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Culture, Power, and Experience: Toward a Person-Centered Cultural Psychology

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Key Words
Conflict · Culture · Power

Conjecture:
[Culture] seems to connote a certain coherence, uniformity and timelessness in the meaning systems of a given group, and to operate rather like the earlier concept of 'race' in identifying fundamentally different, essentialized, and homogeneous social units (as when we speak about 'a culture'). Because of these associations ... [it] falsely fixes the boundaries between groups in an absolute and artificial way [Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 9].

Example:
The authors find East Asians to be holistic, attending to the entire field ... whereas Westerners are more analytic, paying attention primarily to the object ... The authors speculate that the origin of these differences are traceable to markedly different social systems [Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001, p. 291].

How do we study human diversity in a meaningful manner? In this essay I (a) raise some fundamental relations between 'culture', individuals, and social groups; (b) make a case for agency and individuality, and (c) propose ways to rethink relations between culture, power, and inequality.[1] I further ask whether culture is something 'out there' for us to discover, or whether it is produced and sustained through discourse and power, and question whether shared meanings are the

[1] Using quotation marks around 'culture' is meant to indicate that this concept is fuzzy, unstable, and contested. Having made this point once, I mostly omit quotation marks in the remainder of this essay.

It should be noted that socio-cultural theory will not be described in this essay given that Barbara Rogoff [2002] recently discussed this theory in a special issue of *Human Development*. Finally I add that the emphasis on Chinese examples derives from my reaction to Nisbett et al. [2001], their research represents the antithesis to the arguments advanced in this paper.

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basis for cultural units. As will become increasingly clear, I view cultural psychology as a critical undertaking. Those who map cultural phenomena must therefore be aware of the forces that give rise to culture (p. 186). After all, we have not reached Habermas's utopian 'ideal speech situation' where discourse can take place without the intrusion of power relations. Hence there is no politically neutral position from where to study culture.

Cultural psychology, as conceived by many [e.g., Heine, 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett et al., 2001], is typically based on the supposition of unified groups that can be studied in their organic totality. The result is essentialism: the assumption that a group contains features emblematic of all its members. This assumption is perilous because it easily can lead people to be viewed as exchangeable 'carbon copies' and promote disregard for heterogeneity, agency, and individuality. For example, 'East' and 'West' are still being advanced as two distinctly separate geographical areas in cultural psychology. The proffer of continent-spanning generalizations is but one of the practices that require extended scrutiny. In addition, cultural psychology typically neglects inequality and power and the ways in which political forces frame developmental settings. Another shortcoming is the ahistorical nature of most cultural psychology. There is little cross-disciplinary fertilization, whether drawing from anthropology, history, political theory or cultural studies. As a result, many cultural psychologists re-invent the wheel, but often in a cruder form, and revive issues that have been laid to rest decades ago (e.g., Japanese 'groupism', or 'interdependence'). Most importantly, insights into how real people struggle with the complexities and indeterminacies of daily living are infrequent. Although each issue discussed in this essay merits deeper treatment, I hope the following remarks may draw psychologists/students of human development away from inappropriate and cursory generalizations and toward a more fruitful interdisciplinary debate.

Cultural Models of the Person

In cultural psychology, as in other scholarly endeavors, it is important to make one's models explicit. Linger (in press) proposed three models of the human being based on different relations between mental representations (or subjectivities) and public representations. The 'null model' represents the notion of cultural determinism. In this model, mental representations are minimized in that they are seen as being merely reflective of and isomorphic with public representations. The culture and personality approach can be seen as one version of the null model, insofar as cultural and national characteristics are thought to be inscribed on individuals. The 'choice model' also affords public representations substantial influence, but adds a rational actor who purposefully selects and mixes available public representations. According to this model, representations remain influential insofar as they constitute the basis for personal subjectivity. The 'consciousness (individuality) model' comes closest to representing the notion of personal agency. Linger (in press) wrote: 'mediating between public representations and subjectivity is an active, creative, self-conscious, biographical human agent.' In this model, personal subjectivity cannot be reduced to public representations or other external influences; the self is viewed as creative, reflective, and introspective [e.g., Wikan, 1991].

I find the consciousness (individuality) model to be of substantial heuristic value and the reader will recognize its influence in my subsequent remarks. One main consequence of this view/model of the human being is that relations between public behavior and personal meaning become less direct and more problematic. What may appear – at least on the surface – as identical events or behaviors may conceal a multitude of different personal meanings. I further argue that this model permits the analysis of power because of the often unavoidable tension between individuality, on the one hand, and public representations and/or direct coercion, on the other. This model also provides an opportunity to make cultural psychology experience-near by acknowledging individuals' self-consciousness, individuality, and ability to transcend their own culture.

