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INTRODUCTION

Subjective Culture as a Research Tradition



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Harry Triandis's lifelong work constitutes the conceptual core of this volume. Over the past four decades, Triandis systematically and carefully explored the frontiers of culture and psychology. Arguably, his most significant conceptual contribution is the notion of subjective culture. Nearly two decades before psychology "discovered" socially shared cognition (Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991), Triandis, in his 1972 book *The Analysis of Subjective Culture*, defined this notion as "a cultural group's characteristic way of perceiving the man-made [*sic*] part of its environment" (p. 4). More recently, Triandis (1994a) has suggested that subjective culture consists primarily of categories, attitudes, norms, roles, and values, and he has proposed various techniques for their measurement. In short, subjective culture is a conceptual-methodological package that points not only to the psychological concepts we need to emphasize but also to the methods by which we can investigate culture.

An example may help. Suppose we want to examine the subjective culture of U.S. college students. We would look at their beliefs and ideas about many aspects of their lives, like personal relationships, family, and politics. We would also want to know about what they consider appropriate behaviors in a variety of social situations—for example,

dating, how to deal with professors, and how to behave toward their parents. In addition, we would want to know about their values, that is, what they consider to be important principles in their lives, such as individual freedom, world at peace, and concern about the natural environment.

One way to understand the notion of subjective culture is to think of categories, attitudes, norms, and values as *causes* of individual behavior. That is, the kinds of ideas people hold, obligations they feel, or values they espouse lead them to behave the way they do. However, it is important to realize that the elements of subjective culture are also phenomena that emerge from individual interactions with the social environment, social relationships, and group activity; in other words, subjective culture is also *caused by* individual behavior.

Honoring Harry Triandis's contribution, this book is founded on the notion of subjective culture. The authors of the chapters characterize it, extend it, and apply it to various problems in different domains of human experience in a variety of cultures. The majority of the chapters (Parts III to V) reflect this effort. Part III (*Elements of Subjective Culture*) shows how diverse elements of subjective culture can be approached, studied, and measured. Part IV (*Group and Interpersonal Processes*) extends this work to interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup processes. Part V (*Applied Cross-Cultural Psychology*) describes some of the ways in which the analysis of subjective culture can benefit the solution of concrete human problems: training people for successful cross-cultural encounters, family planning, and organizational behavior.

To understand this body of work, it is important to think of it as a research tradition (Lakatos, 1970; Laudan, 1977) and to identify its core characteristics. By a *research tradition*, we mean a heterogeneous set of research activities that is characterized by common underlying theoretical assumptions and compatible methodological approaches. The typical, mainstream psychological approach can be characterized by a theoretical concern with the individual person—for instance, personality dispositions or individual cognitive processes such as memory and decision making. Methodologically, psychologists have developed research strategies that are compatible with this theoretical concern by putting the individual under a microscope. Social psychology has traditionally attempted to extend this theoretical orientation to include within its scope phenomena that involve both individuals and small groups in their social milieu. However, the methodological focus has remained on the individual.

In contrast, research in subjective culture has always had a clear theoretical concern with a large-scale collective or community that shares a culture and a methodological orientation of examining the psychological attributes of the individuals who constitute the collective. Thus, this research tradition expanded substantially the unit of theoretical concern in psychological research (i.e., from the individual or small group to a large collective sharing a common culture), without a corresponding expansion of the methodological focus. To put it simply, the research tradition of subjective culture can be characterized by conceptual collectivism and methodological individualism. We mean by *methodological individualism* the choice of the individual as the unit from which psychological data are collected. Although the same term is used to refer to a wider notion

of a metatheoretical choice of the individual as a unit of analysis, our sense here is somewhat more restricted.

The emergence of this research tradition can be best understood from a historical perspective. Triandis and most of his early collaborators had their intellectual roots in the traditional psychological approach that considers the individual as the unit of analysis. In this way, they maximized the chance that they would be heard and have an impact on mainstream psychology by extending its approach to include large-scale collectives. In effect, the notion of subjective culture allowed researchers to describe and explain the collective phenomenon that is culture while maintaining a strong commitment to the individual as the center of theoretical construction in psychology.

Part I (*Reflections on Cross-Cultural Psychology*) represents this research tradition. The chapters, written by senior cross-cultural psychologists and colleagues of Triandis, reflect on culture's influence on individual behavior. Berry attempts to place much of his work on the ecocultural approach and Triandis's work on subjective culture within a unified framework. To the extent that this is possible, it may indicate their common intellectual roots, that is, conceptual collectivism and methodological individualism.

Both chapters in this section emphasize an important theme in cross-cultural psychology, namely, that there are universal attributes that bind all people or that there is unity in diversity. The focus of Berry's chapter is on the underlying conceptual unity that can be found in diverse psychocultural approaches. By contrast, Bond's chapter celebrates and explains the possibility of unity in heterogeneous societies.

The work described in Part I is based on a simple spatial metaphor of individual elements constituting the collective whole. In other words, the relationship between methodological individualism and conceptual collectivism can be thought of as the mapping of individual elements and processes onto a collective phenomenon, and the search for unity in diversity can be thought of as the mapping of the experiences of the many onto the experience of the unified whole.

The chapters of Part II (*Theoretical Orientations in Cross-Cultural Social Psychology*) add to this metaphor a temporal dimension. They represent an attempt to extend the core assumptions of the research tradition of subjective culture. As explained earlier, this tradition expanded the focus on the microprocesses of the individual to the macroprocesses of the collective. The chapters in this section add another important dimension to the research tradition by highlighting the temporality of the culture-mind relation. Feldman's chapter clearly focuses on short-term processes, whereas Adamopoulos's implies very long-term processes. The chapter by Kashima and Kashima reflects a concern with a range of time-dependent phenomena.

Yet another way in which some of the chapters in this section (by Adamopoulos and by Kashima and Kashima) attempt to extend the research tradition of subjective culture is by conceptualizing culture and individual psychology as mutually constitutive. As described earlier, subjective culture is conceptualized as both the cause and the effect of individual behavior. This implies that the individual is separable from culture, a causal agent who may influence or be influenced by culture. Instead, the work presented in these chapters takes the general view that culture and the individual are indistinguishable and

constitutive of each other, and they should be studied not as distinct phenomena but as constructs with shared meaning.

The chapters in this volume can be thought of as variations on a theme inspired by the work of Harry Triandis. This theme, substantially expanded and modified over several decades, still constitutes a significant perspective in cross-cultural psychology and lies at the core of new research programs around the world that promise to make important contributions to the study of what it means to be human.