

THE CULTURAL MATRIX OF SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

ALAN PAGE FISKE, *University of California, Los Angeles*
SHINOBU KITAYAMA, *Kyoto University*
HAZEL ROSE MARKUS, *Stanford University*
RICHARD E. NISBETT, *University of Michigan*

*All phenomena with which the mental sciences deal are, indeed,
creations of the social community.*

—WILHELM WUNDT, *Elements of Folk Psychology*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social psychologists have demonstrated that there are powerful and pervasive processes that produce phenomena such as self-enhancing biases, the tendency to characterize the self in terms of global attributes, the “fundamental attribution error,” the tendency to discount one’s intrinsic motivation to perform tasks for which one receives extrinsic rewards, the need for cognitive consistency between expressed attitudes and behavior, and the logical progression of stages in moral development. In the last decade, however, the argument has been made more and more frequently and persuasively that such “basic” psychological

processes depend substantially on cultural meanings and practices (e.g., Berry et al., 1992; Bond, 1988b, 1996a; Cole, 1991; Gergen et al., 1996; Kim & Berry, 1993; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Matsumoto, 1989; Miller, 1994a, 1997; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Wright, 1993; Pepitone, 1989; Shweder, 1990; Shweder & Levine, 1984; Smith & Bond, 1994; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990; Triandis, 1990, 1995).

A good deal of evidence, most of it very recently obtained, shows that psychological processes can be very different in cultures other than European and American ones. For example, though Europeans and Americans often prefer to explain social behavior primarily in terms of personal attributes and dispositions, for other populations and groups—probably for most (Hirschfeld, 1995)—explanation of behavior seems to require an analysis of social roles, obligations, and situational factors. And whereas many Europeans and Americans typically emphasize that they are unique, different, and better than others, people in many East Asian and other cultures typically emphasize that they are ordinary, quite similar to, or no different than others.

Using the new evidence about how psychological processes are culturally contingent, some psychologists are now studying the dynamic mutual constitution of culture and the psyche. A premise underlying this work is that in order to participate in any social world, people must incorporate cultural models, meanings, and practices into their basic psychological processes. These psychological processes in turn constrain, reproduce, and transform the

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cultural system. So while each culture is constructed by the coordinated interaction of many psyches, these psyches are themselves oriented, structured, and motivated by the particular culture in which they operate. Thus many of the findings currently regarded as "basic" to social psychology are a function of particular cultural frameworks that may be unseen and unexamined because they are shared by investigators and subjects alike. Conversely, seemingly anomalous "failures to replicate" these standard phenomena in other cultures make sense when we understand the cultural models with which people are thinking, feeling, judging, and acting—including the models of persons.

Humans are born with the capacity to function in any culture, but as they mature they develop psyches that are organized to function in one specific culture. For example, children can learn any language, but they learn to speak a particular one, and adults can communicate only with speakers of their own particular language. Humans have evolved unique psychological capacities and propensities to take adaptive advantage of cultures, but in the course of development these proclivities also make their psyches dependent on their own particular cultures. Hence cultural psychology needs to explore how evolution both enables and constrains the nature of human psyches and socialities, as well as the links between psyche and society.

A major goal in this chapter is to show that culture, psyche, and evolutionary biology constitute one another. There have recently appeared several excellent, comprehensive reviews of the literature in cultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology, and psychological anthropology ("Cross-cultural and Comparative Research," 1991; Berry, Poortinga, & Pandey, 1996; Berry et al., 1992; Berman, 1990; Bock, 1994; Bond, 1988b, 1996a; Cole, 1996; Cole & Cole, 1995; Himmelweit & Gaskell, 1990; Miller, 1994a, 1997; Moghaddam, Taylor, & Wright, 1993; Munroe & Munroe, 1994; Oyserman & Markus, 1994; Schwartz, White, & Lutz, 1992; Shweder & LeVine, 1984; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1994; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990; Triandis, 1994a, 1995; Vijver & Hutschemaekers, 1990). The current chapter does not attempt to be a comprehensive review of this kind. Rather than attempting to duplicate these fine works, we have aimed to show why social psychologists should read this literature in the first place.

In order to accomplish this aim, in this first section we will develop the thesis that culture and the psyche are mutually constitutive. The mutual constitution thesis implies that the psyche is a function of its socioculturally and historically constituted environment. In Section II we will compare European-American models of independence with Asian models of interdependence, contrasting two very different conceptions of the self and social relationships. We focus on East Asia because so much of the recent research has been conducted there. Then in

Section III we review this research. It shows dramatic divergence in psychological functioning between European-Americans and East Asians in some of the phenomena that social psychologists have been most concerned with and that they have regarded as universal. These differences are fully concordant with—indeed we would argue understandable only within the context of—the differences between the two cultural systems. Section IV explores a variety of strategies for understanding the links between culture and psyche, including developing typologies or dimensions of sociality that differentiate the world's cultures and identifying structures for social coordination. Finally, in Section V, we discuss how the human brain has evolved to use cultural models that enable people to coordinate and cooperate in diverse culture-specific adaptations.

Cultural Psychology: Mutual Constitution of Culture and the Psyche

Cultural psychology begins with the thesis that cultural practices and meanings complement and inform psychological processes, which in turn generate and transform these cultural practices and meanings (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1991, 1995a; D'Andrade, 1981; Greenfield & Cocking, 1994; Miller, 1994b, in press; Rogoff, 1990; Schwartz, White, & Lutz, 1992; Shweder, 1991; Shweder & LeVine, 1984; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1991; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995; White & Kirkpatrick, 1985). Cultural psychology has three coordinated aims. First, it aims to characterize varied cultural meanings and practices and the psychological structures and processes to which they are linked. Second, it aims to discover the systematic principles underlying the diversity of culturally patterned socialities and psyches. Third, it aims to describe the processes by which psyches and cultures construct each other, elucidating how cultures create and support psychological processes and how these psychological tendencies in turn support, reproduce, and sometimes change the cultural systems. Its dual premise is that human psychology is relative to culture, but that this contingency is governed by universal principles.

The capacity to form culturally prescribed social relationships is essential for human survival, reproduction, and well-being. Consequently, the human mind has evolved specifically to operate in culturally patterned social worlds (Durham, 1991; Geertz, 1973)—not a particular world, but worlds whose specific parameters are indeterminate in advance, unknowable at birth. At the beginning of development, the human infant requires and possesses many capacities to engage in the social world. These motivated capacities can be realized by utilizing culture-specific models to mediate social interaction. Children and adults actively use the locally available cultural practices to generate meaningful interactions. They select among various alterna-

