The development of adaptive competence: Why cultural psychology is necessary and not just nice

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ABSTRACT

I argue that developmental psychologists need to view cultural approaches to cognitive development as necessary and not just nice. Cultural psychology enables one to study problems one otherwise might not be able to study and also to identify solutions to problems that might be obscured or even distorted if one looked only at results within a single culture (usually, one's own). I describe work my colleagues and I have done around the world addressing specific problems such as what does it mean to be adaptively intelligent in various cultures, how does illness affect intellectual functioning, and what do people even mean by "intelligence" in different cultures. The results show that cognitive development can be fully understood only if one looks beyond one's own cultural boundaries and preconceptions. The article further argues that a theory of successful intelligence can be a useful way of studying phenomena of intellectual development within a cultural framework.

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Introduction

Cultural psychology is often viewed in psychology as a peripheral field. Indeed, the American Psychological Association, with 54 divisions, does not have a division for cultural or cross-cultural psychology. The closest it comes is "international psychology," which really is quite different. But there are many questions that cannot be answered fully, or even at all well, unless one takes a cultural approach. Put another way, studying certain phenomena only within one's own culture, for example,

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the dominant version of the Anglo-Saxon culture in the United States, leaves on unable adequately to address important psychological questions and issues. One such issue is that of adaptive competence.

In order to understand people, regardless of their age, one needs to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and to help them capitalize on strengths at the same time that one helps them correct or compensate for weaknesses. The argument of this article is that psychologists, and especially developmental psychologists, can do a better job of understanding and leveraging the strengths of people from diverse environmental contexts if those strengths are viewed in a cultural framework (Miller, 2005; Nisbett, 2004; Wang, 2009). To understand development, one needs to look beyond one's own cultural boundaries and preconceptions (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1982; Matsumoto & Juang, 2012; Serpell, 2002; Shweder, 2003). Cultural approaches are especially important in studies of everyday cognition (Greenfield, 2014; Nuñes, 1994; Rogoff, 2003; Schliemann, Carraher, & Ceci, 1997).

McClelland (1973) suggested that adaptive competencies go well beyond traditional notions of intelligence (e.g., Carroll, 1993). Others, such as Gardner (2006) and Sternberg (2003), have made a similar argument. Sternberg (2004), moreover, has suggested that in diverse cultural settings, adaptive competencies may differ but that teachers may not recognize them because they are within the teachers' repertoires, either actively (in terms of knowledge or skills the teachers may themselves utilize) or passively (in terms of knowledge or skills the teachers may recognize in others). The result is that students might be able to succeed at higher levels but do not because the teachers falsely label the students as lacking the ingredients for success. As a result, the teachers construct self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2003).

This article summarizes studies purporting to show the importance of a cultural framework when studying intellectual development, in particular, and developmental psychology, in general. The studies cover a range of intellectual functions as well as cultural settings.

Theoretical backdrop: The augmented theory of successful intelligence

The theoretical basis of the studies to be reported is the augmented theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 2003, 2005). According to this theory, successful intelligence is one's ability to choose and successfully work toward the attainment of one's goals in life, within one's cultural context or contexts. People succeed in selecting and attaining goals by recognizing and capitalizing on strengths and by recognizing and then compensating for or correcting weaknesses. They do so in order to adapt to, shape, and select environments that fit their skills, interests, and values.

The theory suggests that the tasks that might be relevant for measuring successful intelligence in one cultural context may be less relevant or even not at all relevant in another cultural context. As a result, assessments of intelligence need to take into account the cultural context of the people who are being assessed. Intelligence is viewed as not merely within the person, but as an interaction between the person, the tasks the person confronts, and the cultural context in which the tasks are confronted. As an example, a kind of sorting behavior that may be viewed as "intelligent" in one cultural context (e.g., taxonomic sorting) may be viewed as not very intelligence in another cultural context, where another kind of sorting (e.g., functional sorting) may be viewed as superior (Cole, Gay, Glick, & Sharp, 1971).

To be clear, the theory does not propose that intelligence is a different entity in each culture. The basic information-processing components are the same, regardless of culture (Sternberg, 1985). For example, in any culture, one needs to identify the existence of problems, define the nature of the problems identified, mentally represent the problems as defined, devise a strategy for solving the problems, and so on. What differs is the nature of the problems encountered in various ecological contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). For example, one child may focus during the day on how to solve an algebra problem, another on how to get past drug dealers on the way to school, another on how to ice-fish so that his family has something to eat for dinner. The mental processes may be similar or identical—what differs is the kinds of knowledge and skills to which they give rise as a result of cultural contexts. What may be a relatively novel problem in one culture (e.g., a textbook algebra problem or effective ice fishing) may be a familiar one in another culture. In the theory of successful