



8-2002

Cross-, Intra-, and Just Plain Cultural

Douglass R. Price-Williams

University of California, Los Angeles, California,, dpw@ucla.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/orpc>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Price-Williams, D. R. (2002). Cross-, Intra-, and Just Plain Cultural. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1100>

This [Online Readings in Psychology and Culture](#) Article is brought to you for free and open access (provided uses are educational in nature) by [IACCP](#) and [ScholarWorks@GVSU](#). Copyright © 2002 International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology. All Rights Reserved. ISBN 978-0-9845627-0-1

Cross-, Intra-, and Just Plain Cultural

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

About 1980 I made a drastic career change in that I began to think less in terms of a cross-cultural psychology and more in terms of a cultural psychology. This was a few years after I had been given a joint appointment with an Anthropology department and had been engaged in the study of psychological anthropology, becoming a co-editor of the first journal devoted to psychological anthropology. This tends to explain why I began to think of the idea of a cultural psychology. In a paper first presented at a cross-cultural conference in Honolulu in 1978, and published a year after (Price-Williams, 1979) I re-introduced the concept of Cultural Psychology as a idea to be considered in its relationship to cross-cultural psychology. I later expanded the theme (Price-Williams, 1980). In that paper I claimed that the idea of a cross-cultural psychology logically necessitated the anterior idea of a cultural psychology, but that the systematics of their relationship, and indeed to other methodological variants such as psychological anthropology, needed to be worked out. I returned once more to this subject in the contribution to Lindzey's third edition of the Handbook of Social Psychology, where I actually called the chapter as "Cultural Psychology" (Price-Williams, 1985), reinforcing the key idea that psychology operated within a cultural medium.

I thought at the time that my idea was fairly innocent, seemingly logical, yet recognizing that there would be a serious division of labor entailed, and giving a little consideration as to how this could be done. But it was at this time that I became more engrossed with psychological anthropology, and missed, with some exceptions, several important developments concerning the idea of a cultural psychology.

From subsequent reading I have been made aware of key publications which are new to me. In particular there is the important volume of the journal *Culture and Psychology* (Vol. 3, No. 3), in which the fundamental ideas of Ernest Boesch are presented. Further, I found that I had regretfully earlier missed the important contribution by Lutz Eckensberger (1979) in which he advanced the perspective of a cultural psychology about the same time as my Honolulu paper.

In what follows, however, I am going to concentrate on two books that have appeared in the 1990s, both with the leading title of *Cultural Psychology*, on which to affix my observations on the development of this subject. The first is a book edited by Stigler, Shweder and Herdt (1990), *Cultural Psychology*, in which there is a seminal chapter by Shweder entitled "Cultural Psychology: What is it?", which re-opens the question, and advances a viewpoint which I did not have at the time of exploring this concept. To my surprise, Shweder draws a sharp distinction between cultural psychology, and both cross-cultural psychology and psychological anthropology (also ethnopsychology). As I had regarded cultural psychology as a superordinate title, with cross-cultural psychology and psychological anthropology therefore as subordinate titles, I was taken aback. It was true that in the Social Psychology Handbook chapter I had suggested that in pursuing this domain we should relinquish partly the starting theories and definitions of subjects that mark these fields of study and plunge more daringly into new concepts. Nevertheless I did not envisage a schism between what I was calling Cultural Psychology and these other fields. Yet this is apparently precisely what Shweder seems to be doing.

The second is an important book by Michael Cole distinctly called *Cultural Psychology*. Whereas Shweder is coming from the discipline of Anthropology and the philosophy of intentionalism, Cole originates from experimental psychology and adopts, one would say, a more positivist philosophy. Nevertheless their engagement in the same topic allows me to further expand on my previous ideas of a cultural psychology. It is easiest to make my commentary on these two books by invoking key points on which to present their ideas along with my observations.

The Question of Scope

Cole (1996) made the comment that Shweder "place[s] a greater emphasis on the centrality of interpretation and methods of analysis derived from the humanities than do Price-Williams or the German action theorists" (p. 103). Indeed, one of the surprises that I had on reading the Shweder chapter was the long laundry list that he gives as constituting a Cultural Psychology (Shweder, 1990, pp. 30-31).

