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## **The Discourse of Cultural Psychology: Transforming the Discourses of Self, Memory, Narrative and Culture**

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**Abstract** The new discipline ‘cultural psychology’ has identified the dominant psychology, including its universalistic ‘cross-cultural’ version, as derived from a particular historical and cultural discourse. What receives only short shrift is that cultural psychology itself is also a body of texts and contexts linked with particular cultural and historical traditions. As examples of cultural psychology, Brockmeier and Wang’s papers (Brockmeier, 2002; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002) are critically examined with special regard to the tendencies of perpetuating the Western discourse, reifying analytical notions, and ethnocentric comparison and contrast. Further, it is argued that, in order for cultural psychology to become more ‘cultural’ than it has been hitherto, a rethinking about ‘culture’, especially along the lines of cultural studies, is required and that such a re-conceptualization calls for not less but more intercultural disciplinary dialogue and critique on ‘psychology’. In this perspective, transforming existing discourses of mind, self and other can, and should, become an important task of cultural psychology.

**Key Words** cultural psychology, cultural studies, discourse, ethnocentrism

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## The Discourse of Cultural Psychology: Transforming the Discourses of Self, Memory, Narrative and Culture

### Cultural Psychology vs General Psychology

The recent turn to culture in Western psychology has brought new diversity to the field. This project, manifested in a growing number of major papers, monographs and conferences—and, certainly, *Culture & Psychology*—has opened up new horizons, over and beyond the universal ideals of general psychology and even of cross-cultural psychology.

This new program, generally known as ‘cultural psychology’, has

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identified the dominant Western psychology, including universal-minded cross-cultural psychology, as deriving from particular historical discourses, specifically Cartesian discourse and the discourse of Enlightenment (Cole, 1996: ch. 1; Gergen, 1999; Shweder, 1990; for the case of the Western psychology of memory, see Brockmeier, 2002). Cultural psychology argues that this Western discourse, portraying the person as an independent and autonomous individual, not only ignores the possibility of human beings from other cultures who might have different experiences and identities, but also neglects the ways that social and cultural practices permeate and constitute individuals' 'psychological' worlds. Furthermore, it has increasingly realized that the basic 'psychological' concepts, such as 'mind', 'self', 'cognition', 'memory', 'emotion', are different across cultures (e.g. Danziger, 1997; Harré, 1986; Lutz, 1988). So, generalization via culture-specific Western theories, models and concepts may not just lead to misleading research results, but also perpetuate the already unequal power relationship within scholarship. The central claim of cultural psychology is that the human mind should be seen as inter-penetrated by intentional worlds that are culturally and historically variable (e.g. Cole, 1996; Shweder, 1990). In the widely accepted definition advanced by Shweder (1990),

Cultural psychology is the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion. Cultural psychology is the study of the ways subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practice live together, require each other, and dynamically, dialectically, and jointly make each other up. (p. 1)

In addition to theoretical innovation and sophistication, cultural psychology has also identified the symbolic mediation of mind and culture as its analytical focus (e.g. Harré & Gillett, 1994; Neisser, 1994; Wertsch, 1991, 1998). This means that culture and mind are to be treated as forms of culturally differentiated semiotic practices.

Thus, cultural psychology, along with discursive psychology, has dismantled many of the traditional distinctions and categories in Western psychology, such as the personal and the social, self and other, the interior and the exterior, thinking and acting, memory and narrative. In the cultural psychology of memory, remembering has been extended to objects and devices of mnemonics, institutions of remembrance and practices of commemoration (Brockmeier, 2002; Middleton & Edwards, 1990). Most importantly, it draws attention to the cultural organization, or saturation, of what was traditionally thought to be

individual, private and subjective territory. Here in particular, it has highlighted the socially, especially discursively, constructed nature of psychological experiences.

