General Issues of Human Development

Cross-cultural Approaches to Human Development

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Findings from psychological research on human development carried out primarily in Western cultures may not be universally valid. Research in other cultures reveal hitherto unknown facts and processes. Thus, a cross-cultural approach provides an essential contribution to the understanding of developmental processes and the influence of genetic and environmental factors, for example universals as well as cultural specification can be found in cognitive, emotional, and motivational development.

1. Main Topics and Controversies

Historically, the course of physical and psychological development was first studied as child psychology. Later, developmental psychology concentrated increasingly on factors influencing the development of individual differences in personality characteristics and on the basic regularities as postulated by various theories. Only later was the scope extended to life-span development. Systematic cross-cultural research began relatively late, although Wundt and Freud had already referred to the importance of psychological phenomena in foreign cultures.

Most research findings, methods, and theoretical approaches have hitherto originated mainly in Western cultures, and a Euro- or ethnocentric viewpoint has prevailed. Consequently, one important objective of cross-cultural research consists in obtaining a broader empirical basis including non-Western cultures. The first question is whether the course of development is similar or different in various cultures and whether different phenomena occur.

A more ambitious objective of cross-cultural comparison is the testing of theoretical assumptions. A classic example concerns the observations made by Malinowski (1927) about the Oedipus complex. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, a boy's object of love is his mother, and his father is therefore his rival; that is why the boy develops aggression toward his father. However, the Trobriander's aggression is not directed against the father, who is only the mother's lover, but against the uncle, who is the male authority figure. Here cross-cultural comparisons make it possible to disentangle the two functions of the father, which are confounded in Western culture.

In this sense, systematic cross-cultural research uses cultures differing in theoretically relevant variables as "natural experiments" to investigate theoretical assumptions: factors that cannot be manipulated experimentally (e.g., living conditions, child-rearing techniques, values) can thus be studied.

Of course, specific methodological problems arise: the functional equivalence in sampling, instruments, and data analysis has to be ascertained. If a concept, a question, or a mode of behavior has a different meaning in one culture than in another, the results cannot be interpreted easily. It is often difficult to exclude with certainty nonobvious differences of meaning.

The central research issue is the nature–nurture problem, that is, the question of whether biologically determined hereditary factors or learning experience (e.g., socialization) is more important for development. This has become a major controversy in psychology, even affecting political ideologies.

In the 1930s and 1940s the culture-and-personality school examined the relations between "basic personality" in a culture and the common cultural conditions of its development. This idea, starting from a combination of learning and psychoanalytical assumptions, was less oriented to the nature–nurture controversy than earlier anthropological studies. Another approach mainly dealt with separate characteristics. Here, some authors tried to demonstrate biological universalities; others believed that cultural experiences are more important (cultural relativism).

Both approaches are limited in scope. In the early 1990s, it is believed that development is the result of interactions between biological factors and experience during socialization. More attention has also been given to the child's own activity in structuring these interactions and thereby in partly structuring its own

development, aspects which can preferably be studied cross-culturally.

Finally, "cultural psychology" must be mentioned as a special approach that is distinctly different from cross-cultural psychology. Cultural psychology pursues the ambitious goal of understanding how cultural traditions, institutions, symbolic systems, and social practices interact and, as a whole, direct psychological development, so that differences in cognitions, motives, self, and so on, seen as a result of culture, are the focus of research. At the same time, culture and the external world are conceived of as intentionally constructed, so that in the end the complex interactions become the object of research (Boesch 1991, Shweder 1991).

2. Nature–Nurture Controversy

An important impetus for cross-cultural research came from Mead's study (1929) on childhood and youth in Samoa. She described cheerful, nonaggressive, free and easy people who showed no conflicts. She explained this by the particular form of socialization in Samoa, that was sexually permissive, "free of constraints," and free of severe and painful punishment or pressure.

Mead's central message was that the problems typical of Western cultures, especially during puberty (such as aggression, rivalry, jealousy, and feelings of guilt) do not originate from biological heritage, but from socialization. She was convinced of the plasticity of human beings; namely, that the personality is, to a great extent, a product of the culture. This was in line with the cultural relativism of her teacher Boas and the early behaviorism which arose as a radical reaction to the previous biological determinism.

Until the 1970s, Mead's work, which obviously accorded with the *Zeitgeist*, considerably influenced theoretical reasoning in social science. But Mead's one-sided milieu-theoretical position has proved to be untenable, as the careful study by Freeman (1983) in Samoa has shown. Mead's report was based on insufficient observations and unjustified conclusions and generalizations. Even in those early days there were no such cheerful, free, and unaggressive personalities; at least they did not differ substantially from other cultures.

