

# CHAPTER 11

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## Culture and Teaching

### *Lessons From Psychology*

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**M**ore than four decades have passed since, as a beginning graduate student, I taught my first university-level course in introductory psychology. I still have the textbook (Morgan & King, 1966) that I used for that course, and in recent years have from time to time (e.g., Keith, 2011b) gone back to consult it as I have tried to put into perspective the ways the field has changed during those four decades. One of the major changes, of course, is in the role that culture plays—in my own field of psychology, as well as in the broader enterprise of teaching in general. In this chapter, I attempt to show some of the ways the world has changed in the past generation, to illustrate some of the important challenges those changes present for those of us who call ourselves teachers, and to highlight some ways the field of cross-cultural psychology might contribute to the cultural competence of 21st-century teachers and students.

### The Frog in the Well

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I have often thought of our teaching in terms of a metaphor derived from an old Asian proverb, the story of the frog that lives in a well. The frog, as the

story goes, cannot comprehend the ocean, and he assumes that the sun and the moon shining down upon his little well shine only for him. For the frog, his well is, for all practical purposes, the universe. His little bit of water and the patch of sky he can see are, as far as he knows, perfectly fine, and he does not, in fact, realize that he lives in a well.

I fear that for too much of our history, many of us have been quite like the frog in the well. Our little corner of the world, the college classroom, constituted a perfectly fine universe, and we saw little need to contemplate the world beyond its boundaries. I will also suggest that, while we were happily ensconced in our corner of the world, the larger world around us was (and is) dramatically changing. However, like the frog in the well, if we fail to get beyond our own little patch of sky, we may be ill equipped to cope with, or even notice, the change.

## A Changing World

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When I was teaching my first class in the faraway 1960s, I drove an automobile that sold new for about 1,900 American dollars, paid 55 dollars per month in rent, bought bread for 25 American cents per loaf, and ate instant soup at a cost of 10 cents per meal. We had no e-mail, no desktop (much less laptop or handheld) computers, and no mobile telephones. International travel was more a luxury than an everyday reality, and the incredible range of information engendered by the Internet and a vast array of cable television channels was not yet even a gleam in the inventors' eyes. In fact, some of the inventors were not yet alive!

The incredible growth of information availability, cross-cultural communication, and instant transmission of images, ideas, and personal data have combined to make the world a much smaller and very different place as we enter the second decade of the 21st century. And these changes have occurred *across* cultures and *within* the multicultural milieu of such complex nations as the United States (see, for example, Matsumoto & Juang, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the nations of the world are no longer isolated, and the diversity of cultural and subcultural groups within many nations has greatly increased as well. Unfortunately, as teachers, we have not always appreciated or acknowledged this great diversity. In my own field, this state of affairs has led critics to observe that we have taught a largely U.S. psychology, based on research conducted largely by Americans, using largely white Americans as research subjects. As Robert Guthrie (1998) famously pointed out in the title of a book on the subject, *Even the Rat was White*.

More recently, Jeffrey Arnett (2008) argued that the conclusions of psychological research are too often based on a small subset of the human population—that of the United States—and Americans have tended to treat

their research results as if they were universally true, often in the absence of cross-cultural data to support many of those claims. The result, Michael Cole (1984) concluded, may be that “cross-cultural work is ghettoized” (p. 1000) and that students may learn little about other cultures. This lack of cultural context is not, of course, what we want in a changing world in which educators acknowledge the importance of teaching today’s students about the relevance of an understanding of cultural diversity (e.g., Branche, Mullennix, & Cohn, 2007).

## Why Culture? ---

Maybe, we might be tempted to say, it is true that psychological scientists have not been as sensitive to culture as they should have been, but what does that have to do with general knowledge of culture and the importance of teaching it? The answers to this question are both simple and complex. The simple answer is to say that intercultural literacy is important to us all if we want to understand our world, recognize cultural stereotypes, and appreciate the cultural diversity and differences around us (Hilferty, 2008). The complex answer lies in recognition that we live in a world fraught with political, religious, and governmental conflict; environmental challenges; inequitable resource distribution; and rapid technological change—and that solutions to these problems can come, at least in part, via improved understanding of cross-cultural psychology (Keith, 2011a).

