Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling

Editors: David Benner, PhD & Peter Hill, PhD

CITATION:

Abi-Hashem, N. (1999). Cross-Cultural Psychology. In D. G. Benner and P. C. Hill (Eds.), *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 294-298). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.

Cross-Cultural Psychology

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A combined field of knowledge (psychosociocultural) that incorporates the study, observation, and analysis of human behaviors, community dynamics, and relational phenomena across cultures. This field of interest takes into consideration cultural mediators and compares personal conditions, communal structures, and sets of ideals among different cultures that guide human behavior.

The emphasis on cross-cultural psychology has emerged during the second half of the twentieth century. It resulted from the activities of many thinkers and clinicians in culturally diverse communities and several developing countries. It integrates a variety of areas from different spheres and applied disciplines and promotes the investigation and comparison of several cultures and subcultures. Anthropology has traditionally played that role by focusing mainly on the study of more isolated and remote cultures. However, the emphasis has shifted lately to pluralistic societies and modern communities, and especially mixed environments and complex living.

During the last decade, this new emerging trend, both in academia and the work place, has been trying to emphasize the cultural reality of contemporary society. Businesses, human resources, medical sciences, public schools, social services, and other helping agencies are heightening the awareness of their staff and employees to the cultural aspects of their communities. The interest in global and international affairs is remarkably increasing. The mass media and many popular periodicals are addressing the importance of the new cultural reality. This reflects the shape and nature of several populations and subcultures, those currently evolving or already established. Many graduate schools have introduced at least one course or seminar on cross-cultural issues in their curriculum designed especially for their field of study. Many academic textbooks in psychology now include a chapter on cross-cultural aspects. Graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology have already begun to require cross-cultural exposure and training. In fact, few programs have recently created a subspecialty, an emphasis, or a proficiency in ethnic and minority studies.

Crosscultural adaptation takes place when a person or a family moves to a new environment or unfamiliar setting. It is the process of mental adjustment and internal modification that enables the person or family unit to become better equipped for living and functioning in that new milieu or under different cultural circumstances. In the helping professions, caregivers are normally more comfortable and least anxious when dealing with people or groups from the same backgrounds and with whom they share similar values and world views. Crosscultural psychotherapy, therefore, could be defined as a counseling relationship where two or more involved individuals differ from each other with respect to race, gender, faith, experience, symbols, practices, or lifestyle. Existentially speaking, every encounter is a cross-cultural encounter. It usually has a profound impact on all the parties involved, so that people leave the encounter, not exactly the same as before, but somewhat transformed in the process.

In regard to empirical research, cross-cultural psychology is concerned with topics like the relationship between language and cognition, perception, mental health and illness, personality types, development, communication, testing and measurement, and organization. Although there is a pressing need to accurately observe, analyze, and research the differences among cultures or subcultures, at many times these activities are affected by the common tendency to overestimate and overhighlight or underestimate and totally ignore these differences. Along this line, Triandis (1993) emphasized that the contrasts provided among mainstream psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and pluralistic human sciences are greatly exaggerated and, in some instances, inaccurate. Therefore, in order to avoid further polarization, generalization, or fragmentation, the psychological culture, or more precisely, the culture of psychology itself must be frequently examined, evaluated, and reviewed in order to remain realistic, adequate, healthy, and relevant.

When observing, comparing, or studying certain phenomena across cultures, or even across families from different backgrounds, it is essential not to rate the cultures on a hierarchical scale (e.g., advanced vs. primitive, superior vs. inferior, civilized vs. backward, high vs. low, rich vs. poor). Such ratings reflect value judgments and ignore each culture's traditional style/linguistic expressions, set of values, unique customs, and normative qualities. Furthermore, each culture has its stored wisdom and inherent richness as well as its social problems and pathologies.

It is possible, however, to compare certain attributes among different cultures and societies without collectively labeling, categorizing, or diagnosing them. Some examples would be aspects related to physical health, density of population, concepts of self and family, environmental resources, political systems, level of communication, social stability, work ethics, spiritual commitment, and degree of connectivity and brotherhood versus privacy and individualism (Levinson, 1994).

The questions that need to be addressed are not only limited to how cultural factors can be detected and their impact on people and institutions measured, but also how cross-cultural adjustments are made and cross-cultural communications facilitated. How can psychology effectively

cross the culture? How can its theoretical concepts, practical tools, and common expertise be appropriate, operational, and contributory in a different setting? In other words, how can psychology cross the boundaries of countries, minorities, diverse populations, ethnic groups, and various communities and remain helpful, reasonable, and meaningful? What really happens when psychology as a discipline and a helping profession (both as an art and science, theory and practice) crosses cultural lines?

