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CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Cultural influences in the early history of anthropology as a discipline (approximately the late nineteenth to early twentieth century) referred to the widespread supposition that ideas, technology, and artistic styles had diffused from one central, originating cultural context to other peripheral cultures, rather than having been independently invented in different locations. While some cultural innovations do appear to have been transmitted in this manner, it has since become clear through improved dating of archaeological finds and other refinements to methods of study that independent invention is likely an equally or more important mechanism. Interrelationships between the concepts of cultural diffusion, unsupported early generalizations based on racial differences, and the now-discredited view of the general superiority of some cultures over others also have led to a decline in support for ideas about diffusion via cultural influences.

Cultural influences came to be considered in education through the adaptation of anthropological theories into educational thought. In education these ideas have been conceptualized using a variety of theories and terms, among which may be counted culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), critical race theory, and multicultural education. These viewpoints commonly focus on the role of cultural influences on learning, including components such as how family and community culture influence students' academic identity, or on learning style preferences (e.g., culture's role in fostering an individualist versus collectivist orientation toward learning). In addition, these approaches tend to foreground the role of differential access to power across cultural actors and

to privilege the understanding of how such power relationships may institutionalize inequity in educational outcomes.

Ideas about cultural influence ultimately have led to a position that espouses the need for teachers to be nonjudgmental and inclusive of the cultural backgrounds of their students in order to be effective in promoting learning in diverse classroom settings (e.g., Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). To develop a nuanced understanding of cultural influence is viewed as a difficult but achievable task, and one that is seen as vital to addressing inequity in the context of the larger, culturally pluralistic and democratic society.

Research Findings Related to Cultural Influences

Cultures influence individuals' values, personalities, cognitive styles, and psychological orientations to the world (Chang et al., 2011). At the broadest level, cultures may be considered collectivist or individualist in orientation based on how their members perceive relationships between individuals and society. Individualist cultures value (a) individualism, (b) change over tradition, and (c) gender equality, and individualism in turn is inversely correlated with cultural perceptions of power distance (i.e., accepting an unequal distribution of power). Collectivist-oriented cultures value stability and agreement across groups within the culture, and devalue individual freedom if it conflicts with these goals.

Examining these differences in slightly different terms, Fischer, Hanke, and Sibley (2012) in an extensive quantitative review (i.e., meta-analysis) study found that some cultures foster high social dominance orientation or group-based hierarchy. Lee, Pratto, and Johnson (2011) found that a higher social dominance orientation was associated with higher hierarchy-enhancing ideology in individualist cultures, and thus in these cultures subordinates (i.e., members of lower power ethnic groups) and females disagreed more with dominants (i.e., members of a more powerful group) in their views of group-based hierarchy, whereas in collectivist cultures subordinates are more similar to dominants in their approval of group-based hierarchy (Lee et al., 2011). Collectivist cultures, such as those in Albania, China, Colombia, India, Israel, Lebanon,

Pakistan, Palestine, Taiwan, the Tunisian Republic, Russia, and others also maintain or create political consensus by preventing calls from subordinates for greater equality, which helps preserve hierarchical social order (Lee et al., 2011). Thus, hierarchy and constraint mutually reinforce one another, so that inequality and social stability are maintained and that the existing hierarchical arrangements appear relatively beneficial, fixed, and inevitable (Lee et al., 2011).

Eastern and Western cultural differences can broadly be viewed in terms of social hierarchy versus equality, with Eastern cultures valuing hierarchy, conservatism, and harmony, whereas Western cultures value intellectual and affective autonomy and egalitarianism (Chang et al., 2011). Easterners focus on collectivism and an interdependent self—that is, seeing the self as part of an encompassing social relationship within which everyone's behavior is determined by and contingent on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship. Individuals may copy or learn from others either by directly interacting with them or by studying their ideas. In contrast, Westerners focus on individualism and independent self, valuing the inner feelings, thoughts, and actions of the self rather than comparing these to the feelings, thoughts, and actions of others. So Easterners focus on interpersonal relatedness, social hierarchy, and authority, whereas Westerners focus on independence, autonomy, and equality (Chang et al., 2011).