Access to higher education for cultural and ethnic minorities is a universally recognized problem (e.g., Obua Ogwal, 1998), acknowledged by such international groups as the United Nations. And, as cultural subgroups gain access to higher education and become included in professional studies, cultural competence becomes increasingly important for the teachers providing that education (Leiper, Van Horn, Hu, & Upadhyaya, 2008). Dialogue with cultural groups is a foundation for the understanding necessary to teaching culture, and some authorities have asserted that cultural competence is an ethical imperative in teaching and research (Tracey, 2005). Clearly, culture matters in 21-century teaching, and cross-cultural psychology, I believe, has much to offer in support of teachers from all disciplines.

## Cross-Cultural Psychology: What Is It? ---

Çigdem Kagitçibaşı and J. W. Berry (1989) provided a concise definition of *cross-cultural psychology*, calling it the “study of similarities and differences in individual psychological and social functioning in various cultures and ethnic groups” (p. 494). This definition suggests a foundation—in

psychological and social processes—that should underpin the efforts of teachers striving to incorporate an understanding of culture in their work. A few organizing principles can aid teachers and students in their conceptualization of the field:

1. Culture consists of both objective and subjective components, but is essentially a psychological construct.
2. Although we tend to notice and focus on differences, people across cultures are more alike than different.
3. All people are likely to view and judge other cultures from the perspective of their own culture.
4. Cultures vary along important dimensions that are useful to understanding of cross-cultural issues.
5. Some psychological truths are universal; some are culture-bound (Keith, 2008, p. 484).]

Although cross-cultural issues have long interested researchers from several disciplines, the field has experienced a proliferation of research and an increase in interest in the past two or three decades. In the process, researchers have shown that cultural influences are powerful and that they run deep in shaping behavior and thought (e.g., Heine, 2008). What then, can teachers across disciplines gain from cross-cultural psychology as they work to improve pedagogy and learning in a diverse range of higher education environments?

## Cross-Cultural Psychology and Teaching

Psychology teachers have long recognized the important role of culture in higher education (e.g., McGovern, Furumoto, Halpern, Kimble, & McKeachie, 1991). Like researchers and any other human beings, teachers bring to their work their own cultural understandings, expectancies, and biases. Each of the principles I enumerated earlier can help enlighten us as we set out to teach.

### The Construct of Culture

Culture, as John Berry, Ype Poortinga, Marshall Segall, and Pierre Dasen (2002) stated, is “the shared way of life of a group of people” (p. 2). Such a shared way of life encompasses the behavioral norms and cognitions of the group, sets the group apart from other groups, and provides the means for conveying beliefs and behaviors to new members (Lehman, Chiu, & Schaller,

2004). Thus, culture, in contrast to such constructs as personality, passes from one generation to the next (Brislin, 2000). Some elements of culture are physical, tangible features such as tools or architecture, and others are subjective, such as attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions (Triandis & Brislin, 1984). The latter, the subjective elements of culture, most concern psychologists and teachers.

Awareness of the reality of culture and cultural diversity is essential for teachers. However, researchers interested in culture have long recognized a dearth of cultural content in teaching (e.g., Cole, 1984; Cushner, 1987). Nevertheless, there are appropriate approaches that teachers can use to improve cultural sensitivity and understanding. For example, Kenneth Cushner and Richard Brislin (1996) used a teaching technique involving presentation of scenarios depicting intercultural incidents. Students could choose among alternative ways of responding to incidents and receive constructive feedback to help them identify culturally sensitive alternative responses. The result was an improvement in cultural knowledge and empathy.

### **People Are More Alike Than Different**

We live today in a global environment in which cultures have more frequent and varied kinds of interaction than at any time in our history. People of many countries have increasing access to common media and other sophisticated electronic communications, despite growing discrepancies between the lives of the rich and the poor in many parts of the world (Keith, 2011a). The result is a dynamic, intermingled mix that requires change in the ways we understand similarities and differences (Shirayev & Levy, 2007).

Despite a multitude of cultural differences in a variety of dimensions (e.g., social, psychological, economic, religious), the fact remains that all cultures have common needs to deal with the same problems—health, safety, reproduction, and, ultimately, survival (Matsumoto, 2009). Organizational leaders who work to solve these problems may differ in their particular styles across cultures (Singh & Pandey, 1986; Sinha, 1979), yet share many of the same leadership traits and levels of motivational strength (Tripathi & Cervone, 2008). Perhaps of more direct relevance to teachers is the finding that educators across cultures agree on the importance of several common sources of motivation for their students, including parental influence, student-teacher relations, and enjoyment of academic subjects (Hufton, Elliott, & Illushin, 2003). Thus, although our students differ in many obvious ways, including the role of such rewards as grades, praise, or goal attainment (Hufton, Elliott, & Illushin, 2002), their basic motivations may have important similarities.