The challenge that is facing psychology as a field of knowledge and human service is that it must grow broader, more flexible, adaptable, and global in its nature, scope, and function. That is, psychology has to become less Western and more international in order to be relevant and survive well into the 21st century (cf. Abi-Hashem, 1997; Kitayama & Markus, 1995; Landrine, 1992).

Because most of the modern psychological studies, publications, observation, and research have been done in the West, there is a need to conduct similar investigations and collect insights about the human nature and sociocultural condition from around the world. Obviously, many theories, approaches, ideas, methods, and therapeutic modalities need to be modified, adjusted, or even changed before they are applied to the new setting. Otherwise, old and past mistakes will be repeated by transporting concepts, tools, and methodologies from one place to another and imposing them on the new hosting culture, people group, or minority (Abi-Hashem, 1991; Augsburger, 1986). Unfortunately, this happened far too often, not only in the fields of psychology and counseling (for example, introducing purely Western theories, techniques, and interventions into a non-Western society), but also in fields of business (marketing goods and products for the mere sake of financial benefits), education (transporting curriculum and training programs without consultation with local leaders or any material modification) (cf. Goldstein, 1993), and missions (spreading Western Christianity, worship styles, and church functions as if they are the biblical model) (cf. Lawton, 1997). Those practices can be dangerous, lead to colonization and modernization by the dominant culture (at times, "Westoxification"), and cause considerable damage to the local psychosocial and spiritual identity (Huntington, 1996). Consequently, what is acceptable and relevant in one culture may be totally unacceptable and irrelevant in another culture.

Although Western psychology has contributed a great deal to the body of knowledge, its applicability is limited in the developing countries because of its individualistic orientation, lack of conceptual totals, and inappropriate emphasis on narrow aspects of human living (Sinha, 1990). Most certainly, multicultural perspectives give psychology the potency to reassess itself (cf. Matsumoto, 1996). It helps reveal how the psychology's tendency toward monocultural universalism has undermined its aims and functions as a science of human behavior and promoter of human welfare (Fowers & Richardson, 1996).

What exactly is a culture? How are cultures best defined? Is there any accurate and comprehensive definition of culture? Although, there have been many great attempts to define its concept, there is still no single precise, articulate, or complete definition of culture. Cultures are hard

to define. Invariably, they are fascinating phenomena. They are better felt than defined and better experienced than explained.

Culture is a design of life. It can be understood as a way of feeling, acting, and believing. It is the knowledge of the community or the people group stored for future use (Hesselgrave, 1984). Culture shapes the life of the community and in return is shaped by the community itself. It is, at the same time, the cause and the outcome, the source and the product. Cultures have an abstract and a concrete element to them. They are, at once, tangible and symbolic, moral and temporal. They represent connectivity with the past and continuity into the future.

Culture is both a content and a process. It consists of tradition and change. The heart of a culture involves language, religion, values, traditions, and customs (Huntington, 1996). Whatever profoundly affects the mental and emotional status of people, directly or indirectly, be it literature, customs, industry, government, means of communication, transportation, social system, level of comfort, environmental stress, and spirituality are all elements of culture. In that context, the definition of psychology is not only limited to "the scientific study of human behavior and mental processes" (Hilgard et al., 1971), but also includes the study and mediation of communal life, cultural heritage, and spiritual phenomena (as relating to God and the supernatural). Paul Tillich (1959) saw culture as the form of religion and religion as the substance of culture. He disconfirmed the dualism of culture and spiritual life. Tillich wrote, "Every religious act, not only in organized religion, but in the most intimate movement of the soul, is culturally formed" (p. 42).

Is there a Christian view of culture? What is considered to be a sound theological perspective of culture? There is certainly a need to develop a balanced biblical approach to culture and an adequate theological understanding of human nature, communal life, and social interactions. Furthermore, there is a need to reconcile the more traditional views with the modern and technological views of culture.

From a psychological and spiritual perspective, culture is a way of operating in life. It is a design of life under God. It is a way of developing intellectual, communal, and aesthetic values and finding ways of meaningfully and experientially expressing them. So in practice, the Christian ministry is an attempt to help people move deeper in the love of God and further toward the kingdom of God. Although the helpers themselves are agents of reconciliation and healing (cf. Lingenfelter, 1996), they still are under the rule of God. That remarkable fact and outstanding reality shapes the culture of all Christian-helping professions and provides an immeasurable source of divine presence, wisdom, comfort, and grace.

