Volume 49 of the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation

Cross-Cultural Differences in Perspectives on the Self

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The volume editors for this 49th edition of the Nebraska Symposium are Professors John J. Berman and Virginia Murphy-Berman. John and Ginny did some of the necessary activities leading to this symposium the hard way, since they left our campus for other academic pastures before the symposium meeting itself. Nevertheless, they hosted an exciting meeting and coordinated the building of this superb volume. My thanks to them and to their contributors, and to Claudia Price-Decker for smoothing the path by handling hundreds of details.

As with symposium sessions of the past several years, to allow other scholars to travel to the symposium as participants, we invited posters relevant to the main theme. Since this is a tradition we will continue, we urge you, our readers, to consider such poster submissions when you receive future symposium announcements.

This symposium series is supported largely by funds donated in the memory of Professor Harry K. Wolfe to the University of Nebraska Foundation by the late Professor Cora L. Friedline. This volume, like those of the recent past, is dedicated to the memory of Professor Wolfe, who brought psychology to the University of Nebraska. After studying with Professor Wilhelm Wundt, Professor Wolfe returned to this, his native state, to establish the first undergraduate laboratory
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of psychology in the nation. As a student at Nebraska, Professor Friedline studied psychology under Professor Wolfe.

We are grateful to the late Professor Friedline for this bequest and to the University of Nebraska Foundation for continued financial support for the series.

Richard A. Dienstbier
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Introduction

Virginia Murphy-Berman
and John J. Berman

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In 1989 the theme of the Nebraska Symposium on Motivation was cross-cultural psychology (Berman, 1990). Now we have an opportunity to revisit this topic. When the cross-cultural symposium was introduced 14 years ago, several important questions were raised and several observations were made about the field of psychology in general and about the place of cross-cultural psychology within that field in particular.

It was observed that much of what we know about scientific psychology has been developed in Western cultures and particularly in an even smaller database: the United States. It was further observed that one can see the strong influence of Western thought on psychology by simply reviewing journal articles, textbooks, and conference proceedings over the past 20 years. Psychology, it was suggested, is for the most part an American discipline dominated by one cultural group. While not a problem for some disciplines, this was seen as crippling for one that purported to explain behavior in a generalized way.

The extent to which this situation has changed could be debated. Clearly, psychology is still very much influenced by Western ways of looking at the world. Although we have seen some progress, there is much to be done before psychology is a culturally representative
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discipline. The current symposium represents a part of the effort to make the field more culturally inclusive.

In 1989 we stated that work in cross-cultural psychology is important because it makes us aware of the cultural limitations of our theories. This and other ideas were explored in our first symposium by a group of people who were leaders in the field of cross-cultural psychology. For instance, papers were presented by Gustav Jahoda, Harry Triandis, Çigdem Kağıtçibaşı, John Berry, Juris Dragons, and Michael Cole.

The authors represented in the present volume continue to build on some of the ideas introduced in 1989. Cross-cultural differences in the idea of the person and in models of balancing obligations to the self, to the family, and to the community are explored. The authors suggest that cross-cultural work not only allows us to see the limitations of our current theories but also challenges us to reconsider our most basic assumptions about behavior.

This year’s symposium also builds on another significant body of work. In 1990 Richard Dienstbier organized the Nebraska Symposium around current perspectives on motivation (Dienstbier, 1991). Several presenters at that conference discussed important work on the topic of the self.

For example, Carol Dweck discussed her research on the development of children’s self-concept. She was particularly interested in what led to the development of a child’s sense of mastery. Albert Bandura explored the idea of self-efficacy and the relationship of self-efficacy to the attainment of goals and intrinsic interest. Bernard Weiner examined the importance of perceived control over the causes of one’s behavior on attributions about that behavior. And Edward Deci and Richard Ryan emphasized three primary psychological needs, which they defined as the need for competence, for agency and self-determination, and for relatedness. They suggested that a strong sense of self involved feelings of agency and self-determination. Implicit in their model is that a strong sense of self is also stable across time and context and internally directed. That is, a person with a strong sense of self believes that I am what I am and my behavior is driven by my own beliefs and interests, not by anyone else’s opinion or expectations for me.

