



## **Politico-economic Factors as Alternative to National Culture as Explanatory Factor in Cross-Cultural Psychology**

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**Abstract.** In this paper, we examine how behavioural differences observed in cross-cultural studies are explained and the accuracy of such explanation. Often researchers fall on culture as an elucidation for the differences observed. However, we demonstrate in this paper how cultural explanation offers arguably a feeble and impractical scientific explanation for behavioural differences in transnational studies. It was shown that when psychologists refer to cultural differences to explain the observed behavioural differences, they are in fact explaining the observed behavioural differences with the expected differences in behaviour associated with societies to which the research participants belong respectively. However, it is concluded that a cultural explanation is an acceptable explanation for incompatibility and lack of fit for the import or export of best practices from one society to another but not an acceptable explanation for differences in the observed behaviours. In its place, politico-economic factors are offered as alternative, viable, and valid scientific explanations.

**Key words:** Cross-cultural psychology, cross-cultural organizational psychology, evolutionary psychology, Ghana.

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## **Background to the Study**

Cross-cultural psychology is a field of psychology in which dependent variables are measured and contrasted across different countries or nations. Indeed, in political science, they prefer to call it comparative studies. The quest to identify the variations that exist among persons of different cultural heritage is an attempt to make the psychology global in order to enhance the external validity of research conducted in the West (Gelfand, Leslie, & Fehr, 2008). For instance, Gelfand et al. (2008) argue that restricting the field of industrial and organizational psychology to the Western societies puts limitations on both theories and practical solutions to organizational problems in the developing economies. Hofstede (1983) has concluded that given the cultural differences he uncovered, ethnocentric management theories based on the value system of one country have become untenable. Bhagat, Kedia, Crawford and Kaplan (1990) suggest that cultural variations are important in understanding cross-cultural issues in human resource management. Bhagat et al. (1990) identified four dimensions of cultural variations that they considered important for international human resource management; these were (a) emphasis on people, ideas, or action, (b) differences in work-related values, (c) emphasis on process versus goal, and (d) emphasis on abstractive versus associative modes of information processing.

If cross-cultural researchers are interested in culture because it provides them with contingencies for application of theories, then it is no “crime”. However, some researchers attempt to attribute differences observed in the dependent variables measured to differences in values. This is when it becomes a “crime” for the researchers and many other like-minded Africans. For instance, in a study of the perceptions of obesity and ideal body size among United State and Ghanaian university students, Cogan, Bhalla, Sefa-Dede, and Rothblum (1996) intimated that a possible explanation for the differences in the ideal body size was differences in values associated with the varying body sizes. As an alternative explanation, Cogan et al. (1996) reported that their study was consistent with the view that persons in

developing countries prefer large bodies and those in developed countries prefer thin bodies; this explanation is not any better. This seems to say that culture is responsible for the differences in the perceptions of the ideal body size between the Ghanaian and the U. S. university students. While many employ culture as an explanatory factor (Louw, 2002), they ignore the impact of macro-level variables such as politics and governance and economic growth (Mortazavi, 2000).

What is then culture? In her book *“Introducing Cultural Anthropology”*, Lenkeit (2001:26) provides a list of definitions that are worth noting. In this paper, three of the definitions will be repeated for emphasis only;

Culture... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society (Tylor, 1958:1)

By culture we mean all those historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945:97)

The culture of any society consists of the sum total of the ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and pattern of habitual behaviour which the members of that society have acquired through instruction or imitation and which they share to a greater or less degree (Linton, 1936:288)

These definitions suggest that culture is shared to some extent, cumulative, dynamic, adaptive, diverse and integrated (Lenkeit, 2001). She further pointed out that culture has three interconnected components: cognitive processes, behaviours and material creations. The exposition on culture provided by Lenkeit (2001) shows that values are part of culture. As a result, to resort to differences in values as worthwhile explanation for observed differences in behavior, as did Cogan et al. (1996) in their study, is to use culture as an explanation.