## Judging Cultures From Our Own Perspective

The human tendency to judge other cultures in relation to our own, and to see our own as superior, is perhaps universal (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). This phenomenon is known as ethnocentrism (Berry et al., 2002), an idea that Charles Darwin (1874) recognized, and that William Graham Sumner (1906) first named. Teachers are likely to encounter and experience ethnocentrism in a variety of ways. Researchers have, for example, studied ethnocentrism directed toward people with disabilities (Chesler, 1965), ethnic minorities in the United States (Gittler, 1972; Hraba, 1972; Mutisya & Ross, 2005; Prothro, 1952; Raden, 2003), and other nationalities (Beswick, 1972; Cashdan, 2001; Khan & Liu, 2008; Li & Liu, 1975).

As teachers, we want, of course, to find ways to overcome or to minimize ethnocentrism in ourselves and in our students. Here too, cross-cultural researchers can provide some possible direction. Higher education may play a role in reducing ethnocentrism (Hooghe, 2008), a possibility that Walter Plant (1958a, 1958b) investigated, finding that students became less ethnocentric following 2 and 4 years of college. Although Plant could not clearly specify the causes of the decrease in ethnocentrism, he suggested that personality and maturational changes associated with the college experience might play a role. There is also tentative evidence that a course with cross-cultural content (Pettijohn & Naples, 2009) or intercultural service requirements (Borden, 2007) may contribute to a reduction in ethnocentrism. Some writers (e.g., Allport, 1954) have discussed the possibility that creating contact between groups may reduce conflict between them, but teachers should know that this strategy may be successful only if we provide sufficient institutional and social support (Brewer & Brown, 1998).

## The Importance of Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede (1980; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) has identified five core dimensions that researchers have found useful to characterize cultures. Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede defined these dimensions, and some of their implications for education, in the following way:

1. Power distance (PD)—the degree to which less powerful people in a culture expect and accept unequal power distribution. In a high PD context, students treat teachers with respect and education is teacher-centered. In a low PD situation, education is student-centered, students ask questions and may disagree or argue with teachers, and teachers may receive no special respect outside the educational environment.
2. Individualism-collectivism (IC)—the extent to which the interests of the individual or the interests of the collective prevail in a cultural

setting or group. Individualist teachers may be surprised to find that students from collectivist cultures, unless specifically addressed by the teacher, are reluctant to speak up in class without the consensus of the group. Teachers may overcome this tendency through use of smaller subgroups within the class. Collectivists may also place a premium on *how to do* things, whereas individualists are more likely to focus on the learning process—*how to learn* (Hofstede and Hofstede seem, here, to make a distinction between the active nature of skills and the cognitive aspects of learning).

3. Masculinity-femininity (MA)—the degree to which cultural gender roles are clearly distinct (masculine) or overlapping (feminine). According to Hofstede and Hofstede, teachers in feminine cultures are more likely to praise and encourage weaker students, in contrast to teachers in masculine cultures, where excellence (seen as a masculine concept) receives praise from teachers. Students from masculine cultures—who may see *average* as *below average*—are more likely to focus on grades and see failure as more disastrous than do students from feminine cultures.
4. Uncertainty avoidance (UA)—the level of tolerance of the ambiguous and unpredictable. Students from high UA cultures are likely to prefer highly structured learning environments: clear timelines, specific learning outcomes, and clearly detailed assignments. These students may see their teachers as expert and believe there is a single correct answer to important questions. Students from low UA countries prefer more informal structures, teachers and books that explain things in ordinary language, and experts who aren't afraid to say, "I don't know."
5. Long-term orientation (LTO)—the extent to which the culture fosters such future-oriented behaviors as perseverance and thrift (long-term) or past- and present-oriented virtues such as respect for tradition and saving face (short-term). Students from cultures ranking high in LTO tend to develop interest and ability in applied sciences, mathematics, and formal problem solving. They also see their academic success (or failure) as the product of their level of effort. In contrast, students from low LTO cultures are more likely to view success or failure as the product of luck, take an interest in more theoretical or abstract sciences, and be less skillful in mathematics and formal problem solving.

