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Presentation by Dr. Christiane Hartnack, Danube University Krems, Austria

Reflections on International and Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Cultural Psychology

What happens when psychologists leave the confines of their laboratories, and face the real world, a world in which variables cannot be controlled and in which frames of reference dissolve into fluid, multifaceted, and complex relationships? In real world settings, cultural psychologists have found the methods of mainstream psychology—with its quantitative and experimental focus—not adequate to the challenge of crossing cultural, disciplinary, and national boundaries. Instead, they have tended to employ qualitative approaches that focus on similarities among human beings. Might their methods be the beginning of an exciting new trajectory in the field of psychology?

One key distinction between cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology is the latter's assumption that cultures, while homogeneous within themselves, are essentially different from cultures other than themselves. This view is based on a concept of culture that took shape in the European counter-enlightenment in the late 18th century, developed with the growth of nation states in the 19th century, and culminated in the nationalistic and exclusive ideologies of the 20th century. In hindsight we know that attempting to develop a taxonomy of cultures in terms of their national-cultural homogeneity were doomed to fail. All over the world, people have constantly been on the move in search of survival or better living conditions or job opportunities, or were and are forced by various circumstances to shift from one place to another. Social anthropologists might still find some ethnically, religiously and linguistically homogeneous groups; but even within these, there are differences in terms of gender, age, occupation etc. In sum, the assumption that a qualitative homogeneity and a temporal stability can be ascribed to ethnic groups or even nations is not an empirically grounded assumption.

What then do we mean when we speak of cultures, which are, in a sense, the common denominator of both cross-cultural as well as cultural psychology? Instead of quoting or summarizing the hundreds or more attempts to define culture, I would like to highlight what Stuart Hall writes in *The Work of Representation*. London: Sage. 1997:

"To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways“.

Hall's view on culture is based on commonalities, not on differences. His notion of cultural belonging implies that it is possible to simultaneously belong to several cultures. I can, for example, share important aspects of my culture—that of a native-German-speaking woman academic—with a native-Hindispeaking colleague from New Delhi. In fact, in many ways, I find it easier to share facets not only of my professional but also my personal life, my thoughts and fears with her than with a young unemployed rural male, a peasant woman in a remote Alpine region, an urban grove musician, or a nouveau riche dealer of luxury cars with

whom I have perhaps little more in common than citizenship. The same might be the case for the Indian woman academic with similarly culturally distant persons in her country.

Hall's view on culture further points to intangible and invisible elements of culture, or what could be termed the cognitive dimension. Yet, there are also social aspects of culture that are evident. The way people interact with each other—whether they bow, kiss or shake hands, and especially the question who initiates this—is culturally constructed and contextually variable. So are material cultural dimensions: depending on the social strata as well as on the situation or even the meanings ascribed to certain cultural symbols, the same person might drink beer or Coke out of a can, home-made elderberry soda in a plastic cup, or aged Burgundy out of a hand-blown crystal glass that is especially designed for this kind of red wine. Others may not even have drinkable water at their disposal.

Such broad views of culture reflect the fluid and complex situation of the early 21st century better than the classical models used in cross-cultural psychology with their neatly drawn ethnic or national borders. In terms of conceptual clarity these extended and temporally fluid ones are, however, more challenging than the classic and static views of culture. In the remaining part of this presentation, I will address the challenges as well as point out the benefits presented by interdisciplinary and international research and application in the emerging field of cultural psychology.

Multidisciplinary Mergers

In his recently published book *Culture in Minds and Societies. Foundations of Cultural Psychology*, Jaan Valsiner claims that “cultural psychology—the newly developed hybrid of psychology, sociology, anthropology, history—is fitting ground to research how human beings are social in their deeply subjective worlds.” I would like to illustrate the importance of multidisciplinary mergers in cultural psychology by presenting a research-oriented example. Recently a group of psychologists embarked on a study of social cohesion and collective identities of very large groups during the Prayag Magh Mela, a month-long religious festival at the confluence of the Ganges and the Jamuna rivers in Allahabad in India. Even though the researchers included both Europeans and Indians, the research team consisted of psychologists only. As a result, important elements of the Mela, such as issues of social stratification, bodily changes, and political impact that contribute to or disrupt social cohesion and collective identities were not sufficiently considered. In my view, such research would ideally include a team of researchers from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, religious studies, neurophysiology and political science. Among the reasons for this are the following:

- Research methods used in anthropology, especially participant observation and qualitative interviews, are most appropriate for social-psychological work on groups that do not belong to the same social strata as the researchers. In the example I just cited, for example, most of the people attending the Mela were illiterate.
- Sociological methods could have been used to capture useful details about the regional, ethnic, gender, generational and caste background, and social status of the participants at the Mela.
- Since the main objects of the study in this research were the pilgrims who travelled to the Mela with a shared religious commitment, and an intention of listening to saints

and religious discourses, and partaking in religious rituals, it was important to understand the religious content and connotations of such an event. Experts in South Asian/Hindu religious studies as well as in comparative religion would have been best-suited to provide the insights and experiences of their field.

- Pilgrimages are often associated with extreme stress, whether from dieting, strenuous walking, lack of sleep, or other impacts on bodily functions. Being confronted with ongoing and at times extreme visual, acoustic, tactile, olfactory, and other sensory experiences might induce chemical changes—these are topics best considered by neuro-physiological researchers.
- Increasingly, political sponsors, economic networks, and other agents who have their own agendas (e.g. Hindutva) are involved in pilgrimages; political scientists could shed light on the role and impact of these third parties.

