

The Study of Diversity in Human Development: Culture, Urgencies, and Perils

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The emphasis on the study of diversity, a growing area of research in developmental psychology, reflects an increasing awareness of the need to recognize the value of the differences among people. This changing climate has stimulated a debate about what many scholars perceive to be the shortcomings of epistemological and methodological perspectives that have dominated the field of child development throughout the second part of the twentieth century. As an example, in the preface to the influential volume on *Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development* co-edited with Rodney Cocking, Patricia Greenfield [1994] wrote that:

The field of developmental psychology is an ethnocentric one dominated by a Euro-American perspective ... At international conferences, all too often, colonial and other hierarchical power relations are replicated at the intellectual level. Cross-cultural and racial/ethnic findings are evaluated in terms of established mainstream Euro-American evidence ... The dominant knowledge base of current developmental psychology comes from Euro-American researchers studying the development of children from their own cultural experience. Significantly, a largely unacknowledged consequence is that our developmental knowledge is primarily knowledge of the acquisition of Euro-American culture as this process transpires in the United States ... When one group, the majority, has the exclusive power, through science, to define the nature of itself and all the other groups in a society, all minority groups are *ipso facto* disempowered (pp. x–xi).

Such an ethnocentric approach, it is thought, does not yield an accurate account of human development.

The call to redress these biases has been taken seriously. Minority groups are now routinely included in developmental research, and previously ignored or stigmatized ‘modes of being’, thinking, and relating have come to the fore of psychological discussion. In the context of this new emphasis, psychologists have championed culture as the main source of development – the origin and organizer of the self, emotion, cognition, and values. Prevailing understandings of culture, however, are deeply problematic. Cultures are commonly thought to involve fairly coherent, integrated, and stable patterns of thought, which are manifested in distinct orientations to self, relationships, and morality. The predominant cultural orientation – typically viewed as either collectivistic or individualistic – is thought to exert pow-

erful influence on the development of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of individuals. Individuals, in turn, are thought to be predisposed to participate in culture, and to accept and reproduce the main features of their culture's orientation. Explicitly or implicitly, therefore, members of cultures are assumed to have a shared commitment to certain goals, values, and developmental paths – indeed, a shared and unitary 'culture'.

Over the years, psychologists have begun to recognize that most cultures are not homogeneous, and the portrayal of cultures as uniformly individualistic or collectivistic has given way to portrayals allowing a mixture of these orientations. This approach is better at capturing some aspects of the multifaceted experiences that make up life within cultures; most importantly, it allows for the possibility that conflicts may arise, within a society, between the features and goals characteristic of different orientations. Nonetheless, even this approach retains crucial flaws. Although 'culture' refers, in this view, to smaller groups, the original proposition of cultures as entailing homogeneous (individualistic or collectivistic) orientations remains unchanged. The underlying view of cultures (or sub-cultures) as consensual loci of shared meanings, values, traditions, and practices also remains unchallenged; the coexistence of diverse orientations within a society is explained as being due to the acquisition of multiple homogeneous cultural templates. Although becoming a member of a culture might involve acquiring more than one cultural orientation (as in the case of immigrant populations), the process of social development remains one of cross-generational apprenticeship and transmission. This view of culture and of social development leaves little room for the varied – and often critical – interpretations and judgments that individuals (adults and children, males and females, haves and have-nots) make about their societies' values, practices, and ideological discourse. It conceals the fact that individuals in all cultures 'are confronted with choices, struggle with others, make conflicting statements, argue about points of view on the same events' [Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 154]. In a rather paradoxical way, efforts geared at understanding and celebrating human diversity divest individuals of agency and render them as imprints of their culture and exchangeable carbon copies of other members of their culture. This move, to viewing members of cultures as cultural imprints, is especially marked – and perilous – in the descriptions of 'them' who, rather than being regarded as individuals with the ability and will to think for themselves, are perceived as 'products of culture' [Wikan, 2002, p. 81].

