

# 4

*This chapter argues for the essential role of culture in forming the basic constructs and theories of developmental psychology. The case is made for the need to overcome the cultural insularity of core developmental concepts and methods in order to create a psychology that is more truly universal.*

## Essential Role of Culture in Developmental Psychology

*Joan G. Miller*

Posing an issue that persists over time in the field of psychology, Michael Cole introduced his recent volume on cultural psychology with a central puzzle: why “psychologists find it so difficult to keep culture in mind” (Cole, 1996, p. 1). As Cole observes: “On the one hand, it is generally agreed that the need and ability to live in the human medium of culture is one of the central characteristics of human beings. On the other hand, it is difficult for many academic psychologists to assign culture more than a secondary, often superficial role in the constitution of our mental life” (p. 1).

Psychologists routinely turn to culture for methodological control purposes, to confirm the universality of existing psychological theories or to identify factors that mediate or moderate particular psychological outcomes. Attention is paid to culture in these methodological and hypothesis testing senses, but culture tends to be given relatively little weight and to be viewed as nonessential in forming psychological constructs and theory.

Addressing this puzzle, this chapter explores the role of culture in understanding basic psychological processes. Through an overview of illustrative research in cultural psychology, the case is made that culture needs to be understood as critical to developmental psychology in a theory-construction sense, one that stands to enrich the field both conceptually and methodologically. In turn, the argument is forwarded that developing more sophisticated understandings of culture and overcoming the cultural insularity of core psychological constructs and methods constitute central challenges that must be met to succeed in identifying the constitutive role of culture in basic developmental processes and to create what is truly a more universal discipline.

## Culture in Contemporary Developmental Psychology

With their sensitivity to contextual influences on behavior, developmental psychologists routinely attend to culture for methodological control as well as purposes of theory confirmation. In the former sense, for example, it is widely recognized that methodological bias may result if methodological procedures are not equivalent in meaning for individuals from differing age and cultural subgroups. It is this type of insight that has led researchers of cognitive development to emphasize the importance of using materials as well as response modes that are familiar to respondents; such insight has also made it possible to identify the presence of greater cognitive competences among various cultural populations than was once assumed, on the basis of their low scores on conventional intelligence test measures (Greenfield, 1997).

In terms of theory-confirmation purposes, culture is commonly taken into account in contemporary developmental psychology in testing the universality of existing theories. Most major developmental theories are routinely subject to cross-cultural testing to assess their presumed universality and identify processes that may account for variation in the rate of development or in the highest level of development obtained. Commonly such research either yields findings of universality or uncovers patterns in which middle-class European American participants are observed to develop more rapidly or obtain a higher level of developmental competence than participants from other sociocultural backgrounds—results that are explained in terms of variation in some underlying psychological processes. Thus, for example, the finding that more securely attached children are observed in middle-class European American communities than in other cultural and socioeconomic groups is seen as consonant with the universality of attachment processes (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Main, 1990). It is explained in terms of factors such as less socially responsive forms of parenting being emphasized in lower socioeconomic groups and various other sociocultural communities. Likewise, the finding that most cultural populations do not obtain the higher stage of postconventional moral development found among urban middle-class Western samples but instead reason purely at a conventional level is interpreted as congruent with the universality of Kohlbergian theory (Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci, 2002), while highlighting the importance of education and of experience in cognitively rich social environments in promoting the rate and highest level of moral development obtained.

This type of stance assumed in contemporary developmental psychology yields theories that appear to have impressive predictive power and explanatory force. Investigators point to consistency in the empirical links observed between psychological constructs across cultural settings as evidence for the construct validity as well as universality of theories. To illustrate, the external validity of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985,

1990) is supported by findings that autonomy support shows the same empirical relationship to individual satisfaction and self-esteem within Bulgarian and U.S. samples (Deci and others, 2001).

Research in cultural psychology does not call into question the replicable nature of empirical findings of this type. Rather, its central challenge to such approaches is conceptual—that is, to point to overlooked cultural processes that contribute to such psychological effects and to uncover previously unrecognized modes of psychological functioning (Miller, 2004a). The concern is raised that to date major theories in developmental psychology tend to privilege middle-class European American outlooks and fail adequately to take into account contrasting cultural beliefs, values, and practices and their implications for basic psychological theory.

### **Developmental Research in Cultural Psychology**

To illustrate the contributions of work in cultural psychology to developmental theory, a brief discussion is presented of examples of work in this tradition. The case is made that work in cultural psychology not only yields insights into the processes underlying developmental change but also contributes to a culturally broadened understanding of the endpoints and course of development.