Culture and Groups: Ambiguous and Slippery Terms

In his seminal work *Orientalism,* Said [1978] asked: 'How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture ... a useful one ...?' (p. 325). The current emphasis on cultural influences on children's development forefronts these issues and highlights the problem of classifications, both in everyday life and in science. What is a 'people'? How is a 'people' constructed, maintained, and disciplined? What is a 'group', whether defined in cultural, national, societal or communal terms? Are 'ethnic groups' or 'ethnic/cultural communities' viable constructs? These questions are central to the study of whether members of any real or imaginary unit possess unique attributes that can be reliably identified and compared. In response to questions such as these, it is often proposed that no group is homogeneous and one should therefore also look for within-group differences [e.g., Goodnow, 2002, p. 239]. This sounds reasonable. But it is deceptive. If the cultural group in question is not homogeneous, what then makes it a group? I do not mean to take this argument to the level of ad absurdum and end up in solipsism. But one thing is certain: The ontological status of the term 'group' needs substantially more reflection.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, 'culture', 'society', 'nation', and 'community' were seen as bounded and stable units.[2] Today, they are increasingly critiqued – see Abu-Lughod [1991], among many others, on culture; Barth [1992]; Bauman [2001] on community, and Urry [2000] on society. The criticism focuses both on the stability and boundedness of these units as traditionally conceived. New 'mobility' metaphors are being proposed to replace the former 'stability' metaphors. These new metaphors capture the movement of individuals in an increasingly *borderless* world. Examples include nomads, vagabonds, liquid modernity, fluid networks, and de-territorialization. Physical mobility, accompanied by technologies that allow for even larger waves of imaginative and virtual mobility, further challenges culture as spatially bounded. 'Travel' may be a more useful 'root metaphor' for culture than 'location', and change is viewed as an inherent attribute of social life [Clifford, 1997]. If culture can no longer be seen as stably tied to a specific location, but si-

[2] The term 'community' raises problems because it always has positive connotations. Bauman [2001] referred to 'community' as a feel-good term, or another name for 'paradise lost'. Perhaps this is why Colombian cocaine cartels, for example, are not referred to as 'Communities of Practice'.

multaneously connected to multiple locations, then the notion of natural, spatially localized cultural groups is questionable and comparisons among 'them' become increasingly problematic. Moreover, culture may never have been localized; the localization of culture may be an artifact of anthropological practices.

Although the psychological literature is full of references to cultural groups, this concept is being used in many different ways, and most cultural psychologists make no serious attempt to explicate its meaning [see, Gjerde & Onishi, 2000].[3] Culture, surely among the most abstruse words in the English language, emerged in a complex interplay between 'civilization' and 'society'. Hence nobody knows exactly what it is being meant by this concept; nobody knows exactly what is being communicated when it is employed, even though the use of this common term suggests that communication of some sort does occur. The result is a deceptive rift between public representations and subjective interpretations. Although communication may always be ambiguous insofar as the overlap between public representations and private meanings may never be perfect, culture deserves special attention because of its importance in both common and academic parlance. Culture may also be purposely left ambiguous and therefore resist a clear definition.

Fluidity of Traditions and Values

Discussions of culture also tend to posit authentic traditions or practices that are handed down from generation to generation. The continuity between past and present is taken for granted. However, mental representations – unlike viruses – do not replicate themselves during transmission. Traditions and practices are always transformed when they are passed from person to person [Sperber, 1996]. Nor can we make invariable assumptions about the complex relations between action and belief. Participation in a shared public practice need not indicate shared personal meanings, and the relation between a group and the individuals who constitute the group is at best uncertain [Rapport, 1997]. Thus, we should spend less time thinking about culture as traditions transmitted and preserved from generation to generation and more about traditions as fluid representations shaped, in part, by hegemonic forces. Traditions are not static historical fragments or authentic representations of times gone by – they represent selective views of the past. Prominent historians have even argued that traditions are in many cases recent inventions [Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1983]. Confucianism, for example, may not be an ancient Chinese tradition, as commonly believed. Jensen [1997] proposed that Jesuit priests created Confucianism in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Similarly, Fujitani [1996] and Vlastos [1998] have presented absorbing illustrations of inventions of traditions in Japan. Is it not important that we distinguish the past from the present construction of the past?

Of course it is! The fluidity of intergenerational transmission prevents easy equations of culture and tradition. Traditionally, perhaps, knowledge was transmitted from adults to children (although it was certainly transformed in the process). Increasingly, however, knowledge is disseminated from pre-teen child to pre-teen

[3] There are of course exceptions. Sociocultural scholars [e.g., Rogoff, 2002], for example, are quite explicit about their views.

child (e.g., via cell phones, the Internet), even from child to adult. By this I mean both that these technologies have increased the extent to which knowledge is disseminated among peers (i.e., quantity), and also that the quality and content of the shared knowledge are different. This view has direct consequences for our conceptualization of culture. Rather than positing that children learn through participation in cultural practices, it seems more correct to add that children also transform cultural practices through their participation in cultural routines with each other and through attempts to resist the dominant adult world. Relations between parents and children increasingly take the form of negotiation about conflicting values, children are not docile bodies or passive recipients of cultural practices and values. Children's resistance and animosity to dominant cultural practices are a crucial but mostly neglected component of their participation. It is partly through this resistance that intergenerational social change occurs [Corsaro, 1997; Gullestad, 1996]. In speaking about the fluidity of intergenerational transmission of cultural practices and values in Confucianism, Duara [1995] eloquently stated that 'Practices ... are often inherited from the past, but they do not remain of the past ... which is what the term traditional implies. What we call Confucianism in the early twentieth century was not an inheritance from the past, but equally a set of responses to this very inheritance in the contemporary scene' (p. 89, 90).

