

## **CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: STILL STRUGGLING WITH ITS ENCOUNTERS OF THE OTHER**

Laungani, P M (2007) **Understanding Cross-Cultural Psychology: Eastern and Western Perspectives**. London: Sage Publications. ISBN-13: 978-0761971542. Pages xvi + 280.

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Cross-cultural psychology has been at the forefront in demonstrating that psychological phenomena differ according to their cultural setting and it has identified various cultural factors that can explain these differences (Ratner and Hui, 2003). One of the first to draw a link between psychology and the environment in which one lives was Vygotsky (1978). In his book **Mind and society**, Vygotsky highlights that the mind and society cannot be understood in isolation. Human beings are the only animal who uses tools to alter their own inner world as well as the world around them. It is the society that provides the individual with the tools to shape the private processes of mind.

However, despite promising roots in Vygotsky's work, the history of cross-cultural psychology has been plagued with theoretical and methodological limitations, and writing an introductory book to cross-cultural psychology is by no means an easy task. For the purpose of this review, I would like readers to envisage a continuum of cross-cultural psychology. The one extreme of the continuum represents the views of scholars who have made sweeping generalisations about psychological differences among groups that are often based on abstract notions of cultural variables and a questionable conception of the interaction between biological and cultural factors on psychology (Ratner and Hui, 2003). The other side of the continuum represents more critical and analytical scholars (e.g. Ratner, 1991 and Jovchelovitch, 2007) who draw on more concrete cultural factors in explaining and understanding psychological phenomena. This review seeks to place Laungani's book **Understanding Cross-Cultural Psychology: Eastern and Western Perspectives** on this continuum.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing five chapters. The first part introduces conceptual and theoretical issues within cross-cultural psychology and the second part deals with more applied and descriptive issues within the discipline. The geographical focus of this book is India, representing Eastern cultures, and England and America representing Western cultures.

The first three chapters examine the meanings assigned to the term “culture” and explore the role and scope of cross-cultural psychology in understanding the cross-cultural differences in Eastern and Western cultures. In chapter one, Laungani starts off by providing an overview of the uses and abuses of “culture” and gives examples of national stereotypes. He states that “although stereotypes have little or no basis in reality, they are widely shared. They may arise from our initial impressions and intuitions, through hearsay, through the prevalent beliefs within our own in-group, through experience, which may be imagined, baseless, or fantasized” (Laungani, 2007:23). Nevertheless, Laungani arguably falls into the very trap he warns against in his own work – when in chapter three Laungani proposes a theoretical model that offers four interrelated core values or factors, which he claims distinguish Western cultures from Eastern cultures.

“The four core values or factors are:

- Individualism – Communalism (Collectivism)
- Cognitivism – Emotionalism
- Free will – Determinism
- Materialism – Spiritualism” (Laungani, 2007:57)

Although Laungani seeks to avoid charges of stereotyping by saying these distinctions are not dichotomous – but rather situated along a continuum, the rest of the book fails to be adequately reflective of this continuum. Little attention is paid to the complexities within cultures.

The final two chapters of part one provide some useful insights to the ethical considerations and methodological issues that are present in cross-cultural psychology. Most of the basic ethical considerations one would expect to find in an introductory book are mentioned. These include avoidance of exploitation, awareness of motives and culturally inappropriate behaviour, and a discussion of some of the cultural aspects, such as gender, belief systems and traditions that one should pay extra attention to. Case studies usefully highlight how bad things can go if ethical considerations are ignored. The discussion of ethics is placed into context and history, starting off with the Nuremberg Code, which provides the reader with a real and useful understanding of why ethical considerations in cross-cultural psychology are so important. Nevertheless there is a critical gap in the absence of attention to the execution and understanding of ethical measures, which is often argued to be a Western construct, in diverse settings – a focus one would hope for in a cross-cultural psychology book.

Laungani succeeds in directing the reader through some of the most important methodological issues in cross-cultural psychology. Through useful and thought provoking questions he gets the reader to think about how one can interpret a scenario in a different culture. This is followed by a discussion of experimental and non-experimental methods within cross-cultural psychology. The emic-etic dilemma within cross-cultural psychology is rightfully described in great detail, highlighting the approach by the *etically* oriented researchers who approach cross-cultural psychology from a trans- or meta-cultural perspective, as opposed to *emically* oriented researchers who view phenomena through the eyes of their subjects (see Helfrich, 1999 for a more detailed debate). The chapter rounds up with a comprehensive list of factors and questions that cross-cultural psychologists ought to consider before conducting research. These include: the nature and type of problem and culture being investigated, the theoretical underpinnings and

orientation of the problem and the investigators and some more practical considerations such as funding, time and use of electronic devices.