It is not, of course, invariably the case that individuals from cultures ranking high (or low) on these dimensions will follow the pattern for their culture. Thus, teachers must be wary of stereotyping individual students, and recognize that, for example, many cultures mix individualistic and collectivistic features or that not all people in a collectivistic culture will be collectivists (Triandis, 1994). Nevertheless, awareness of these culture-based patterns of behavior may well prove useful for teachers working in

multicultural settings. Teachers may note, for example, that individualistic students find their motivation in personal goals or recognition, whereas collectivistic students are more attuned to the well-being of the group; or students from a background high in uncertainty avoidance may bring an expectation of a level of formality uncommon to many Western classrooms.

## Universal and Culture-Bound Truths

Researchers have long searched for psychological principles that are universally valid or true. However, it is evident that many psychological research findings are limited, or at least significantly influenced, by their cultures. The concepts *emic* and *etic* derive from the work of linguist Kenneth Pike (1967) and denote principles or truths that vary from culture to culture (emics) or that seem pancultural or universal (etics). Just as psychological truth may differ across cultures, so too may views of education and teaching (Kemp, 2008). Recognition of this may be essential to those who teach in a multicultural or cross-cultural context.

For example, it is challenging to develop tests that measure skills that are valued in more than one culture (Cianciolo & Sternberg, 2004). Both teachers and students find it difficult to get beyond a single-culture (emic) perspective, to see the world from a broader etic viewpoint that allows understanding of multiple cultural perspectives. Teachers, like members of the helping and caring professions (see Zander, 2007), must realize that the reality of their students' lives can differ widely across the bounds of culture and that it is essential to bridge differences in communication, religion, and worldview. In a diverse world, an etic, one-size-fits-all perspective will well serve neither students nor teachers.

## The Culture of the Classroom

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Many university faculty members teach in settings that include a majority ethnic or cultural group and one or more minority groups. This situation, coupled with the fact that the faculty, too, often comprise majority and minority groups, has prompted some writers to question who should be responsible for teaching about cultural diversity. Should teaching about diversity be the role of majority faculty, minority faculty, or both? In a discussion of this issue, Loreto Prieto (2009) concluded, "We must engage in a joint, unified effort in which academicians from both majority and diverse cultures do their part" (p. 26). There is simply not, Prieto argued, a sufficient number of minority faculty to meet the immediate demands of teaching about culture, or to have a widespread impact on students' understanding of culture and diversity—it is a job for *all* faculty. In a similar vein, Kenneth D. Keith (2011a), writing about psychology, said, "We



might imagine a future in which culture would be an integral part of all teaching and research in psychology” (p. 556).

Culture, then, might be embedded in all teaching, not necessarily as an explicitly taught addition to our courses, but as an implicit aspect of the regular culture of the classroom. Teachers’ understanding of at least three areas of emphasis seems important to achieving such an integrated aim. These are the contribution of language and communication, the nature of acculturation, and conceptions of teaching and learning. I will briefly discuss each of these in relation to the role of college and university teachers.

### Language and Communication

In a discussion introducing culture to the classroom, Karen Cone-Uemura (2009) described the communication factor of the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (Sodowsky, Taffe, Gutkin, & Wise, 1994) in terms of two key notions: an individual understanding that there are differences in people’s ways of sharing meaning with each other, and recognition that there is not a single “right” way to communicate. Inevitably, as classrooms bring together people from different cultures, the importance of competent, flexible communication comes to the fore (Chung, 2011).

Unfortunately, cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts seem to occur regularly in academic exchanges between people of different cultures (Degen & Absalom, 1998). These difficulties may result in the inability of students to achieve learning objectives and may even cause them to drop out of educational programs (Slimmer, Highland, & Stout, 2009). In U.S. colleges, two interesting, related approaches have shown promise for alleviating some of the communication problems experienced by international students: the assignment of U.S. students as “buddies” for international students (Shigaki & Smith, 1997) and pairing of international students with English-speaking student, faculty, or staff conversational partners (Zhai, 2002).

