

General Article

CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: Implications for Basic Psychological Theory

By Joan G. Miller

Institute for Social Research University of Michigan

A theoretical argument for the importance of culture in psychological explanation is offered. It is maintained that the view that culture is integral to psychological theory rests on a meaning-based view of culture and on the recognition that culture is necessary in individual psychological development. Research on cognition and on the self is discussed briefly to illustrate ways in which work in cultural psychology is contributing to basic psychological theory. In future research, greater attention needs to be given to developing more sensitive understandings of culture and to incorporating these understandings in the constructs and methods of the discipline. In conclusion, cultural psychology is shown to represent a perspective to bring to bear in all types of psychological inquiry. While building on existing work in the field, cultural psychology offers an alternative vision that underscores respects in which psychological development represents an open, culturally mediated process.

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in interest in cultural approaches within psychology. The field has changed markedly from the state of affairs noted by Pepitone and Triandis (1987), who estimated a decade ago that less than 10% of all hypothesis-testing research in social psychology involved samples drawn from two or more cultures, or from that noted by Graham (1992), whose review of more than 14,000 empirical articles in psychology published between 1970 and 1989 yielded fewer than 4% centering on African Americans. Throughout the discipline, an expanding number of empirical studies have involved non-European-American cultural populations, psychology textbooks, review chapters, and handbooks are paying more attention to issues of diversity, and funding agencies have placed an increased emphasis on representation of minority populations in research.

Yet even with these signs of greater attention to culture within the discipline, there remain key questions about the role that should be given to cultural considerations. There are indications that, to the extent that culture is being increasingly taken into account in psychology, it is primarily in a diversity sense and not also in a basic process sense. Thus, for example, the trend remains in publications to raise cultural

issues in a footnote, concluding note, or ancillary chapter, and not in the presentation of basic psychological theory. Culture tends to be portrayed merely as a qualification on the generality of psychological effects or as a moderator variable and not as a constituent process that is implicated in explaining what are considered basic psychological phenomena. Critical questions about the importance of culture in psychological theory are also being raised by recent biological approaches (e.g., Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Plomin, 1986). Stimulated by new theoretical models as well as by groundbreaking technological advances, work in evolutionary theory and in neuroscience is seeking to uncover deep structural principles for explaining human behavior. These approaches have been embraced as having the potential to transform psychology radically, by giving it the type of physical-science grounding that has long been held up as an ideal. Notably, they are also frequently interpreted as implying that culture is not a key construct in psychological explanation. Culture is understood as part of the environment, which is essential for the development of psychological processes, but not as a qualitative source of patterning of these processes themselves.

The purpose of the present article is to present a theoretical argument for why culture needs to be seen as implicated in basic psychological processes and to identify certain challenges that must be met within the discipline to make culture an integral part of theory in psychology. By appreciating the contributions of culture to psychological explanation, the field stands to gain insight not only into diversity in psychological behavior but also into powerful sources of regularity that underlie all psychological phenomena. Psychology already is and has always been cultural, and the theoretical challenge is to make this cultural grounding explicit.

This article is organized into three parts. Framed in the context of the newly reemerging perspective of cultural psychology (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1990, 1996; Miller, 1994b, 1997b; Shweder, 1990; Shweder & Sullivan, 1990, 1993), the first section argues that the claim that psychological processes are culturally grounded rests on a meaning-based view of culture and on the recognition that culture is necessary to completion of the self. Illustrative domains of research in cultural psychology are discussed briefly to highlight respects in which this work is contributing to basic psychological

Address correspondence to Joan G. Miller, Institute for Social Research - RCGD, University of Michigan, Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248. e-mail: jgmiller@umich.edu

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theory In turn, the second section raises challenges that must be met in developing more culturally sensitive psychological theory Finally, a concluding section on implications considers ways in which work in cultural psychology both builds upon and challenges present psychological inquiry

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Meaning-Based Approaches to Culture

