Cross-cultural psychology

Type of psychology: Biological bases of behavior; cognition; developmental psychology; multicultural psychology
Fields of study: Attitudes and behavior; behavioral and cognitive models; biological influence on learning; cognitive processes; multicultural issues

Traditional views of psychology often ignored the role of culture in characterizing human behavior and thought. However, researchers have begun to appreciate the role of culture in psychology. Culture and thought are often mutually interdependent.

Key concepts
- collectivistic cultures
- dispositional factors
- fundamental attribution error
- individualistic cultures
- religion
- situational factors

Introduction
Cross-cultural psychology is a broad term for the scientific study of human behavior and mental or cognitive processes among cultures. In general, this field addresses similarities and differences among cultures. According to the American social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Ara Norenzayan, the view that there are differences between cultures (at least for cognitive processes) was not widely held in the twentieth century. Instead, most psychologists assumed that basic cognitive processes were universal—that the fundamental aspects of thinking and perceiving that involve attention, memory, learning, and reasoning operated in the same way among all cultures. Based on their research and that of other scholars, Nisbett and Norenzayan concluded that the basic processes of thinking and behavior develop and are shaped by culture. At the same time, there are aspects of thinking and perceiving that may be innate (genetic or possessed at birth) that limit or constrain how culture can shape thinking and behavior.

How Thinking Constrains Culture
In the field of developmental psychology, much evidence suggests that very young children have sets of basic building blocks that they use to understand human minds and important entities and events in the world. These sets of building blocks are thought to be innate and domain specific (for example, one set helps children understand how other people think and another set helps them understand the properties of objects). Evidently, they are common to all infants across cultures and limit the types of thinking about the world that can exist in any culture.

For example, the American developmental psychologist Elizabeth Spelke describes an experiment in which infants were shown a single toy animal placed on a stage and a curtain was lowered to hide or occlude the toy. A second toy was shown to infants and then placed behind the screen. Next, the screen was raised, revealing either both toys or only one of the toys. Infants looked longer at the single toy than the two toys. This finding shows that infants were able to keep track of the two objects in their mind even when they were hidden, and they were surprised that one of the toys had disappeared. It also suggests that infants do not need to learn that objects do not spontaneously disappear. Related experiments by American developmental psychologist Renee Baillargeon show that, without being taught, infants understand that objects cannot spontaneously appear, break apart, coalesce, or change size, shape, pattern, or color. These findings illustrate one of the basic building blocks of all cultures, called the principle of persistence (that is, certain object changes are impossible).

Another type of thinking that may constrain cultures involves ideas about religion. American anthropologist and psychologist Pascal Boyer notes that religions share many similar beliefs across cultures (for example, that something nonphysical, such as an invisible spirit, survives after a person’s death and that a few individuals are in contact with these spirits). These ideas arise from basic beliefs shared among cultures about physics, biology, and the mind.

How Culture Shapes Thinking
Differences among cultures lead to different ways of thinking. Consider the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. In an individualistic culture, people view themselves more as individuals and are taught to act independently, taking personal responsibility for their successes and fail-
ures. In a collectivistic culture, people view themselves more as members of groups (for example, a member of a university) and are taught to act interdependently, favoring the needs of the group over their individual needs. The United States is an example of an individualistic culture, while most East Asian cultures are collectivistic.

These different cultural perspectives affect thinking in many ways. For example, one important finding in social psychology is the fundamental attribution error, which is the tendency to overestimate how much a person’s behavior is due to dispositional factors and to underestimate how much it is due to situational factors. Dispositional factors refer to a person’s internal characteristics, such as personality traits, abilities, and motives. Situational factors refer to external causes. For example, students might explain why they did so well on an exam because they are intelligent (a dispositional factor) or because the teacher gave an easy exam (a situational factor). Collectivistic cultures are less likely to make the fundamental attribution error than individualistic cultures. For example, cultural psychologists Michael Morris and Kaiping Peng examined newspaper reports of two mass murders and found that an American newspaper was more likely to describe the mass murders in terms of dispositional factors (such as a very bad temper), whereas a Chinese newspaper was more likely to focus on situational factors (such as isolation from the Chinese community because of having been recently fired).