It is also the case that the simple dichotomy that portrays personality characteristics as either genetically or environmentally determined, is insufficient; the question regarding the extent to which these two factors determine the development, for example, of intelligence, is posed incorrectly. It is known that both factors play a decisive role in a complicated interaction during development. The real task for research is to clarify this interaction; here, cross-cultural research has made essential contributions.

Another major topic in cross-cultural research is the question of biologically determined universalities on the one hand and culture-specific developments on the other. One example of the search for biologically rooted universals is the extensive series of ethological studies by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1976). He assumes that, in human development, factors which are phylogenetically inherited are of special importance. By observing children in different cultures he showed, for example, that special forms of rivalry and aggression occur everywhere, even in cultures that are considered to be nonaggressive (e.g., Bushmen). Also territoriality, courting behavior, and some facial expressions and gestures are universal.

In the same way, many studies (e.g., Ekman 1972) showed that certain emotions (joy, fear, anger, etc.) are expressed and recognized universally. However, cross-cultural investigations have also shown that the further development of emotional expression, in particular its perception and impact on behavior, are not universal to the same degree. Culturally determined learning processes obviously play a role; for example, in societies where the expression of anger is inappropriate, children develop the ability to control the expression of anger, and even to diminish the experience of anger (e.g., by reinterpreting a frustrating situation). These processes still have not been sufficiently investigated but cross-cultural results indicate that emotions are not simply innate reactions to specific situations but are mediated by cultural learning.

3. Cross-cultural Studies on the Development of Specific Functional Areas

3.1 Achievement Motive

The concept of achievement motivation (to strive for success in competition with a standard of excellence) has been accepted as a universal motive and as the driving force for economic and academic success. Early cross-cultural studies demonstrated that the achievement motive and economic success (in individuals, as well as in society) were positively correlated (McClelland 1961). The development of the motive was assumed to be influenced by certain child-rearing techniques: early independence training is related to high achievement motive. From further cross-cultural studies, it became clear that it is not the age but the appropriateness to the child's development that is crucial.

Furthermore, cross-cultural studies have shown that a specifically Western interpretation of the motive that makes a functional distinction between achievement and affiliation motives is ethnocentric. Although this distinction appears valid in the West, both motives are related in other cultures (e.g., Japan). In Japan, striving for individual achievement and success is not approved because achievement should serve the group. These findings have also led to the insight that

functional criteria have to be derived from development in order to differentiate motives and to allow for their transcultural identification.

3.2 Attachment

Cross-cultural research in various cultures has shown that infants are universally motivated to develop affective bonds with a person with whom they can feel secure (e.g., in case of danger). Different types of attachment (secure, avoidant, resistant) emerge depending on the care-giver's responsiveness. These forms of attachment are also the basis for the development of prosocial and antisocial motives and of cognitive schemata about the self and the world ("working models") in further personality development.

From cross-cultural research it is known that infants can have affective bonds with a variety of people. Cultural differences in the frequency of various forms of attachment are of special interest. In Japan, the number of securely attached infants is significantly higher than in the United States and Germany (Grossmann and Grossmann 1992). This reflects a special kind of caretaking which is deeply rooted in the culture (Kornadt and Trommsdorff 1990).

3.3 Aggression

Many cross-cultural studies have shown that cultures differ significantly with regard to aggression (Kornadt et al. 1980). Because aggressive reactions in early childhood are universal, culture-specific forms of socialization should influence the development of aggressiveness. Whereas results concerning the effects of punishment are contradictory, it is known that neglect and rejection and a positive evaluation of aggression promote aggressiveness. However, the function of these factors is not clear. An investigation in five cultures based on motivation theory demonstrated that the cultures differed in the strength of the aggression motive. Interestingly, in all cultures a certain sequence of internal processes led to aggressive action (frustration—anger—malevolent interpretation—activation of aggression motive—goal setting—decision for aggressive action) indicating a possibly universal motive system. However, this pattern is not inevitable.

In East Asian cultures, where aggressive behavior is disapproved of, frustration is often interpreted as harmless (so that no anger occurs). One culture-specific reaction to anger is regret for the situation and guilt about it (Kornadt et al. 1992).