## **Cultural Modernism: Self, Memory and Narrative**

What appears to have been overlooked, or at most received only short shrift, however, is that cultural psychology itself may not be the only valid form of 'psychology', but it, too, is a form of discourse, that is, a body of texts/activities and contexts, and is subject to the same kind of discourse study as the modern Western psychology it has deconstructed. For example, its own texts, including its notions, theoretical perspective and methods, can, and should, be examined from a historical, cultural and political perspective. Failing to realize this discursive nature of the discipline, or to gloss it over in its production process, is tantamount to creating yet another discourse of naturalization and universalization, hence monopoly of truth, and thereby excluding other possible cultural discourses of 'psychology'.

To ascertain this academic, professional layer of cultural reflexivity, we need only to look at what the practitioners do, as Geertz (1973, p. 19) has suggested. In this case, we may recall just a few familiar facts of cultural psychology. For example, where do its epistemological assumptions and theoretical perspective come from? (For example, whose discourses do the practitioners routinely mobilize as unquestionable premises?) How are the data constructed and interpreted, and what are they used for? (For example, in whose terms are they evaluated and whose claims are being supported?) How is their work presented, marketed, and what purpose does it serve? (For example, is it a singular truthful way of doing [cultural] psychology, and to what use can it be put regarding the development of human cultures?)

To illustrate this point in some detail, I shall focus on the two papers by Brockmeier and Wang in this issue (Brockmeier, 2002; Wang & Brockmeier, 2002), which I regard as exemplars of cultural psychology. But before we begin the analysis, let me reiterate that I sympathize with cultural psychology more than with any other strain of psychology that I know of and regard it as a more holistic and sophisticated approach than any others currently on offer. So the two texts I shall try to dissect here are meant merely to draw attention to the kinds of tendencies we as cultural psychologists should try to avoid, and, more generally, to issues of reflexivity in social science as a whole (Woolgar, 1988).

First, I would like to argue that the authors here premise their theoretical perspective on a particular, Western, lineage of discourse and yet

reflect little on the cultural nature of their discourse. To begin with, it may be observed that they are concerned with formulating a cultural notion of memory in terms of narrative. Where do their basic arguments come from? From period to period, layer upon layer, arguments are assembled from a 'close-knit' group of widely quoted Western authors. By cultural psychology's own logic, this heavy load of underlying Western assumptions would equally restrict the applicability of cultural psychology to the understanding of peoples from other cultures. Apparently, this is forgotten, or rather, to follow Brockmeier's (2002) proposed conception, it is taken over by a different discourse, which, at least implicitly, is that of natural and neutral description. The author's very attempt to compare and translate culturally different ways of thinking is the evidence of such presumed cultural transcendence. (I will re-analyze this act shortly.)

Secondly, while the authors call for the recognition of the cultural organization of human experience, they seem to assume that they are able to extract some abstract, external, neutral facts from semiotically mediated social practice. This is the case with a number of central notions that the authors highlight as part of their theoretical construction: 'narrative', 'storyline', 'orders of discourse' and, indeed, 'culture' and 'individual'. These theoretical constructs are presented as if they had independent existence: that is, as if they have structures and properties that are free from the theorists' own desire and interest.

Let us look, for example, at the use of the notion of 'culture'. Wang and Brockmeier (2002) state,

We view culture as the system and the process of symbolic mediation—a mode of configuration, that is, in which language is pivotal. Manifesting itself in social institutions as well as in the actions, thoughts, emotions, beliefs and moral values of individuals, culture regulates both intra-personal and inter-personal psychological functions, to put it in Vygotskian terms. (pp. 45–46)

Thus, in a number of comparative projects that Wang and Brockmeier's paper draws upon, the cultural categories of '(Caucasian) American' and 'Chinese/Asian' are employed as taken-for-granted notions, rather than specified or analyzed or contested ones. Similarly, narrative is projected as something that has intrinsic properties or meaning prior to or independent of social practice. As Brockmeier (2002) suggests,

... the multifunctional nature of narrative discourse is pivotal here, the fact that narrative is capable of playing a number of different (cognitive, social and emotive) roles at the same time... Yet there is still another and, perhaps, more fundamental potential of narrative at work... This is

narrative's distinctive capacity to give shape to the temporal dimension of human experience. (p. 27)

See also the Conclusion of Brockmeier's paper, where narrative is viewed as 'an important integrating force in the mnemonic system of a culture' and 'a particular synthesis of distinct elements' (p. 36). This notion of narrative is typical of logocentric approaches to language and communication where abstract signs and other semiotic structures are assumed to have intrinsic, fixed meanings. I should like to point out that narrative as abstract structure, just like those of argumentation and explanation, is but a resource for social interaction (like words in a language), which has meaning only when it is embodied in practical activity.