Cole, on the other hand (although only somewhat; it's as if we need three hands for Cultural Psychology), is a little less pantheistic. His broadening focuses on development and history and on everyday activities that do not fit easily into a nice tight nomothetic scheme. Let me quote him directly:

"Consistent with the ideas of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural psychologists, as well as the Russian cultural-historical school, I adopt a developmental approach to the study of human nature. Consistent with the broad, contextual underpinnings of cultural psychology, I seek to derive its principles from activities at the level of everyday practices as a grounding for its theoretical claims" (p.349).

In both cases then, we have a radical enlargement of the discipline as we knew it at the beginning of the Jubilee time frame. There is of course no theocratic mandate as to what discipline should be considered under this rubric. Still, we are forced to notice that a discipline, by definition, has its own programmatic mode, its own methods of analysis and its own scope of generalization. Coming from our own discipline, what other discipline should we take note of, if any? This decision may not, or only partly, influence what we do, but it has to factor in to our final interpretation of the wider field.

The Matter of Definition

I had hoped to avoid this issue, as I have always found the problem of defining culture a tiresome affair. I am constrained here, alas, to at least tell how Shweder and Cole define culture, as perhaps the previous question of scope depends on the definition.

It is noteworthy that Shweder, in keeping with his philosophy of intentionalism, does not define culture as something apart from the person. Over and over again he stresses this point. Cole (p. 301) also stresses the interconnection when he states: "culture comes

into being wherever people engage in joint activity over a period of time". Thus, although there are microcultures as well as macrocultures, there is still culture, if one defines it in terms of people implicitly or explicitly engaging in agreements regarding habits of conduct, shared values and the like.

The Historical Factor

We meet here a theme which Levi-Strauss has met in the study of myth: namely the diachronic versus synchronic dichotomy. Both Cole's position and the writers in the Stigler et al. book are by admittance clearly on the diachronic and developmental side. The question arises as to the relationship between cross-cultural psychology, which does not necessarily concern itself with history, and cultural psychology, which inevitably involves history. The situation is the same for anthropology, on which Levi-Strauss (1966) has commented,

"The anthropologist respects history, but he does not accord it a special value. He conceives it as a study complementary to his own; one of them unfurls the range of human societies in time, the other in space" (p, 256).

Perhaps this comment will suffice for our discipline also. We should, however, keep in mind especially in these days of rapid social change, of the time factor when a study is done. We need perhaps to treat the time factor as a sampling variable.

Context

Context, as Cole (p. 338) reminds us, "is a devilishly polysemic concept". Cole's way of handling context, what he calls the "culture as garden" metaphor of context, appears to be a satisfactory way of dealing with it. Earlier I had opted for "necessary" context when dealing with psychological variables within a culture, but I think Cole's essentially Chinese boxes notion, of variables stacked within other variables, is a better way of handling it. It is as he thinks of it, a multi-level methodology, and although there will always be argument regarding the contents of each level, nevertheless I think this is the only way to go.

Comparison

The consideration of context with the acceptance of the idea that psychological variables are embedded in a cultural medium, undoubtedly complicates our simple-minded idea of comparing psychological factors. Cole (pp. 305-309) shows how this can be done, but admittedly it is cumbersome. As Eleanor Ochs, in another chapter of the Stigler, Shweder and Herdt book (1990), regarding the specific problem of relating language to sociocultural context, states:

"We have as well to account for how the sociolinguistic organization of specific communicative events in turn interfaces with more general systems of social order and cultural knowledge. The jump from situation to the more generalized culture is often complicated" (p. 291).

Ochs cites for example the case of traditional Samoan communities, whose "members view activities and tasks as social and not individual accomplishments". Here we have an instance in which cultural values pervade the level of situation at its most elementary level. A reasonable emphasis can be given to what Popper used to call the "logic of the situation". Roger Barker's ecological psychology seemed to indicate that when one goes to a hairdresser or when one goes to a butcher, the situation calls for a certain standard behavior. In any one culture, yes; but situations differ with cultures.

