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Culture + Behaviour + Comparison = Cross-Cultural Psychology

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Prefatory Comments

For many years I have advocated the view that cross-cultural psychology should have the following characteristics: it begins with an ethnographic search to select those settings that may provide the cultural and ecological contexts that are theoretically-relevant to the development of the particular behaviour of interest; this is followed by advancing hypotheses that link the context to the behaviour; then fieldwork is undertaken to further examine these cultural attributes, and to carry out the assessment of the behaviour of individuals. These activities are carried out across contexts for three reasons: (i) in order to gain sufficient variation in the cultural and behavioural information to allow the examination of their co-variation (ie. to assess the hypothesis); (ii) to search for universals in the structure of behaviours; and (iii) to allow the possible discovery of universals in culture-behaviour relationships. In my view, cross-cultural psychology is cultural first, then psychological, and then comparative.

The field of cross-cultural psychology can be defined by thinking about, and then carrying out, activities suggested by the three terms in its name:

1. Culture - the examination of cultural contexts in which behaviour develops and is displayed.
2. Psychology- the assessment of behavior using tools that are appropriate to the cultural context
3. Cross- the making of comparisons of cultures, of behaviours, and of culture-behavior relationships across different societies.

Steps in Undertaking Research in Cross-Cultural Psychology

In substantiating this view, I have advocated that cross-cultural psychology should consist of the following 5 steps:

It begins with an ethnographic search to select those settings that may provide the cultural and ecological contexts that are theoretically-relevant to the development of the particular behaviour of interest. Often the Human Relations Area Files, or original ethnographies, are the best source.

Then fieldwork is undertaken to further examine and verify these ecological and cultural attributes. Often this work is carried out in close collaboration with anthropologists or linguists who are working in the area.

Once the contexts are well-understood, the researcher is in a position to advance hypotheses that link these contexts to the behaviours of interest. Often these hypotheses are rooted in extant psychological findings in other cultures.

Assessment of the relevant behaviours of individuals is then carried out in the selected ecological and cultural contexts. Usually much test development and adaptation are required in the early stages of this work in order to achieve culturally-appropriate modes of measurement.

These behavioural assessments across contexts are then examined comparatively to discern any patterns of relationships between contexts and behaviours that may provide a basis for making generalisations, or possibly contribute to the establishment of psychological universals.

The Ecocultural Approach

To help carry out these activities, beginning in 1966 I developed the ecocultural approach. This approach examines both the ecological and cultural contexts of societies and the individual behaviours that are developed by populations living in them.

In general terms, the ecological perspective in the social and behavioural sciences has given rise to the fields of ecological anthropology, and ecological psychology.

In ecological anthropology, features of cultures are seen as long-term and accumulated adaptations by populations to the demands and constraints of the ecological contexts in which they have evolved. In ecological psychology, individual behaviours are seen as being developed into a repertoire that is adaptive to the demands and experiences of an individual in their ecological, social and cultural situations or settings.

The ecocultural approach to studying cultural and psychological phenomena draws from both these academic traditions.

The ecocultural approach is rooted in two exogenous contexts: ecological and socio-political.



Video clip from John Berry's talk

First, the ecological context is one core element in the ecocultural perspective. In cross-cultural psychology, this element serves as the basis for the view that groups and individuals develop their customary and individual behaviours as adaptations to the demands of their ecology, as they live in particular ecosystems. Hence, similar habitats should give rise to patterns of cultural attributes, social institutions and individual behaviours that are shared, common ways of living.

Second, the sociopolitical context is the element that provides the basis for the view that cultural and psychological influences on the population and its individual members come from outside their local habitat. This perspective identifies acculturation (through culture contact, such as colonisation, or migration) to be important sources of social and psychological development.

These two sets of influences (ecological and sociopolitical) are predicted to alter the development and expression of the cultural and psychological features of people.

The current version of the ecocultural framework (Figure 1) is a kind of map that identifies the core features of cross-cultural research. It proposes to account for human psychological diversity (both individual and group similarities and differences) by taking into account these two fundamental sources of influence.

Moving from left to right in the Figure, the two factors on the left (ecological and sociopolitical contexts) are considered to influence the cultural and biological characteristics of the population through a process of long-term adaptation.

These cultural and biological population variables are then transmitted to individuals by transmission variables (in the middle) such as cultural and genetic transmission, and acculturation.

Behaviours (both overt and inferred, on the right) are considered to be the outcome of individual development in these contexts, as influenced proximally by these forms of transmission, and distally by the two exogenous inputs

The main flow of these linkages are from left to right (contexts to behaviours). However, the return arrow across the top portrays the influences from behaviours back to contexts and to population adaptations. That is, how we behave as individuals can screen, select, alter and even disrupt the features of the habitat in which we live.