Cultures arise in different geographical regions and environments that can lead to important differences between cultures. One area of differences is the structure of families. Most families across societies have parents who are monogamous (one man marrying one woman). However, in some families, there is polygamy, which includes polyandry (one woman marrying more than one man) and polygyny (one man marrying more than one woman). According to American social psychologists Douglas Kenrick, Steven Neuberg, and Robert Cialdini, polygamy arises in cultures because of survival needs. For example, a polyandrous woman in Tibet may marry her brothers because the harsh environment in the high Himalayan desert makes it difficult for a single man and woman to survive. The brothers in turn share the wife so that they can preserve the family estate from generation to generation. This family structure appears to be driven by economic conditions originating from the environment.

**Sources for Further Study**


Laungani, Pittu D. *Understanding Cross-cultural Psychology: Eastern and Western Perspectives.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2007. This text discusses the framework of culture, family structure, health, bereavement, and intercultural interaction between the West and East.


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See also: Cultural competence; Culture and diagnosis; Culture-bound syndromes; Multicultural psychology; Religion and psychology.
Crowd behavior

Type of psychology: Social psychology
Fields of study: Aggression; group processes; social motives

Crowd behavior is the study of how the behavior of people in groups differs from that of individuals. People in crowds often become much more focused on their social identity than on their individual identity. As a result, they are much more influenced by the norms of the group.

Key concepts
- bystander effect
- deindividuation
- diffusion of responsibility
- group norms
- social identity theory

Introduction
Crowds are groups of people who are together for short periods of time. The study of crowd behavior examines the actions that people in a crowd perform, and how these actions differ from the behavior of individuals acting alone. Crowd behavior became a focus of scholarly thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in reaction to the social turmoil in Western Europe at that time. Italian criminologist Scipio Sighele first wrote about crowd behavior. French psychologist Gustave Le Bon, the founder of crowd psychology, formalized and popularized the concept with his book The Crowd, published in 1895. Le Bon’s ideas reached a wide audience and are said to have influenced German dictator Adolf Hitler and Italian dictator Benito Mussolini as well as psychologists. Because crowds have performed many senseless and destructive acts, both historically and recently, understanding crowd behavior remains extremely important for psychologists.

The term “crowd” refers to a wide spectrum of human gatherings, varying in their complexity and the intention with which people join them. Some crowds are casual; people come together by happenstance (as a group of pedestrians standing on a sidewalk). These tend to be simple, disorganized groups of people who do not know one another and will probably not see each other again. Others are conventionalized—the people have all chosen a common activity (for example, watching a parade or a sporting event) and express excitement in standard ways (cheering). Some crowds are purposive, choosing to be together for a common goal, such as a rally or political protest. These groups are often highly cohesive and highly organized.

Because crowds differ so much in their composition, organization, and purpose, there is also considerable variation in typical crowd behavior. Popular and scholarly attention has tended to focus on the situations in which crowd behavior is considered problematic. In these situations, the crowd often has an unusual problem to solve rapidly (for example, how to respond to a hostile police force). The occurrence of riots and violence attests to the fact that these sorts of problems are not always solved constructively by crowds. It should be noted, however, that crowds are capable of behaving in positive ways as well.

Underlying Psychological Processes
Early theories of crowd behavior hypothesized that unruly crowds were made up of criminals or the mentally deficient. Proponents of this perspective assumed that crowd behavior could be explained by the makeup of the individual personalities of people in the crowd and that certain kinds of people were more likely to be found in a crowd. Le Bon provided a more psychological analysis of crowd behavior, recognizing that even people of high intelligence could become members of an unruly crowd. He believed that crowds transform people, obliterating their normal abilities to be rational and putting them in a hypnotic, highly suggestible state. Le Bon disapproved of crowd behavior in all forms. Consequently, in his book he painted an extremely negative picture of crowd behavior.