The authors in the present volume challenge us to revisit these
topics and to reconsider the idea of the self and self-worth. They suggest that ideas of psychological effectiveness have often been construed rather narrowly and assumed to be universally linked to such factors as intrinsic motivation, taking personal responsibility for one’s actions, feeling in control and unique, and being optimistic and hopeful concerning one’s future. These authors particularly examine the extent to which these types of associations may be culturally bound. In fact, even focusing on the term *the self* has been noted by some to reflect a Western cultural bias (Sampson, 1985). Thus, the contextual limits of current Western theorizing about the self and ideas of effectiveness are explored, and more culturally inclusive theoretical models are offered.

Although the ideas presented are diverse, all chapters focus on this common theme of the self. Each chapter both stands alone as a significant contribution to cross-cultural psychology and builds upon the others to produce an integrated body of work. Each author asks us to carefully question our assumptions about what we may consider universally valid theories and basic psychological principles. They further ask us to suspend our easy categorizations and to “see” the world in new ways.

The chapters in this volume are from authors who have made major contributions to this field. First, Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama consider cultural differences in models of psychological agency. They challenge our notion that Western styles of independence tend to be inevitably associated with higher levels of agency than non-Western styles of interdependence and that behaving in an interdependent manner is stifling to individual initiative and the development of personal efficacy. Markus and Kitayama suggest that these assumptions rest on European and middle-class American construals that define agency solely in terms of autonomy, self-expression, freedom, and individual choice. Other forms of agency, or ways of being an actor in the world, focus more on interpersonal, social, and relational styles. They point out that these other forms of agency are found not only in what has been labeled traditional collectivist cultures but also in working-class cultures in the West. Consideration of these alternative models, they assert, invites us to rethink answers to basic questions: What impels people to act? Why and how are people motivated to accomplish things? How much do
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(and should) others influence individuals’ behavior? What contexts afford a sense of individual freedom and personal choice? And in what ways can people succeed?

Joan Miller also asks us to rethink the meaning of the term *agency*. She considers, among other things, how social obligations and expectations tend to be viewed differently in different cultural contexts. For instance, do attempts to fulfill social obligations, by definition, impede one’s personal growth and the development of an authentic sense of self? To act with agency, do we have to choose behavior freely and “Do it my way,” as the old Frank Sinatra song suggests? Is life satisfying only when it is played out on one’s own terms and not on the basis of society’s role expectations? Must there inevitably be a struggle or built-in tension between acting freely and acting dutifully? And finally, do affirmative answers to the above questions reflect a distinctly Western way of looking at the world? Miller considers these questions in her chapter and analyses the extent to which many popular theories in psychology in such areas as social development and parenting, attachment behavior and conceptions of morality may rest on rather narrow Western models of behavior and effective functioning.

Steve Heine further challenges us to suspend our ideas about what we may consider to be some universal forms of cognitive processing. For instance, much work in psychology has suggested that particular types of self-serving biases are quite common. Examples include tendencies to exaggerate positive aspects of oneself and one’s abilities, to take too much credit for one’s successes and to distance oneself from failure, to hold unrealistic ideas about one’s ability to be in control of events, and to view the future in overly optimistic terms (Paulhus, 1998). In fact, as Heine points out, these biases seem so prevalent in Western cultures that they have even been seen as providing a necessary buffer for the development of healthy personalities (Taylor & Armor, 1996). Thus, the person who is seen as being unrealistically optimistic and who believes he or she can accomplish it all is defined as a strong, “can-do” person. The fictional village of Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon where “all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average” is seen as a prototypical rural community. But, Heine asks, are these biases universal? Do they “work” in all cultures to promote a strong sense of self, or are they particularly apparent
only when the cultural ideal of self follows an independent Western model?

