

Situating Ourselves Linguistically and Culturally in Psychological Reality

A review of

(cover image)



Advances in Culture and Psychology (Vol. 1)

by Michele J. Gelfand, Chi-yue Chiu, and Ying-yi Hong (Eds.)

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Writing late in the last century, David Matsumoto (1999) of San Francisco State University, a recognized author in cross-cultural psychology whose textbooks are frequently used in teaching the subject, claimed,

Cross-cultural psychology as we know it today will cease to exist in the 21st century.

Instead, it will be integrated into mainstream psychology. Yet that integration should not be a total assimilation. . . . There will be major accommodations as well, fundamentally changing the essence of the way we model and study human behavior. (p. 152)

Advances in Culture and Psychology (Vol. 1) is an important book that supports Matsumoto's prediction and verifies that we are already witnessing these changes. During the 21st century, a new direction has been emerging at the intersection of developmental, cognitive, and social psychologies, as well as biology, epidemiology, anthropology,

education, political science, and sociology. This new interdisciplinary intersection has become labeled *cultural psychology*.

The knowledge base of psychology, always fairly global in perspective, has now become truly interdisciplinary as well as authentically international, as Gardiner and Kosmitzki (2011), McCarthy, Cranney, Dickson, Trapp, and Karandashev (2011), McCarthy et al. (2007, 2009), Stevens and Wedding (2004), and others have clearly documented in current books in the field. Thus, research, teaching, and applications of psychology need to be informed by the vast varieties of cultural experiences and expectations experienced by human beings.

In this interdisciplinary, intercultural milieu, the knowledge base must be international, even if applications remain local. To this end, books such as *Advances in Culture and Psychology* are critically needed and offer important contributions. The editors have provided an international forum for scholarly research, communicating key ideas regarding how psychology is situated in interdisciplinary studies of human culture. Sections are written by scholars from several disciplines and address a range of topics including evolutionary perspectives, emotional expression as influenced by culture, the role of infectious disease in cultural characteristics and personality traits, attachment, learning, coping, language, individualistic versus collectivistic orientations, niche approaches, and other important concepts.

New knowledge is rapidly emerging regarding the relationship of culture to cognitive processes, human development, psychopathology, social behavior, organizational behavior, neuroscience, language, marketing, and other topics. In recognition of this exponential growth, *Advances in Culture and Psychology*, according to the publisher's website, is intended to be "the first annual series to offer state-of-the-art reviews of scholarly research in the growing field of culture and psychology" (see <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/series/AdvancesinCultureandPsychology/?view=usa>). If this first volume in the series is any indication, that goal is likely to be realized.

The promises of the publisher and editors to build connections across disciplines, provide an intellectual home for culture and psychology research programs, and publish articles that reflect theoretical, methodological, and epistemological diversity appear to be well on their way to being met. How often the book, as opposed to the original journal article sources that make up the rich summaries that are contained in the chapters, will be cited by scholars remains to be seen, as does the influence the series will have on the identity of cultural psychology as a field.

At the very minimum, however, the book provides a comprehensive background for many psychological research projects for which culture is a relevant variable. In addition, the volume includes understandable optional readings for use in a variety of psychology courses and seminars. We have already found the material useful, for example, in undergraduate and graduate human development courses, assessment seminars, consultation

and personality courses, and educational psychology courses focused on bilingual and multicultural education and language acquisition.

As an example of the rich and varied material offered in this volume that can be used for course readings, Semin reminds us in Chapter 5 of the constantly shifting balance and convergence of syntax and semantics in the constructions of psychological realities. Drawing upon a linguistic category model (Stapel & Semin, 2007), with its application to film animation (Heider & Simmel, 1944), Semin invites us to ponder the use of language for categorization and formulation of reality.

According to a study he describes, subjects tend to offer different interpretations of reality when prompted with adjectives than when prompted with verbs. He also notes how the composition of various languages consists of a larger or smaller proportion of adjectives and nouns versus verbs, and this itself changes perceptions of relationships. The Whorfian hypothesis is well illustrated, for example, by the simple fact that the phrase “The man is riding the horse” could not even be expressed in Navajo; the closest translation would have to be something akin to “the man and the horse are wandering about together.”

