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If heft is an indicator of health, then the new academic subfield of Cultural Psychology is thriving. The weighty volume under review is almost double the size of its nearest rival, A Companion to Psychological Anthropology (Casey and Edgerton 2005). As the titles indicate, there is also a disciplinary distinction. Forty seven of the sixty six contributors to the Handbook are affiliated with Psychology Departments, only five are in Anthropology Departments; in contrast, twenty five of the thirty one contributors to the Companion are in Departments of Anthropology, only one is a Professor of Psychology.

To understand these differences, a little history may be of use. The term ‘Cultural Psychology’ was coined by the erstwhile Cognitive Anthropologist Richard Shweder in 1990 to indicate his turn away from the universalist and often Freudian paradigms of Psychological Anthropology and to mark the inauguration of new discipline that would focus on the myriad ways in which psyche and culture “make each other up.” What he hoped for was an interpretive, pluralistic, imaginative and humanistic approach that would inspire social scientists to experience radically new cultural universes.

However, as Shweder wistfully laments in his contribution, this is not what occurred. Rather, in the Handbook, culture is definitely the modifier, not the noun, and the dominant influence is not radical interpretivism, but the highly pragmatic and quantitative research model of Shinobu Kitayama and his collaborator Hazel Markus, who have long relied on a battery of inventive psychological tests to elicit and elaborate the contrasts between the egocentric West and the sociocentric rest, with an emphasis on
outlining the distinctive features of East Asian interdependent collectivism. This comparative approach accounts for the large number of Asian scholars contributing to the volume.

The Shinobu/Markus agenda is not the only one on offer here. Other authors rely on models from evolutionary psychology, biology, cognitive psychology, Vygotskian theory, and so on. What they have in common is the shared belief that it is possible and worthwhile to quantify the influence of culture on the motives, beliefs, feelings, thoughts and deeds of actors, or ‘selves’ (agency, a quest for meaning, and intentionality are uncritically taken to be essential human attributes). In other words, culture is understood as another (very important) variable that must be taken into account in experimental design.

How this accounting is to be accomplished varies, but in spite of some noises to the contrary, the authors in the Handbook generally assume that cultures exist as unique, relatively solid and coherent entities or ‘processes.’ Seeming contradictions within culture are thought to be compatible at different levels of analysis (e.g. Cohen’s analysis of violence in the South, which coincides with a high degree of politeness). These old-fashioned but attractive premises generate a baseline for practical research agendas that can sometimes produce counter-intuitive results. Most fascinating is the ‘priming’ effect outlined in Oyserman and Lee. Simply put, when experimental subjects circle plural or singular pronouns, or assemble sets of words that are collectivist or individualist, they then significantly shift the values and thoughts they express in later tasks. Many other pieces are equally thought provoking. I especially enjoyed Konner’s synthetic essay on evolutionary psychology, Rozin’s brilliant study of food, which included a discussion of
the relationship between masochism and chili peppers, and Atran’s analysis of religion as an adaptive solution to the problem of self-interest. Most sophisticated methodologically are the six chapters on cognition across cultures.

In all the essays, pencil and paper tests, manipulated discourse, tightly focused interviews, and broad generalizations replace the messiness of actual experience that anthropologists hold so dear. Ambivalence, change, resistance, guilt, denial, cruelty, charisma, stigma and repression (in both the psychological and materialist sense) are not much in evidence. There is very little (save in the article by Atran) on the psychology of groups and the roots of fanaticism. Freud is almost completely absent, as are Marx and Simmel; Erik Erikson is unmentioned, and Weber and Durkheim are given only token obeisance. The range of examples is also small: the ubiquitous American college student remains the standard test subject. Globalization, mobility and the confusing pluralism of the present-day are downplayed. Most of the essays lacked insight on psychic ‘push’ factors and any theory as to why some aspects of culture are so much more motivating than others.

But, despite qualms and disputes, it is a very good sign indeed that academic psychology has accepted the importance of culture (even as many anthropologists are denying its existence). We can now begin a conversation.

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REFERENCES: