean that other, culture-specific dimensions do not exist. Rather, Triandis and Adamopoulos proposed that around the world, regardless of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic background, people understand social behavior as communicating primarily the presence or absence of affiliative motives, the desire to dominate another or be submissive to another's authority, and the need for interpersonal closeness (or its absence).

The interpersonal dimensions described above are found – often in almost identical form – in other psychological domains (e.g., the study of parent-child interaction, and the analysis of the interpersonal domain of personality). However, despite such strong convergence of evidence supporting universality, it is not the case that every behavior has similar meaning across cultures. Rather, the three dimensions provide a framework or context of psychological similarities within which we can reliably explore cross-cultural differences in the meaning of interpersonal behavior. Consider, for example, some social behaviors whose meaning was explored, among many others, by Triandis, Tanaka, and Shanmugam (1966) in the U.S., Japan, and India. Figures 1 and 2 report results from that investigation and adapt them for the current discussion.
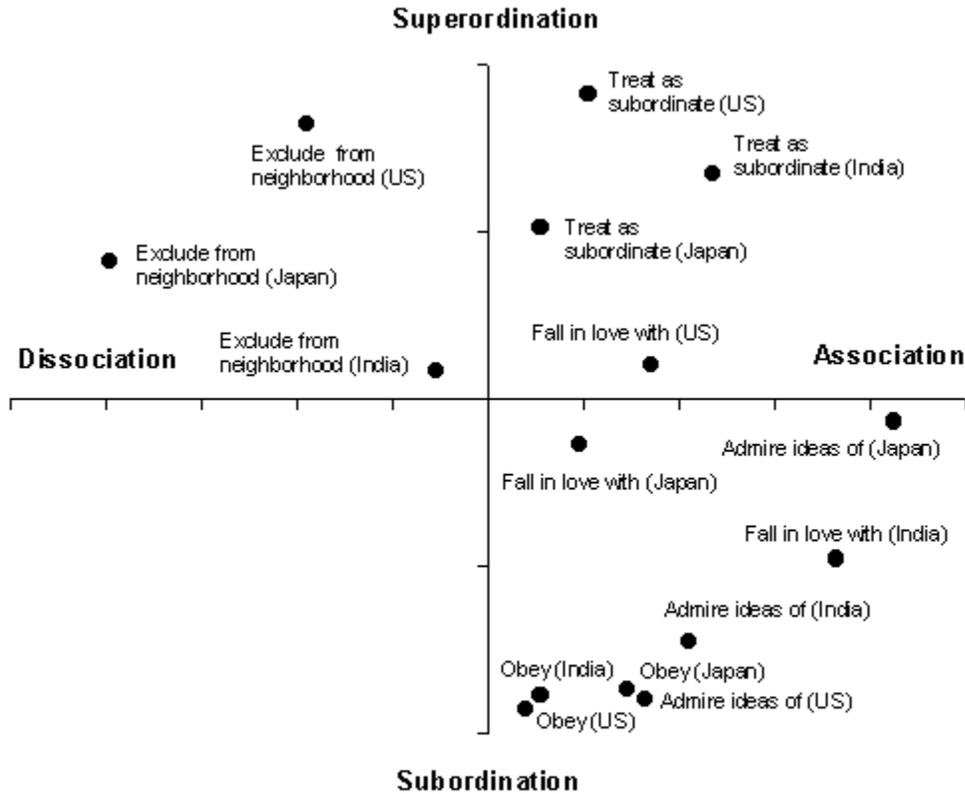
Figure 1. An example of the dimensions of Association-Dissociation and Superdordination-Subordination in three cultures (adapted from Triandis et al., 1966).

The three universal interpersonal dimensions were identified (though labeled differently in the original paper) and described separately for each culture. Figure 1 presents the dimensions of Association-Dissociation and Superordination-Subordination, and Figure 2 presents the dimension of Intimacy-Formality plotted against Association-Dissociation again.

It is clear that the three dimensions are quite meaningful to the respondents (in this case, all males) from the three cultures. These dimensions also provide the opportunity to explore some important differences in the meaning of specific behaviors to these respondents. For example, the behavior "exclude from neighborhood" appears to convey a strong dissociative (unfriendly) and superordinate (control) meaning to U.S. and Japanese respondents, but these meanings are not present in the Indian understanding of the behavior. Instead, the Indian respondents appear to perceive "exclude from neighborhood" as a formal behavior, which may reflect the wide acceptance of the caste system that specifies social divisions in traditional Hindu society. Following a similar line of explanation we can first describe cross-cultural differences in social meaning and then relate them to particular cultural practices and features for other components of subjective culture. Thus, the main contribution of the research paradigm of subjective culture has been the

