



Mind and virtue: The meaning of learning, a matter of culture?



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ABSTRACT

Does the meaning of learning vary across cultures? In order to answer this question we propose a theoretical framework that integrates various reported cultural differences in the domain of learning. Building on the qualitatively derived themes of mind and virtue orientations by Li (2003, 2005), we argue that the Western philosophical tradition has led to a 'mind orientation' in learning, whereas learning beliefs in East-Asia can be characterized as 'virtue oriented'. Characteristic of the Western mind orientation is for learning to be primarily attributed to the cognitive domain. In the virtue orientation, the moral dimension is just as much associated with learning as the cognitive, focusing on the development of the person as a whole. These two orientations are proposed to represent cultural mandates of learning in the respective cultures and are suggested to influence a variety of cultural tasks that can be clustered into four domains. As the review reveals, the purpose, processes, affect and motivation and social perceptions that are associated to the concept of academic learning in Western and East-Asian settings are influenced by equally elaborated cultural traditions and can be meaningfully interpreted in the framework of mind and virtue orientations.

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1. Introduction

The human capacity to learn is universal. Nevertheless, various cross-cultural differences in learning related psychological phenomena in particular between East Asian and Western European/American students have been reported in the literature. To name just a few, such East-west¹ differences have been found with regard to achievement motivation (Hau & Ho, 2008), self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), verbalization (Kim, 2002, 2008), classroom participation (Paulhus, Duncan, & Yik, 2002; Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008), learning strategies (Helmke & Tuyet, 1999; Joy & Kolb, 2009; Kember, 2000; Kingston & Forland, 2008), reasoning (Peng & Nisbett, 1999) and holistic versus analytic cognitive styles (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). Although each of these topics has received ample attention in their respective fields (e.g. educational research, psychology, sociology, anthropology), a systematic understanding of the different findings has not been established so far (Hau & Ho, 2008). Research with the specific aim of assessing the meaning that learning and receiving an education hold for students around the world has even been called "sparse" (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006, p. 196). As such, no standard methodology has been established to assess cultural models of learning (Fryberg & Markus, 2007). With international mobility in academia becoming an increasingly important part of everyday life at universities around the world, understanding and making explicit the distinct, but often tacit and taken for granted cultural assumptions that underlie the concept of learning, are of primary importance (Al-Issa, 2005; Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Gay, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006).

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¹ Throughout this paper, the notion of 'Western' will refer to a cultural rather than a geographical distinction. Due to an emphasis on the European context, the term 'Western' primarily refer to the (western) European context. The term Eastern Asian on the other hand will refer to societies and educational systems that share the Confucian culture. The primary focus will be on mainland China, although the Confucian heritage countries typically include the societies of Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan as well (e.g., Biggs, 1996; Leung, 2001).

From a social constructivist perspective on learning, in which schooling is regarded as an inherently cultural process (Palinscar, 1998), we will review the literature in different sub-domains of research in order to construct two new interpretive themes in which these diffused findings can be integrated. At the moment, these findings represent different cultural tasks that are a part of the learning process, which have not been integrated in a meaningful way yet. The integration of these findings into a larger contextual framework allows the construction of two 'cultural mandates' of the concept of learning (Kitayama & Imada, 2010). The mandates that we propose are the mind and the virtue orientation. The aim of this approach is to explain how abstract goals and ideals on the cultural level affect psychological processes on the subordinate level.

