A dynamic constructivist approach to culture: Lessons learned from personality psychology

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Abstract

The comparison of differences between cultural groups has been a dominant approach in cross-cultural psychology. This approach assumes behavioral influence of a relatively static, monolithic culture on members in a cultural group. This paper, however, calls for a dynamic constructivist approach to the study of culture. We begin by drawing a parallel between past research in cultural and personality psychology. We then highlight recent findings that attest to the value of a social-cognitive model of culture. Specifically, we discuss studies that have demonstrated how well established cross-cultural differences may appear or disappear depending on the availability, accessibility, and applicability of cultural theories. We present evidence that situational characteristics may render cultural theories more or less accessible and applicable, and propose a culture × situation interaction model for understanding inter- and intra-cultural variations.

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1. Introduction

Cross-cultural psychologists have attempted to uncover coherence in the organization of behaviors within human groups that have the same cultural background. Many early attempts to understand cultural influences have focused on discerning
the modal personality traits, or “national character,” that differentiate one cultural group from another (e.g., Benedict, 1934/1946; DuBois, 1944/1961; Inkles & Levinson, 1954). In contemporary personality psychology, there have also been attempts to establish a typology of traits (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1997) or values (see review by Smith & Schwartz, 1997) that could be applied to compare people from different nations around the world. This approach attributes culture to a geographically or demographically defined group of people, and seeks to discern the effects of culture by comparing such groups along some global, static and “universal” dimensions (cf. Hermans & Kempen, 1998). In such comparisons, the mean score differences found among those groups are taken to indicate entrenched cultural differences. Frequently, national groups included in these comparisons are assumed to be influenced primarily by their heritage cultures. Despite the presence of multiple cultural systems within some groups that occur as a result of rapid globalization (see Arnett, 2002), the effects of multiple cultural systems are seldom considered.

The common assumption in such research is that cultural characteristics (e.g., individualism and collectivism) are global constructs that invariantly characterize members from different national groups. Although this approach has contributed substantially to the understanding of culture, recent research has challenged the consistency of cross-cultural differences on some global cultural dimensions across domains and situations. For instance, in a review of the literature on individualism and collectivism, Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) found that a considerable percentage of the studies did not measure, but assumed individualism and collectivism based on the country from which participants were sampled. Typically, North Americans were assumed to be more individualistic and less collectivistic than were East Asians (e.g., Japanese). This assumption in fact contradicts Triandis’s (1995) conception that both individualistic and collectivistic orientations can be endorsed by members within a cultural group, making intra-cultural variation inevitable.

Interestingly, when studies that measured individualism–collectivism were compared, a surprisingly large amount of inconsistency appeared, part of which can be attributed to the particular domains that were sampled. For example, when individualism assessment scales did not include a measure of personal uniqueness, contrary to the assumed difference, North American subjects scored lower on individualism than did Japanese. When competition was included in the scale, differences between Americans and Japanese disappeared. Depending on the item content of individualism–collectivism scales, typical cross-cultural differences may disappear, and even reverse.

Aside from the domains of assessment, we argue that the situation (or social context) would also influence the effect of culture on cognition, affect and behavior. Our position is that inter- and intra-cultural variations can be better understood by taking context into account. The purpose of the current paper is to highlight the need for a model of cultural psychology that accounts for the dynamic role of context in inter- and intra-cultural variations. We first introduce a parallel between culture research and theories in personality psychology. We then review some recent literature suggesting the importance of context to the study of culture. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for future research.
2. Lessons from personality psychology

In their social cognitive theory of personality, Walter Mischel and Yuichi Shoda called upon fellow psychologists to begin the move from early focus on traits toward an approach that accounts for situational variation in behavior (Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Shoda & Mischel, 1993). Mischel and Shoda did not suggest that the search for personality coherence be abandoned. Rather, they asserted that the key to understanding personality coherence may lie in the measurement of systematic and predictable patterns of behavioral variability (behavior × situation profiles) that remain relatively stable over time. Thus the social cognitive theory of personality takes into account both the stability of personality systems, and the inevitable, intra-individual behavioral variability that appears across diverse social contexts (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) and relationships (Zayas, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2002; see also Cooper, 2002; Reis, Capobianco, & Tsai, 2002).