The definitions also demonstrate that culture consists of patterns of adaptive behaviours that enable members of the society survive in their particular environment or circumstances. This means that the culture that evolves in a society is a response to the living conditions and ecology of the members of that particular society. Often members of the societies in a given geographical location eat those crops that usually flourish in their particular climate and wear those clothes that offer the maximum protection against the weather. In other words, we can explain variations in patterns of behaviours across the globe in terms of the differences in living and ecological conditions that require such adaptive behaviours. In this paper, the researchers advance the propositions that politico-economic factors form the vital bedrock of the conditions of living across the globe. These conditions require different patterns of adaptive behaviours. Indeed, Lenkeit (2001) discussed religion, economic activities, political order and social control as well as communication as constituting conditions of living in any society. In effect, culture is a response to challenges of those living in a society at any given time. For instance, Oscar Lewis (1966; cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2004) argues that the pattern of behaviour of the poor is a design for living transmitted from one generation to the next. He adds that this design for living becomes self-perpetuating. In the subsequent paragraphs, we examine whether or not providing another label for a class of observed behaviour is a spot-on explanation.

### **Epistemological Test of Culture as an Explanatory Factor**

West and Turner (2000) define epistemology as questions about how we go about knowing and what counts as knowledge. They added that epistemology concerns the approaches to research and how we arrived at the truth. Among other things, one of the aims of psychological science is to explain (Kerlinger, 1963). In the context of this paper, the epistemological question posed is: Is culture as used in cross-cultural

studies an adequate and viably valid scientific explanation for the observed differences in behaviours between members of different societies?

Bordens and Abbott (2002) provide two conditions under which scientific explanations fail. These include failures resulting from faulty inferences and pseudo-explanations (circular explanations or tautology). Of interest to us is the circular explanation. According to them, in “seeking to provide explanations for behaviour, psychologists sometimes offer positions, theories, and explanations that do nothing more than provide alternative label for the behavioural event” (Bordens & Abbott, 2002:11). They added that circular explanations have intuitive appeal but do not serve as valid scientific explanation. As an illustration, they pointed out that if we observe aggressive behaviours displayed by research participants and attribute their behaviour to aggressive instinct we are engaging in circular explanation. This is because the observed behaviour (aggression) is also used to prove the existence of the explanatory variable (aggressive instincts). They further showed how Seligman’s concept of continuum of preparedness as the explanation for why animals can learn some associations easily and others with difficulty was circular explanation (Bordens & Abbott, 2002). In Seligman’s analysis, animals are biologically prepared to learn certain associations while contra-prepared to learn others. The problem here lies in the relabeling of biological preparedness as continuum of preparedness and to use the new label as the explanation for the difficulty of the animals have in learning some associations and not others. When asked what is the proof that continuum of preparedness exists, the usual answer is the observed difficulty in the learning of associations. This is definitely tautological.

The invalid circular explanation discussed above seems to be the exact thing that happens when we offer culture as the explanation for the observed differences in behaviour between members of two societies. For instance, in Cogan et al.’s (1996) study, using differences in values and by extension, cultural differences as an explanation for the observed differences in perceptions of body sizes is intuitively appealing but it constitutes a pseudo-explanation. This is to say that if we say that

culture caused the differences in the perceptions of the ideal body size observed between the Ghanaian students and the U.S. students, then we are also saying that differences in patterns of adaptive behaviours were responsible for the differences in the observed behaviour and that differences in the perceptions is the proof of the existence of cultural differences. This is definitely a circular explanation. How would you feel if someone tells you that the difference between male students and female students in terms of their level of test anxiety is because of gender or sex differences? Yes, outraged! The forgoing discussion shows that culture is definitely not an explanatory factor and that cross-cultural psychologists should look for more useful explanatory factors. This suggests that cross-cultural studies are at best descriptive. This may also suggest that the name “Cross-Cultural Psychology” may even be a misnomer; transnational or trans-societal comparative studies may be more befitting.