**Understanding of Self and Others.** Cultural work on developing understanding of self and others has challenged the assumptions that the emergence of social knowledge can be explained fully in terms of self-constructive processes and that it proceeds along a universal developmental path. Early work in this area (Miller, 1984, 1986) demonstrated that the explanations individuals give for everyday social behaviors follow culturally variable developmental courses. Thus over the age range of eight to adolescence a significant developmental increase occurs among European American (although not among Hindu Indians) in the tendency to explain behaviors by reference to personality traits (“she is helpful”), but a significant developmental increase occurs over the same age range among Hindu Indians (although not among European Americans) in the tendency to explain behaviors by reference to contextual considerations (“she is his mother”). Such results suggest that developmental change results in part from processes of enculturation and cannot be fully explained in terms of cognitive and experiential factors.

More recently, this type of focus has been extended to the area of autobiographical memory and to self-understanding. Theoretically shifting the focus of work on infantile amnesia from the question of explaining why early autobiographical memories are lost to the question of what accounts for their formation, Nelson, Fivush, and their colleagues make the case that it is through participation in sociocultural “communities of minds” that autobiographical memories emerge (Fivush & Nelson, 2004; Nelson, 1993; Nelson et al., 2003). It is argued that through everyday discourse and social

interaction children come to develop an understanding not only of a common past but of the significance of their particular outlook on the past. Further evidence that autobiographical memory depends on sociocultural processes is found in work showing that both the age of emergence of autobiographical memories and their content are culturally variable (Leichtman, Wang, & Pillemer, 2003; Wang, 2004).

In sum, cultural work on understanding of self and others contributes to developmental theory through revealing that developmental change reflects, in part, enculturation into culturally variable views of the self and cannot be fully explained by reference to the self-constructive processes emphasized in mainstream developmental psychology. Equally, it forwards new process accounts concerning the onset and nature of autobiographical memory.

**Moral Development.** Research in cultural psychology on moral development is yielding evidence for the need to broaden theoretical conceptions of the content of the moral domain, from the exclusive focus on issues of harm and justice associated with the Kohlbergian and distinct domain traditions (Kohlberg, 1984; Nucci, 2002; Turiel, 1998). Thus, for example, evidence suggests that the role-based considerations emphasized in many non-Western cultural communities represent an alternative form of postconventional morality that is not adequately represented within the Kohlbergian model (Snarey, 1985; Snarey & Keljo, 1991). Cultural work also reveals that the approach to the morality of caring articulated within Gilligan's morality-of-caring framework is culturally bound (Miller, 1994) with qualitatively distinct forms of the morality of caring emphasized within various cultural settings (Miller, 2001; Shimizu, 2001). In a critique of the exclusively secular focus of the dominant theoretical models of moral development, cultural work on morality also points to the need to recognize that spiritual concerns may be invested with moral force and are not invariably conceptualized as a matter of convention. Evidence is presented that in every culture morality encompasses not only issues of autonomy and community but also concerns with divinity (Jensen, 1998; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, & Park, 1997).

In sum, cultural work demonstrates that the culturally variable views of self and others emphasized in cultural communities are linked to moral outlook. Highlighting the need to broaden existing theoretical understandings of morality, work on culture and moral development points to ways of making psychological models of morality less ethnocentric and more culturally inclusive.

**Attachment.** Processes of attachment constitute a fundamental aspect of human experience that is essential to survival in ensuring that the dependency needs of infants are met by their primary caregivers. The thrust of work in cultural psychology is not to challenge the importance or universal existence of attachment processes but rather to argue that the qualitative approach to attachment instantiated in contemporary attachment theory is culturally narrow and fails to take into account alternative cultural outlooks

on attachment. As LeVine comments: "The metaphor of emotional security, so clearly a product of twentieth-century Euro-American notions of individual needs and interpersonal relations, is a remarkably recent and local concept on which to build a universal model of human development. . . . Neither the possibility that security of attachment was advantageous in human evolution nor its formal operationalization in reliable assessment procedures eliminates doubt about its status as a universal condition of mental health rather than a culturally contingent preference" (LeVine, 1989, p. x).

Reflecting this type of focus, cultural research documents that the concern with security emphasized within attachment theory more closely maps onto the beliefs and values emphasized within middle-class European American cultural communities than those emphasized within other cultural settings.

Cultural work on attachment conducted among Japanese populations, for example, calls attention to how concerns with empathy, interdependence, and indulgence of the other's needs that are related to the Japanese concept of *amae* do not fit closely with concerns with security that are emphasized in attachment theory (Rothbaum et al., 2000). The issue is not whether secure forms of attachment are broadly preferred to the insecure forms within Japan (which considerable evidence suggests they are; see, for instance, van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 2001). Rather, the concern is that, in emphasizing security, attachment theory in its present form does not fit closely with salient aspects of social behavior that are emphasized within Japanese cultural communities and reflected in their modes of parenting, such as emphasis on fitting in with others, loyalty, and interdependence. Parenting behaviors that embody these developmental goals, notably prolonged skin-to-skin contact with infants and responding in anticipation of rather than in response to the child's signals, constitute sensitive parenting within the Japanese context, though they are appraised as an indication of insecure attachment in terms of the assumptions of attachment theory.