In cultural psychology, there is also recent evidence for intra-cultural variation in what were previously thought to be stable cultural characteristics. Thus, we propose a model of culture that is similar to the social cognitive theory of personality. We ask: “What if cultural psychologists were social-cognitive theorists?” The answer may be simpler than it first appears. Fig. 1 depicts the hypothetical behavior × situation profile for two cultural groups. Suppose that the profiles depict two groups’ tendencies to make external attributions in a variety of situations. The first set of points on the graph represents the average attributional pattern of these groups across a wide range of situations, while A–D represent four distinct situations in which the groups’ tendencies to make external attributions were measured. Examining the first set of points in isolation might lead researchers to draw the following conclusion: Members of cultural group Z make more external attributions than do
members of cultural group Y. However, it is clear from the figure that the behavior patterns of both groups vary as a function of situation. In some situations, the differences between cultural groups Z and Y may disappear (e.g., situation B) or even reverse (e.g., situation D). If researchers want to predict the future attribution of individuals in these groups, they could enhance their accuracy by considering a profile of behavior × situation interactions.

3. When would cross-cultural differences appear and disappear?

Although the behavior × situation approach has not yet fully taken hold in the field of cultural psychology, a number of recent studies suggest its potential utility. For example, in their review of cross-cultural differences in attribution styles, Choi, Nisbett, and Norenzayan (1999) found evidence that East Asians are in general as likely as North Americans to make dispositional attributions. However, when situational constraints on the actors are salient, East Asians are more likely than North Americans to attribute the behavior to situation (versus dispositions of the actor). These results suggest that East Asians and North Americans hold different causal theories for social events. In another study, Norenzayan, Choi, and Nisbett (2002) measured social inferences of Koreans and Americans, while manipulating the salience of situational constraints on behavior. The findings reveal that Koreans display a tendency to make more situational inferences than do Americans when situational constraints are salient. However, when situational constraints are not salient, no significant cultural group differences appear. These results taken together demonstrate the variability, yet coherence of cross-cultural differences.

Other lines of research suggest that individuals in one culture may have more than one set of implicit theories available. In any given situation, these individuals use the theories that are most accessible. In a sample of American participants, Wendi Gardner and her colleagues (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999) demonstrated the accessibility effect by increasing the salience of participants’ independent or interdependent selves. Before completing a standard TST (Twenty Statements Test), participants read a short passage, circling each of the “I” (independent self) or “we” (interdependent self) pronouns. Participants who circled “I” were more independent on the later TST measure, while those who circled “we” were more interdependent (Gardner et al., 1999; see also Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). These results suggest that the level of accessibility of a given cultural meaning system varies with the situation and such variability is the target of examination in our approach. (For a similar view of personality coherence, see Cognitive-Affective Processing System, CAPS, proposed by Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Shoda & Mischel, 1998.)

4. Dynamic constructivist approach to culture

Recognizing the presence of both inter- and intra-cultural variation, Hong and her colleagues (Hong & Chiu, 2001; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000)
proposed a dynamic constructivist approach to the study of culture. This approach rests on two premises. First, culture is conceptualized not as a general, monolithic entity, but as a loose network of domain-specific cognitive structures (including theories, beliefs). Second, an individual can hold more than one cultural meaning system, even if the systems contain conflicting theories. The model stresses culture × domain and culture × situation interactions, in contrast to the main effect of culture (Hong & Chiu, 2001). The dynamic constructivist approach borrows the concepts of accessibility, availability, and applicability from the theory of knowledge activation (Higgins, 1996; Wyer & Srull, 1986) in order to address the interaction between culture and situation.

4.1. Accessibility

In the dynamic constructivist approach, cross-cultural differences can be conceptualized as differences in systems of shared meaning among members of different cultural groups. To the extent that a given meaning system is widely shared among members of a cultural group, it would be frequently used in communication among members and thus become chronically accessible. The chronically accessible meaning system (including its theories and beliefs) can provide efficient cognitive shortcuts for sense-making, and would be more likely to be used when people have limited mental resources. As such, cross-cultural differences would be more readily revealed when people lack cognitive resources than not.

Consistent with this idea, Knowles, Morris, Chiu, and Hong (2001) found that when participants were engaging in a concurrent secondary task that limited their mental resources, the typical cross-cultural attribution difference between Chinese and North American participants emerged (i.e., Chinese participants were more likely to make external attributions than were American participants), suggesting that the two groups used different causal theories that were most accessible to them. However, when they did not engage in a concurrent secondary task (and thus had access to more mental resources) participants in the two cultures did not differ much in their patterns of attribution. As predicted, the cultural “difference” disappeared when the increased availability of cognitive resources allowed participants to focus on other, less accessible causal theories.