explication of the meaning systems that people of different cultural backgrounds use to make sense of the world around them.
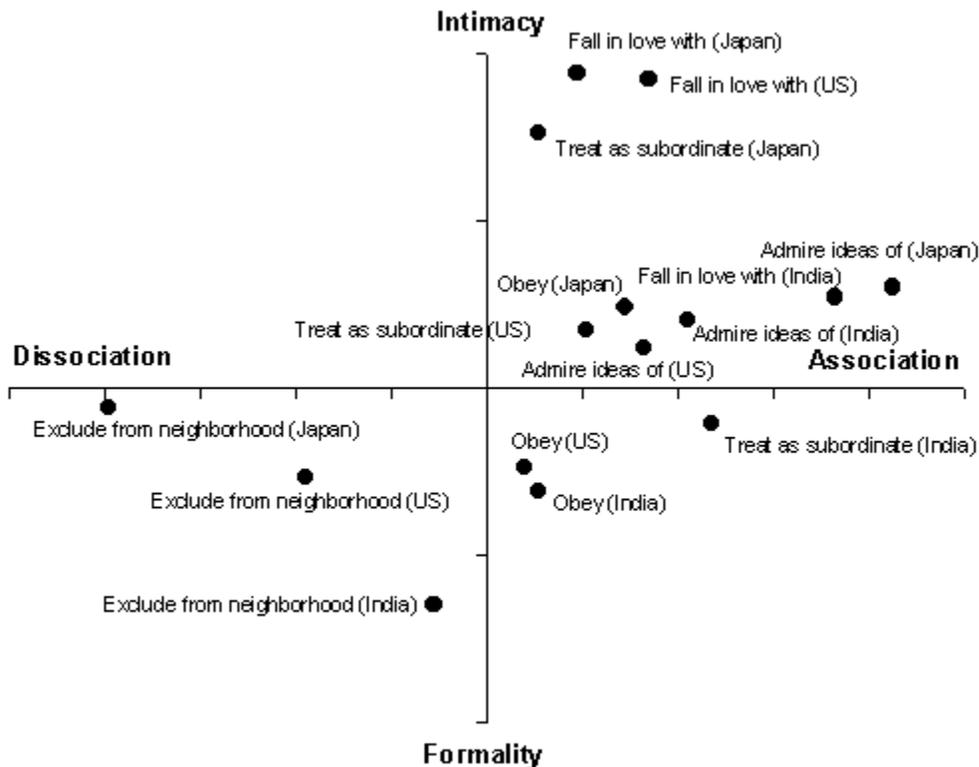

Figure 2. An example of the dimensions of Association-Dissociation and Intimacy-Formality in three cultures (adapted from Triandis et al., 1966).

Diachronic Universals and the Need for Historical Evidence

As implied in my comments so far, there appears to be strong evidence, amassed over several decades of research, that there are several dimensions involved in the perception of interpersonal behavior that are common across cultures. It is tempting to call such dimensions "universal." However, the question that must be raised here is: Exactly what is a psychological universal? Triandis (1978) asked the question more than twenty years ago and admitted that it is difficult to provide an exact answer. Still, he felt that considering the paucity of cross-cultural psychological research at the time – a situation that has changed somewhat since then – a finding that is common in just a few cultures, with no cases to the contrary, should qualify as a "universal." In other words, Triandis rightly advocated the use of rather loose criteria for "universal" status. In the particular case of interpersonal structure, the three dimensions reviewed earlier have been identified in many diverse cultures, and thus could easily qualify for such status.

I have proposed an additional criterion for universal status – that of (relative) continuity through time (Adamopoulos, 1988). To the extent possible, we must be able to show that a psychological universal has been present throughout human history. It may have undergone considerable change over time, but there ought to be some core elements that reflect an underlying consistency in meaning. For example, the construct "intimacy" may have undergone considerable change in its meaning over time (including in the manner in which it has been manifested throughout human history), but some fundamental notion that people have always had a need for interpersonal closeness must surely be evident in the human record if we are to consider the construct a "universal" (and, hence, a component of what some might call "human nature"). The problem then becomes one of locating the appropriate records and the relevant information contained in them.

I have described a method to obtain such data in some detail elsewhere (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1982; Adamopoulos & Bontempo, 1986). It consists mainly of locating literary sources describing interpersonal interaction in considerable detail in various cultures and historical periods (e.g., the Homeric epics – the Iliad and the Odyssey – or the medieval epic poem of Beowulf). This interaction is then recorded across a number of social relationships and situations, and the data are analyzed via factor analysis in much the same way that responses to the behavioral differential are analyzed, as described earlier.