Although many cross-cultural misunderstandings are directly related to language differences (rather than broader cultural differences; Roberts, Moss, Wass, Sarangi, & Jones, 2005), Thushari Welikala (2008) has proposed that language embodies particular approaches to knowledge and culture. Welikala argued that students from diverse cultures, studying in English, may feel disempowered in the face of apparent marginalization of their own cultural narratives and worldviews. According to Welikala, teaching and learning would be improved if English-speaking academics could work to overcome the disarticulation between the pedagogical perspective of the institution and that of students’ native cultures. Thus, teachers need to make the effort to understand and be sensitive to the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their students. Increased understanding can come from simple everyday efforts such as informal conversations with

culturally diverse students, use of multicultural examples in teaching, or attendance at international student organizational activities. The result is likely to be improved communication and improved education.

## Acculturation

People become competent members of their social group through experience with the normal institutions of their native cultures: parenting, education, religion, and the like, a process called *enculturation* (Cole & Packer, 2011). In contrast, a minority culture individual aspiring to become a competent member of the majority culture experiences acculturation (Miller, 2011). Colleges and universities are likely to support dominant cultural ideologies, and experience in the university exposes international or minority students to new aspects of culture, knowledge, and the majority society (Weiner-Levy, 2008), requiring them to become acculturated to the academic environment. In the process, they may well experience social isolation and a kind of transitional shock associated with accommodation to a different culture (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

International students, then, may experience health and adjustment difficulties, especially within the first 6 to 12 months at a new university (McLachlan & Justice, 2009), suggesting the need for outreach to facilitate their adjustment. In addition to understanding the initial adjustment needs created by the transition to life in an unfamiliar university environment, teachers should be aware that students are also striving to become acculturated—trying to create an identity as a member of the majority university culture. Faculty members must also expect that minority students will sometimes withdraw and reject the majority culture, and that diversity can prompt backlash among majority students (Prieto, 2009). So, although it is true that people from various cultural backgrounds are more alike than different, it is also the case that teachers need awareness of the special acculturative challenges that students from such varying backgrounds may experience. Teachers can aid the process of acculturation by reaching out to students—in informal conversation; by inquiring about students' adjustment and well-being, or by remaining alert (and responding) to signs of academic difficulty.

## Conceptions of Teaching and Learning

Teachers, like all people, have individual backgrounds and experiences that shape their perspectives on life and work—their worldview. Our worldviews influence our approach to broad social and cultural issues and affect our behavior in such environments as the classroom and in the inferences we make about the behavior of others (Robinson, 2009). Teachers from different cultures may therefore have different conceptions and beliefs about

teaching (Kemp, 2008). Educators have, for example, characterized educational philosophies as “Western” or “Eastern” (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 404) and “teacher-centered” or “student-centered” (Kemp, 2008, p. 252).

Perhaps, as Darryl Mitry (2008) suggested, there was a time in Western cultures when the shared customs, beliefs, and practices of students allowed teachers to adopt a single-culture viewpoint and ignore a diversity of perspectives. That time, however, is past; today’s teachers need to contemplate the cultural assumptions that underlie their methods and the corresponding difficulties those methods may present for students (Ryan & Louie, 2007). Teachers should also challenge their own worldviews, raising questions about their assumptions and their potential effects on student attitudes and learning. We must realize that, as teachers and researchers, we too, have our own biases and ethnocentrism. When considering the behavior of students from other cultures, we must be alert to the fact that they are products of their own experience. Accordingly, such judgments as “too reserved,” “insecure,” or “disengaged” may say as much about our own cultural biases as they do about the behavior of the student.

## Concluding Thoughts

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Much of the literature dealing with diversity and internationalization of curricula has discussed the importance of aiding the achievement and adjustment of international and minority students. However, as G. William Hill (2002) suggested, our students and our academic disciplines may suffer if we fail to excite the interest of diverse students because, he noted, students may simply choose not to pursue studies in fields they see as lacking ethnic and cultural diversity. It is therefore important that teachers not marginalize cultural content and viewpoints (Goldstein, 1995), but that they attempt to develop a “meta-cultural” awareness and be willing to attempt to meet the needs of all students, no matter what their cultural background (Ryan & Louie, 2007).

Clifford Geertz (1973) characterized cultures as webs of significance through which people seek meaning. We have seen that the search for meaning must extend beyond the knowledge deriving from culture-limited research and that the integration of culture and diversity is the job of all college and university teachers. As Regan Gurung (2009) concluded, “Culture is multifaceted, influencing every aspect of life. Healthy curricula need both specialty courses and the infusion of culture into standard courses” (p. 19). Unlike the frog in the well, we have a choice: We can move beyond the boundaries of our own cultural experience, and as we do so, we can provide our students a new, broader view of the world.

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