There is, however, a caveat to be expressed concerning the collaboration of researchers from several disciplines: the history of science shows that these disciplines are very distinct from each other in terms of their respective origins, methods, objects of study and political embeddedness. These differences cannot just be swept aside in multidisciplinary mergers. Rather, it is important to confront the challenges of the different viewpoints, methodologies, findings, and yes, biases, of these various disciplines and to actively strive to collaborate.. When multi-disciplinary teams of researchers have been able to do this, tremendous synergy has resulted and the quality and depth of the research has been improved.

Diversity and International Collaboration

The second example comes from contemporary applied psychology. When Lufthansa executives developed ambitious plans to increase the current number of direct flights between Germany and India, they decided to hire 40 new flight attendants with the requirement that they be fluent in English and Hindi, and preferably Tamil as well. Further prerequisites for these future Lufthansa employees were that they hold at least a B.A. degree, be of a certain height, physically fit, socially skilled, and attractive according to current Indian as well as German standards. Once hired, these flight attendants would be required to reside close to the International Airport in New Delhi and to integrate into Lufthansa's corporate structure. This meant that they would be wearing the same uniforms as the other flight attendants, and would be spending considerable time with their German colleagues between flights.

The personal challenges for these future Lufthansa employees included adjusting to the lifestyle of a North Indian urban professional with a rather unusual time schedule—something not every Indian husband or mother-in-law might approve of. As you can imagine, there would also be international challenges: coping with the social environment and the potential loneliness during the time they would be spending off-duty in Germany.

Based on ads in English-language newspapers in India, 3500 persons—mostly men—applied. From a cultural psychological perspective, it would make sense that these 40 employees would be selected by a team consisting of a senior German psychologist and a senior Lufthansa purser, a senior Indian psychologist and a female Indian psychology student. The reason for including a student are her competencies in understanding specifics of the age-

cohort and of gender aspects since Lufthansa wanted at least 2/3 of the selected flight attendants to be women.

The two Indians in the team would bear the bulk of the responsibility of deciding whether to include qualified gay men; who, even though employable by Lufthansa antidiscrimination standards, might not be acceptable to an influential group of travellers: Indian businessmen.

Ideally, all members of the team would jointly develop the criteria for screening the applications; for developing a questionnaire to be sent to the top 10% (i.e. to 350) applicants; and for devising a role play, a test, and an interview to be administered to a short list of candidates. Such a culturally diverse, international and inter-disciplinary team would be able to understand the biographical and cultural background of the applicants, to assess their acceptance by German as well as Indian travellers, and to foresee their potential in adapting to Lufthansa's requirements than an all-German, age-40+ recruiting team consisting of a German purser and a psychologist. Yet the latter is the one that will actually be doing candidate selection.

Political and economic power structures and conceptual hegemony

All psychological activities, no matter whether these are cross-cultural or cultural psychological, take place in an environment where issues such as age, gender, economic, and political power matter. Even in my idealised Lufthansa selection team scenario, the senior German Lufthansa psychologist is likely to carry more weight and bear more responsibility in the selection process than the Indian psychology student—because he is German, senior, an academic, and male. . If they are female, the Indian psychologist, and the Indian student will have to work extra hard to have an impact in the decision-making process. As the only non-academic in this team, the German purser might anticipate some degree of resistance to her influence. Being a woman as well as a non-academic, the German purser faces a double challenge.

Currently, in debates on diversity, issues of age and gender are widely discussed. Therefore, I would like to focus on international aspects of conceptual hegemony.

In international collaboration, the direction of the psychologists' gaze is mostly in one direction: from North to South or from West to East. The activities of European or North American researchers who work outside their domestic region—in African, Asian or Latin-American countries—can be roughly divided into four categories. They:

- work on African, Asian or Latin-American topics, but do not collaborate with colleagues from the region of study
- work with African, Asian and Latin-American colleagues, but only to replicate and test the universality of theories and methods developed in Europe and North America
- work with African, Asian and Latin-American colleagues, but utilize them to gain access to knowledge not found in Europe and North America
- jointly develop new research questions and methods with their African, Asian and Latin-American colleagues, and participate in all stages of research as equal partners

Psychologists from Asian, African or Latin-American countries do not have this same range of options available to them. If I exchange the actors in these activities, it would look like this: Asian, African or Latin-American researchers

- work on European or North American topics, but do not collaborate with colleagues from this region
- work with European or North American colleagues, but only to replicate and test the universality of theories and methods developed in Asia, Africa or Latin-America
- work with European or North American colleagues, but utilize them to gain access to indigenous knowledge in Europe and North America that is not found in Asia, Africa or Latin-America
- jointly develop new research questions and methods with European or North American colleagues, and participate in all stages of research as equal partners

Such a reversal of agency shows that cultural psychology is still far away from the situation where we could simply exchange the direction of the psychologists' gaze, and look from Asia, Africa or Latin-America to Europe or North America.

Challenges of Globalisation

Like almost all human beings in the early 21st century, cultural psychologists—no matter where they come from—are confronted with the impact of globalisation on their personal life and work. Among these are:

- growing economic pressure and insecurity
- increased mobility with resulting cultural excursions into previously unknown material, social and conceptual realms
- a digital divide, e.g. an increasing difference between those who have access to information technologies, and a widening gap between this group and those who do not have access to these technologies
- the dissolution of traditional working conditions through dislocated work, irregular time schedules, accelerated speed, and the requirement for constant uptime
- challenges to traditional lifestyles and values, perhaps even identities, which might result in attempts at retaining some kind of personal stability through consumer fetishism, identity politics, or religious fanaticism.

Implications for Cultural Psychology

The more we confront “the real world”, the more interdisciplinary, culturally diverse and international cooperation will be needed. If psychologists want to strive to remain socially relevant amidst these changing realities, if they want to have an impact, they must confront and come to terms with the challenging demands of cultural psychology.