Modern social psychological research suggests that neither of these early viewpoints is a good description of the psychological forces underlying crowd behavior. Experimental research has determined that almost any individual could be influenced to behave in uncharacteristic ways under the right circumstances. Le Bon’s perspective has also been greatly refined. Rather than relying on Le Bon’s concepts of mass hypnosis and loss of rationality, modern researchers draw primarily from social identity theory to help explain crowd behavior. Social identity theory, originally developed by European psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner in
the 1970’s, posits that individuals derive an important part of their sense of identity from the groups to which they belong. Groups such as one’s family, school, or religion can all provide positive sources of identity.

Under some circumstances, crowds can become a source of identity as well. A key psychological mechanism through which crowds become a source of identity is deindividuation, the loss of a person’s sense of identity and weakening of inhibitions that occurs only in the presence of others. Crowds are especially likely to lead to deindividuation for a number of reasons. First, crowds lead individuals to feel less accountable for their actions; they are less likely to be singled out and feel less personally responsible for any act the crowd commits. Crowds also focus attention away from the self, so one’s own values and internal standards become less influential. Thus, in line with social identity theory, deindividuation leads someone to become focused on social identity rather than individual identity. When social identity is salient to an individual, that person becomes particularly susceptible to social influence. Group norms, or a group’s standards and expectations regarding appropriate behavior, become especially important, and the individual is likely to conform strictly to those norms. In the short time frame of many crowd gatherings, the norm becomes whatever everyone else is doing.

It should be noted, however, that being amid a group of people does not always lead one to become deindividuated, nor does it always lead to the ascendency of social identity over individual identity. Often crowds do not engage in collective behavior at all. For example, on most city streets, pedestrians walking and milling about do not consider themselves to be part of a group and do not draw a sense of identity from the people around them.
Eugen Tarnow noted that these wide variations in the effect of crowds on individuals can be best understood by identifying two phases: an individual phase and a conforming phase. During the individual phase, people move freely about. At these times, individuals are not particularly aware of their membership in a crowd and are not particularly influenced by those around them. In the conforming phase, however, individuals in a crowd are highly aware of the group of which they are a part, and they show high levels of conformity. During this phase, the group norms heavily influence each individual's behavior. Crowds typically alternate between these two phases, sometimes acting collectively, sometimes individually. For example, at a sporting event, fans are sometimes talking to their friends about topics of individual interest. However, when points are scored by the home team, the crowd responds collectively, as part of a social group. At these moments spectators are not responding as individuals but as members of the social group, “fans.”

The behaviors that members of a crowd perform will thus depend on how strongly the crowd becomes a source of social identity and the norms for behavior that become established among the group. Because these factors vary considerably from group to group, crowds cannot be characterized as wholly negative or uniformly simplistic, as Le Bon described them.

The Violent Crowd
Violent and destructive acts are among the most studied forms of crowd behavior. Many historical examples, from the French Revolution of 1789 to the Los Angeles riots of 1992, attest to the destructive power of crowds. A crowd of deindividuated people will not become violent, however, unless a group norm of violence becomes established. In riots, for example, there is usually an identifiable precipitating event (for example, one person smashing a window) that introduces a norm of violence. If a critical mass of people immediately follows suit, a riot ensues. Other crowds, such as lynch mobs, have the norm of violence previously established by their culture or by the group’s previous actions.

Further, there is some evidence to suggest that the way in which a crowd of people is viewed by authorities can escalate crowd conflicts. For example, in 1998, European psychologists Clifford Stott and Stephen Reicher interviewed police officers involved with controlling a riot in Great Britain. Their analysis revealed that while police officers recognize that crowds contain subgroups of more dangerous or less dangerous members, they tend to treat all group members as potentially dangerous. The police officers’ negative expectations often translate into combative behavior toward all crowd members. By acting on their negative expectations, authority figures often elicit the very behaviors they hope to prevent. This often leads to increased violence and conflict escalation.