To take another example, in attachment research that compared the outlooks of European American and Puerto Rican mothers, it was found that the former spontaneously emphasized concerns related to their child achieving a secure sense of self when asked both to describe their goals for their own child and to interpret the behavior of hypothetical children in the "strange situation" (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). In contrast, Puerto Rican mothers spontaneously brought up concerns related to maintaining a calm outlook and displaying respect and affection. The secure child was found to be a close match to the ideals that middle-class European American mothers held for their own children but did not capture the behavioral dimensions that Puerto Rican mothers considered of value, which were related to displaying proper demeanor and maintaining a contextually appropriate level of relatedness.

In sum, just as cultural work on moral development is pointing to constructs that are overlooked in theories of moral development, work on

attachment in cultural psychology is likewise pointing to central dimensions of attachment in cultural communities that are not taken into account in how optimum attachment is defined. By expanding present conceptual models of attachment to capture more of the culturally variable constructs, goals, and practices that make up attachment processes in diverse cultural communities, work in this area is broadening the explanatory scope and cultural relevance of attachment theory.

### **Challenges and Contributions**

The challenge for developmental psychology posed by research in cultural psychology is not only, or even necessarily primarily, to call into question the universality of existing psychological constructs and theories. Rather, its primary challenge is to the cultural inclusiveness and explanatory adequacy of these constructs and theories. In formulating conceptual models based on the beliefs, values, and practices emphasized in middle-class European American cultural communities, many major developmental theories are insufficiently sensitive to alternative, culturally variable modes of psychological functioning.

Overcoming this cultural insularity and achieving more culturally inclusive psychological theory requires greater sensitivity on the part of investigators. There is a need to go beyond the stereotypical formulations associated with the individualism-collectivism dichotomy and to base research on more nuanced understanding of cultural meanings and on greater attention to cultural practices (Miller, 2002; Kitayama, 2002). Equally, effort must be made to develop more culturally sensitive research methodologies (Miller, 2004b). In this regard, for example, it must be recognized that many of the standardized psychological scales so widely used in psychology are based on culturally narrow constructs and thus do not make it possible to tap culturally related psychological outlooks that do not map onto these constructs. Applying such research instruments allows us to identify apparent universals as well as uncover developmental trends in which certain populations do not obtain the higher level of development assumed in a theory; however, using such methodologies does not enable us to tap more culturally distinctive emphases that are not incorporated into the constructs tapped by the measures.

It must be recognized that cultural psychology does not eschew universals, deny the importance of biological influences on behavior, or assume that unique psychological theories must be formulated for every cultural community. Its goal is for cultural processes to be taken into account in psychology as a fundamental constitutive source of patterning of human development. Cultural psychology will achieve this goal when it ceases to exist as a distinct perspective within the discipline but, like explanatory approaches to psychology within biology, has become so fully integrated into psychology that a concern with culture is now implicated fundamentally in our constructs, methods, and basic theoretical explanatory models.

The gain from bringing culture more centrally into our basic constructs and theories is to capture the reality of human experience that is reflected in Cole's comment about culture as the ever-present medium of human development. Within contemporary developmental psychology, we tend to recognize cultural influences only fleetingly, as in the cross-cultural findings that are reported in our textbooks as an exception to an expected trend, or in multiyear life-span longitudinal studies that we recognize as having a somewhat dated quality that makes, for example, the experience of adolescents during the Depression appear less immediately relevant to that of present-day youth. However, the call of work from cultural psychology is to recognize that it is not merely the "other" and not merely our ancestors whose psychological functioning is affected by particular sociocultural historical experiences; this is a fundamental and inevitable aspect of all human experience. Psychology is always cultural, just as it is always biological; the recognition of this fact opens new theoretical insights and new areas of applied relevance.

The promise of taking culture into account more centrally in developmental psychology is to enable us to gain new conceptual insights into the nature of psychological processes that stand to enrich basic developmental theory. It will also enhance our effectiveness in applying developmental theory to social policy concerns, in making it possible for application of developmental theory to be more closely tailored to the outlooks and experience of individuals from diverse sociocultural backgrounds. This type of stance assumed in cultural psychology, it may be noted, is part of a broader effort to make psychology more inclusive of the perspectives of minority group populations and reduce the parochialism not only of its database but also of its core constructs and theories. By enriching our field, such efforts are essential in creating a discipline that recognizes the existence of culturally and subculturally variable successful pathways of human development, and thus that it is more truly universal.