For many years, psychology has been dominated by ecological views of culture that, although extremely important, have not fundamentally challenged the dualistic form characteristic of psychological explanations, with their focus on features of the person and of the situation Ecological perspectives on culture have informed both theory and research in cross-cultural psychology, as well as evolutionary, behavioral genetic, and environmental approaches to psychology (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Whiting & Whiting, 1975) These views approach culture exclusively in functional terms, as adapted to the objective requirements of the physical and social structural context Culture is understood as bearing a causal relationship to individual psychological processes as both a context to which such processes are adapted and a form that is itself adapted to individual psychological requirements An early highly influential example of this type of model, the Whittings' classic Six Cultures study of child development, linked culture to the objective ecological environment through the mechanism of individual personality (Whiting & Whiting, 1975) Thus, for example, the Whittings demonstrated that rich natural ecologies lead to the development of societies with complex social structures, which, in turn, lead to the development of egoistic individual personality dispositions and to cultural forms emphasizing competitiveness

The treatment of culture in symbolic terms represents arguably the most decisive contrast between ecological perspectives and the views of culture emphasized in cultural psychology Within recent views, culture is understood as shared meaning systems that are embodied in artifacts and practices and that form a medium for human development (Cole, 1995, Shore, 1996) Culture is recognized to be public, in that it depends on intersubjectively held understandings and exists as a socially established reality prior to any specific individual's involvement with it (Strauss & Quinn, 1997) It also is seen as encompassing behavior, in that it is expressed in laws, customs, everyday routines, discourse, and other communal modes of life As a meaning system, culture is understood to have representational functions, in including collectively held understandings about the nature of experience, as well as prescriptive functions, in including normative standards for behavior However, it is also seen as serving constitutive functions, in defining and thus in bringing into being certain realities It is understood that this reality-creating role of culture is broad,

extending not only to recognized social institutions (e.g., marriage, school), roles (e.g., bride, student), and artifacts (e.g., wedding ring, pen), but also to fundamental categories of epistemological knowledge Thus, for example, it is recognized that many of the perceived natural categories assumed in current psychological theory, such as "mind," "emotion," and "self," depend, in part, for their existence on cultural distinctions embodied in natural language categories, discourse, and everyday social practices (Lillard, 1997) Unlike postmodern views, the present approach does not deny the existence of a world of experience or of individual psychological processes, but emphasizes the essential role of culture in affecting how these realities are known and structured

While taking into account the functional aspects of culture, the present view assumes that culture is not based exclusively on adaptive considerations In many cases, cultural meanings and practices are nonrational in that they involve considerations that are not directly related to utility or to logic (Shweder, 1984) It is also understood that cultural significance frequently drives function rather than the reverse Thus, as Sahlins (1976) illustrated, the edibility of particular animals reflects cultural definitions of personhood that determine their status as food versus as pets and that in many cases override biological considerations

Meaning-based approaches to culture challenge both the form and the focus of psychological explanations The context is no longer understood merely in terms of objective constraints and affordances, but also in terms of the shared beliefs and values through which it is interpreted and the practices through which it is structured Thus, for example, whether a low teacher-student class ratio represents a desirable characteristic does not result from functional considerations alone (e.g., the amount of individual attention from an adult that such an arrangement makes possible), but is based as well on cultural conceptions of the self (e.g., whether the child is conceptualized in individualistic terms as benefiting from opportunities to cultivate a unique individual perspective or in interdependent terms as benefiting from opportunities to function as part of a group) (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) When culture is understood in this type of meaning-based way, explanations in psychology become tripartite Consideration is given not only to the person and to the ecological context, but also to culture, as an intersubjective reality that makes an added contribution to explanation

Incompleteness Thesis

A widely shared assumption has been that universal features of psychological development can be understood independently from culturally specific features—in other words, that the basic nature of psychological processes and structures is unaffected by the culturally dependent content on which they operate or the culturally structured contexts in which they are displayed As Scarr (1993) observed in arguing for such a

stance "Becoming human is one matter. Becoming French, Mongolian or African-American is another. Becoming Georges Sand, Ghengis Khan, or Martin Luther King Jr., is still another" (p. 1333). This view recognizes that environmental factors, including culture, are necessary for the emergence of psychological processes and that deficient environments can seriously retard if not disrupt development. However, the sociocultural experiences that are viewed as necessary for normal human development are assumed to occur universally and to lead to universal outcomes.