The second part of the book covers some of the more common and applied perspectives of cross-cultural psychology, including family structures and child-rearing practices, cultural interaction and perception, health, illness, happiness, death and bereavement. Before leading the reader through these applied areas of life, Laungani takes the reader on a fantasy research trip to India. The journey highlights many of the preformed attitudes, assumptions and stereotypes that Laungani believes Westerners have of India or the East. This imaginary journey is an unorthodox but refreshing way to get the reader thinking about the applied perspectives of cross-cultural psychology that are to follow. Chapter seven goes on to introduce some of the main features underlying contemporary Western and Eastern families. The term “family” is discussed with reference to socio-historic developments in the West and in the East. The content covers a broad range of issues, from variations in family structures including lesbian and gay relationships to Hijras (people often referred to as the “third sex”), right through to features of and changes to extended families in India and in Western culture. Looking at contemporary influences on family life in India, Laungani puts forward an insightful debate on the impact of globalisation in homogenising the developing world as it adopts the so-called Western values of *individualism, rationalism, humanism, empiricism* and *secularism* in the process. Laungani, however, believes that Indian society has displayed the ability to withstand cultural invasion and concludes the chapter by saying “in terms of physical distance, the West has crept closer to the East. But in terms of fundamental cultural values, it remains as distant as it ever was. Perhaps, a little less so!” (Laungani, 2007:155).

Chapter eight touches on social representations theory, and argues that we all perceive the world and the people in it through a subjective lens. Our self-perceptions also change with time and context and are effectively equally subjective. This chapter presents the reader with some critical reflections on the communication between people of different cultures and in power imbalanced positions e.g. the client-therapist relationship.

In chapter nine Laungani discusses health and wellbeing in relation to four interrelated issues which can be paired up: health as “freedom from” disease, discussed both in relation to physical and mental health, which is seen in biological terms and “freedom to” health and happiness discussed in relation to other cross-cultural models of health, happiness and illness. From these discussions emerges Laungani’s core argument of the chapter that Western notions of health and wellbeing, especially mental health, are unduly influenced by biomedicine, whose interests are closely tied to the imperatives of a free-market economy. Responding to the popularity of counselling and psychotherapy in many western settings, Laungani, based on a personal experience at a conference in Oxford, argues that counsellors may inadvertently damage health rather than “cure” it. Laungani subsequently introduces the reader to an alternative approach, rooted in Eastern worldviews and understandings of well-being, which he calls positive psychology. According to this approach, feelings of empowerment, assertiveness, inner growth and positive development – attained through positive communalistic experiences - are positive alternatives to conventional western notions of “treatment” and “therapy”.

The chapters of this book cover key stages over the life course. The development of “being’ through culture, through to family life, health, illness - with a final chapter on death and bereavement. We all have to die and in both Western and Eastern cultures there is a fear

of death. However, according to Laungani we deal with death differently. He goes on to say that compared to people from Eastern countries, Westerner's medicalised and secular approach to death tends to be ritual-free, whereas people from Eastern countries place greater emphasis on and give meaning to death-related rituals. The applied perspectives outlined in the second part of this book bring forward clear examples of Laungani's endeavour to explain how the societies of the East and the West are constructed and have different values, and henceforth assumes that psychological differences are due to the differences in social value.

### **With *Understanding Cross-Cultural Psychology: Eastern and Western Perspectives***

Laungani has produced a remarkable introductory textbook to cross-cultural psychology. Three points are noteworthy. Firstly, the book takes the reader on an introductory and personal journey through cross-cultural psychology in the company of some of our greatest philosophers including Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Plato and Popper. The journey introduces and prepares the reader for an encounter with other cultures and diverse epistemologies. The clear structure of the book allows the reader to sit down comfortably and really enjoy the journey from the West to the East. Complex concepts are clearly illustrated with examples and contrasting interpretations, gently illuminating and challenging the perspective and assumptions of the reader. Secondly, despite these strengths, the book unfortunately generalises and dichotomises the West and the East. In so doing, it falls into the trap of much cross-cultural psychology, which generates stereotypes and labels. Ironically Laungani himself expresses disapproval of this tendency in other peoples' work, yet does not avoid it in his own (cf Laungani, 2007:5). Thirdly, despite a very refreshing first person writing style, the numerous personal reflections and interpretations evident throughout this book leave it full of questionable value judgements which can at times be off-putting.

If we return to the continuum outlined in the beginning, it is clear from this review that this book is closer to the cross-cultural psychology work that generalises and dichotomises than to the more concrete and critical cross-cultural psychology work. Through the provision of analytical tools, some social psychologists have taken this as a challenge to open up the important pluralist work evident in cross-cultural psychology. These include Sandra Jovchelovitch (2007) – who has developed a social psychological approach to knowledge, which analyses the personal, interpersonal and socio-cultural worlds in which we live through social representations. Her analysis and insight into diverse epistemologies down to a community level, highlights the various knowledge systems, representations and cultures that exist within cultures. Her work provides cross-cultural psychologists with the tools and theoretical framework to avoid dichotomising and generalising "cultures".

Despite these problems, the book stands out for its personal and spiritual touch. ***Understanding Cross-Cultural Psychology: Eastern and Western Perspectives*** is a truly insightful introductory book which, provided it is read alongside more critical cross-cultural psychology work, will be useful for students as it is easily readable, exceptionally well-structured and constantly refers to original pieces of work and great philosophers.

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