

Cross-cultural psychology has lived on the margins of general psychology as a frustrated gadfly, and it is not too hard to understand why. For one thing, cross-cultural psychology offers no substantial challenge to the core Platonic interpretive principle of general psychology (the principle of psychic unity). Moreover, if you are a general psychologist cum Platonist (and a principled one, at that) there is no theoretical benefit in learning more and more about the quagmire of appearances—the retarding effects of environment on the development of the central processing mechanism, the noise introduced by translation of differences in the understanding of the test situation or by cultural variations in the norms regulating the asking and the answering of questions.

Rather, if you are a general psychologist, you will want to transcend those appearances and reach for the imagined abstract forms and processes operating behind intrinsic crutches and restraints and distortions of this or that performance environment. Perhaps that is why, in the circles of general psychology, cross-cultural psychology has diminutive status, and why its research literature tends to be ignored. Not surprisingly, developmental psychology—the study of age-graded differences in performance on psychological tests and tasks—has suffered a similar fate, and for similar reasons.

My own view is less gloomy than this. Despite their shortcomings, cross-cultural methods can (as in the case of the effects of forced change toward prolonged sleep episodes in early infancy or modes of explaining self-continuity in adolescence) help us to understand the contributions of particular kinds of experience to the development of particular kinds of characteristics. Cross-cultural research alerts us to the possibility that the very existence of certain stages of development may be the consequence of particular cultural-historical circumstances and not universal ones, as in the case of adolescence. It also achieves the important function of getting us to question the sources of age-related differences observed in our own culture, as indicated by the research on the effects of schooling in middle childhood. The fact that we are left wondering about the generality of the resulting changes in many cases (schooling effects being a major case in point) is disappointing of course, but the good news is that it puts us on our guard against the ever-present danger of overgeneralizing the results of work conducted in our own societies.

When we turn from cross-cultural research, where culture is considered as an independent variable, and begin to take seriously the garden metaphor of culture as medium (what Valsiner, 1989, referred to as an “organizing variable”), entirely new avenues of research are opened up, posing major challenges to developmental scientists. When we make the move from cross-cultural to cultural psychology, we stand the usual relation between everyday experience and experimentation on its head. Instead of starting with presumably culture-free measures of psychological process, we begin with observation of everyday activities as part of a culturally organized sequence with its own internal logic and goals. Experiments then become ways to model conveniently existing cultural practices in order to externalize their inner workings. When we begin in this way, we come across such new (theoretically speaking) phenomena as the revelation of the projection of ideal or mental models of past gender relations onto ideal or mental models of a child's future and the transformation of this ideal model into concrete reality. Or we are led into an analysis of the organization of everyday conversations between mothers and children to understand how their structure is related to the society's worldview (Bornstein, 1989; Goodnow, 1984) or that of school activities to determine how to make instruction developmentally beneficial (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989).

Such analyses are often, from the perspective of experimental psychology, messy and difficult. However, a growing literature on this topic, only a small part of which I have been able to touch on in this chapter, suggests that it holds great promise for the future development of the science of human development.

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