The 'Cultural Unit' and the Persistence of Essentialism

Following Durkheim, Western social science has tended to focus on collective and coercive structures. In cultural psychology, this tendency has often taken the form of holistic dichotomization [Baumrind, 1998]: the separation/comparison of large collective structures, even continents [see Markus, Mullally, & Kitayama, 1997, on the African Self]. Underlying this approach is the idea of essentialism, that is, the assumption that a group has one or more defining features characteristic of all group members. It implies that there exist *natural entities* – often described as tribes, ethnicities or cultural groups – that share essences such as language, blood, kinship, or customs, and whose affinity is real, natural and overpowering. In this view, each individual possesses the properties of his or her culture and groups can take on the status of independent variables and operate as causative factors. These characteristics are presumed to be so deeply inscribed that each person within the 'cultural unit' can be treated as an exchangeable item – at least with regard to the attribute being studied. According to this conceptualization, peoples are reduced to miniature representations of their societies, cultures, and continents. Certainly, individuals 'are attached to one another and to societies and cultures but they are *not* [italics added] emanations from, or embodiments of them' [Rapport, 1997, p. 201].[4]

[4] The personality and culture tradition, however, discussed already in the 1930s and rejected in the 1950s and 1960s, seems to have reemerged in the study of ethnic groups. These groups increasingly seem to take on distinct attributes that can be quantified and compared. It might be useful to remind the reader that what creates one ethnic group might be very different from what creates another. Different boundaries can be drawn on very different bases.

A popular example of essentialism is the binary divide between 'East' and 'West' and the proposition that East and West constitute two cultural regions [e.g., Triandis, 1995]. Triandis, with his concepts of collectivism/individualism, has perhaps done more than any other scholar to promote a pernicious dualistic view of the world and simultaneously prevented a more differentiated, fluid and open view of cultures to gain influence. Triandis' argument is of course fallacious. No one knows where the boundaries between East and West lie – which is reasonable, given that these terms belong to imagination more than to geography. Williams [1977] traced this contrast in European thought to the Roman Empire and the division of the Christian church; only later was the West-East distinction expanded to include Muslim lands and the peoples of Asia. The discourse[5] of the 'West' was elaborated and refined further during the Enlightenment [Hall, 1996] and gained even further strength during the era of colonialism and empire.[6]

Today, references to 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' are not only common, but each group is assigned discrete and different human attributes, including different selfways [Markus et al., 1997], styles of cognition [Nisbett, 2003], even personality traits [Cross & Markus, 1999]. This view of East and West as two stable, homogeneous and geographical locations represents precisely Orientalism in Said's terms [1978] and Occidentalism in Carrier's [1995] terms. For example, Nisbett [2003], a maestro of grand essentialisms, stated: 'Debate is almost as uncommon in modern Asia as in ancient China' (p. 73). Also, the overwhelming use of mostly North-American undergraduate students as representatives of the 'West' connotes cultural imperialism. One may reasonably claim that there are deep differences between the United States and Europe, within Europe, and within each European country.

However, 'West' and 'East' do not map on to specific geographical areas. The former 'is a force – technological, economic, political – no longer radiating in any simple way from a discrete cultural geographical center ... it is disseminated in diverse forms from multiple centers, including Japan' [Clifford, 1998, p. 272]. Indeed, Shanghai may be the last prototypically Western boomtown. Where, then, is the West? [see Latouche, 1996, especially chapter 2]. The same argument can be raised about 'Asia' [Sung, 2000]. Cultural scholars have noted that Asia is a political, cultural, and discursive term, which include contradictory values that have changed over time. Harootunian [2000], for example, aptly referred to Asia as a phantasmagoric territory, noting that this 'enmapped place has never been more than a simulacrum of a substanceless something' (p. 25).

[5] Discourse is here used in the Foucauldian sense of the term: A strongly bounded area of social knowledge, or a system of statements that enables us to understand the world. Thus, the world is just not out 'there' to be discussed or talked about. It is through the discourse itself that the world, as we understand it, is brought into being. It is also through discourse that we come to understand others, our relationships as well as ourselves. For a critical discussion of this position, see Rapport and Overing [2000, p. 117–126].

[6] As Andrew Barshay noted [pers. commun., July 28th, 2003], cultural psychology has not stated cultural dichotomies in terms of 'North' and 'South'. This latter distinction would provide, on the one hand, a more radical asymmetry grounded in the vast imparity of wealth, but also one of supposed political functionality versus dysfunctionality. Yet one does not hear much of essential 'Southernness' as a cultural mode of being. The 'South' is clearly locked in an incapacitating, structural relation with the 'North', which, for its part, does not seem to stand for any particular set of values. Adding to the confusion is also the fact that what counts as 'East' in cultural psychology in many cases counts as 'South' in economics and political science.

Other examples of essentialism arise in references to people according to their nationality. When Nisbett and his colleagues [Nisbett et al., 2001] discussed the Chinese, they did not only mistake passports for cultural categories, but they also ignored centuries of discourse on racial and ethnic differences. Perhaps the current Chinese interest in identifying racial attributes [Dikötter, 1992] betrays an underlying uncertainty about their homogeneity? After all, Hegel's owl tends to fly at dusk. Moreover, the boundaries of China were and are fuzzy and disputed. To equate the Chinese with the Han people marginalizes approximately 100 million people.

