Universalism without uniformity: explorations in mind & culture. Julia L. Cassaniti and Usha Menon, ed...

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<th>Version</th>
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Universalism without Uniformity is a powerful homage to Richard A. Shweder’s generative work in cultural psychology. At the volume’s center is one of Shweder’s enduring mantras and intellectual commitments, “universalism without uniformity.” This entails several other foundational principles that trace their lineage, as do the volume’s contributors, to John and Beatrice Whiting’s mid-20th-century interdisciplinary, psychological anthropological comparative work. “Original multiplicity,” “one mind, many mentalities,” and “culture and psyche make each other up” are some of Shweder’s related ideas that each of the chapters takes up, with some focusing more on the universal aspects of experience despite cultural plurality (e.g., Fiske, Schubert, and Seibt, Nuckolls), while others highlight the near (but not complete) incommensurability of human experience and its valuation and meanings across different cultural communities (e.g., Ahmadu, Cassaniti, Menon).

Separately and together, the essays indict a number of universalist formulations common in other disciplines. These include culture-blind and often ethnocentric perspectives prevalent in the fields of mainstream social psychology and human development (LeVine, Haidt and Rozin, Miller, Cassaniti, Weisner), migration studies and sociology (Hickman), economics, philosophy, and political science (Hota, Ahmadu, Shweder), and psychiatry and global health (Horton, Good
and DelVecchio-Good). Collectively, the contributors denounce perspectives that regard culture as peripheral or an overlay that can and should be “factored out,” leaving just an essential, asocial and universal individual to be analyzed. Instead, the authors advocate studying humans as fundamentally social and cultural beings who are not blank slates and whose shared humanity resides in their heterogeneity.

Medical anthropologists will no doubt be familiar with the Boasian tenets of this volume. Many of the chapters call for greater tolerance and attention to cultural context as constitutive of human experience. This spans the realms of child-rearing and attachment (LeVine, Weisner), moral evaluations and modes of thinking (Haidt and Rozin, D’Andrade, Hickman, Ahadu, Shweder), and the classification, understanding, and sometimes treatment of trauma, mental distress or disorder, and the emotions (Good and DelVecchio-Good, Horton, Cassaniti, respectively). Even the more evolutionary and universalizing accounts of emotions and religion (respectively, Fiske, Schubert, and Seibt, Nuckolls) shun hierarchizing schemes that rank societies, and largely locate the source of feelings or experience in society rather than biology.

In short, speaking to and from a variety of fields, essentially all the contributors insist that there is no universal, singular moral grid by which to evaluate different cultural practices, developmental trajectories, and experiences of health and well-being. Highlighted here are several essays that additionally challenge critical medical anthropologists and psychiatrists to examine the underpinning assumptions of their critiques or programmatic calls for action. Byron Good and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good (Chapter 14), for example, justify their collaborative work with mental health professionals in post-2004 tsunami, post-conflict Aceh on the grounds that whether or not trauma and PTSD are imported or manufactured medicalized categories that serve the interests of others (e.g., the pharmaceutical industry, humanitarian organizations, global
health professionals), suffering on the island was real and tangible, and mental health interventions helped alleviate some of that suffering. They reject Derek Summerfield’s (1999) assessment that posttraumatic stress is a pseudocondition, and instead support Allan Young’s (1995) insight that the question should not be whether something is “real,” but how it has been made real (Good and Good, pp. 263–64). The practical—as well as moral and political—question, in turn, becomes how to aid those who suffer. In response, the authors advocate bringing together clinical, cultural, and political perspectives that often are at odds with each other.

Similarly searching for common ground, Julia Cassaniti (Chapter 6) summarizes contentious approaches to the emotions as internal, universal states, or as wholly constructed cultural products that cannot be compared across different communities. Cassaniti argues that it is not “emotion states” that are shared cross-culturally, but rather different “aspects of emotionality that are differently elaborated in different times and places,” allowing for universalism without uniformity (p. 110). Usha Menon (Chapter 7) elaborates on this analysis by adding a case study from India to complement Cassaniti’s Thai example, while Jacob Hickman (Chapter 10) highlights intracultural variation and advocates a life-course perspective when studying migrants.

Tackling the more explicitly politicized issue of “Female Genital Mutilation,” Pinky Hota (Chapter 11) deftly brings unlikely perspectives into conversation. Hota shows how despite mutual suspicion between cultural psychologists and political anthropologists—for positivist complicity in reifying difference, or for postmodernist distrust of difference as always “cunning” (see Povinelli 2002 and Hota, p. 200)—both similarly expose the limits of “tolerance” as a (neo)liberal discourse that privileges dominant (Global North) values while demonizing and
subordinating Others. Fuambai Ahmadu (Chapter 12) similarly indicts second-wave feminists for misunderstanding, misrepresenting, and criminalizing female circumcision. Yet she ultimately calls for the sort of tolerance to live and let live that Shweder also gestures to in Chapter 15. This leaves open the concern that tolerance can easily converge with “imperial liberalism,” serving not to equalize but to legitimize “a conditioned, hierarchical, provisional acceptance” of those who are seen as Others (Hota, p. 211).

Shweder (Chapter 15) alternatively critiques both feminists who demonize sex-selective abortion in India and progressives who despair at growing income inequalities in the United States. He warns that calls to protect the disenfranchised can easily become paternalizing, hegemonic moves that enforce homogeneity at the expense of diversity. Shunning explicit discussion of power (as do most of the chapters), while (like many of the chapters) also alluding to persistent hierarchies that privilege and value some over others, Shweder posits that it is only through increasing homogeneity and a flattening of diversity that more equality can be achieved—a goal that he sees as ultimately untenable in pluralistic societies.

In all, the chapters provide rich and varied perspectives, some of which partially disagree with each other (e.g., Fiske, Schubert and Seibt vs. Cassaniti; Weisner vs. Nuckolls; Hota vs. Ahmadu), stimulating further exploration of the field of cultural psychology. The volume reminds us of the predominantly non-medicalized roots of this field, while beginning to engage with current significant issues in medical anthropology.

References Cited