On a most abstract level, learning goals can be categorized into two major important developmental domains. First, scholars aim at improving their mental skills and their knowledge. Secondly, personal development of the scholar in the sense of moral and social self-improvement is a generally endorsed important learning goal as well. While both can be considered to be important goals for learners' everywhere, we will argue that the relative emphasis that is placed on each of these high order aspects varies between cultures. In fact, like most human behavior, learning requires engaging with socially constructed meanings and practices. It does not merely concern brain structure and cannot be examined regardless of its historical and cultural context (Peters, 2007). By contrast, thought, learning and knowledge are social phenomena (Palinscar, 1998). The influence that culture has on the social construction of phenomena such as meanings and practices causes learning to be a fundamentally cultural endeavor (Cheng & Wong, 1996). Therefore, cultural variation in the underlying meaning of learning related concepts should be taken especially seriously in the highly globalized arena of higher education. For this purpose we will review the current literature on cross-cultural differences in the meaning that students and educators with East-Asian and Western cultural backgrounds attach to the concept of learning with a focus on the higher education context. We introduce the conceptualization of the mind and virtue orientations as cultural mandates that form the overarching theme for many observed cultural differences between Western and East-Asian contexts. The review focuses on integrating literature from psychological studies in the academic domain in which cultural differences are found in behavioral and psychological tendencies of Western and East-Asian students.

2. The mind and virtue orientations

The empirical origin of the formulation of the mind and virtue orientations towards learning lies in the extensive qualitative work of Li. Li (2003) conducted a qualitative prototype study, asking Chinese and European American students to freely associate words, which they felt reflected the concept of 'learning'. A systematic qualitative difference emerged between the concepts that Chinese and European American students hold about the concept of learning from this bottom-up approach. The domains of the concepts of learning that her analysis revealed were labeled as the *purposes* (e.g., what people think the goal of learning is; whether or not and why learning is important), *processes that are assumed to underlie learning* (e.g., which strategy to apply), *affect and motivation* (e.g., whether one experiences joy or dread from learning and from successes and failures), and *social perceptions* (e.g., the perception of successful learners vs. unsuccessful ones and perceptions of teachers). One's beliefs about these elements of the learning process underlie the motivation for learning and influence learning on a cognitive, affective and behavioral level. Li found that although this structure of four domains that are included in the mental construct of learning is similar for both Western and Asian students, the content of the categories of conceptions of learning differ due to fundamental differences in the meanings that the two cultures attach to learning (Li, 2003). These four domains form the structure for the current literature review as well. In the following, we will review studies that relate to these four sub-domains and will analyze the degree to which the concepts of mind and virtue orientations can facilitate the interpretation of the findings of these studies. We will review both empirical and theoretical contributions. The review will however reveal that the literature has addressed the four domains to differing degrees. For example, more empirical work has been conducted in the domains of affect and motivation and the processes that are associated to learning than in relation to the question what the purpose of learning is, as seen from different cultural perspectives. The review thereby reveals important domains in the current state of the literature which would benefit from further investigation. We will start the review by examining the higher order level of meaning, namely the overarching purpose that is associated to the concept of learning by Western and East-Asian academics. Before we do so, we would like to emphasize that the finding that the mental representation of beliefs about learning is identically structured in the East-Asian and Western mind, but contains culturally emic contents resonates well with studies on cultural differences in epistemological beliefs (Chan & Elliot, 2002). Nevertheless, the concept of cultural beliefs about learning needs to be distinguished from that of epistemological beliefs. Whereas epistemology concerns the theory of knowing and knowledge, the mind and virtue orientations towards learning focus on the processes, affect and motivational processes and social perceptions of scholars as well and the meaning that is associated with the concept as such. They do not aim to explain cultural variation in notions such as truth, belief or justification. Rather, they aim to integrate variations in the four domains that Li found to be associated to the concept of learning in both cultural contexts.

Cultural orientations have been described as abstract constructs that are typically embodied in the culture's philosophical traditions (Kitayama, Pak, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009). Also, they represent the ideals and general goals that are sanctioned and encouraged within the culture. The mind and virtue orientations towards learning represent the ideals and goals of learning that are encouraged within the two cultural regions at hand. These overarching orientations however do not offer specific routines or procedures for individuals. As will be discussed, becoming a 'good learner' in the mind orientation can for example be achieved by the 'task' of critical thinking. This does not imply that people who grow up in an environment that endorses another overarching cultural orientation cannot perform this task. It merely is closer to the cultural orientation of mind oriented learning. In fact, the reviewed studies have been conducted in samples that represent a variety of sociocultural contexts

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