The strain between the rigidity of national borders and the transience of people is not new. Chinese identities, for example, are also much more fluid and contentious than ordinarily presumed, and many and conflicting identities of China are gaining increasing attention in contemporary scholarship [Hershatter, Honig, Lipman, & Stross, 1996; Weston & Jensen, 2000]. For example, Gladney [1998] described how nationality in China is represented, how the Han was essentialized as the 'normal' Chinese and how so-called minorities were subordinated. He also noted that registration papers in China identify individuals as Han, Hui, Manchu, or one of 56 stipulated identities. To speak of the 'Chinese' as a natural group is naïve, if not disingenuous. According to Wei-ming [1994], not to problematize Chineseness is 'ideologically repugnant' (p. vii). For analyses of the fluidity of Chinese national, personal or generational identity, see also Dittmer and Kim [1993]. In principle, any single group may simultaneously belong to multiple cultural categories. A primary theoretical flaw in the study of culture has been the loss of the relation/distinction between social groups and cultural categories [Keesing, 1987]. This confusion results in the use of nations as 'cultural containers'. The use of nations as proxies for cultural units is unconvincing, although nations of course still function as powerful identity symbols.[7]

Culture, Dominance, and Subordination

Whatever culture is, it is not sui generis, but intrinsically a political and historical construct. Super and Harkess [2002] are therefore only partly correct when they say that 'culture structures the environment for development' (pp. 270–274). They leave out the factors that frame culture, including the structures of power. Culture comprises, necessarily, a tension between personal subjectivities and public representations. But why do some representations 'catch on' – as Sperber [1996] put it – more easily than others and become predominant? The answer to this question is likely to lie beyond the discourse itself.

The key issue becomes: Who has the power to advance and maintain some representations and disguise or suppress others? For example, experts and intellectuals worked closely with the American elite in shaping the post-World War II political order [Domhoff, 1990]. Research needs to clarify why one discourse takes

[7] If there is an exception to this statement, it is found in the historical ethnography school at University of Lund, Sweden. An excellent example of this perspective is *Culture builders: A historical anthropology of middle-class life*, co-written by Frykman and Löfgren [1987].

hold whereas others fade away. Who possesses the hegemonic voice? Cohen [1994] referred to these forces as *interpretative hegemonies*.

Power is a multifaceted concept, difficult to fully describe, and it works in many ways. One aspect of power is the ability to determine what counts as knowledge and to make knowledge appear 'natural' rather than a human construction. Hence I am particularly interested in the mode of power that is not necessarily experienced as directly coercive but which frames, molds and structures the settings in which people live their lives and what they can and cannot do without being subject to coercive violence. Galtung's [1990] notion of 'cultural violence' is relevant here. By this term he referred to aspects of culture that can legitimize both direct and structural violence (i.e., violence built into the social structures themselves) – it may even make these two kinds of violence look acceptable (e.g., religion is frequently used as an excuse for the most brutal violence). It does not necessarily kill but it can be used to legitimize both direct and structural violence. Cultural violence can be used to legitimize theories about, for example, race superiority and, as such, lead to direct violence. Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony[8] and Foucault's interest in how power influences and governs consciousness represent related notions. Inspired by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, Williams [1977] argued that hegemony is a more extensive concept than culture because it takes into consideration how both dominance and subordination not only affect ideas, but also penetrate the entire life experience of individuals. For Gramsci, classes were the decisive actors in history; he viewed culture through the lenses of class as well as the reciprocal relations between power and culture [Crehan, 2002]. Sugimoto [2003], for example, employed the concept of *friendly authoritarianism* to describe how the Japanese state exercises its power; each member of the society is encouraged to internalize a common value system which considers control and regimentation as normal, and embraces the orders of their subordinates as natural. The 'carrot' is emphasized, but the 'stick' is there whenever needed. Moreover, Galtung [1971] emphasized that elites in different countries may have more in common with each other than the elite in any country has with the rest of the population. This is another reason for emphasizing classes, not countries as our units. Cultural psychology, in contrast, has mostly focused on ethnic groups or nation-states and largely ignored socioeconomic differences. Thus, to date, it has had little to say, for example, about how a specific ethnicity is experienced from different class perspectives. In cultural research, it is important that we 'unpack' class as different life-worlds. Hashimoto [2003], in his analysis of the Japanese class structure, adopted this life-world approach by examining class differences in leisure, social networks, participation in cultural activities, etc. Although class may be seen, from the outside, as a shared condition, we must avoid simplistic conclusions about the psycho-

[8] Hegemony is a concept that is frequently used in this essay. Although it is generally considered to have emerged with Lenin and Gramsci, different scholars have since used it in different ways. A common definition would view hegemony as power by consent or the domination of the ruling class to persuade other classes that their interests represent the good of all. The interests of the ruling classes are thus presented as the common interest and taken for granted as such. It does not depend on direct coercion (at least not initially) but more on a subtle control exerted by the state-controlled media and education.

logical implications of belonging to a class. Variation in the relation between social structure and subjectivity also needs to be recognized in the context of class.

In addition, we should not underestimate direct coercion. A single-minded emphasis on hegemony runs the risk of overlooking that cultures are also maintained by raw power, that people are not always bamboozled by interpretative hegemonies. In Japan, during the Tokugawa era alone (1600–1868), there were approximately 3,000 peasant uprisings [Takano & Osaka, 1999]. The Meiji era (1886–1912) was characterized by increasing repression and increase in the power of the state, including the 1889 Meiji Constitution, the 1898 Civil Code, which included the Ie household system, and the 1890 imperial Prescript on Education. This period, in combination with the increasing repression characteristic of the early part of the Showa era (from 1926 to the end of the Pacific War in 1945), exemplifies the role of direct power. Similarly, though some scholars [e.g., Nisbett et al., 2001] would have us believe that daily life in China has been mostly harmonious, coercion, tyranny, and civil wars were also common. The Confucian rules were limited to relationships among family members, especially between the father and the eldest son. Confucianism had little to say about behavior in the public domain.