Individualist cultures eschew power distance between individuals and allow for greater intergroup dissension. Subordinates differentiate themselves from dominants more in individualist cultures than in collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures offer individuals more freedom to think and feel for themselves; thus subordinates may compare themselves to dominants, become more aware of how unequal their groups are, and reject group-based hierarchy. Thus, social mobility and freedom are associated with greater intergroup dissent, whereas security concerns and stability lead to less intergroup differentiation. Greater group dissension in individualist cultures suggests that greater freedom may give rise to greater demands for equality, especially among subordinates, leading

eventually to cultures with greater equality (Lee et al., 2011).

Culture not only influences how individuals understand their world but also influences their emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral responses to the events in their world, including their perceptions of justice or injustice. Shao, Rupp, Skarlicki, and Jones (2013) in a meta-analysis study found that culture influences employees' perceptions of how fairly they are treated at work. Justice effects are strongest among countries characterized by (a) individualism, (b) femininity (i.e., valuing interpersonal relationships and concerns for others; vs. masculinity [i.e., valuing personal assertiveness and personal gains]), (c) management certainty/predictability, and (d) low power distance (i.e., rejecting an unequal distribution of power). Although collectivist cultures also focus on interpersonal relationships, they value in-group goals over personal goals and norms rather than diversity of attitudes; individualist cultures focus not only on personal gains but also on personal feelings and rights.

Culture also influences expressions of individuals' emotions. In a meta-analysis study, Matsuzono (1989) found that high-power-distance (i.e., accepting an unequal distribution of power) collectivist cultures (a) valued hierarchy and group cohesion, while (b) devaluing individuality, and thus (c) the communication of negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness threatened group solidarity and interpersonal social structures, and therefore were discouraged. In contrast, low-power-distance individualist cultures valued the communication of negative emotions, viewing these as related to individual freedom to perceive and express one's self rather than as something threatening to social structures.

Cultures also influence individuals' learning styles. Collectivist Eastern cultures emphasize conservatism, harmony, and hierarchy, leading to learning behaviors that are oriented toward copying, memorizing, and attending to details. These also depend on conformity, compliance, and relatively low self-concept, all of which facilitate getting along with and copying others. These learning styles are based on cultural attitudes about conformity and compliance. In contrast, in individualist Western

cultures, independence, autonomy, self-confidence, equality, lack of compliance and conformity, and individual detachment from groups characterize learning styles. These are based in drawing reference internally to one's own attributes rather than externally by comparison to group norms. Associated learning styles in these cultures are supportive of critical thinking and innovative problem solving (Chang et al., 2011).

Effectiveness of teaching approaches are also influenced by culture, as learning preferences vary across cultures (Rodrigues, Bu, & Min, 2000). Individuals in low-power-distance individualist cultures tend to be low on measures of uncertainty avoidance and prefer a hands-on approach, whereas individuals in high-power-distance collectivist cultures tend to score higher on measures of uncertainty avoidance and prefer a teacher-centered approach (Rodrigues et al., 2000).

Culture influences individuals' ideological attitudes, which in turn are related to their measured cognitive ability. In a meta-analysis, Van Hiel, Onraet, and De Pauw (2010) found that authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, conservatism, and dogmatism were associated with (a) lower cognitive flexibility and complexity; (b) lower tolerance for ambiguity; and (c) lower cognitive ability: individuals with higher cognitive ability tend to adhere to left-wing social attitudes (social progressivism), whereas those with lower cognitive ability tend to adhere to right-wing social attitudes (social conservatism; Van Hiel et al., 2010). This might indicate that individuals in traditional, conservative, dogmatic, authoritarian, and ethnocentric cultures use fewer cognitive resources than other cultures.

Conclusions

Having an understanding of cultural influences and how their history and operation inform roles and relationships in contemporary society is vital to the success of efforts to promote tolerance, equity, and excellence in education and other social endeavors. Research provides one way to develop such understanding, but thoughtful discussion and reflection also are vital components. Broad conceptions of individualist versus collectivist perspectives and the corresponding influences of these conceptions provides a foundation upon which to build a more

nuanced understanding of specific cultures and the individuals who constitute them.

Kyung-Hee Kim

Michael S. Matthews

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