From such a perspective, there is assumed to be little theoretical yield from an attention to culture. Basic psychological theory is seen as formulated in terms of universal psychological processes and mechanisms, which are merely filled in by cultural parameters. As Malpass (1988) articulated this position,

So long as one is theory-oriented one will also be process-oriented, and incommensurabilities due to concrete and highly "local" content (as opposed to process) will not be particularly interesting. Cultural differences are trivial because they are at the wrong level of abstraction, and stand as "medium" rather than "thing" in relation to the objects of study (pp. 30-31).

Recent work in cultural psychology challenges this type of view in its recognition that experience in culturally specific environments is necessary to the completion of individual psychological development. As Bruner (1990) observed, the Cognitive Revolution set the stage for this insight in demonstrating that behavior depends on the meanings individuals actively contribute to experience. If higher level psychological processes are affected by individuals' interpretations of experience and if these interpretations themselves reflect, in part, culturally based meanings and practices, it follows that culture represents a source of patterning of psychological functioning. Arguments for the incompleteness thesis also derive from a recognition of the constitutive role of culture in human evolution. As Geertz (1973) maintained in an early statement of this position,

What happened to us in the Ice Age is that we were obliged to abandon the regularity and precision of detailed genetic control over our conduct for the flexibility and adaptability of a more generalized, though of course no less real, genetic control over it. To supply the additional information necessary to be able to act, we were forced, in turn, to rely more and more heavily on cultural sources—the accumulated fund of significant symbols. Such symbols are thus not mere expressions, instrumentalities, or correlates of our biological, psychological, and social existence, they are prerequisites of it. We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it. (p. 49)

Challenging claims that biologically complete hominoids suddenly invented culture, the present position treats culture not merely as a product of evolution but as itself a selective factor

in the evolutionary process (Shore, 1996). It is recognized that experience in a cultural environment is essential to the emergence and maintenance of most psychological processes that are displayed over ontogeny, with the exception of certain innate propensities evident in early infancy, as well as certain involuntary responses (Wertsch, 1995). It is also understood that qualitative differences may be observed in the psychological functioning of individuals inhabiting cultural settings characterized by markedly different meanings and practices (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Examples of Contributions to Basic Theory

To highlight ways in which work in cultural psychology is contributing to basic psychological theory, I provide some examples of research in the areas of cognition and of self. This discussion is meant only to be illustrative of the types of contributions of work in this area; I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive coverage of the diverse traditions within cultural psychology or of its growing body of empirical findings.¹ Heterogeneous in character, research in cultural psychology employs a wide variety of methods and focuses on diverse substantive questions. What lends unity to this work is a shared conceptual commitment to understanding the cultural grounding of psychological processes. As the examples illustrate, work in cultural psychology not only enhances understanding of cultural diversity, but also offers new theoretical frameworks that are relevant in understanding psychological functioning in the prototypical research population of middle-class European Americans.

Culture and cognition

Work on culture and cognition has been undertaken largely within the sociocultural tradition identified originally with such Soviet theorists as Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Luria and extended in recent years by such investigators as Cole, Rogoff, Scribner, Valsiner, and Wertsch. From this perspective, cognition is viewed as constituted, in part, by the concrete practical activities in which it is situated and the cultural tools on which it depends.

In its attention to cultural diversity in cognitive functioning, work in the sociocultural tradition is expanding current conceptions of the forms of cognition. Thus, for example, research by Lave and her colleagues has shown that learning in apprenticeship situations and in various other contexts of use involves a problem-oriented focus that entails an engagement in the activity at hand, in a way that is characteristically absent in the more "out of context" learning characteristic of formal school settings (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This type of work

1 For recent reviews of research in cultural psychology, see, for example, Berry, Dasen, and Saraswathi (1997), Cole (1996), Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, and Nisbett (1998), Markus, Kitayama, and Heuman (1996), Shweder et al. (1998).