How do we, then, study human diversity? The articles included in this special issue bear on this question. In the two lead articles, Per Gjerde, and Elliot Turiel and co-author Serena Perkins put forth critical views on culture and its complex relations to human diversity. In the two accompanying essays, Lynn Liben and Vonnie McLoyd comment on the lead articles and discuss the implications that such critical analyses of culture might have for research bearing on gender (Liben) and race and ethnicity (McLoyd). The constructs of gender, race, and ethnicity – not unlike culture – have been purported to shape development in ways that yield uniform groups or categories of individuals. Although there may be parallels among culture, race and ethnicity, and gender, it cannot be merely assumed that what goes for one goes for the other. The reason for including the essays on gender, race, and ethnicity is, rather, that reflection on one set of problems may inform our perspective when we turn to another set. Not surprisingly, none of the authors in

this series of essays offer simple solutions. Rather, they urge us to wrestle with the complexity of these constructs and the phenomena they are meant to represent, and leave us with a set of challenging questions of arguably profound consequences to the study of diversity in human development. Each essay is well argued and requires no further explanation on my side. As this volume's editor, I have the privilege to offer some of my reflections on all four essays as a group.

Neither Gjerde nor Turiel and Perkins devote much of their writing to making the case for diversity within cultures. And rightly so, I think, for it is no longer necessary (or, indeed, sufficient) to merely make a case for diversity within groups. What is essential is to say something about the nature of that diversity. How does the diversity observed within cultures come about? Is it intrinsically related to culture, or extrinsic to it? Is human development 'affected' by cultural diversity, or is it at the source of cultural diversity? Both lead articles offer a complex set of reflections on these issues. In both articles, the authors take issue with the assumptions that cultures are characterized by coherent orientations and harmonious relationships, and that persons replicate, in their views, feelings, and behavior, their culture's collective orientation. Neither Gjerde nor Turiel and Perkins, however, dismiss the questions about the relations between culture and human development as irrelevant. Rather, they forcefully advocate the need to reexamine, in fundamental ways, the notion of culture and the prevailing thinking about development in cultures.

Drawing on the main contributions of the literature in cultural studies, cultural anthropology and, more generally, postcolonial studies of the last 20 years, Gjerde challenges essentialist reifications and urges us to think of 'culture' not as a bounded and stable unit tied to a specific geographical location or a set of authentic traditions and shared practices handed down from generation to generation, but as a political and historical construct created and sustained by ideological struggles, a fluid product of power clashes and contested meanings. This proposition challenges many commonly held views of culture. (Indeed, you might feel a little foolish next time you catch yourself thinking about culture as 'a faraway place', or as 'the way we, or they, do things'.) Boundaries that appear to be natural are unmasked as mutually constructed contrasts. Rather than being authentic representations of the past, cultural traditions are exposed as selective views of the past. History and power struggles are not merely something that happens 'in' cultures, but rather the fabric of which cultures are made. Gjerde first persuades us to regard culture not so much as a 'truth' but as a point of view, and then challenges us to ponder why some points of view, but not others, become 'culture'. Unquestionably, Gjerde's position differs from a mere emphasis on diversity within cultures.

As Gjerde foregrounds the forces that frame the cultural contexts or the people who interpret them, and back again, he depicts a fertile and largely unexplored territory. It is, I believe, in this territory, where Elliot Turiel and Serena Perkins work. Rather than assuming that cultural practices reflect shared meanings, Turiel and Perkins make this a central target of investigation. In that context, they make a compelling case for focusing on the often ignored perspectives of those in lower or subordinate positions within society. While the research they describe does not directly address Gjerde's question of *why* certain points of view take hold, it does challenge the typical, though perhaps unwitting representation of those points of view in psychological research. More directly, their research is instructive in regard