Sheena Iyengar and Sanford DeVoie build on what has been offered in the previous three chapters and examine intrinsic/extrinsic motivation and the value of choice from a cross-cultural perspective. Based on numerous studies in psychology, for instance, many believe that giving individuals choice leads to the development of higher levels of intrinsic motivation, greater task satisfaction, and increased task persistence and performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Thus, we know that the child who is told or made to do some task will show less interest in that task later than the child who is given the opportunity to choose his or her own work. But do we “know” this? Are these ideas culturally bound? Do other cultures place the great value on having a free choice that we do in the United States?

Kuo-Shu Yang asks us to reflect on Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). This theory, in addition to having had a wide influence on psychology, has also had a remarkable impact on popular culture and has influenced how we think about what it means to be a fully functional and psychologically healthy individual in the West. As Yang discusses, Maslow (1970, p. 22) defined self-actualization as “the desire to become more and more of what one is, to become everything that one is capable of being.” Thus, we have the “Be all that you can be” appeals to young people in military recruitment ads. Teachers inform parents whether or not their children are “working up to their potential.” And in her magazine O, Oprah Winfrey reminds us that the real power of the self lies within. She tells us that nobody should be our boss and that we should refuse to abide by the judgments of others. For instance, in her November 2001 article in O on unleashing creativity, writer Martha Beck tells a story of her daughter who, at the age of 12, responded to her father’s suggestion about how to make cookies by remarking that she did not really care how he did it. The writer went on to assert that this ability to speak one’s mind was an auspicious display of a healthy sense of self. Talking back to her father was defined as an important step in fostering creativity. In fact, the author suggested that to be authentically creative one must be able to say to the world that you don’t “give a damn” about what others think.

But, Yang questions, are these conceptions of the creative self-actualized individual universal? Do Eastern views of the “ideal”
self parallel the Western self-actualized model? In what way is self-actualization different from self-transformation? Can we identify cross-cultural universality at some level of basic needs and differences at other levels?

Finally, Ype Poortinga invites us to step back and reexamine not only the possible cultural boundaries of our theories but also the very meaning of the term culture. He suggests that two assumptions are often made about the nature of cultural differences. One assumption is that cultures are coherent in meaningful ways and that behavior at the individual level can thus be explained by examining broad cultural systems. The second assumption is that differences in behavior across cultures are reflective of meaningful psychological dimensions by which cultures can be differentiated. Poortinga examines each of these two assumptions and challenges us to be more thoughtful in how we use the term culture as an explanatory variable. He warns us that the percentage of variance in behavior that can be explained by culture is often woefully small, and he suggests that we need to be more careful in considering the criteria that will allow us to falsify or limit as well as positively confirm our theories.

Thus, in each chapter, culture and the impact of culture on behavior are examined. The work of two authors, Steve Heine and Sheena Iyengar, is representative of the new generation of scholars in this area. Both already have strong empirical records and have built exciting research programs. Hazel Markus, Shinobu Kitayama, and Joan Miller all combine remarkable skills at broad conceptual analysis and integration as well as exceptional talents for putting together truly innovative empirical research programs. They prod us to pierce through old ways of thinking and ask us to question ideas that others assume to be true. And Kuo-Shu Yang and Ype Poortinga bring us perspectives from Asia and Europe. They broaden our horizons with their wisdom and by the depth of their understanding.

In addition to the six chapters representing the authors’ individual contributions, we have added a last chapter entitled “Epilogue: A Conversation.” This conversation represents the highlights of a panel discussion among symposium participants after the six major papers had been presented. In this section, one “hears” the authors talking together and expressing their opinions (and their disagreements) about some of the major issues in cross-cultural psychology. The questions posed in the epilogue reflect those raised either by the
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panel participants or by members of the audience. As can be seen, the debate on how to conduct meaningful cross-cultural research is not closed and will likely continue to be the subject of lively dialogue among scholars for some time to come.

References