To avoid the trap of proposing circular explanations, Bordens and Abbott (2002) suggest that there should be independent measures of the dependent variables and the explanatory factor. In addition, the measurement of the explanatory variable should not involve the dependent variable or observed behaviour. In other words, for culture to qualify as a viably valid scientific explanation, the measure of culture should not make reference to the observed behaviour. This is quite difficult and as a result, we go the easy lane by relabeling the observed behaviour and using the new label as explanation for the observed. This is how culture has been used so far in cross-cultural studies. However, some critics may counter-argue that Geer Hofstede has provided us with measures of culture in terms of work-related values. Hofstede (1983) identified four different dimensions of national culture which he labeled as individualism versus collectivism, large or small power distance, strong or weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity versus femininity. It is important however, to note that the cultural dimensions were labels Hofstede gave to the cluster of behaviours he measured on which the members of the 50 countries he studied differed.

In order to demonstrate why the use of the cultural labels to explain employee behaviour becomes tautological, a second look at definitions of two of the dimensions is necessitated. Power distance refers to the degree to which the less powerful members of institutions within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Hofstede (1983:81), in his words, argued, "in organizations, the level of power distance is related to the degree of centralization of authority and the degree of autocratic leadership". Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the degree to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. "Some societies socialize their members into accepting this uncertainty and not becoming upset by it. People in such societies tend to accept each day as it comes and take risk rather easily (Hofstede, 1983:81). These definitions shows that Hofstede only relabeled a cluster of behaviours and to use the labels to explain the existence of the cultural differences is to explain the behaviour by itself. Again, no independent measures of the cultural dimensions will exist without reference to the behaviours we wish to explain. An example will suffice. If one observes democratic leadership in a U. S. firm, we cannot say that the democratic leadership exists in that firm because of the low power distance of the U. S society. This will definitely be tautological as low power distance can be another label for democratic society and leadership while at the same time the measure of power distance cannot be independent of democratic leadership behaviours.

Thought provokingly, when is cultural explanation not a circular explanation? Cultural explanation is not a pseudo-explanation when it is being used to account for the difficulty in applying theories and practices developed in one society in another. In this situation, we are not explaining behavioural differences but incompatibility of societies and behavioural events. In other words, we are not explaining why there exist behavioural differences but why we are unable to import one set of practices from one society into another successfully. In this regard, cross-cultural organizational psychologists have been successful. For instance, in attempt to explain why it is difficult to import performance management practices from

Western societies (e.g. Britain and U.S.) to developing countries, Mendonça (2000) suggested cultural differences as the cause for the lack of fit. He argued that performance management as practiced in Western societies when applied in developing economies will be affected by the prevailing high power distance and high feminism. According to him, joint-problem solving and joint-decision making so essential to successful performance management is incompatible with the high power distance while performance - and goal-orientation required for performance management is nearly absent because of the focus on personalized relationships. This explanation is definitely not tautological! What he did was to explain why it is difficult to export performance management in the developed societies to emerging economies and not why there exist differences between developed and developing countries in terms of performance management practices. To use culture to explain incompatibility and lack of fit for the import or export of best practices from one society to another appears operable explanation. However, that is not how cultural explanation is being used in many cross-cultural studies. Cogan's et al.'s (1996) study is an example.

What are the alternatives to culture as an explanatory factor in such transnational or comparative studies? Drawing on the earlier inference that variations in patterns of behaviours across the globe (culture) may be due to differences in living and ecological conditions that require such adaptive behaviours, I advance the earlier suggestion that politico-economic factors are important factors that can explain the differences observed in the dependent variables in many of the transnational psychological studies. This is because politico-economic explanations avoid the two pitfalls of cultural explanations. First, the differences in observed behaviour can be attributed to varying politico-legal conditions and economic conditions without having to resort to prove the existence of the former in terms of the observed behaviours. That is politico-economic conditions exist independent of the behaviours being studied in transnational researches. For instance, a viable alternative to the cultural explanation offered by Cogan et al. (1996) is differences in economic