Much evidence suggests that there is a direct relationship between degree of deindividuation and the extremity of a crowd's actions. For example, in 1986 Brian Mullen examined newspaper accounts of sixty lynchings occurring in the first half of the twentieth century. His analysis revealed that the more people present in the mob, the more violent and vicious was the event. Similarly, Leon Mann found in his analysis of twenty-one cases of threatened suicides that crowds watching were more likely to engage in crowd baiting (encouraging the person to jump from a ledge or bridge) when crowds were large and when it was dark. On a more mundane level, sports players are more aggressive when wearing identical uniforms than when dressed in their own clothes. Any factor that increases anonymity seems to increase deindividuation and increase the power of social identity, and thus increases the likelihood of extreme behavior.

In South Africa, psychological research on these phenomena has been presented in murder trials. People being tried for murder have argued that these psychological principles help explain their antisocial behavior. The use of psychological research findings for these purposes has sparked a great deal of controversy in the field.

The Apathetic Crowd
While crowds are most infamous for inciting people to rash action, sometimes crowds inhibit behavior. Research on helping behavior suggests that helping is much less likely to occur when there are many people watching. This well-established phenomenon, known as the bystander effect, was researched and described by American psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané. In a typical experiment, participants overhear an “accident,” such as someone falling off a ladder. Researchers observe whether participants go to help. Most people help
when they are alone, but people are significantly less likely to help when they are with a crowd of other people. Darley and Latané argued that bystanders in a crowd experience a diffusion of responsibility. That is, each individual feels less personally responsible to act because each assumes that someone else will do so.

This phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that in many situations, it is unclear whether an event is an emergency. For example, an adult dragging a screaming child out of a store could be a kidnapper making away with a child or a parent responding to a tantrum. Bystanders observe the reactions of others in the crowd to help them determine what the appropriate course of action is in an ambiguous situation. However, because the situation is ambiguous, typically each individual is equally confused and unsure. By waiting for someone else to act, bystanders convey the impression to others that they think nothing is wrong. Psychologists call this phenomenon pluralistic ignorance. People assume that even though others are behaving in exactly the same way as themselves (not acting), they are doing so for a different reason (knowing the situation is not an emergency). Thus, a social norm of inaction can also become established in a crowd.

**The Prosocial Crowd**

Despite the potential for great violence and destruction, most crowds that gather do so quite uneventfully. Further, sometimes crowd behavior is quite positive and prosocial. Research shows that sometimes deindividuation can lead to prosocial behavior. For example, nonviolent protests operate under an explicit norm of peaceful resistance and rarely lead to escalated violence on both sides. The power of prosocial norms was also experimentally established in a 1979 study conducted by psychologists Robert Johnson and Leslie Downing. Johnson and Downing had participants dress in either nurses’ apparel or a white robe and hood like those worn by the Ku Klux Klan. Some from each group had their individual identity made salient, while the rest did not. All participants were then given the opportunity to deliver an electric shock to someone who had previously insulted them. Among participants wearing the robes, those who were not identified delivered higher shock levels than those who were identified. Presumably these people were deindividuated and thus more strongly influenced by the violent cue of their costume. Of those in nurses’ uniforms, the opposite was observed. Unidentified, deindividuated participants gave much less intense shocks than identified participants did. They were also more strongly influenced by the cues around them, but in this case the cues promoted prosocial action.

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Surowiecki, James. *The Wisdom of Crowds*. New York: Anchor Books, 2005. The thesis in this readable resource, written by a business columnist for the *New Yorker*, is that crowds make more intelligent decisions than the smartest individuals in them. The writer describes various situations—such as driving in traffic, voting for a political candidate, and navigating a busy sidewalk—in which the collective intelligence of a crowd produces a better outcome than a group of experts.


See also: Bystander intervention; Community psychology; Group decision making; Group therapy; Groups; Social support and mental health.

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**Cultural competence**

**Type of psychology:** All  
**Fields of study:** All

Cultural competence is characterized by a set of skills and developmental experiences constituting an ongoing awareness of important differences among individuals from communities with different backgrounds related to biological, environmental, historical, political, psychological, religious, and other social aspects of heritage.