Thirdly, I want to argue that cross-cultural data comparison is made from an ethnocentric, Western, point of view. Moreover, there is scant attention paid to how such cultural psychological work can actually help with improving the wellbeing of individuals, groups or institutions or future cultural development. The several comparative studies of 'Caucasian American' and 'Chinese' 'cultural groups' cited and described in Wang and Brockmeier's paper is a case in point. Here a first problem is the lack of context information about the data collected—which is vital in any discourse-oriented study. For example, one might read the conversation by 'American mother-daughter pair' rather differently: given the available information, many of the daughter's references to family activities and collective experiences can be understood as showing precisely the opposite of 'individuality' and 'unique autobiographical self'. Another methodological difficulty lies in the question of how readers are to make sense of the cross-cultural comparisons of autobiographical memory when, as the authors agree, people's basic concepts, such as those of 'self', 'memory' or 'life story', can be culturally different. This is directly related to my next concern, namely with the way that the 'American' and 'Asian/Chinese' discourse data are contrasted and evaluated. Let us look at a couple of quotations from the paper (italic type is mine):

In a study with Korean, Chinese and American preschoolers, researchers interviewed 4- and 6-year-olds in each country in their native language, asking a series of open-ended questions about recent life events such as how children spent their last birthday (Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998). It was found that, *compared with Asian children's memory narratives, American children's* narratives were more complex and elaborate, as indicated in their more frequent use of temporal markers (*words that indicate chronological time and complex temporal and causal relations*), descriptives (*words that*

provide descriptive texture to the narrative, including adjective, adverbs and modifiers) and internal state language (*words* indicating inner cognitive and emotional processes). *In addition*, while American children tended to focus on themselves when describing specific past events, *Asian children* often provided '*bare-bones*' accounts of routine activities that, however, involved significant others. (Wang & Brockmeier, 2002, pp. 52–53)

I would have thought that, for making sense of children's talk (or anyone's), it would be essential to take account of the life circumstances of such talk. Relying solely on lexicon and grammar can be misleading, and here this is further complicated by the elusive nature of cross-linguistic 'translation', if we indeed agree on culturally different worlds. Therefore, contextual ways of expressing time, events, internal states, which can be culturally different, should also be brought into the picture. More subtly, it should be noted that, in this apparently cross-cultural study, American children are placed center-stage, with Asian children in the background, as a mere negative contrast. Each and every variable chosen—from whose method?—has the American children on the positive side of the comparative continuum. When Asian children are added to the description, a negative picture is painted. To illustrate this pattern of discourse further:

When discussing with their 3-year-old children shared past experiences, American mothers often provide *rich* and *embellished* information about the events under discussion, *elaborate* on and *supplement* children's responses, and *invite children to co-construct* stories of the shared past. *In contrast*, Chinese mothers tend to *pose and repeat questions* in order to elicit memory information from their children *without providing embellishment or following up* on children's responses, with the conversation *often resembling a memory test*. Correspondingly, American children *frequently provide more event information* than do their Chinese peers during family memory-sharing. (p. 56)

Granted that the conditions of the data collection were the same for both groups, and the hidden difficulty of the compatibility of different cultural practices and experiences aside, it may be noted that the parameters set for comparison here, again, have the American group on the positive side of the evaluative continuum. Then, inevitably, the Chinese group falls into the negative category, hence the polarizations. But it seems to me that one needs to be critically conscious of where these parameters or methods come from. Whose value do they reflect? Would the Chinese members themselves feel the same about the phenomena being examined or evaluate them in the same terms? In other words, do these memory-experimental

activities mean the same to the members as to these professionals? In what way do such contrasts help with the cultural groups being studied?