The Discursive Turn

Cultures can be said to exist as contested representations situated in public domains or institutions in which power is both exercised and resisted. Scholars influenced by Foucault have described these domains as *discursive* in order to emphasize that places (e.g., public domains, institutions, nations) are made 'objective', or publicly represented, through discursive struggles [Hall, 1996; Kubota, 1999]. This notion of discourse highlights the fluidity of cultural representations, an instability that allows different interest groups to suit their own interest and promote their own representations. Two examples of dominant discourses, or sets of statements woven together into what Foucault calls a *discursive formation,* are found in *Orientalism* [Said, 1978] and *Nihonjinron* [Befu, 2001]. *Orientalism* referred initially to the manner in which the 'Orient' was constructed in nineteenth-century European thought, but the term can also be applied to recent constructions of East Asia by cultural psychologists (e.g., Kitayama [1997], Markus et al. [1991, 1997] and Nisbett et al. [2001, 2003]). In contrast, *Nihonjinron* refers to a special kind of cultural nationalism that emphasizes cultural exceptionalism and broad generalizations about Japan and the Japanese.

Cultures can be made *objective* only through such discourses. Ivy [1995] has illustrated how 'Japan' was transformed, for example through mass travel campaigns, based on desires for 'authenticity', or the fact that Japan itself had become exotic to a new generation of Japanese. Hall [1996] maintained a related position when he argued that we must think of (national) cultures as 'constituting a discursive device ... They are cross-cut by deep internal divisions and differences, and "unified" only through the exercise of different forms of cultural power' (p. 617). In this national discourse, different groups have varying degrees of influence in defining 'national culture'. Foucault [1980] elaborated these issues in his essay 'Truth and Power', wherein he described the circular relations between truth and systems of power, and how truth is constructed and upheld by the forms of power

he called 'regimes' of truth. Accordingly, culture is not 'out there' as an objective referent to be revealed, but the result of ideological struggles and competing systems of meaning.[9]

Although different social regularities indubitably exist, their meaning is not transparent. Only a nitwit would argue that, on average, people in Bangkok and Tokyo do not behave differently in the public domain. For example, when you are walking down a major street in Bangkok, people look and smile at you much more often than in Tokyo, where eye contact is generally avoided among strangers. Danes are dramatically less likely than Swedes to rinse their dishes; they let them dry with the soap still on [Linde-Laursen, 1993]. How should we interpret such differences? (The inane conclusion would be that Japanese are shyer than Thai, or that Swedes are tidier than Danes.) Allende [2003] provided another illustrative example of the ambiguity of meaning: 'we are affectionate; we go around bestowing kisses right and left ... Women kiss, even if they hate each other' (p. 101). To understand regularities, we must proceed from the assumption that cultural discourse reflects struggles over meaning rather than revelations of consensual truths. Hence shared cultural forms disguise an abundance of substantive discrepancies. The link between cultural practices and personal meanings is both highly problematic and constantly changing.

Balibar's [2002] notion of the production of peoplehood reminds us that the study of culture does not deal with natural entities or coercive Durkheimian 'social facts', but with imaginary, fictive, or constructed entities whose creation is often overseen by ideologically tainted state apparatuses such as national media or departments of education. With regard to Japan, Garon [1997] and Gluck [1985] have provided admirable descriptions of such attempts. These fictions, of course, can be reified and made more stable: they may even take on, if only temporarily, the appearance of social 'facts'.

As an example of this naturalizing power, consider Nihonjinron. Many Japanese scholars have produced an idealized past that serves as an ideological bedrock for the current imagining of the Japanese State and people. These ideas about Japan have been widely disseminated both in Japan and abroad by foundations such as National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council and the Japan Foundations [Harootunian, 2000]. Japan has been particularly concerned with maintaining its uniqueness. Different attributes (e.g., language, race, blood) have been woven together to form a cohesive cultural ideology [e.g., Befu, 2001; Yoshino, 1992]. Clammer [2001] re-interpreted Nihonjinron as a heterogeneous and indigenous discourse, although he agreed that Japan's otherness remains the master narrative.

In his impressive historical analysis of Nihonjinron, Oguma [2002] wrote, 'I do not believe that the Japanese nation is an entity that actually exists' (p. xxxvi). He argued, I believe, that the nature (or culture) of Japan has constantly changed as

[9] Developmental psychologists doing cultural work have become more aware of diversity at the expense of homogeneity, however, most still adhere to 'cultural groups'. The position outlined above differs from a mere emphasis on diversity, however admirable this emphasis is. Cultural groups, like culture, are neither fixed nor static but fluid. Even gender cannot be said to represent the natural categories of males and females. In Thailand, for example, one can clearly speak about a third gender – the Kathoey. This third gender is considered to be women born into a man's body. Gender is a much more fluid category in Thailand than in the US and also a much less important organizing principle in daily life [van Esterik, 2000].

different views, or discursive notions, came to the forefront, faded away, and were replaced by others. One example: In the beginning of the 20th century, the theory that Japanese were Caucasians was promoted. One version of this theory proposed that the Japanese – a superior Caucasian nation – had wandered eastward in ancient times but had forgotten their splendid past. According to Oguma, the widely held view that Japan is a homogeneous ethnic country was not established in the 19th century, but at the end of the Pacific War. Even the idea of *wa* (harmony) – believed to have characterized Japan for centuries – may be a rather new post-war development [Ito, 1998]. In sum, the culture of a nation is indeterminate and subject to competing representations. It is also worth considering that alongside with explicit state-sponsored national representations one also finds what Billig [1995] called banal nationalism, such as the flag that (innocently?) tops the maypole during the Swedish summer night. Power and hegemony come in many forms, some less innocuous than others.