to what happens to the overlooked points of view – those that do not take hold and do not become ‘culture’. Finally, relying on examples from their own research, Turiel and Perkins also show that contested perspectives, bids for personal goals, and efforts at resisting and subverting unjust arrangements are not the sole utterance of faraway peoples: American physicians do it, American children and adolescents do it. This is important, I believe, because at the heart of their argument is an alternative view of development in culture – in any culture. This is, moreover, a view of development that makes sense within the multifaceted and contested cultural landscape so aptly described by Gjerde. In this view, individuals – including children – accept and conform to some aspects of the cultures, and critique and even subvert others. Rather than viewing individuals as acquiring and somehow ‘having’ the attributes of their culture, Turiel and Perkins put forth a view of individuals who bring ‘flexibilities of mind’ to bear on cultural practices and values. Not unlike Gjerde, Turiel and Perkins do more than merely point to evidence of diversity within cultures. Their evidence, rather, establishes convincingly that persons develop multiple perspectives about their culture, sometimes act in accord with their culture without sharing the cultural beliefs, and sometimes outright oppose their culture. This evidence, therefore, challenges the very essentialism that permeates the view of individuals as products of cultures.

As attested by the accompanying essays by Lynn Liben and Vonnie McLoyd, essentialist views in psychology are widespread well beyond analyses of culture and cultural groups. Both Liben and McLoyd challenge the biological reductionism that underlies essentialist views of gender, race, and even ethnicity. Echoing arguments by Gjerde and by Turiel and Perkins, they discuss the ways in which the view of group differences in gender, race, or ethnicity as the consequence of inescapable natural forces disguises the historical and social processes that go into the making of those categories, and obscures within-group variations. The proposition that gender, ethnicity, and race are relational constructs rather than truths or facts, comes through loud and clear in both commentaries. Altogether, attending to the specific ways in which each social construct becomes reified renders the works of essentialism less opaque. In addition, each essay also raises distinct, related, and profoundly interesting questions that bear directly on the study of diversity in human development. McLoyd’s arguments bring to the fore the urgent conditions in which social categories emerge; Liben’s remind us of their peril.

In her provocative discussion of race and ethnicity, McLoyd brings sharply into focus the dimensions of historicity and power that shape and sustain the construct of ethnicity. She recognizes that the use of cultural and ethnic categories in psychological research has never been a simple, objective, and value-free move; these categories are politicized whether they are used to advance or to contest racism. McLoyd’s essay points to the indisputably contested nature of American ‘culture’. In this regard her arguments are consistent with those expressed by Gjerde and by Turiel and Perkins: out of the conflict between those with power and those without, certain representations are heard and others are silenced [compare McLoyd on ‘cultural capital’ (p. 186) and Gjerde’s discussion of ‘cultural violence’ (p. 145)].

There is a decisive point, however, about which McLoyd remains ambiguous. Even as she fully unveils the power differences and struggles between ethnic groups in American society, she steers away from discussing differences within

groups, in particular within the African-American group. She does mention socio-economic differences within the African-American community, but does not view those as reflecting meaningful differences in the power to advance particular views; though she allows for variation within the African-American community, she precludes social opposition, resistance, conflict, or subversion. And even as she acknowledges that 'membership in an ethnic or racial minority group is not equivalent to a common cultural experience for individuals' (p. 189) and that 'it is dubious to assume that the historical experience of one's ancestors is the primary determinant of one's cultural framework' (p. 189), she nevertheless urgently insists on the viability of an African-American culture. It would be a mistake, I think, to assume that McLoyd is blind to this tension, as she herself recognizes that, inasmuch as it refers to a generalized orientation, speaking about African-American culture reflects the very essentialist tendency that Gjerde, Turiel and Perkins, and she herself challenge. Furthermore, she is not alone. In a recent issue of *Human Development*, Carol Lee [2002] acknowledged the value of approaches that seek to capture the complexity of culture, but at the same time cautioned against the potential risk of overlooking commonalities and distinctive patterns of practice within the African-American community. I suggest that McLoyd's insistent call to articulate, rather than do away with a shared ethnic African-American culture, might be viewed as a way of revising racist scripts. McLoyd says explicitly, 'redefining African-American culture in ways that suit African-American interests has been integral to the broader struggle for racial equality' (p. 186).