## The Politics of Cultural Psychology

If the kinds of tendency I pointed to above are not incidental or marginal, but typical in the current practice of cultural psychology, then we require nothing short of a conceptual and methodological reorientation. If cultural psychology is itself also a form of cultural discourse and subject to the same postmodernist critique to which it has exposed universalist Western psychology, then it should take steps to prevent itself from falling into the pitfalls it has discovered and to try to turn the apparent problem of disciplinary cultural reflexivity into an advantage. Indeed, whilst my sympathy *is* on the side of a culturalist approach to human experience and action, I do think that cultural psychology is not 'cultural' enough. Certain things need yet to happen and other things need to be put higher on the agenda.

### Culture as Contested Discourses

Central to this reorientation, I believe, is to rethink the notion of culture itself. Thus, first and foremost, I suggest that we become more profoundly aware of the discursive and, in particular, the contested nature of what we have normally taken to be 'culture', just as we are, by now, of Western psychology. That is, culture is not fixed, nor is it homogeneous, but always exists in situated, dynamic, largely discursive *versions*, and hence is always in tension (Clifford, 1992; Geertz, 1973, p. 29; Hall, 1996, 1999; Shi-xu & Kienpointner, 2001; Williams, 1976). For culture, like race and nation, is part of historically shifting discourses (Williams, 1976), and it is maintained, negotiated, utilized and transformed in popular and professional discourses as well. Thus, drawing on the political tradition of cultural studies (e.g. Hall, 1996, 1999; Said, 1993) and critical anthropology (e.g. Clifford, 1988, 1992), we should define culture as sets of meanings embedded in discourse that are contested along gender, race, ethnicity, class or other group-based categories. So culture is not a semantic or abstract unit, but a part and form of situated texts, hence 'discursive culture' or 'the discourse of culture'. As part of discourse, culture can be either an element of the context of textual production, circulation or interpretation (including texts from the past), or part of the object of discursive construction (e.g. 'the East', 'the West'). Such meaningful entities typically involve (e.g. imply or presuppose) versions of the origin, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, nationality and patterns of thinking and



acting of a particular group of people associated with a particular geopolitical place and historical time. Instances of culture or rather discourses of culture are contested media texts about 'the future identity of Hong Kong' and their relevant contexts; or diverse texts about the current situation in Northern Ireland and their relevant contexts of conflict. It should be clear that to say that culture is discursive and contested does not mean that we researchers should no longer use the notion. We continue to employ it as we have to, not as explanatory device or unquestionable category, but as a contestable and contested concept: for example, objects for deconstruction or interpretive resources. (In this connection, it may be mentioned that theoretical concepts and categories such as 'culture' and 'narrative' must not be used to reify the very objects that we researchers are supposed to analyze and specify, but rather are constructed to serve analytical, social and political purposes.)

### **Culture as Power Struggle**

By becoming more profoundly conscious of the discursive and contested nature of culture, I mean furthermore, and especially, that in doing cultural psychology we must pay attention to power asymmetry and power struggle as an essential and integral part of culture and, therefore, of psychology. We need to realize, in other words, that we are not merely dealing with 'culture interacting with psychology', as is usually understood, but perforce encounter the seen but unnoticed political issues of domination, prejudice, exclusion and resistance and, consciously or inadvertently, make our own political choice, that is, take sides. Currently—if we recall the common conception of cultural psychology referred to above—the notion of power is missing from the picture, just as it is from Western psychology more generally (see also Hermans, 2001, p. 271). There is not yet an explicit recognition that 'culture', 'context', 'background', 'practice', 'the intentional world', and so on, as envisioned in cultural psychology, are all saturated with power struggle. But the importance and usefulness of the incorporation of power into our theoretical horizon is no more forcibly demonstrated than by the recent attacks on America's World Trade Center and the Pentagon and their wider, and unfolding, historical and intercultural context of division and conflict.