**Key concepts**
- bias  
- culture  
- ethnicity  
- norms  
- prejudice  
- racism

**Introduction**

When psychology is practiced, whether as a science or as a profession, it is practiced in a social and environmental context called culture. Culture is a characteristic of populations reflected in traditional beliefs, values, rituals, and other behaviors that are shared and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture is often thought of in terms of concepts such as ethnicity and norms. Ethnicity is generally described as a personal background characteristic connoting individual membership in a group that is defined by a common and distinctive linguistic, racial, national, and religious heritage. Norms are understood as the standard, average, or model behaviors, beliefs, or values people might have in a particular social grouping.

When psychologists speak of cultural competence, they are speaking about proper psychological practice that reflects an ongoing state of understanding, perceiving, and evaluating interactions among persons of differing cultural backgrounds. This can take place in therapeutic relationships, educational relationships, research endeavors, efforts to develop public policy, and even the way information is presented. These interactions also may take place among individuals, families, communities, institutions, and nations. As such, this means that cultural competence must extend to these other levels of understanding human behavior and interactions.

Cultural competence also involves awareness and knowledge that there are many types of differences based on culture. Such awareness might include the varying values and importance assigned to different holidays, personal traits, language, standards of dress, standards of beauty, and even cultural icons by members of a particular cultural group. Other important dimensions of culture include differences in terms of preferred behavior states, for instance, being active or passive, or the types of interpersonal values that are preferred, for instance, cooperation versus competition. Still others are found in terms of preferences for acquiring knowledge (through teaching, through experience, or both), how time is seen (as linear, as cyclical, or in terms of important events), and even for how reality is seen (objectively, subjectively, spiritually, or some combination of these ways of experiencing). This list is certainly incomplete, as cultures are constantly evolving. The things that make cultures distinct are dynamic in nature, and therefore achieving cultural competence is an ongoing process that requires constant self-awareness and self-evaluation.

**Importance**

A good understanding of one’s own culture and those of other individuals is important, as the points
of interaction among cultures are where problems can develop. Bias, or an impartial or erroneous judgment or tendency to misperceive people or situations, may be activated by a lack of awareness of cultural issues. One familiar way bias may present itself is through prejudice. Prejudice is a judgment based on a bias, and it is typically injurious or detrimental to the person misjudged and to the person doing the misjudging.

One particularly damaging type of prejudice that can result from a lack of cultural competence is racism, or prejudice based on race. Racism entails a belief that one’s own race is superior to others. It is mostly associated with prejudice. Racism and prejudice may show up between individuals or groups, causing harm to one or both parties. However, racism may also show up not only at the level of individuals but also at the institutional level. For instance, some might call racial profiling an institutional form of racism. In health care, as an example, this might be evidenced in the form of individuals of a particular ethnic or cultural background being refused access to important health care services because of ill-informed beliefs about their need for such services, or it might develop because health care providers are not properly educated as to how different problems might present in culturally unique ways. Such a lack of identification would then result in a lack of referral for treatment services. The root cause of a lack of multicultural education at the point of identifying problems might be interpreted as a form of cultural incompetence at the individual and institutional levels. Some might go as far as to designate such consequences as a result of institutional racism. To some, this might seem an extreme judgment because the problems may result from a lack of awareness rather than deliberate discrimination, but this is at the heart of the concept of cultural competence: encouraging those in the social sciences and social services areas to always be on the alert for such potential problems.

**Context**

It is projected that by the year 2050, changes in both immigration and birthrates among individuals of different cultural backgrounds will mean that one out of three U.S. residents will be of a nonwhite racial background. Global communications are also increasing, as more forms of media become available to a wider audience through the Internet, television, and radio. Additionally, definitions of culture extend beyond race and ethnicity; cultures can be defined in terms of characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. As a result, the concept of cultural competence is likely to grow in importance as interactions among diverse cultures are likely to increase and foster as many opportunities for miscommunication as communication. Given this, cultural knowledge must be incorporated into policy development that supports clear communication among culturally diverse populations.

**Sources for Further Study**


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