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not only highlights the need to avoid privileging formal school contexts as the only or even necessarily the optimum context for learning, but more generally underscores the need to view learning as inherently socioculturally constituted

Research in the sociocultural tradition is also leading to a rethinking of fundamental conceptions of development and of core cognitive constructs. In a major theoretical challenge to Piagetian theory, it is shown that developmental change depends on cultural learning, rather than proceeding independently of enculturation. Thus, for example, work by Rogoff (1996) indicates that the marked cognitive shifts documented to occur in the 5- to 7-year-old range result, at least in part, from changes in the sociocultural settings and types of cultural supports provided to children during this age period. In another example, Cole (1995) provided a solution to the well-known paradox of development—that is, the problem of explaining how individuals acquire a more powerful structure if they do not already possess that structure. From a sociocultural perspective, it is argued that many of the mediational means that facilitate cognitive achievements exist between persons in cultural artifacts, knowledge, and practices before they come to be displayed as individual competencies. In an application of this approach to the teaching of reading, Cole demonstrated that poor readers show dramatic improvement when they are brought into learning communities that provide cultural support to reading, through sharing of real-world knowledge and through making salient important real-world goals to be achieved by reading. Research in this tradition is also offering new meanings for such central cognitive concepts as internalization and transfer. This work implies that it may be more productive to understand learning as facilitated by cultural supports present in everyday practices than to approach it as an individual acquisition that has been internalized. Equally, to explain the problem of cognitive transfer, investigators within this tradition are focusing on the interrelationship between activities and individuals' involvement with them rather than on the generalization of mental structures.

Culture and the self

Work on culture and the self is addressed to a wide range of topics, including social cognition, motivation, emotion, personality, and psychopathology. Crossing disciplinary boundaries, this work is being undertaken both by quantitatively oriented researchers, particularly those associated with social and developmental psychology, and by ethnographically oriented investigators, particularly those associated with psychological anthropology and sociolinguistics.

Research in this area not only is uncovering diversity in psychological functioning, but also is identifying new constructs to expand existing psychological theory. In one of its major thrusts, this work is highlighting respects in which certain psychological phenomena have been approached predominantly in terms of a secular, individualistic view of self, with socially ori-

ented and nonsecular aspects of self downplayed. Thus, for example, Roland (1988) observed that psychoanalytic theory has centered on dimensions of self that have relatively limited importance in Asian cultural populations, such as firm ego boundaries, rationalism, and individuation. Roland presented evidence to show that the psychological makeup of Indians and Japanese emphasizes both a familial self, centered on dimensions such as empathy, receptivity to others, and permeable ego boundaries, and a spiritual self, expressed in religious and aesthetic beliefs and practices. In another example of this type of contribution, cross-cultural work reveals that control tends to assume a relational or shared form in certain Asian cultural populations—an orientation not captured in the dominant psychological theories in this area, with their emphasis on control as being either internal or external (Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn, 1984).

Cross-cultural work is also leading to a rethinking of the implicit cultural underpinnings of various psychological effects observed among European Americans. For example, research by Kitayama and his colleagues implies that there may be multiple forms of self-esteem rather than only a unitary mode (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Thus, their cross-cultural work indicates that the tendency to achieve self-esteem through use of self-enhancement strategies is specific to European Americans and to other cultural populations that emphasize individualistic views of self. In contrast, among Japanese, self-esteem tends to be maintained through a self-critical stance that gives rise to positive feelings of sympathy for the self and serves to realize the self as a responsible social agent. In another example, cross-cultural research demonstrates that Gilligan's (1982) morality-of-caring framework not only lacks universality but also embodies certain modern Western cultural assumptions that are generally absent in the qualitatively distinct approach to interpersonal morality emphasized among Hindu Indians (Miller, 1994a). Thus, for example, whereas European Americans tend to treat interpersonal responsibilities to family and friends as dependent on personal affinity and liking, Hindu Indians tend to regard these responsibilities as unaffected by such individualistic considerations (Miller & Bersoff, 1998).

In contributions in other domains, research in this tradition highlights respects in which development represents an open process, characterized by variability in its course and end point. Thus, for example, it is shown that the pattern of simplifying speech to infants known as "motherese" is not found universally, but rather is closely linked to the cultural views of self and associated practices emphasized in middle-class European-American cultural communities (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Advancing a process understanding of developmental change, work of this type points to the roles played by discourse practices and by other everyday cultural routines as implicit means of instantiating and communicating cultural views of self.