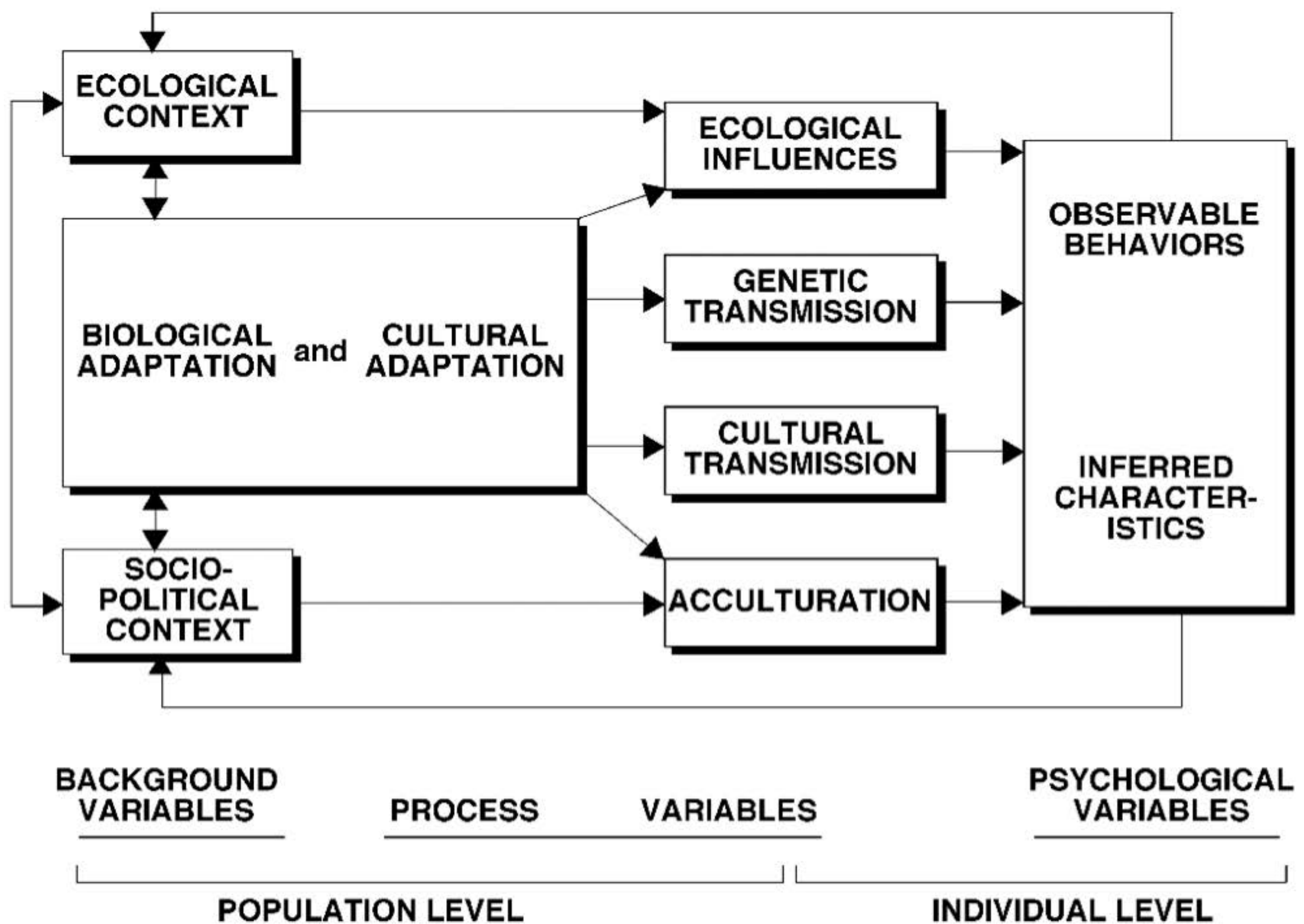


Figure 1
The ecocultural model

In summary, the ecocultural framework considers human diversity (both cultural and psychological) to be a set of collective and individual adaptations to context.

Within this general perspective, it views cultures as evolving adaptations to ecological and sociopolitical influences, and views individual psychological characteristics in populations as adaptive to these contexts.

The ecocultural approach has been used to guide a number of empirical studies (e.g., 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996, and 2006). It has also served to help structure accumulating knowledge in the field as a whole (eg., Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis & Sam, 2011).

Conceptual Issues

Embedded in the ecocultural approach are three conceptual issues.

First, the ecocultural approach views (group) culture and (individual) behaviour as distinct phenomena at their own levels, phenomena that need to be examined independently. Thus independence of observation at the two levels is required in order for systematic relationships to be sought (and found) between these two sets of phenomena. This independence is the very basis required for establishing co-variation between cul-

tural and behavioural phenomena.

Second, the approach examines the ecological, cultural and behavioural features of populations by using the comparative method. The goal of comparison is to systematically explore what goes with what, to discover any consistent relationships among these three kinds of variables across societies.

Third, the ecocultural approach searches for possible psychological universals that may provide a basis for our common humanity. There are well-established universals in cognate disciplines, such as anthropology, biology, linguistics, sociology. The search for psychological universals thus has both a conceptual and empirical basis in human sciences. In my view, the existence of universals in these other disciplines makes it reasonable to carry out a parallel search in psychology.

Conclusion

As proposed in the title of this paper, I consider that: Culture + Behaviour+ Comparison = Cross-Cultural Psychology. When we follow the steps outlined above, they generate the field we know as cross-cultural psychology.

And, increasingly, those who identify with the field(s) of cultural psychology and indigenous psychology also seem to be following these steps. We all: study culture; study behavior; make comparisons; and draw some general conclusions from our common efforts.

I conclude that we are all cross-cultural psychologists, and that we all inhabit the same big tent now!

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