

## CULTURAL BACKGROUND

*Culture* refers to patterns of thoughts, beliefs, and values that distinguish members of a particular social group and that are acquired through social interaction rather than being based in biology (i.e., inherited). Anthropologists have studied culture since the origins of that field of study, and over recent decades their findings and interpretations of cultural differences and similarities have become influential in interpreting human behaviors in other fields ranging from education to medicine.

*Cultural background* thus refers in broad terms to the combination of one's ethnic, geographic, and linguistic origins, with varying weights assigned to these and to related but less central areas (e.g., socioeconomic, religious, or political affiliation), depending on beliefs about the relative importance of each area. Though it may be identified ethnically by researchers or by others—for example, as someone having an Asian, versus American, versus Asian American cultural background—when considered at a more fine-grained or emic level, cultural background becomes primarily a self-identified construct.

Cultural background is important in education because research indicates that a mismatch between the cultural background of teachers and of their students can lead to decreased achievement and other undesirable outcomes (such as increased disciplinary referrals for these students; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). This mismatch, and corresponding achievement issues, hold true not only in the United States where teachers tend to be predominantly (>80 percent) white and female, but also in other settings across the globe.

Fortunately, there are some strategies that appear to be effective in helping teachers address this mismatch (e.g., Beyer, 2010). Thoughtful exploration by teachers of their own cultural background, specifically as it informs their status in society (i.e., by examining white identity and corresponding white privilege, as well as examining one's own cultural background in depth) offers an effective strategy set (cf. Kaufman & Hines, 2010). The use of these strategies leads to the development of increased cultural competence (i.e., the ability to interact effectively with individuals from cultural backgrounds different from one's own). Participation in professional development training that focuses on developing

teachers' ability to infuse multicultural content into the curriculum is another strategy that may be effective in reducing the effects of differing cultural background on student achievement and related outcomes of interest.

### *Research Findings Related to Cultural Backgrounds*

Researchers have used cultural background to explain individual and group differences in a variety of areas. Some cultural backgrounds are more conforming and submissive than others. Bond and Smith, in a 1996 extensive quantitative review (i.e., meta-analysis) study, found that conformity was higher in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures, and that cultural values had a stronger impact on conformity than any other variables.

**CULTURAL BACKGROUND AND THE SELF** Individuals' reasons for happiness vary depending on their cultural backgrounds. In Western cultures, individuals' happiness is dependent on their pleasure and positive feelings, whereas in Eastern cultures, it is dependent on actualizing their potential (Joshanloo, 2014). In Western cultures, the self is based on the ideals of individualism, enhancing autonomy, independence, self-esteem, and a strong ego, which are viewed as essential ingredients of individuals' happiness. In contrast, in Eastern cultures, individuals' self is seen as a small part of the collective and the cosmos; the self alone is de-emphasized, and its relational aspects are emphasized, transcending personal desires for the sake of family and group (Joshanloo, 2014). In Eastern cultures, the Western concept of happiness is criticized for being too self-focused and temporary, and it is thought eventually to lead to individual and collective unhappiness. In Eastern cultures, filial piety is considered as an important sign of maturity, whereas in Western cultures, family obligations and social expectations may be viewed as constraints preventing the full expression of unique selfhood (Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008).

**HUMANITY'S PLACE IN THE WORLD** In Western cultures, humankind is seen as privileged, attempting to master, manipulate, or control the world in various aspects that include one's life, relationships, and raw nature; autonomy and independence are core values. In Eastern cultures, in contrast, humankind

is but a small part of the cosmos; adjustment to the environment and achieving harmony with others and the cosmos are valued, and thus mastery, manipulation, or control over nature are devalued (Joshanloo, 2014).

**CULTURAL BACKGROUND, HAPPINESS, AND CONTENTMENT** In Western cultures, it is difficult to accept hardship, negative experiences and feelings, and unhappiness as integral parts of a good life, whereas in Eastern cultures, happiness includes the wisdom to embrace unhappiness as part of life. Negative feelings are to be accepted as parts of a truly happy life, given that hardship, suffering, and pain are unavoidable. An emphasis on self-cultivation and self-discipline renders Eastern concepts of happiness more tolerant toward negative experiences and feelings. Despair and failure are expected in the process of self-actualization and self-development (Joshanloo, 2014).

