

Research Review

A dynamic view of cultural influence: A review

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Abstract

Static models of culture's influence have given way to a dynamic view, which identifies not only differences across cultures in people's judgments and decisions, but also the situations and conditions in which these differences do or do not appear. Theory and evidence developed from a cognitive psychological perspective underlie this dynamic approach, including research emerging from the “dynamic constructivist” and “situated cognition” models. In the present review, we focus on findings that confirm the utility of this cognitively oriented approach, and briefly discuss the advantages and complementary nature of the “social collective” and neuroscience approaches to understanding culture.

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Keywords: Culture; Dynamic constructivism; Situated cognition; Cultural syndromes; Social collective; Cultural neuroscience

Contents

1. Different views of culture	558
1.1. Social collective perspective: Culture is in society.	558
1.2. Neuroscience perspective: Culture is in our biology.	559
1.3. Cognitive perspective: Culture is in the mind	560
1.3.1. Advantages and drawbacks.	560
2. Dimensions of cultural variation	561
2.1. Cultural determinants	561
2.2. Individualism–collectivism	562
2.2.1. Social influences	562
2.3. Independence vs. interdependence.	562
2.3.1. Social influences	562
2.4. Prevention vs. promotion	564
2.5. Temporal orientation.	564
3. Communication, language and emotional expression.	565
3.1. Cultural differences in language	565
3.2. Auditory vs. visual processing differences.	566
3.3. Emotion and facial expressions	566
4. Further questions and future directions.	567

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4.1. Dynamic constructivism versus cultural syndromes	567
4.2. Other considerations	568
5. Concluding remarks.	568
References	568

Cultural differences in the comprehension and communication of information, and in the judgments and decisions that result from it, have been a major focus of attention over the past three decades of research in both psychology and consumer behavior (for reviews, see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007; Wyer, Chiu, & Hong, 2009). There are at least two reasons for this. First, the increasing frequency of interaction among members of different cultures has made it particularly important to understand cultural differences in comprehending and communicating information, thereby avoiding misconceptions of one another's motives and minimizing interpersonal conflict (Brislin, 2009; Leung & Brew, 2009). The second reason is theoretical. As Markman, Grimm, and Kim (2009) note, "culture" is not an explanatory variable. However, cultural differences in judgment and behavior call attention to important determinants of behavior that might go undetected in a more homogeneous environment.

The increase in research on cultural differences in behavior during the past 30 years has been accompanied by a change in the conceptualization of culture itself. Traditional conceptions (e.g., Kluckhohn, 1954; for a historical review, see Triandis, 2007) viewed culture as a static entity that could be described by stable differences in values along a fixed set of dimensions that influence behavior independently of its situational context (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). This approach, however, has given way to a more dynamic view of culture in which its effects on behavior are contextually and situationally dependent. This view calls attention not only to characteristics that distinguish representatives of different cultures, but also the situational factors that lead these distinctions to be apparent.

Some of the most important advances in cultural psychology are being driven by this dynamic, cognitively oriented approach (Chiu & Hong, 2007; Oyserman & Sorensen, 2009). However, other models for understanding culture also stimulate vibrant inquiry and yield important insights (for examples of alternative approaches to cultural research, see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). These different approaches make salient a fundamental question about the nature of culture itself: Is "culture" a characteristic of society at large, or does it exist primarily in the minds of individuals (Wan & Chiu, 2009)? Although research based on these alternative possibilities often has similar implications, the conceptual distinction is obviously important. One model views culture as a collective-level phenomenon composed of socially shared meanings and associated scripted behavioral patterns (Cohen, 1998; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 2004). The other assumes that culture-based meanings are represented in the mind of the individual and may or may not be activated and applied, depending on situational factors that affect their accessibility (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Along with these collectively- and cognitively-oriented conceptualizations, a third approach to understanding culture,

which is stimulated by recent advances in cognitive neuroscience, examines how brain biology shapes and reinforces cultural patterns (Chiao & Ambady, 2007).

These three conceptual perspectives, which are summarized in Table 1, are discussed in the first section of this article. In the second section, we discuss the "syndromes" that appear responsible for many of the cultural differences in judgments and behavior that have implications for consumer behavior. The cultural syndrome construct provides a particularly useful tool for conceptualizing cultural differences in behavior and the situational factors that give rise to their occurrence. The research we review is largely restricted to a comparison of two general cultural groups: East Asians and Anglo Americans. This emphasis is due in part to the fact that these groups differ substantially in their social orientation, and in part to the increasing prominence of Asia in the world marketplace. However, the countries that compose these broad groups are obviously not the same. In fact, the few studies that have made comparisons within the groups (e.g., Nelson, Brunel, Supphellen, & Manchanda, 2006) have identified differences that do not appear when broader comparisons are made. Nonetheless, most of our discussion in this article will share the deficiency of previous research, focusing largely on East Asians and Anglo North American cultures without considering other, finer distinctions that may in fact be quite important.

However, not all cultural differences in behavior are likely to be governed by cultural syndromes, which pertain to conscious behavior dispositions. In the third section of this article, we turn to a discussion of communication-related phenomena that do not clearly fall within a situated cognition framework but are nevertheless of importance in conceptualizing cultural differences in consumer behavior. Features of the language one speaks, for example, may dispose one to comprehend and communicate in ways that are not tied to more general norms and values but are governed by automatic processes of which individuals are unaware (for a review, see Semin, 2013). Cultural differences in nonverbal behavior (eye contact, gestures, etc.) can also differ between cultures and can potentially lead to miscommunication (Wang, Toosi, & Ambady, 2009). These behaviors, unlike those that are governed by cultural syndromes, may not be a function of the accessibility of concepts and knowledge in memory, but rather, may occur spontaneously, without awareness.

In the final two sections, we discuss areas for future research and present some concluding remarks.

1. Different views of culture

1.1. Social collective perspective: Culture is in society

Early culture researchers defined culture at a macro level, suggesting that the essence of any cultural system is the set of

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