Power is conceived of as the effect of social and cultural practice whereby things get done or people are put under control (cf. Giddens, 1984). It is manifested in various aspects of social events and practices, such as texts and talk, and can also be related to instruments or resources for action (e.g. knowledge and social positions). As an

integral part of social action and social event, it is also always morally defined, that is, associated with the norms and values of specific cultural and historical contexts, such that power can appear in the form of domination, exclusion, resistance or equilibrium. In the analysis of power, there are two particular forms of power imbalance that deserve special, critical attention.

One is *ideology* and the other *hegemony*. Ideology refers to symbolic power (or power consequence), whereby one group becomes dominated, excluded, prejudiced against by another—'symbolic violence'—and which is smoothed over or turned 'natural' or 'universal' through 'commonsensical' ways of thinking and speaking (Billig, 1991; Bourdieu, 1991; see also Shi-xu, 1994). From the present power-minded perspective, what is far worthier of attention than 'cultural/linguistic' differences is such ideologies in the cultural psychological process, because they are detrimental to the lives of social others and often hidden. Moreover, it will be realized that ideology has its antithesis: that is, oppression begets resistance.

Another form of unequal power relation worthy of attention, hegemony (in the sense of Gramsci, 1971), resides in the existing *context* of global discourse in which we produce, distribute, consume—and analyze—culture and psychology. Such contextual power imbalance is usually defined institutionally (e.g. government, education, health service, family, religion, ethnic groups, communities). It is part of discourse context, which means that it is part, and kind, of discursive, contextual interpretation, rather than merely a structural and material phenomenon. Indeed, the present proposal has been motivated at least in part by the observation that our cultural worlds are steeped in the context of historically evolved hegemony. Such hegemony refers especially to the existing relations of domination, exploitation, exclusion, prejudice, between the (Middle) East and the West, the North and the South, the center and the periphery, the Empire and the colony, as well as classes and genders—despite the now fashionable discourse of 'globalization'.

Thus, the social conditions under which we live can be analyzed in terms of differential power relations, where one group is dominated by another, through differential power resources that are available to some groups or individuals but not to others. For any form of psychology to pretend this context is not there, to reduce it to domains outside of 'culture', is to render the occupation ineffectual and, perhaps worse still, to collude to legitimate, consolidate and perpetuate the existing hegemonic global order and aura.

### **Intercultural Dialogue and Critique of 'Psychologies'**

Although culture, psychology and cultural psychology are culturally diverse and contested versions of social discourse, this does not mean that cultural psychology will have to slip into cultural relativism. I want to argue, to the contrary, that in spite—in some sense because—of the contested nature of culture, hence also of 'psychology' and disciplinary knowledge, cultural psychology should, and can, be mobilized to encourage and enable intercultural dialogue and critique (and not just criticism in the self- or other-negating sense), critique both of itself and of other cultural forms of 'psychology'.

There are several reasons why intercultural dialogue and critique are desirable and possible. First, and most obviously, as Shweder (1990) expresses it, 'what is truly true (beautiful, good) within one intentional world . . . is not necessarily universally true (beautiful, good) in every intentional world' (p. 3). However, there is still a possibility that some psychological perspective has served its cultural environment more successfully than others and, therefore, can benefit other cultural forms of psychology. (By the same token, less successful ones can serve as negative examples for them.) Secondly, because we live in an increasingly interconnected but conflicting globe, the world's 'psychologies' have an opportunity, and obligation, to come together to co-construct commonly beneficial experience and to devise ways to prevent or reduce division and conflict. Most fundamentally perhaps, because we as both intellectuals and ordinary human beings have moral and rational consciousness, the consciousness to strive for a justifiable and better life (Freire, 1972; Shi-xu, 2001), there is also hope that cultural psychologists have the capacity to break out boundaries of disciplines, cultures, self, and engage in intercultural dialogical and critical construction for a better, common future.