The results of these analyses – only a few conducted to date – have generally provided support for the proposal that the dimensions of association-dissociation, superordination-subordination, and intimacy-formality are psychological universals. The results are particularly strong for the first two dimensions, with little apparent change in the basic meaning of affiliation and dominance reported over time. The evidence is a bit less clear in the case of the Intimacy-Formality dimension. As implied earlier, the notion of intimacy appears in descriptions of interpersonal interaction going back possibly to the 10th century B.C., but it also appears that considerable changes have occurred in the psychological status of this construct. For example, intimacy does not appear as an independent dimension of meaning in many of the oldest documents, but, rather, is diffused and folded into other psychological dimensions – such as affiliation or even dominance. For example, the kind of love and closeness that motivated the behavior of Ancient Greek heroes like Achilles or Odysseus, at least as we glean that behavior from the Homeric epics, was inseparable from their role as kings in charge of their households, their extended families, and their property – in other words, their superordinate status vis-…-vis their fellow human beings (for more detailed examples see also Adamopoulos & Lonner, 1994).

We are still very far from being able to establish such "diachronic" universality for many psychological constructs. In fact, it may be quite impossible to do so for the vast majority of these constructs. However, it is important that we put considerable energy into developing appropriate methods and theoretical frameworks for this endeavor that is an important step to future progress in cross-cultural psychology.

The Whys and Wherefores of Association, Superordination, and Intimacy

Once the universality of a psychological construct is established, the question that naturally follows concerns its origins. Thus, we may ask what the reasons and causes for the universality of the three interpersonal dimensions are. Why is it that they are found in so many of the world's cultures and across such long periods of time? Some years ago, Osgood (1969) asked a similar question – in a paper that inspired the heading of this section – about the three universal dimensions of affective or connotative meaning (Evaluation, Potency, and Activity). In pioneering work over several decades that inspired many other researchers – including Triandis' development of the subjective culture paradigm – Osgood and his colleagues established that human beings, regardless of culture and language, tend to interpret objects and ideas in their world based on how good or bad (Evaluation), strong or weak (Potency), and fast or slow (Activity) they are (cf. Osgood, May, and Miron, 1975). Osgood eventually speculated that the universality of these psychological dimensions could be explained on the basis of their survival value. Early human beings probably found it extremely beneficial to their survival to be able to decide when facing a new potential threat (e.g., a saber-tooth tiger) whether or not it was friendly, stronger than them, and fast or slow (so that they could outrun it).

In much the same way, we could argue that the three interpersonal dimensions established as universal so far may have survival value in some fundamental way for human beings. After all, the ideas of Association, Superordination, and Intimacy bear some basic – though rather vague – resemblance to Evaluation, Potency, and Activity. The question is: what sorts of processes could explain the emergence of these meanings across cultures and time?

I have outlined elsewhere (Adamopoulos, 1984, 1988, 1991) a model that attempts to explain this emergence of social meaning and the formation of the three interpersonal dimensions. The process is based on one fundamental assumption: All human social behavior is conceptualized as resource exchange. In other words, I assume that human beings engage in interpersonal activity because they need to secure resources that enable them to survive and thrive in their environment. This assumption is by no means unique. There are several resource-exchange frameworks in psychology that have been developed over the past few decades. The theory that has informed the present work was developed by Foa and Foa (1974) (see also Foa, Converse, Tornblom, and Foa, 1993). This theoretical model assumes that any human social behavior can be categorized in one or more of six broad classes of resources: (1) Love, (2) Services, (3) Goods, (4) Money, (5) Information, and (6) Status. These resource classes are organized in a circumplex defined by the dimensions of concreteness and particularism. Thus, Love is highly particularistic whereas Money is very low in particularism. Similarly, Status and Information are low in conreteness, whereas services and goods are very concrete resources.

Whereas concreteness is a fairly straightforward notion, particularism bears some explanation. In general, particularistic resources are involved in social exchanges in which the identities of the participating individuals play a significant role in the satisfactory completion of the interaction – as is the case in exchanges of love, for example. Less

particularistic (universalistic) exchanges are not as much based upon the identities of the participants. Thus, in money exchanges at a bank, for instance, the relationship between customer and teller does not usually play a significant role in the satisfactory completion of the transaction.

These ideas – the concreteness and particularism of resource exchange processes – can be conceptualized as fundamental constraints on social interaction with which people had to contend early in human history. For example, it is reasonable to assume that in the very first human-to-human interaction a resource (e.g., care and support or information about an animal or event) had to be given or denied. Human beings then had to learn to differentiate between particularistic exchanges where the identity of the other person – and his/her relationship to the actor – was a significant part of the exchange process, and universalistic exchanges, where an actor's relationship with the target of the interaction does not contribute significantly to the successful completion of the interaction. For example, care and support would be provided to a close friend or relative (e.g., mother to child), whereas information about a dangerous animal could be given to anyone, including a complete stranger. This differentiation process may be thought of as analogous to the process through which human infants have to learn to distinguish self from others and to differentiate between an ego-oriented and an other-oriented perspective.

