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Cultural Differences

Definition

Cultural groups can differ widely in their beliefs about what is true, good, and efficient. The study of cultural differences combines perspectives in psychology and anthropology to understand a society's signature pattern of beliefs, behavior and social institutions, and how these patterns compare and contrast to those of other cultural groups.

Cultural differences appear both between and within societies, for example, between Canadians and Japanese, and within the U.S. between Anglos and Latinos. Descriptions of cultural differences are made in context to the many similarities shared across human groups. Although a variety of attributes differ between cultures, there are also many similarities that exist across human societies. Moreover, even where there are differences between cultural groups, individual differences mean that not every person within a particular culture will have beliefs or exhibit behaviors that resemble predominant patterns in their society.

Context and Focus

Cultures can contrast in many ways, some more obvious and observable than others. For example, cultures differ in language, dress (kilt, kimono or three-piece suit), and social greetings (kiss, bow, handshake). From a psychological perspective, cultures also differ in more subtle, yet important ways, such as how they explain why someone behaved the way they did, what they notice and remember from social interactions, or whether they try to 'fit in' versus 'stand out' in their peer group. For example, in the U.S. and Australia individuals tend to define themselves in terms of their unique personality characteristics and individual attributes (e.g., outgoing, optimistic, ambitious), whereas in Korea and Mexico, individuals are more likely to define

themselves in terms of their connection to others or membership in social groups (e.g., sister, friend, student). In Chinese cultures, building deep personal relationships is considered more effective than contracts as a way to establish trust in a business relationship. Yet, in the U.S., contracts are valued more than personal assurances. Psychological research on cultural differences focuses on such subtle differences and unexpected similarities in beliefs and behavior.

Background and History

Humans have long been interested in cultural differences. The first written accounts of cultural diversity appear as far back as the 4th century B.C. in Herodotus' description of the unique beliefs and customs among the different cultural groups that traded along the shores of the Black Sea. However, it was not until around the 19th century A.D. that scholars began to conduct systematic studies of unique cultural beliefs and practices, such as Tocqueville's writings about the unique aspects of early American culture and Weber's analysis of how religious ideologies developed in Northern Europe created cultural differences in beliefs about the meaning of work. About a hundred years later, the field of cultural anthropology emerged with an exclusive focus on understanding the nature of cultural differences around the world. Today, psychological research has brought new understanding about the nature of cultural differences and similarities by combining an anthropological focus on culture with sophisticated experimental methods developed in social and cognitive psychology. This area of research within social psychology is referred to as cultural psychology.

Before psychologists began to study culture, it was often assumed that knowledge gained from psychological research conducted within one culture applied to all humans. This assumption about the universality of human psychology was challenged when researchers then

tried to replicate studies in other cultures and found very different results for a number of important phenomena. For example, psychological experiments showing that people tend to exert less effort when working in a group versus alone showed an opposite pattern in East Asian societies. There, people tend to exert less effort when working alone compared to when working in a group. Further, studies conducted in India, and later in Japan, showed an opposite pattern to earlier research conducted in the U.S. showing that people tend to overestimate the influence of personality and underestimate the influence of situational factors on behavior.

Evidence

Three broad types of evidence have been used to demonstrate cultural differences. First, in-depth studies of single cultures have found a variety of culturally unique ways people think about and engage in interpersonal relations. For example, within Mexico, interpersonal relations are characterized by a sincere emphasis on proactively creating interpersonal harmony (i.e., *simpatía*) even with strangers. In Japan and Korea, people also exhibit a heightened focus on interpersonal harmony. However, unlike Mexicans, the concern for harmony among the Japanese is more focused on relationships with one's in-group (e.g., friends, family), and it is sustained through a more passive, 'don't rock the boat' strategy. In the U.S., the concern for interpersonal harmony differs for casual, social relationships versus work relationships. While it is common in the U.S. for individuals to create a pleasant and positive social dynamic across most settings, they show a tendency to attend less to interpersonal relations and overall level of harmony while in work settings. To provide evidence of these different relational styles across cultures, researchers have examined, for example, how members of these cultures convey information that could be embarrassing or disappointing to others. When talking with friends or social acquaintances, Americans and Koreans use indirect, subtle cues to avoid embarrassing others

when conveying such bad news. However, when talking with someone in a work setting, Americans believe it is more appropriate to be direct even if the message contains bad news for the listener. In contrast, Koreans believe that at work it is even more important to use subtle communication that will convey the message but also save face for the listener. Thus, cultural differences in attention to interpersonal concerns can be more pronounced in some settings (e.g., work) than in other settings (e.g., party).

A second type of evidence comes from multinational surveys that have measured people's values in every major continent, across hundreds of societies. In these survey studies, people are asked to rate how much they agree with statements like, 'it is important to be free to make one's own decisions' and 'people are defined by their connection to their social group.' This type of research shows that cultural groups fluctuate significantly in how much they value individual autonomy versus obligations to follow traditions; equality versus respect for differences in status; competition versus cooperation; and distinctions between in-groups and out-groups.

A third, and compelling type of evidence for cultural differences is provided by cross-cultural experiments on the way people perceive and react to their social environment. When experimental studies present individuals from different cultures with the exact same situation, for example, a video of two people talking with each other during a workgroup meeting, very different interpretations and responses can emerge. In many Latin American cultures, people notice and remember how hard the individuals in the video are working and how well or poorly they are getting along interpersonally. In North American cultures, people tend to also notice how hard people are working but notice much less information about the level of interpersonal rapport.

There is evidence that cultural differences are the result of people's experience living and participating in different social-cultural environments. Bi-cultural groups, for example, Chinese-Canadians or Mexican-Americans, often exhibit psychological patterns that are somewhere in between those found in their mother country (e.g., China or Mexico) and those in their new adopted culture (e.g., Canada or the U.S.). Experimental evidence also shows in certain domains significant cultural differences between different regions within a society, for example, between individuals from the Northern versus Southern United States. In relative terms, an insult to one's honor is a fleeting annoyance for Northerners, but a more serious affront to Southerners, and although violence is generally no more tolerated among Southerners than Northerners, it is more likely to be considered justified when honor is at stake.

Implications

Cultural differences have implications to virtually all areas of psychology. For example, cultural differences have been found in child rearing practices (developmental psychology), the range of personality traits in a society (personality psychology), how people process information (cognitive psychology), effective treatments for mental disorders (clinical psychology), teacher-student interactions (educational psychology), motivational incentives important to workers (organizational psychology), and interpersonal styles (social psychology). Research in each of these areas provides knowledge about how cultures can differ and when they are likely to be more similar than different.

The existence of cultural differences has significant implications for people's daily lives whether at school, work, or any other setting in which people from diverse cultural backgrounds interact. It is important to recognize that diversity can mean much more than differences in ethnicity, race, or nationality; cultural diversity also includes sometimes subtle, yet important

basic differences in the assumptions, beliefs, perceptions, and behavior that people from different cultures use to navigate their social world.

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Further Readings

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