A crucial question that follows is how to conduct intercultural dialogue and critique in psychology. A number of tacks can be taken in such intercultural interaction. One is to introduce more of other cultural, for example non-Western, traditions of 'psychology' and even cognate or related disciplines into the current, largely Western, forum of 'psychology'. Another is to make use of intellectual resources from other cultures to enrich the existing cultural psychological concepts, models and methodology. Furthermore, other than de-contextualized comparison and contrast, cultural psychology should work with other cultural traditions to find, create and develop common bases for intercultural criticism and critique in psychology. Then, these different approaches can go on to co-construct new ways of practicing psychology that are suited to fast-shifting cultural realities (Bal, aan der Wand,

& Janssen, 1996; Bal, Crewe, & Spitzer, 1999). Last but not least, cultural psychology should continue to examine critically its own cultural and historical limitations. Throughout this dialogical and critical process, emphatically, we should no longer act in an omniscient manner, but rather try to interact with our professional Other on an equal basis. Only in this way can a truly cultural approach to psychology begin to emerge.

### **Deconstructing and Transforming the Discourses of Culture and Mind**

Now, if the defining feature of the cultural organization of psychology is power, and, in particular, the relation and practice of domination and repression, then, clearly, cultural psychology is faced with a political choice: either to collude with the existing orders of ideology and hegemony or to change them. In this regard, I would like to suggest that cultural psychology align with the political tradition of cultural studies (*à la* Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1982; Hall, 1996, 1999; Said, 1993, for example). The objective of cultural studies is to change the way in which we live. More specifically, it attempts to address, in the words of Hall (1996), the 'central, urgent, and disturbing questions of a society' (p. 337), and, I would add, to do so in the interests of repressed and underprivileged groups of people. It was thus a new, political project with 'deadly seriousness of intellectual work' (Hall, 1999, p. 108). For cultural psychology, this means that a reoriented, politically motivated methodology is required that goes beyond 'description' and even 'informed interpretation' and seeks to bring about *change* towards common equality in individual and cultural life as the ultimate consciousness of intellectual and academic work. Put another way, cultural psychologists should make their political choice explicit and continuously try to attain, in dialogue with the already repressed social and cultural groups they choose to side with, what they both believe to be a better (more helpful, more beautiful) experience. More concretely perhaps, it may be said that cultural psychologists should take the position of what Gramsci (1971) called organic intellectuals and engage with such socio-culturally pressing issues as social alienation and division, racism, sectarianism, environmental disaster, and, the most urgent of all at the present moment, the increasing threats of sustained worldwide violence and terror.

There can be at least two major types of strategy that cultural psychology can take to accomplish that political-methodological goal: deconstructive, on the one hand, and transformational, on the other. By

'deconstructive' is meant the method to expose, challenge, undermine or resist existing, repressive ways of thinking and speaking about, for example, mind, memory, self and culture. By 'transformational' is meant the procedure to create new and alternative patterns of discourse about individual and cultural life that are useful and helpful to the groups that we believe are already repressed, prejudiced, excluded or marginalized (see also Shi-xu, 2001; Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001).

So, for example, there is a great need, and opportunity, for cultural psychology to engage critically and constructively with the patterns of 'mental' and 'cultural' talk following the terrorist attacks in America. The US Secretary of State Colin Powell told Afghanistan: either hand over bin Laden or meet *the full wrath* of the United States. Here massive, violent military attack is turned into a matter of emotion. In mobilizing the military buildup around the world, President Bush stated to the international community: either you are with America, or you are on the side of the terrorists. By categorizing any dissenting individuals, groups and countries as terrorists, the US Government has continued to try not only to dominate the rest-of-the-world's thinking and behaving, but also to threaten them with military action. What seems missing, or forgotten, from the West-dominated media narrative on Palestine, Iraq, the Arabs, the Muslims, fundamentalists, fanatics and, above all, the evil of the world is the broader, historical context in which the West, especially the United States, has dominated politically, economically and militarily. On a positive note, cultural psychology can have an important, active role to play in the current human tragedy too. One obvious task is to help construct a healing discourse so as to forget hatred, pain and horror. Such a discourse should perhaps begin with making sense of terrorism, the evil and suicide bombers in light of the world's historical context in which they were bred. More importantly perhaps, new and alternative discourses of human cultures must be created and cultivated that will help prevent further waves of hatred and terrorism and favor world justice and peace. Such a discourse should be based on the hitherto much suppressed themes of human cultural diversity, equality and common destination.

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### Biography

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