Finally, the actual resource exchanged could be concrete and material (e.g., sharing food with someone) or abstract and symbolic (e.g., acknowledging another person as the leader of the social group to which one belongs). A number of social and biological scientists have speculated over the years that the emergence of the ability to think in symbolic terms marked the beginning of human culture. In other words, we may reasonably assume that the ability to differentiate between concrete and abstract resources appeared relatively late in human history.

Figure 3 presents an outline of the process through which the meaning and structure of social interaction emerges over time. We see that the universal dimensions of interpersonal behavior, which were derived empirically in previous investigations, can now be defined theoretically. For example, Association is defined in terms of the giving of resources, and Dissociation is defined as the denying of resources to another person.

Superordination is defined as the denying of particularistic and abstract resources (e.g., the denial of status) to another individual, whereas Subordination is defined as the giving of such resources. Finally, intimacy is defined as the exchange of particularistic and relatively concrete resources (e.g., love and services), whereas formality is the exchange of universalistic and relatively abstract resources (e.g., money). Note that both intimacy and formality may involve the giving of denial of such resources. This explains, for example, why the behavior "hitting another person" is often found to involve both dissociative and intimate meanings at the same time. The target of the behavior is often a person the actor knows quite well (e.g., a family member or a roommate), and the behavior typically requires human contact – a thoroughly intimate setting.

This model also proposes that there are other universal features to interpersonal behavior that have not been identified in previous psychological research. For example, trading involves the exchange (giving or denial) of concrete and universalistic resources

(e.g., goods). Of course, there is plenty of anthropological evidence suggesting that market places – the settings where much of the trading behavior typically occurs – are a ubiquitous phenomenon in human societies around the world.

Facets	Constraints							
Exchange Mode	Giving				Denying			
Social Orientation	Particularistic		Universalistic		Universalistic		Particularistic	
Resource	Material	Symbolic	Symbolic	Material	Material	Symbolic	Symbolic	Material
Behavioral Feature	**Intimacy**	**Subordi-nation**	**Formal-ity**	**Trading**	**Trading**	**Formal-ity**	**Superordi-nation**	**Intimacy**
	Association				**Dissociation**			

Figure 3. The emergence of the meaning of interpersonal behavior (adapted from Adamopoulos, 1988).

Overall, then, the model presents a tentative – and certainly incomplete – description of a system that captures some of the universal aspects of the emergence of social meanings. Testing the model may involve a number of different approaches. All of them, however, are based on the order in which the interpersonal features of meaning emerge in the structure outlined in figure 3. For example, the order in which the various constraints are assumed to have appeared historically and subsequently combined with each other determines strictly the order of behavioral features – a different set of assumptions would lead to a different order of features. The order of behavioral features or meanings leads to predictions about the empirical relationships expected among the dimensions of interpersonal behavior because, in the model, the closer two features are, the more elements they have in common, and, therefore, the more related they are presumed to be psychologically. Thus, for example, Superordination-Subordination and Intimacy-Formality are not expected to be totally independent dimensions, but are thought to be somewhat correlated – a fact borne out by empirical investigation. Also, it is expected that Association-Dissociation will be more highly correlated with Intimacy-Formality than will be correlated with Superordination-Subordination, a fact also supported by empirical analyses.

To test the model's assumptions, the relationships among the behavioral features can be explored directly in laboratory or field investigations (e.g., Adamopoulos, 1984). The temporal assumptions can be explored through the analysis of historical and literary sources, as outlined earlier in this chapter. To date, such analyses have yielded some initial support for the model's assumptions, but much more remains to be done in order to establish the validity of the hypothesis that the emergence of social meaning has followed a relatively predictable course through human history based on principles of resource exchange.

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Questions for Discussion

1. It is argued in the chapter that much of the meaning of interpersonal behavior can be captured by the three dimensions of Association-Dissociation, Superordination-Subordination, and Intimacy-Formality. Can you think of any other dimensions that are important in understanding social behavior? Do you think that these new dimensions would also be universal?

2. Foa and Foa (1974) argued that six broad classes of resources are needed to categorize all human social behavior. Can you think of particular interpersonal behaviors that cannot easily be categorized into one or more of the six resource classes? What additional, if any, resource classes might be needed?

3. The author of the chapter makes the fundamental assumption that all human interpersonal behavior can be conceptualized as resource exchange. Do you think that this is a reasonable assumption? Why or why not? What other assumptions about the basic nature of human behavior might one make? To what theories of human behavior might such assumptions lead us?

4. Discussions about what makes a psychological construct "universal" are generally pretty vague. Can you come up with more precise criteria to establish the universality of psychological constructs?

5. To what extent can we use reliably historical/literary sources of data in order to explore psychological constructs? Do you think that there are serious methodological problems (e.g., reliability and validity) with such an approach? What are these problems, and how can we address them?