New terminology has been emerging to describe these cross-cultural phenomena, like multiculturalism, ethnicity, cultural adaptation, intercultural studies, multinationalism, internationalization, acculturation, deculturation, hosting culture, majority versus minority culture, racial harmony, socio-cultural aspects, culture shock, people groups, ethnic minority, subcultures, cultural awareness, cultural diversity, and cultural relativism. In addition, new terms are replacing

old stereotypes, like internationals instead of foreigners, and developing countries instead of third world countries.

The recent past years and decades have witnessed the birth of several international associations and culturally oriented periodicals, like the Journal of CrossCultural Psychology, International Journal of Psychology, and CrossCultural Studies. Agencies, Councils, and societies like the International Association for CrossCultural Psychology, World Federation for Mental Health, and International Council of Psychologists, hold an annual congress or symposium in a different part of the world.

Therapists, pastors, missionaries, educators, physicians, and members of the helping professions cannot avoid crossing cultural lines. In fact, they are called to be students of culture. In that context they deeply learn about human nature, history, and authentic condition. Coote and Stott (1980) emphasized that God is the supreme communicator and the ultimate cross-cultural expert and we should take other people's cultures seriously as God has taken our culture seriously. The incarnational ministry of Christ is our model and guide in this endeavor. We need to discover how Christ crossed the culture(s), what strategies Christ used, and how can we apply these profound insights and approaches to our counseling service and soul care ministry.

The following are suggestions and guidelines designed to help the professional cross the culture and effectively deal with people from different backgrounds:

- Be open to learn about the norms, values, faith, and traditions of the other person or group of people.
- Acknowledge the obvious differences between you and them. Gently ask if they have any concerns about relating to or working with you.
- If people belong to an ethnic or racial minority, acknowledge the reality of hardship, stereotype, and even discrimination they may face.
- Make an effort to be culturally sensitive in your comments and in your interpretations of behavior.
- Do not be afraid of silence. Be careful not to interpret politeness, slow disclosure, repetition, indirectiveness, low expressiveness, and not enough eye contact as defensiveness, high resistance, or emotional disturbances.
- Do not be offended by their lack of modern refinement or non-Western mannerism.
- Avoid generalization. Do not label, e.g., "You Black... Arab... Latino... people." Watch the non-verbal dimensions. Listen to their signals, cues, and style of communication. Do not impose on them your ideas, solutions, values, or cultural preferences.
- Inquire gently. Allow enough time. And be patient. Do not demand information or put pressure on them to quickly and completely describe their heritage, struggles, habits, or needs.

- Be faithful to what you learn from them. They internally expect you to remember and honor that information.
- Try to find out the individual's degree of acculturation. Detect any existing tension between the individual and the family, the community, or the hosting culture. Discover any confusion of roles, conflict of norms, and division of loyalties (splitting) between home culture and larger society. Help them navigate well within their cultural setting.
- Realize that people from certain minorities and subcultures (non-Westerners in general) have substantial tolerance for pain and suffering. They do not expect you to fix their problems or provide a quick relief and immediate resolution to their struggles.
- Develop the skills and sensitivity to discern what is culturally normal and what is psychologically abnormal, in other words, detect the difference between what is cultural and what is pathological.
- Build a desire to discover God's image in the person you are dealing with and to value that inherent potential and profound quality.
- Allow yourself to learn, grow, and be changed as a result of such encounters. Enjoy the depth and richness of these experiences.
- Rely on God's wisdom and presence with you as you endeavor to serve across the cultures and effectively minister to a great variety and quality of people.

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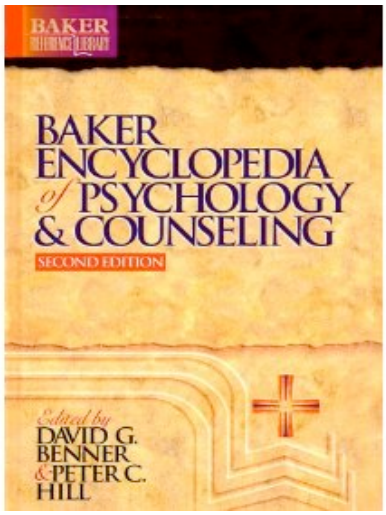
See also (as cross references):

Acculturation; Affiliation, Need for; Anthropology, Psychological; CrossCultural Therapy; Culture and Cognition; Culture and Psychopathology; Culture and Psychotherapy; Self-Esteem; Social Psychology; Stereotype.

—Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling



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