By the same token, the typical cultural group differences emerge when people need a readily available, widely accepted solution to a problem, such as when people are under time pressure or when they have a high chronic need for closure (see Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). For example, Chiu, Morris, Hong, and Menon (2000) have shown that when participants were under time pressure or had a high need for closure, Chinese participants were less likely to make attributions toward the individual actor than were the American participants. American participants were, in turn, less likely to make attributions toward the group than were the Chinese participants. This difference, however, disappeared when there was no time pressure, or among participants who had a low need for closure.
4.2. Availability

Recent work with biculturals (i.e., individuals who have been exposed extensively to two cultural meaning systems) demonstrates the interaction between accessibility and availability. For a group of Chinese–American biculturals, cognition may rely on two distinct cultural knowledge systems. Whether these knowledge systems are stored separately or in an integrated fashion is unclear (see Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). However, bicultural individuals appear to have access to constructs from both meaning systems, and the accessibility of each meaning system appears to vary as a function of situation. Experimental manipulation of the accessibility of one cultural meaning system has been termed cultural priming.

For example, in Hong’s cultural priming research, cultural icons were used to increase the accessibility of cultural meaning systems (Hong et al., 2000, 2003; Wong & Hong, 2003). Chinese–American bicultural participants were exposed to pictures of cultural icons (e.g., the Great Wall, the Statue of Liberty) prior to completing a measure of judgments or behavioral strategies (i.e., attributions or cooperation versus competition). In these studies, experimental activation of Chinese or American knowledge systems led bicultural participants to think and behave in ways generally characteristic of Chinese or American individuals, respectively. Using an experimental method to manipulate accessibility also allows for the inference of causal links between cultural primes and the subsequent responses.

4.3. Situational applicability

While the effect of accessibility has proven to be a powerful determinant of intra-cultural variation, it is conceivable that other important context variables exist. Recently, Hong and her colleagues explored the applicability of cultural knowledge system as a boundary condition of cultural influence (Hong, Benet-Martinez, Chiu, & Morris, 2003; Wong & Hong, 2003). Applicability refers to the appropriateness and/or feasibility of culture-related behaviors in context. While situational differences in accessibility lead to frame-switching, differences in situational applicability may lead to “culture sampling”: the conscious or unconscious selection of cultural normative behaviors that are most appropriate in a given social situation. In order to understand applicability, researchers must know something about the social situation above and beyond cultural salience.

Situational applicability may be affected by a number of different context variables, including but not limited to the following: (a) the cultural knowledge systems held by partners in social interaction (cultural knowledge will be applicable when the interactants come from the same cultural background); (b) the nature of the interpersonal situation (different cultural norms may be applied toward in-group versus out-group, or people of higher versus lower status, see Deutsch, 1985, for the basic dimensions of interpersonal situations); and (c) general behavioral applicability (an accessible construct will guide subsequent behavior if the situation affords enactment of that behavior. For example, a person who has been primed with the word
“rude” could behave in an impolite way when she is put in a social situation but not when she is left alone).

Recent work by Wong and Hong (2003) demonstrated the interaction between accessibility and applicability in the behavior of Chinese–American biculturals. In this study, bicultural participants engaged in a prisoner’s dilemma game with partners. The authors argued that the cooperative norms of the Chinese cultural system apply toward in-group members but not toward out-group members. Therefore, applicability was manipulated by pairing participants with either in-group members (friends) or out-group members (new acquaintances) as partners in the prisoner’s dilemma game. Accessibility was manipulated by priming participants with either Chinese or American cultural icons, or geometric figures (control condition) as in Hong et al. (2000). After the priming manipulation, participants played the key rounds of the prisoner’s dilemma game, in which their cooperative versus competitive strategy choices were measured.

Results suggest the utility of a culture × situation interaction model. The bicultural participants primed with American cultural icons used relatively few cooperation strategies in both the in-group and out-group condition. However, as predicted, participants primed with Chinese cultural icons used more cooperation strategies than did the American-primed participants only in the in-group condition. Chinese-primed participants in the out-group condition behaved similarly to American-primed participants. These results are theoretically interesting in that they demonstrate the interaction of accessibility and applicability with respect to cultural behavior.

5. Conclusion

The present paper highlights the need for further research on the interaction between situation and culture. Some personality psychologists recognize that we cannot accurately predict individual behavior by treating cross-situational variability as noise. Similarly, we cannot predict cultural behavior in context while treating intra-cultural variation as measurement error. If we are interested in documenting intra-cultural variation, we must begin by examining the conditions and processes that give rise to variation. Current literature suggests that situational variation in accessibility and, more recently, applicability, are important contributors to intra-cultural variance. Our assertion is that variance, which has traditionally been treated as “noise,” can and should be systematically studied.

As we move into the new millennium, multiculturalism prevails in many parts of the world. With rapid globalization comes the need for more precise definitions of culture, and more precise models of cultural influence on cognition, affect, and behavior. Thus, it may no longer be useful to treat culture as a static, homogenous tendency that occurs, on average, across groups of people. Rather, the mean differences between cultural groups revealed in previous research could serve as a point of departure from which researchers further their exploration of the processes that give rise to inter- and intra-cultural variations.
References


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