CHALLENGES IN DEVELOPING MORE CULTURALLY SENSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY

The present discussion has highlighted the role of cultural meanings and practices as an intersubjective context for human development and argued for the constitutive role of this symbolic environment in the completion of individual psychological development. I have also shown that one of the major contributions of recent work in cultural psychology is to identify new process explanations for basic psychological phenomena.

The purpose of this section is to identify key conceptual and methodological challenges that must be addressed as the field of psychology moves toward giving a more central role to culture. In order to realize the promise of cultural research to contribute to the broadening and deparochialization of psychological theory, the field must pay greater attention to developing more sensitive understandings of culture and to incorporating these understandings in the constructs and methods of the discipline.

Greater Sensitivity to Culture

In future work, it will be important to cultivate a greater process appreciation of culture as a symbolically structured environment (Greenfield, 1997) and to avoid the circularity of approaches that treat culture merely as a psychological schema. Although culture and psychology are mutually constitutive, it must be recognized that neither can be reduced to the other. Thus, for example, it cannot be assumed that a laboratory-based manipulation of collectivism replicates, on a process level, the nature of cultural differences associated with being from a collectivist culture. Cultural variation in psychological functioning arises not merely from individuals maintaining contrasting schematic understandings but also from their involvement in contrasting cultural activities and practices. In this regard, greater research attention needs to be paid to the processes through which symbolically structured environments influence individual behavior—a topic that has been addressed extensively in research within the sociocultural tradition but has tended to receive only limited attention in other culturally based psychological research.

Greater sensitivity must also be shown to the dynamic, heterogeneous, and interpenetrating nature of cultural systems— aspects of culture increasingly recognized in anthropological research. Such a stance is critical in order to avoid the tendencies to essentialize both cultures, through portraying them in overly static, uniform, and isolated terms, and culturally based variation in psychological processes, through portraying it as showing little or no contextual dependence. In this regard, researchers should avoid basing interpretations on stereotypical generalities associated with the individualism-collectivism dichotomy or the related distinction between independent and interdependent cultural views of self. Moving beyond a

reliance on convenience samples, psychological investigators need to develop more in-depth knowledge of the specific cultural populations they study, through drawing on ethnographic sources or through undertaking field research, focus-group studies, or other types of qualitative inquiry.

Culturally Informed Constructs and Methods

For investigators to succeed in uncovering the constituent roles of cultural systems in psychological phenomena, it is also vital that they bring to bear a cultural perspective in informing the constructs and methods they employ. It must be recognized that culture will come to take on more importance in psychology not merely because more culturally based research is being conducted or because greater effort is being made to sample diverse populations, but because research is being conducted in a more culturally informed way.

Whereas establishing cultural validity is part of the standard procedures followed in validating any psychological instrument, work in cultural psychology suggests that such efforts must be even more culturally grounded than in the past. Thus, it must be recognized that the response options permitted in many standard assessment instruments inadvertently exclude the perspectives of certain populations. For example, in treating a high self-image as an index of healthy psychological functioning, many commonly used measures of self-esteem (e.g., Rosenberg, 1965) and of the self-concept (e.g., Harter, 1982) are not fully sensitive to the forms of self-concept that arise in cultures that embody a relational view of self and place a positive value on self-effacement. Not only may markedly different research methods be required to tap constructs in settings characterized by divergent cultural meanings and practices, but there may be a need to rethink the cultural relevance or even cultural applicability of various psychological dimensions. Thus, for example, the problem of security of attachment is likely to be particularly salient in modern European-American cultural contexts, in which a central problem for the self is balancing autonomy and relatedness (i.e., avoiding an overly self-less stance on the one hand and an overly isolated stance on the other). In contrast, this conception of attachment is unlikely to capture the central problems for the self in cultural contexts, such as traditional Hindu India, in which greater value is placed on the maintenance of an interdependent rather than autonomous stance, and in which relatedness in in-group relationships tends to be based on relatively immutable role-based duties, rather than on voluntaristic commitments (Miller & Bersoff, 1995).