In Eastern cultures, *contentment* should be preserved in both happy and sad times (Kwee, 2012). Contentment is a balance between joy and sorrow, and it involves satisfaction and a sense of being at peace with oneself, others, and the whole cosmos, which is achieved through spiritual practice. Individuals' goal achievement, social comparison, and even the amount of suffering should not affect the sense of contentment, as it is accompanied by a sense of fulfillment and abundance (Joshanloo, 2014).

**LOCUS OF CONTROL** Culture shapes the way individuals appraise their emotions by informing individuals' subjective appraisal in the form of locus of control. Individuals characterized by an *internal* locus of control consider the outcomes of events to be contingent upon their own actions, whereas those characterized by an *external* locus of control view event outcomes as largely influenced by outside forces, such as other people and chance. In general, an internal locus of control is beneficial in motivating people to gratify their need for competence by actively engaging in strategic coping behavior. In a meta-analytic study, Cheng, Cheung, Chio, and Chan (2013) found moderately strong relationships between external locus of control, depression symptoms, and anxiety symptoms, and showed that the link between external locus of control and anxiety symptoms was weaker within collectivist cultures compared with individualist cultures. Autonomy,

which is felt more strongly in individualist cultures, is related to psychological well-being; the willingness of individuals in these cultures to confront and change the environment rather than staying inert fosters attainment of agentic goals (Cheng et al., 2013). By contrast, collectivist cultures promote interpersonal harmony and alignment with the environment, and their members are encouraged to change themselves, rather than their surroundings, which may foster calmness or contentedness (Cheng et al., 2013).

Cultural background explains not only differences in coping outcomes but also in strategies for handling stress. Members of collectivist cultures report more frequent deployment of *acceptance* for handling stressful events whose outcomes are beyond their control, resulting in lower levels of anxiety (Gan, Shang, & Zhang, 2007). In Eastern cultures, individuals have to accept the influence of the environment by following the flow of nature. Thus, acceptance of external control is also a form of personal control (Cheng et al., 2013). The term *fate control* refers to the belief that although events in life are predetermined by impersonal outside forces, there are ways in which individuals can shape the degree of such forces via specific culturally endorsed strategies. Fate control is endorsed more by collectivist cultures than their counterparts from individualist cultures (Leung & Bond, 2004). Although members of collectivist cultures tend to believe that events are predetermined by fate, they continue to strive to achieve better outcomes (Leung, Chen, & Lam, 2010), which is referred to as *negotiable fate*. Asians and Asian Americans believe in negotiable fate more than Caucasian Americans (Au et al., 2011).

Cultural backgrounds shape individuals' psychological, emotional, and cognitive tendencies, and at the same time, individuals also shape cultures. Lamoreaux and Morling, in a 2012 meta-analysis study, found that individuals shape cultural products through shared, tangible representations such as advertising, television, texts, laws, public behavior norms, Internet content, language, architecture, and the like. Thus, individuals are shaped by participating in the meanings, opportunities, and norms of specific cultures, and in turn, these culturally shaped individuals reinforce, recreate, and

maintain those cultural contexts (Lamoreaux & Morling, 2012). For example, U.S. cultural products manifest: power distance more than Korean cultural products; feminine characteristics less than Mexican, Korean, or Hong Kong cultural products; and masculinity more than non-U.S. cultural products. In an earlier meta-analysis, Morling and Lamoreaux (2008) also reported that North American cultural products such as psychology, communication, and business literatures are more individualistic and less collectivistic than those from East Asia.

### Conclusions

Understanding the role cultural background may play in relations among and between individuals and groups can strengthen efforts to achieve social goals, particularly in educational settings but also in other spheres of interaction. An understanding of the cultural background's role is also helpful in examining general trends related to individuals' perceptions of happiness, locus of control, and agency. As with other aspects of culture, while some generalization is possible, there also may be variation among individuals who outwardly may appear to share similar backgrounds. Thus, caution is advised in making broad explanatory statements, and individuals' self-perceptions must be taken into account.

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### CULTURAL CAPITAL

As the word *capital* suggests, *cultural capital* describes the “return on investment” (or lack thereof) that