"Inter" Cultural Aspects

So far, we have discussed the "cross", "intra" and "plain" cultural aspects of the talk. We need now to discuss the "inter". By this I do not mean, for example, how one ethnic group might think of another ethnic group, which could be and has been taken into consideration. I am thinking more of the reflexive aspect of the comparative problem, wherein the nature of the experimenter or researcher needs to be taken placed into the equation, most notably with the possible impact of his or her own culture or gender, and perhaps one's religious affiliation also. It is not so much a simple-minded bias that I have in mind, as the effect of the researcher on subjects. Also, the choice of what should be studied in a target culture may well reflect the nature of the researcher. I have mentioned elsewhere that when women began to be interested in shamanism, the number of women shamans throughout shamanic cultures suddenly began to increase. The question does arise as to the importance for cross-cultural psychology of what, in general psychology, has become understood as the experimenter effect. I do not think we know, there not being sufficient data, whether the results of psychological studies are seriously influenced by the matching of investigator with investigated, or even by type of study. For this problem I suggest that we adopt the spirit of the old Campbell and Fiske (1959) principle for behavioral assessment, namely the multimethod-multitrait approach. We might apply it to cross-cultural psychology as the multimethod-multi researcher principle. This does not necessarily mean that for each individual study we are constrained to employ several researchers from different cultures or genders, and utilize more than one method. It only means that we should not be satisfied with the teasing out of one variable until it has been investigated from different angles and by researchers of different backgrounds, including, though not limited it to, the crucial investigator factor of matching the culture with an investigator from it.

Open Questions

Two questions remain. The first, lamentably and inexorably, concerns the word "culture". The word as used stretches from the diffuse and generalized values of a society to the narrower definitions of the activities of a small group. Perhaps we are better off consistently delineating the term, when we use it, in terms of its appropriate and concrete synonym: that is, either a specific value or a specific custom or a specific way of looking at things or a specific rule or a specific standard or whatever. In all instances however, Shweder's insistence on intentionality is well taken. "Culture" is not something "out there", apart from people. We must be careful not to reify the concept, as the tendency is with common parlance of "history". There is no "history" in the abstract, only what historians write.

The second question is the relationship of cross-cultural or comparative psychology to cultural psychology. Cross-cultural psychology might be conceived of as sampling a variable from two or more societies or groups. If that is the case then the more we know about the society or group under consideration the better off we are, including knowing what to study. We not only need more samples, but we need to know, in any one society or group, how one particular variable is connected to other variables. For this we turn to studies under the rubric of cultural psychology. In my own opinion such studies may not necessarily be "psychological" in the scientific sense. Literary studies, for example, can well throw light on any particular culture. For our own studies, of course, we need to translate these literary studies into our own terminology and make them amenable for psychological analysis. Nevertheless, in the first degree of approximation, I do not see why they cannot be plumbed.

References

- Campbell, D. T., & Fiske, D. W. (1959). Convergent and discriminant validation by the multitrait-multimethod matrix. *Psychological Bulletin*, 56, 81-105.
- Cole, M. (1996) *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard.
- Eckensberger, L. H. (1979) A metamethodological evaluation of psychological theories from a cross-cultural perspective. In L. H. Eckensberger, W. J. Lonner, & Y. H. Poortinga (Eds.), *Cross-cultural contributions to psychology* (pp. 255-275) Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1966). *The savage mind*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ochs, E. (1990) Indexicality and socialization. In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 287-308). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Price-Williams, D. (1979) Modes of thought in cross-cultural psychology: an historical overview. In A. Marsella, R. Tharp, & T. Ciborowski (Eds.), *Perspectives on cross-cultural psychology* (pp. 3-16). New York: Academic Press.

- Price-Williams, D. (1980) Toward the idea of a cultural psychology: A superordinate theme for study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 11, 75-88.
- Price-Williams, D. (1985) Cultural psychology. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds), *The handbook of Social Psychology* (pp. 993-1042). New York: Random House.
- Stigler, J. W., Shweder, R. A., & Herdt, G. (Eds.) (1990). *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Shweder, R. A. (1990). Cultural psychology - What is it? In J. W. Stigler, R. A. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.) *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 1-43). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.