Cultural Values, Ideologies, and Subjective Experience

Cultural values should not be reified and mistaken for lived experience. As noted above, the relation of daily experience to institutional structures is complex; seemingly homogeneous structures, often represented by a shared terminology of symbolic forms, may yet be accorded a variety of personal meanings. Hence cultural values and subjective experience may be linked, but this conjoining is imperfect. The inconclusiveness of the relations between individual knowledge and objective life forms implies that the appropriateness of new meanings will continuously outdistance the current being of socio-cultural circumstances. This does not mean that values do not matter or that their study is entirely trivial. Cultural values must, however, be situated in their historical perspective.

The study of cultural values raises problems not commonly recognized by cultural psychologists. In contrast to Markus and Kitayama [1991], who merely postulated Japanese interdependence as a static, ahistorical, and global characteristic, Nisbett et al. [2001] tried to provide a historical basis for their research on culturally-based thinking styles by attributing holistic thinking to the Confucian emphasis on *harmony*. Although the authors admit that these are speculations – and indeed they are – they raise the intricate issue of the relations between history, values, propaganda, and individual attributes. Cultural values should be taken as contested propositions, particularly when they are institutionalized or propounded by the state. Even the most superficial knowledge of the history of China or Japan reveals that harmony was not a cornerstone of the second millennium in these countries. It is for this very reason – the constant danger of disharmony – that the state may have needed to promote the concept of harmony. (For an antidote to Markus and Kitayama's [1991] proposal that Japan is characterized by interdependence, see Befu [2001]. Ito [1998] provides examples of how harmony is/was used, propagated, and commodified in Japan.)

Nonetheless, one may question the importance of the study of cultural values because they may have less impact and may be less consensual than ordinarily considered. Along with Barth [1993], I propose that *concerns* are more likely to resist essentializing than values. Barth described concerns as themes that are salient, but

urged that we not 'see their formulation as an end point in an effort to extract the essence of ... culture ... as if they existed out of time and place as logical axioms' (p. 343). Instead, Barth [1993] argued that concerns 'summarize recurring life experiences: they provide caveats, puzzles, and maxims of people who are trying to cope in a complex, unpredictable, and imperfectly known world' (p. 343). Thus, concerns are themes of which people are generally cognizant but which can nonetheless be approached in multiple ways: embraced, negotiated, but also rejected. People can be said to 'live by' sets of cultural concerns, which influence to various degrees how they think, feel, and act. However, concerns should not be reified or reduced to 'cultural essences', or 'core cultural values' that impel people to act in specific ways. Rather, there is substantial individual variation in how concerns are interpreted and acted upon in everyday life, partly because these concerns exist within contexts defined by other institutional pushes and pulls. Concerns may be shared but their solution may differ widely.

Cultures as Mutually Constructed Contrasts

Although it is often argued that globalization conflates, redraws and erases distinct socio-cultural traditions, this issue may not be recent. Both during current and former times, contact among localities may lead to reified borders, or self-essentializations. Nihonjinron can be seen as an example of this process. Although the main theme of Nihonjinron is Japan's uniqueness, Nihonjinron changes according to who is at any moment considered the main Other. Because the US has occupied a large part of this role since the end of the Pacific War, this comparative discourse has been dominated by contrasts such as American individualism versus Japanese collectivism – see Takano & Osaka [1999] for a meta-analysis that effectively debunked this received view. As Clammer [2001] noted, this us-them relationship opens up for analysis of how Otherness is constructed and maintained. It also poses the question of how different forces both within and outside Japan participate in this discourse whose ultimate goal is to gain a dominant view of Japanese culture.

As a result of centuries of mutual contact, individuals/cultures have in many cases dialectically constructed each other. Cultural, national, or ethnic identities require comparison with others. In this sense, identities are always indeterminate, depending on who is perceived as the Other. Neumann [1999] described how the 'East' influenced the formation of European identity. Prior to the middle of the Tokugawa era (1600–1868), the Japanese compared themselves principally with the Chinese – China was Japan's Orient [Tanaka, 1993]. But as China gradually lost its influence in the latter part of the Tokugawa era – partly because it was being colonized – it emerged as the 'negative other': an example of what Japan should *not* become [Harootunian, 1980]. Europe and the US, perhaps even North-Korea and Russia, slowly emerged as alternative 'Others'. In general, the relation of Japanese intellectuals toward the 'West' has been highly ambivalent; one can talk both about Japan's turn to the 'West' [Hirakawa, 1998] and Japan's revolt against the 'West' [Najita & Harootunian, 1998]. Should China's influence rise in this century, China may regain – although ambivalently – its position as the positive 'Other'. Thus over time, Japan's concept of 'Otherness' will take on different forms as dif-

ferent contrasts emerge. In the process, the conception of Japanese culture will be revised. This process introduces additional cultural fluidity.

In sum, cultures are neither static nor ahistorical; they are mutually constructed on the basis of changing images of relevant Others and how We differ from Them. Our identities become fully articulate only in the contests and struggles with the identities of others. Morris-Suzuki [1998] described how Western concepts, such as race, gender, and culture influenced the Japanese self-definitions or generated counter-definitions. Markus and Kitayama [1991] highlighted interdependence as the dominant feature of Japanese life, at least partly because they compared Japan to the nebulous notion of 'Western independence'. Had they instead looked to Indonesia or India, they most likely would not have focused on interdependence.[10] The idea of mutually constructed contrasts takes on a particular relevance in the study of 'ethnic groups'. A totally isolated group cannot be an ethnic group more than one hand can clap. Ethnic groups require boundaries, comparisons and interactions. Indeed, one ethnic group may contain several cultures, and vice versa. Ethnic groups must therefore *not* be mistaken for cultural groups [Barth, 1969/1998; Gjerde & Onishi, 2000].