The more “global properties” (p. 228) of adjectives, as noted by Semin, foster more extensive and complete examination of the perceived world. Whereas the sentence “Jack helped David” describes Jack in a specific a situation, the sentence “Jack is helpful” broadens the spectrum of Jack as a person in uncountable situations and invites an open-ended and flexible mental picture and imaginative speculation of language ecology and psychological reality.

Having thus established the ecological power of adjectival classification, the author moves on to the issue of unintended consequences and notes how names of geographic locations can offer social practice. To illustrate, Semin notes the mentioning of large-city names sprinkled through a series of newspaper articles and explains how simple repetition of these names establishes a textual sense of expected sophistication in the minds of culturally attuned critical readers. Having established the sense of cultural ecology, Semin proposes the question “What is language for?”

Information such as this could also be expanded to many other areas, including women’s studies, forensic psychology, counseling, linguistics, and even language and communication classes by allowing students to cite examples such as a recent article in the *New York Times* that dealt with the meeting of Saudi Arabian and Israeli police officers. The encounter took place at an undisclosed neutral location, and evidently a friendship developed between members of the two groups. On one occasion, during a pleasantly flowing discussion, one of the Israeli officers referred to himself as a proud Zionist. At that moment, his Arab counterpart stopped both listening and understanding; he later explained that the clash of the words *proud* and *Zionist* were so incongruous in his conception that his powers of comprehension came to a complete halt.

The adjective game has, of course, often been put to use in the wonderfully evasive and euphemistic world found in letters of recommendation in which candidates can be

generous instead of *wasteful*, *frugal* instead of *stingy*, and *challenged* instead of *handicapped*. It illustrates the dangers of categorization for those who have been labeled and remain imprisoned by the linguistic power of such adjectives.

The essence of Semin's work lies in the warning not only that language labels carry political power and thus must be exposed to interpretation and studied with caution informed by an understanding of cultural foci, but also that the structures themselves of the languages we speak influence our views of how reality is constructed and how relationships between individuals and objects are weighted. This is valuable information for any student studying education, languages, gender studies, law, political science, human relations, or psychology.






Each of the chapters in *Advances in Culture and Psychology* provides material with comparable richness, likely to be useful to many researchers, professors, and students. Although there is nothing startlingly new to those who have carefully followed developments in cross-cultural psychology, the authors of the various chapters represent several respected programs in the field and come from several different cultural backgrounds. The many references incorporated in the various chapters reflect the highest quality research to date, and many important concepts are engagingly and comprehensively presented.

The chapters by Shavitt, Torelli, and Riemer (Chapter 7) and Yamagishi (Chapter 6) offer a thorough analysis of research on individualistic versus collectivistic cultures from Triandis's early work. Important research on cultural differences in learning, cultural variation in attachment patterns, and comparative child-rearing practices presented by Rothbaum, Morelli, and Rusk in Chapter 4 are likely to enrich any developmental or educational research or coursework. Matsumoto and Hwang's thorough explanation of culture, emotion, and expression in Chapter 2 offers rich material on the interplay between theory and research and also offers insight on the complexities of conducting comparative cross-cultural empirical research. In Chapter 1, Tomasello integrates anthropology and psychology to shed light on the development of culture. Schaller and Murray do the same with biology and psychology in Chapter 3.

There are few books published in our discipline that can be recommended to all psychologists, researchers, and students from all content areas, specialty areas, and subspecialties with confidence that there will be something new of interest. *Advances in Culture and Psychology*, however, is such a book. The editors have done a superb job representing the interplay between culture and psychology. They have proven the statement by Matsumoto (1999) to be prophetic in predicting an important new role for cross-cultural psychology across disciplines.

We found this book to be well-organized, accurate, and engaging. We plan to use it in many of the classes we teach and are likely to cite it in much of our research and writing in the future. We eagerly look forward to future volumes and recommend the series to everyone working in or studying psychology in the early 21st century.

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