The Cultural Psychology Endeavor to Make Culture Central to Psychology:

Comment on Hall et al. (2016).

Abstract

When Hall, Yip, and Zárate (2016) suggested that cultural psychology focused on reporting differences between groups, they described comparative research conducted in other fields, including cross-cultural psychology. Cultural Psychology is a different discipline with methodological approaches reflecting its dissimilar goal, which is to highlight the cultural grounding of human psychological characteristics, and ultimately make culture central to psychology in general. When multicultural psychology considers, according to Hall et al., the mechanisms of culture's influence on behavior, it treats culture the same way as cross-cultural psychology does. In contrast, cultural psychology goes beyond treating culture as an external variable when it proposes that culture and psyche are mutually constitutive. True psychology of the human experience must encompass world populations through research of the ways in which a) historically grounded socio-cultural contexts enable the distinct meaning systems that people construct, and b) these systems simultaneously guide the human formation of the environments.

Hall, Yip, and Zárate (2016) based their characterization of cultural psychology on findings pertaining to the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Cultural psychologists publish widely, notably the journal *Culture & Psychology*, but the title of the former journal indicates that its primary focus is instead the discipline of cross-cultural psychology. Although it is more important to conduct diverse research incorporating culture than to discuss disciplinary boundaries, a historically grounded clarification seems to be needed. Otherwise, the *American Psychologist* readership could misunderstand the discussed article as evidence against the entire endeavor of bringing culture into psychology.

Comparative cross-cultural research indeed originated as a deliberate extension of the mainstream research framework, with its idealization of experimental methods and frequent use of psychometric testing (Ellis & Stam, 2015). Originally, cross-cultural psychology focused on comparative research with contrasting groups (Lonner, 2015) to explore how formerly assumed psychological universals translate differently into non-Western cultures (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). It was important to document the true psychological diversity in various socio-cultural contexts, to provide evidence that the assumed universals and psychological laws are, in reality, a culturally specific product of ethnocentric research using predominantly mainstream urbanized middle-class samples, within secularized Western socio-cultural contexts (Greenfield, 2000; Lonner, 2015).

Cultural psychology was subsequently founded to pursue further goals, which remain distinct even as many cross-cultural psychologists have recently adopted certain aspects of cultural psychology theorizing, and proposed integration of these two disciplines (Ellis & Stam, 2015), which may be impossible. Mainstream general psychology did not perceive the cross-cultural differences reported by cross-cultural research as a challenge because both disciplines were based on the premise of psychic unity, and on a search for the presumed central processing mechanism

of mental life (Lonner, 2015; Shweder, 1991). However, cultural psychology has challenged this psychological universals premise and proposed that what used to be called general psychology or considered universal psychological theory, is in fact only one of indigenous theories (Greenfield, 2000).

It is also important to note that cross-cultural psychology tends to treat culture as an external variable that exerts influence on universal psychological dimensions (Lonner, 2015). In contrast, cultural psychology proposes that culture and psyche are mutually constitutive (Shweder, 1991). This principle allows for individual agency, but does not imply relative degrees of significance, as Hall et al. (2016) seemed to suggest. Instead, this mutual constitution concept implies that human cognition, emotion and behavior cannot be studied independently from the historically based socio-cultural contexts in which people live, because psychological functioning necessarily reflects the socio-culturally specific meanings and practices that are involved in the emergence of higher-order psychological processes (Miller & Boyle, 2013).

Hall et al. (2016) might have considered cultural psychology "an example of the group differences approach" (p. 44) because it has indeed been studying "the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, and transform the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion" (Shweder, 1991, p. 73). However, this introductory statement must be deliberated in its context, in which Richard A. Shweder explained not only how cultural psychology differs from cross-cultural psychology but also that the goal of cultural psychology is to develop analytic frameworks to determine the relationships between reality-constituting psyches and culturally constituted realities (Shweder, 1991). In short, instead of merely comparing groups, theoretically informed cultural psychology research furthers conceptual understanding of ethno-racial and socio-cultural diversity.

In any case, there is no need in the cultural psychology conceptual framework for studying solely phenomena that exist across groups, or for using Western samples as a reference group, as mentioned by Hall et al. (2016). The "lived experiences of persons in society" (Shweder, 1991, p. 95) are in the focus of cultural psychology because "it is at the level of experience that psyche and culture constitute one another" (Ellis & Stam, 2015, p. 307). The cultural psychology conceptualization of the research participants' perspective was amended within the quarter century that had passed since the publication of the discussed article by Shweder, and its "theory construction and development of new methodology that honors the qualitative, dynamic and holistic nature of cultural phenomena" (Valsiner, 2014, p. 147) continues. Cultural psychologists had already described the challenges of culturally sensitive psychological theory development in the last century (Miller, 1999); it is therefore unfortunate that the same issues have to be reiterated.

However, since integrating culture into basic psychological theory turned out to require great persistence, the domestic contribution by Hall et al. (2016) to this world-wide endeavor is opportune. Psychology in general should indeed include "underrepresented populations for their own merits" (Hall et al., 2016, p. 45), and the essential pre-requisites of quality research in any field do imply the use of more than ethno-culturally diverse samples of convenience, together with avoidance of culturally insensitive measures and of research without conceptual grounding. True psychology of the human experience requires increased inclusion of world populations in research of the ways in which a) historically grounded socio-cultural contexts enable the distinct meaning systems that people construct, and b) these systems simultaneously guide the human formation of the environments. Such integration will make theorizing in the field of psychology as a whole more relevant to today increasingly diverse and globally interconnected society, whether this endeavor be called cultural psychology, multicultural psychology or perhaps true general psychology.

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