Culture can be created and re-created continually through dialogues. Bakhtin argued that cultures, indeed all human interactions, are dialogic: they all presume Otherness, or in Clammer's [2001] terms, 'the logic of difference ... requires the Other' (p. 6). As such differences become ambiguous, the logic of cross-cultural comparisons become increasingly problematic. Bauman's [2001] term 'liquid modernity' captures today's fluid boundaries between Self and Other, but this fluidity may be perceived by some as a threat and give rise to defensive and reified self-definitions. For example, one recent Japanese school asked students how much they 'loved the nation' and whether they 'had an awareness of being Japanese' [Arita, 2003].

In sum, one cannot say that Japan and the US/Europe represent drastically different socio-cultural traditions because so many of the ideas that formed the basis for so-called Japaneseness emerged in mutual interchange with European ideas of race and civilization (especially in the 19th century following the Meiji Restoration) and later with American ideas, however flawed [e.g., Benedict, 1946]. In that sense, the Other is always incorporated in some degree in the Self and vice versa, creating both similarities and differences. How we 'construct' ourselves needs to be understood in the context of the Other. Japan is therefore unimaginable if its changing historical positioning vis-à-vis the West is ignored. Said [1994] expressed our interdependence eloquently; despite differences in identities, cultures and people 'have always overlapped with one another, through unhierarchical influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict' (p. 331).

[10] En passant, Kitayama in his post-1996 writings in Japanese language ceased to use the term 'interdependence' in favor of 'inter-cooperative' or 'mutual-cooperative' (sougo-kyouchou-teki) [Kitayama, 1997, p. 26]. Those words have a favorable meaning in Japan because they imply that people are equal and collaborate in a constructive manner – a meaning very different from the one implied by Kitayama in his English-language writings. The more correct translation, 'sougo-izon-teki', has negative connotations because it may be interpreted as 'co-dependence' or 'symbiosis'. Apparently, the concept of 'interdependence' was not well received in Japan. Takano [1999] noted this 'mistranslation'. Perhaps 'Japanese interdependence' goes over more easily in the US because it fits our local stereotypes of Japan as a country based on consensus and harmony?

Cultures as Distribution of Subjectivities[11]

Notions of culture were mostly developed on the basis of fieldwork conducted in limited and bounded social contexts. This context may explain the emphasis on shared concerns, even consensus. On the other hand, a limited social group, such as a tribe, may not have shared a common culture but, rather, a difficult and vulnerable life situation, thus being bound together more by this vulnerability than by shared values. In any case, the notions of shared values and consensus are more difficult to maintain in large societies – such as the US, Japan, or France – where consensus is, by definition, impossible because no one can fully represent his or her culture in its totality. This conjecture is consistent with Barth's [1993] argument that culture is distributive; shared by some but not by others, and that the most important cultural structures 'may not be embedded in its forms but in its distributions' [1969/1989, p. 134]: individuals know 'quite different things and have had very different experiences' [Barth, 1993, p. 171]. No person can be the bearer of a culture in its totality or reconstruct it invariably through successive generations. It is erroneous to treat national or ethnic status as equivalent to a common cultural experience for different individuals. Hence it becomes difficult to speak about a 'cultural insider', given that any one person is only able to provide knowledge about sections of his or her culture.

Mental representations (or subjectivities) are not distributed along a single dimension but rather along a multitude of dimensions, or a matrix. It is in this complex matrix of distributed knowledge, emotions, and understandings that individuality emerges – an individuality that cannot be reduced to monolithic selves or mere reflections of macro-structures [Linger, 2001]. It is also important to be mindful of both between- as well as intra-individual differences in subjective representations and their transformation. Unfortunately, subjective variations within and between human beings have been obscured by our fixation on 'groups'. If we can free ourselves from the constraints of nationalism or ethnicity, subjectivities (e.g., identities, emotions, etc.) could be freely expressed in so many more forms. The idea of nations as 'cultural containers' and the comparison of individuals from different nations as if they reflected natural cultural differences limit the exploration of authentic subjectivities [Clammer, 2001; Sakai, 1997].[12]

What Needs to Be Done?

My recommendation is that we work from the bottom and up and do not take groups, collective structures or broad cultural meaning systems for granted. Rather, we should start with the individuals and map the areas where they overlap and the

[11] I am indebted to Dan Linger for this expression.

[12] A full understanding of subjectivities must also take into consideration their relation to material things. An excellent description of the relations between subjectivity, identity, and consumption can be found in Chapter 5, 'Feeling Capitalism', in Clammer [2001]. It merits attention that it is becoming increasingly common to analyze nations, ethnicities and subjectivities in terms of consumption and commercial desires. Shopping is not merely the acquisition of things but also the acquisition of identities [Clammer, 1997]. Maffesoli [1996] proposed that advanced capitalist societies are organized in terms of temporary 'neo-tribes;' groups shaped around the consumption of distinctive commodities.

areas where they do not overlap. In this process, we need to take into consideration both external, assigned group boundaries as well as internal, perhaps more fluid boundaries. This approach is in agreement with Azuma [2000], who advocated that we start with a careful study of 'personal culture' and proceed therefrom and upward. Close analysis on the individual level will help subvert facile generalizations about 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic/cultural groups'.