McLoyd's position is reminiscent of the political discourse surrounding the notion of collective rights of ethnic and cultural groups. In a discussion of the discourse introduced by groups such as the Black Consciousness Movement, Baumann [1996] notes that ethnopolitics 'stresses, ideologizes, reifies, modifies, and sometimes virtually recreates the putatively distinctive and unique cultural heritages of the ethnic groups that it mobilizes. Ethnic categories are thus validated as forming ethnic groups, and these groups are defined with reference to a culture they are assumed to share' (pp. 11, 12). Thoughtfully, Baumann adds, 'In a discourse of political contestation ... reification may be desirable, and even seems necessary, to effect mobilization' (p. 14).

Though often applauded as a needed antidote to colonialism and racism, the merits and dangers intrinsic to the notions of collective identities and group rights have also been the target of serious criticism. The main objection is that the proposition of ethnic-based or culture-based collective rights is – or, at least, many think it is – very much at odds with individual rights. In a compelling response to Charles Taylor's [1994] *The Politics of Recognition*, African-American scholar K. Anthony Appiah [1994] writes:

If I had to choose between the world of the closet and the world of gay liberation, or between the world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Black Power, I would, of course, choose in each case the latter. But I would like not to have to choose. I would like other options. The politics of recognition requires that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and sexual body as personal dimensions of the self. And personal means not secret, but not too tightly scripted (p. 163).

It is about these dangers, I think, that Liben warns us in her essay. Liben discusses the ways in which power relations enter into the construction of gender categories and, then, issues a cautionary note about the consequences that such categories – any group categories, including those used to distinguish among cultural groups and, I presume, ethnic groups – can have for the individuals whom these categories are meant to sort. It is interesting that the consideration of gender – and the role of power in the definition of gender categories – can, in this respect, throw further light on the question of how ethnic and cultural categories (or other collective identities) can become a straightjacket. For the situation of women who have been constrained by their definition as ‘nothing but women’ can indeed inform our understanding of how, for example, African-Americans could be constrained by the expectation that they make their ethnic identity the central and defining aspect of their lives [Wolf, 1994]. I would like to quote at length, again, from Appiah [1994], who both recognizes the urgent circumstances in which these categories emerge, and cogently points to the intrinsic perils:

In our current situation in the multicultural West ... certain individuals have not been treated with equal dignity because they were, for example, women, homosexuals, blacks, Catholics ... In order to construct a life with dignity, it seems natural to take the collective identity and construct positive life-scripts instead. An African-American after the Black Power movement takes the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a nigger, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive Black life-scripts ... It may even be historically, strategically necessary for the story to go this way. But I think we need to go on to the next necessary step, which is to ask whether the identities constructed in this way are ones we ... can be happy with in the longer run. Demanding respect for people as blacks and as gays requires that there are some scripts that go with being an African-American or having same-sex desires. There will be proper ways of being black and gay, there will be expectations to be met, demands will be made. It is at this point that someone who takes autonomy seriously will ask whether we have not replaced one kind of tyranny with another (pp. 160–163).

Questions concerning whether and how cultural groups, and other groups, should be identified and recognized are among the most salient and vexing on the political agenda of democratic societies. They are also of fundamental importance to the study of human development. Should we work with culture and other collective representations, or do away with them altogether? The authors of this absorbing series of articles will not offer simple solutions. All recognize, I think, that people make collective representations. Gjerde states explicitly that people ‘collectively make somewhat overlapping meanings in opposition to hegemony – for a limited time, for a limited purpose, and in a limited domain’ (p. 153). Turiel and Perkins, in giving voice to those in subordinate positions in society, also acknowledge that there are collective voices to be heard. This is not to say that overlapping representations are coherent systems of long-lasting shared beliefs. Both articles caution against assuming that any collective representation (whether associated with culture, social class, or any other group) can be taken for granted unexamined and presumed to *cause* people to think or act in certain ways. Liben’s and McLoyd’s essays remind us of the urgent need to devise ways to capture diversity among people, and the dangers intrinsic to this enterprise. All agree, I think, that this goes beyond contrasting cultural (or ethnic, or gender) groups or speaking about within-group variation. The ways in which power differences and struggles

frame developmental contexts, and the ways in which human agency interprets, transforms, and transcends those contexts, are an integral part of any substantial account of diversity in human development.

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