In a related vein, work in cultural psychology underscores the importance of recognizing that the degree of ethnographic validity of the constructs informing research invariably affects the findings. For example, the conclusions drawn about whether or not basic emotions are universal depend, at least in part, on the weight given to local cultural practices and to natural language distinctions in identifying categories of emotion.

or even in defining what is meant by emotion (Ekman, 1994, Russell, 1994). In a dramatic illustration of this type of effect, research has shown, for example, that the Minangkabau of West Sumatra show the same patterns of autonomous nervous system arousal as do Americans when asked to pose facial expressions linked to happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, and anger (Levenson, Ekman, Heider, & Friesen, 1992). However, they are less likely than are Americans to interpret this arousal in emotional terms—given the Minangkabau cultural view that the meaningful involvement of another person represents a defining element in emotional experience. These considerations do not imply that there is an optimum level at which all research should proceed (i.e., that it is always preferable to employ constructs that are culturally specific or alternatively ones that are comparative, Miller, 1997a). However, they underscore the need for recognizing the construct-dependence of all research findings and suggest that certain earlier conclusions of universality in basic psychological processes may have resulted, at least in part, from cultural limitations in the constructs brought to bear in inquiry.

IMPLICATIONS

The argument for the need to make culture a more integral aspect of basic psychological theory gives rise to questions about what type of change this represents and what may be gained or lost by adopting such a stance. I maintain that cultural psychology needs to be understood as a perspective that is building on existing work in the field. Investigators associated with this tradition recognize the observer-dependent nature of inquiry and the sociocultural grounding of science. In contrast to postmodern theorists, however, they assume the existence of a self—albeit one that is culturally mediated and known in culturally dependent ways. As illustrated in the work that has been discussed, investigators in this tradition are engaged in empirical inquiry and in comparative appraisal of cultural practices, both the explicit comparisons of cross-cultural research and the more implicit comparisons of ethnographic research, in which implications for psychological theory are drawn from observations in a single cultural setting. Even as it challenges some universals, assumed in past psychological studies, as spurious and vacuous, cultural psychology is itself identifying certain new universals (Miller, 1997b, Shweder, 1995).

Cultural psychology may best be thought of not as a subfield or area of specialization within psychology, but as a perspective to bring to bear in all types of psychological inquiry. As such, it is no different from biological, sociological, historical, or other perspectives that contribute explanatory force to understanding human psychological functioning while, in themselves, never providing a complete explanation for psychological phenomena.

Although cultural psychology does not entail that we “jettison all that we have learned before” (Bruner, 1996, p. 160), it is also important to underscore respects in which it does

represent a shift in the ways in which psychology is understood, if not practiced. The insight that psychological development is mediated by cultural processes implies that it needs to be viewed as an open process that assumes forms that are contingent on historical changes. Many important psychological phenomena may be expected to be culturally bound, psychological theories are limited only to the extent that they fail to recognize this cultural patterning, and not in their failure to uncover universals. As is apparent in the relatively few life-span longitudinal studies that have been conducted (e.g., Block, 1971), psychological development is not timeless, but is patterned critically by the social, economic, political, and cultural concerns of particular historical points in time.

From this perspective, it is understood that the object of inquiry in psychology differs from that in the physical sciences in that it represents a reflexive agent, whose self depends fundamentally on systems of meaning that it itself creates. Whereas this insight differs from the image of the discipline held by many psychological investigators, it does not differ from the reality of the field. As theorists have noted (e.g., Cole, 1990, Geertz, 1973), psychology has always been cultural, even if it has not always viewed itself in these terms. Whereas many of the psychological processes that have been identified to date are likely to be culturally invariant, many depend on presently unrecognized culturally specific assumptions and may be anticipated to assume somewhat contrasting forms in different cultural contexts. The absence of cultural explanations in many current psychological theories has resulted from investigators not yet having undertaken the type of culturally informed and conceptually innovative research required to uncover the cultural dimensions of such theories and does not indicate that the phenomena under consideration have been conclusively shown to be unaffected by cultural processes.

In sum, rather than representing a radical break with the past, cultural psychology has always been an implicit part of the discipline. The present challenge is to pursue its implications for basic psychological theory. While providing knowledge about diversity in psychological processes and a less parochial basis for comparative evaluation of psychological functioning, cultural psychology offers insights into and the promise of broadening the fundamental constructs and theories of the discipline.

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