conditions between Ghanaian and the U.S. students. This is to say that the Ghanaian students' perception that large body size is ideal reflects as an adaptive response in a country in which the majority live below the poverty line and where the only evidence of living above the poverty line and not starving is what people will see - your body size. Because your body size will also enable you have access to other "goodies" of life such as respect, the pursuit of the ideal body size is adaptive for survival reasons. Reference to differences in values may not be enough explanation for the lack of fit of many psychological theories in Africa and Asia. For instance, Mendonça (2000) argues that Herzberg's two-factor theory is "completely at variance with the fact that, in emerging countries, economic and social security is considered more important to life than are freedom and control at the workplace." Even though Mendonça 's (2000) suggestion seems to imply that pursuit of economic and social security are cultural values, it also implies that the application of Herzberg's theory will fail because the context or hygiene factors are not adequately met in most developing countries. Given the generally low pay levels and prevalence of poverty, Ghanaian workers are more likely to choose higher pay rather than high autonomy. We agree with Gelfand et al. (2008) that the current research questions posed by organizational psychology researchers in the developed economies assume post-materialist worldview whereby individuals who have attained a certain level of material comfort seek autonomy and independence. From the perspective of the millions who live below the poverty line, research questions currently posed by organizational psychologists in Western societies are unnecessary and luxurious. A young Ghanaian graduate who has spent more than four years in search of a job and sees "job search as a job" does not care much about discriminatory work practices than just securing a job because "man must eat to survive"; there is no unemployment benefit. Of course, with time they show frustrations and disappointments. In short, legal framework, nature of political regime, various indicators of economic conditions from this analytical stand seem to offer more workable explanations for differences in behaviours between the Western

and Non-Western societies than do cultural differences offer. Cultural differences are thus to be seen as descriptive and not necessarily explanatory.

## **Conclusion**

We have learnt that cross-cultural or transnational comparative studies are important for identifying the contingencies that constrain the applications of psychological theories developed in Western societies. However, cultural differences do not seem to offer viably valid scientific explanations for the observed differences between members of Western and Non-Western societies. Cultural explanations are merely pseudo-explanations or tautological. It was found that culture is only a label for class of adaptive behaviours shared and exhibited by members of a certain society. As a result, to use it to explain differences in behaviours between two different societies is to say that the observed differences in the behaviour are due to the expected differences in behaviour. In its place, politico-legal factors, unemployment levels, poverty levels, cost of living, and quality of life (access to essential services and ability to adequately meet basic needs) may offer practical explanations than culture offers now. In other words, cross-cultural studies as conducted now are largely descriptive rather than explanatory. It was also found that a cultural explanation is an acceptable explanation for incompatibility and lack of fit for the import or export of best practices from one society to another but not for why differences exist in the practices between the societies concerned.

Let us conclude by saying that many of the explanations and labels for observed behaviours in transnational studies also suffer from faulty inferences as well. The researchers who are often from Western societies infer causes that are often inaccurate and give labels for cluster of behaviours of members of developing countries that appear discourteous and belligerent. I suggest that cross-cultural researchers should always give the results of their data analyses to researchers who are members of the societies they are attempting to contrast with their own for

independent explanation for the observed difference. In such research enterprise, both explanations should be captured in the final report; they should be labeled as 'Etic' (outsider perspective) and 'Emic' (insider perspective) explanations. For people not to ridicule the emic explanations, they should be reported as given by the member of the other society without changes to the meaning and words that may disagree with the researcher providing the etic explanation. The criteria for the selection of the "emic" researcher should be (1) being a member of the other society by birth, (2) having sound background in the area of inquiry, (3) having resided in the country for most part of his or her life, and (4) residing in the country at the time of the request for the emic explanation. As an example, Ghanaian researchers born and raised in the U. S. are not in full freeness of scholarly speech when it comes to providing emic explanations for a transnational study that contrast Ghanaians and Americans. We strongly advocate that care be taken in undertaking cross-cultural research and if these analytical views are heeded to, "international" psychology will become rightly international.

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