Bruner [1990] argued that people render their experiences as narratives and rewrite these narratives over time. This may be another place to start. As an example, Gullestad [1996] asked Norwegians to 'Write your life', thereby giving individuals the voice to reconstruct their lives and societies as intimately experienced and interconnected. Miller et al. [e.g., Miller, Hengst, & Wang, 2002] share the use of the narrative approach, although greater attention to variability within China would strengthen their approach. It is interesting to note the difference between Miller's and Linger's [2001, 2003] methodologies. Linger is less inclined to make generalizations about common ethnic identities (e.g., Brazilian-Japanese). The life struggles of each informant are forefronted through detailed dialogues that provide a deep insight into the diversity of how transnational lives are formed and lived. This work provides a fine description of how external forces frame the settings in which the interviewees work and live, yet the participants retain their individuality as struggling, thinking, and self-reflective beings. It questions the validity of broad ethnic categories, and assigns to culture its true ontological standing as a human creation, not as an independent variable or a creator.

It merits attention that the narrative approach to the study of lives represents an emergent field in other parts of psychology, especially in the study of identity and personality development [e.g., Weir-Chang & Gjerde, 2002; McAdams, 1993]. The convoy model [Levitt, 2004], the Ecocultural Family Interview [Weisner, Bernnheimer, & Coots, 1997] and Cooper et al. [Cooper, 2003; Cooper, Jackson, Azmitia, & Lopez, 1998] analyses of adolescents' 'multiple worlds' present new opportunities for person-centered cultural research. Cooper's approach is particularly attractive because the 'worlds' are not pre-assigned but left for the participants to define. Narratives, however, should not be accepted on face value, but also as an opportunity to study ideology in speech. When people talk about a topic, there is a good chance that there is a problem underlying their discourse. It is therefore important that the discourse not be taken at face value but as an entry into dilemmas, concerns, etc. A closer relation between narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis is therefore recommended.

I referred earlier to Barth's [1993] notion of *concerns*. Values have often too strong connotations as powerful and static influences on behavior. Concerns, on the other hand, are more dynamic and more compatible with the *consciousness model*. Concerns, or themes, may also lend themselves more easily to generating diversity. Onishi and Gjerde [2002], for example, integrated Bowlby's [1969] attachment theory with Barth's [1993] ethnographic work on Balinese concerns and demonstrated how differences in concerns can give rise to between-person variation in marital attachment.

Although we need to emphasize the importance of experience-near cultural psychology and the study of lives, we must be alert to the forces that frame the settings within which people act. There need not be an opposition between hegemony and experience-near psychology. Indeed, experience-near studies may be the

best methods to reveal how real people experience how power orchestrates their lives. At the same time, one should not underestimate the power of people to collectively make somewhat overlapping meanings in opposition to hegemony – for a limited time, for a limited purpose, and in a limited domain. Individuals are always more than their memberships in communities, cultures or any other social aggregates.

Coda

Culture is not an objective reality 'out there' to be revealed/discovered by cultural psychologists. Rather, it is something that is invented, reinvented, and sustained by people in personally meaningful ways within the political terrain that frames their lives; it is dynamic, fluid, and emergent. This process takes, to some extent, place through discursive practices. Culture is 'primarily a *discursive* notion, a tool for the (subjective) representation of reality rather than itself an objective reality' [Eelen, 2001, p. 238]. It is important, however, to add that these discursive practices do not emerge in a political vacuum but are influenced, perhaps even limited, by hegemonic forces. Sharedness, to the extent it exists, should not be taken as an unquestioned premise but as a topic of investigation.

Greater attention needs to be paid to how cultural and structural violence frame development. Super and Harkness [1997] described how environmental niches mold children's development, but were silent about the political forces that frame the developmental niches – their view of the environment is de-politicized. Power emerged only in the context of 'the power of culture', that is, culture was seen as an external independent variable that framed human behavior. But developmental niches do not emerge fortuitously and independent of political forces, as Super and Harkness appear to believe.

Why do most cultural psychologists shy away from analyses of conflict and power? Is the positivistic belief in a value-free science still so deeply inscribed in the beliefs of cultural scholars? Or does this absence reflect the dominant instrumental role of most American intellectuals, who emerge from their academic institutions only as 'experts' without any self-perceived political legacy? The contrast vis-à-vis countries like France is striking [e.g., Kristeva, 1986]. Overall, American cultural psychology is insular. Most American cultural psychologists overlook the rich European and Asian literature on culture and ethnicity. In this essay, I have made a point of drawing on these literatures.

I realize that in order to do cultural research, categories, however gross, are necessary. Whatever categories and boundaries we use, however, we need to keep in mind that they are unstable, historical, emergent, and indeterminate. Even Japan, a unit apparently so unambiguous and neutral – a natural space – is a contested territory [Morris-Suzuki, 1998]. There is no Japanese culture, or any other culture for that matter, *an sich*. One cannot map social/cultural phenomena from the outside in a neutral and objective manner. Because descriptions of cultural activities imply specific assumptions about the social world, there can be no impartial choice of language categories. Each view of culture is positioned and every statement about culture has an ideological dimension. Cultural psychology is per se a critical discipline; anyone who maps cultural phenomena has, implicitly or explicitly, a

value orientation that influences his or her perceptions. Hence there is no neutral place from where to observe, interpret, or name cultural phenomena.

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