## References

- Ainsworth, M. D., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the strange situation*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1990). A motivational approach to self: Integration in personality. In R. A. Dienstbier (Ed.), *Nebraska symposium on motivation: Perspectives on motivation*, vol. 38 (pp. 238–287). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Deci, E. L., Ryan, R. M., Gagne, M., Leone, D. R., Usunov, J., & Kornazheva, B. P. (2001). Need satisfaction, motivation, and well-being in the work organizations of a former Eastern Bloc country. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(8), 930–942.
- Fivush, R., & Nelson, K. (2004). Culture and language in the emergence of autobiographical memory. *Psychological Science*, 15(9), 573–577.

- Greenfield, P. M. (1997). You can't take it with you: Why ability assessments don't cross cultures. *American Psychologist*, 52, 1115–1124.
- Harwood, R. L., Miller, J. G., & Irizarry, N. L. (1995). *Culture and attachment: Perceptions of the child in context*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Jensen, L. A. (1998). Moral divisions within countries between orthodoxy and progressivism: India and the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(1), 90–107.
- Kitayama, S. (2002). Culture and basic psychological processes—toward a system view of culture: Comment on Oyserman et al. (2002). *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(1), 89–96.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *The psychology of moral development: The nature and validity of moral stages*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Leichtman, M., Wang, Q., & Pillemer, D. P. (2003). Cultural variations in interdependence and autobiographical memory: Lessons from Korea, China, India, and the United States. In R. Fivush & C. A. Haden (Eds.), *Autobiographical memory and the construction of a narrative self: Developmental and cultural perspectives* (pp. 73–97). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Main, M. (1990). Cross-cultural studies of attachment organization: Recent studies, changing methodologies, and the concept of conditional strategies. *Human Development*, 33, 48–61.
- Miller, J. G. (1984). Culture and the development of everyday social explanation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(5), 961–978.
- Miller, J. G. (1986). Early cross-cultural commonalities in social explanation. *Developmental Psychology*, 22, 514–520.
- Miller, J. G. (1994). Cultural diversity in the morality of caring: Individually oriented versus duty-based interpersonal moral codes. *Cross-Cultural Research: The Journal of Comparative Social Science*, 28(1), 3–39.
- Miller, J. G. (2001). Culture and moral development. In D. Matsumoto (Ed.), *The handbook of culture and psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, J. G. (2002). Bringing culture to basic psychological theory: Beyond individualism and collectivism: Comment on Oyserman et al. (2002). *Psychological Bulletin*, 128(1), 97–109.
- Miller, J. G. (2004a). The cultural deep structure of psychological theories of social development. In R. J. Sternberg & E. L. Grigorenko (Eds.), *Culture and competence: Contexts of life success* (pp. 11–138). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Miller, J. G. (2004b). Culturally sensitive research questions and methods in social psychology. In C. Sansone, C. C. Morf, & A. T. Panter (Eds.), *The sage handbook of methods in social psychology* (pp. 93–116). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nelson, K. (1993). The psychological and social origins of autobiographical memory. *Psychological Science*, 4(1), 7–14.
- Nelson, K., Skwerer, D. P., Goldman, S., Henseler, S., Presler, N., & Walkenfeld, F. F. (2003). Entering a community of minds: An experiential approach to theory of minds. *Human Development*, 46(1), 24–46.
- Nucci, L. P. (2002). The development of moral reasoning. In U. Goswami (Ed.), *Blackwell handbook of childhood cognitive development* (pp. 303–325). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K., & Morelli, G. (2000). Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan. *American Psychologist*, 55(10), 1093–1104.
- Shimizu, H. (2001). Japanese adolescent boys' senses of empathy (*omoiyari*) and Carol Gilligan's perspectives on the morality of care: A phenomenological approach. *Culture and Psychology*, 7(4), 453–475.

- Shweder, R. A., Much, N. C., Mahapatra, M., & Park, L. (1997). The 'big three' of morality (autonomy, community, divinity) and the 'big three' explanations of suffering. In A. M. Brandt (Ed.), *Morality and health* (pp. 119–169). New York: Routledge.
- Snarey, J. R. (1985). Cross-cultural universality of social-moral development: A critical review of Kohlbergian research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 97(2), 202–232.
- Snarey, J. R., & Keljo, K. (1991). In a gemeinschaft voice: The cross-cultural expansion of moral development theory. In W. M. Kurtines & J. L. Gewirtz (Eds.), *Handbook of moral behavior and development: Theory*, vol. 1 (pp. 395–424). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Turiel, E. (1998). The development of morality. In N. Eisenberg (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Social, emotional, and personality development*, vol. 3 (pp. 863–892). New York: Wiley.
- Van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Sagi, A. (2001). Cultural blindness or selective inattention? *American Psychologist*, 56(10), 824–825.
- Wang, Q. (2004). The emergence of cultural self-constructs: Autobiographical memory and self-description in European American and Chinese children. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(1), 3–15.

JOAN G. MILLER is associate professor of psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York City.