These characteristics in East Asian cultures are connected with culture-specific socialization. Especially in Japan, mothers establish a very close attachment with the child. If the mother requires acquiescence from the child, she avoids risking the harmony between herself and the child. However, she does not generally give up or question any of the rules she had set up before (Kornadt and Trommsdorff 1990). This behavior is embedded in a much wider cultural context in which several factors have a similar effect on development. The fact that such functional systems, different from those in the West, can develop underscores the importance of considering complex interaction processes in development.

3.4 Prosocial Behavior

According to psychobiological approaches, prosocial behavior (altruism), like aggression, results from a built-in motivation promoting survival. The observation of prosocial behavior in infancy also indicates a universal predisposition. Universal tendencies to help family members rather than strangers have been demonstrated by comparing Chinese and English samples. Despite contradictory results within United States samples, cross-cultural studies have shown that empathy induces helping. However, cultural differences exist in the quality and frequency of helping: this has been shown by Whiting and Whiting (1975) for children from cultures of different complexity and household structure, and by Trommsdorff (1995) for children from individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Data on socialization show that the mother's responsiveness fosters the child's empathy, and that "individualistic social responsibility" training fosters helping.

3.5 Cognitive Development

Many studies have investigated whether the sequence of stages of cognitive development and its age-specific occurrence as postulated by Piaget, who assumed a genetic basis, is universal. It has become clear that cultural differences in cognitive development do exist for the later developmental stages; also, the development of formal operations is domain specific. One explanation is that although cognitive competence has developed, the corresponding performance lags behind (e.g., because a behavior is not culturally valued). Another assumption is simply that growing up in a specific culture determines cognitive development. However, although there is evidence that fundamental processes in cognitive development are universal, it is still not clear how they are genetically determined (Jahoda 1986). At the same time, the local cultural and interpersonal context is important.

3.6 Moral Development

Proceeding from Piaget's stage theory, Kohlberg postulated six transculturally invariant stages of moral development. Again, the lower but not necessarily the highest stages appear to be universal. For example, it was found in India that interpersonal obligations are given priority over competing justice obligations. This can be seen as a culture-specific alternative of

a postconventional moral code. Whether this implies another structure of moral judgment or only that a different principle than that of abstract justice is used is still an open question (Eckensberger 1993).

3.7 Self

The nature–nurture controversy appears to be obsolete; obviously, both factors interact with each other. A child is born in a certain ecocultural environment and already has capabilities. In the course of development, in which both sides influence one another, the child gradually starts to develop individual functional systems, which must be adaptive in his or her environment.

If processes of development are conceived not as passive reactions to the external world, nor as biologically predetermined internal processes, but rather as an active interaction between the individual and the environment, it is insufficient to study the development of single variables. These are interrelated within the personality. Thus, the self as an integrating factor gains importance.

In developmental psychology, it is usually assumed that children strive to become independent and autonomous. This implies the development of a corresponding concept of self. However, cross-cultural research has recently shown how ethnocentric this view is. In Asian cultures, interconnectedness with others characterizes the self-concept. Here, the self is seen as part of a social network in which the individual is embedded. The differences between an independent and an interdependent self have consequences for cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes: a stronger other-orientedness prevents ego-focused emotions (e.g., anger, pride) and promotes other-focused emotions (e.g., shame, indebtedness). Abstract principles are less important for behavior than the social context (Markus and Kitayama 1991).

3.8 Holistic Approaches

Some cross-cultural approaches analyze the complex influences of culture. In the famous work by Whiting and Whiting (1975) children from six cultures were observed in their daily activities. It was shown that basic forms of social behavior (e.g., helping, hurting, dominating) are universal, but that they vary according to characteristics of the particular culture. In cultures with a relatively simple (as opposed to complex) socioeconomic structure, children were more "nurturant-responsible" and less egoistic. Similarly, cultures with nuclear, rather than extended, families showed more prosocial behavior.

Another theoretical approach distinguishes between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Triandis 1990). Some cultural differences mentioned here (e.g., those concerning achievement, aggression, child-rearing, self) are partly related to this dimension;

others are social values, rules, control orientation (Trommsdorff 1989, 1995). However, because concepts of individualistic/collectivistic orientation are still rather general, further studies of their function are needed.

4. Outlook: Trends and Tasks

An increasing tendency to include different cultures in empirical research can be observed. This allows optimistic expectations that ethnocentric biases will be reduced. However, several shortcomings have to be overcome. Often, the methods used in cross-cultural research have been tested only in Western cultures and their appropriateness for non-Western cultures is not ascertained. The ecological validity of verbal measures and their relation to behavior are seldom clear. Also, results are often generalized for an entire culture without discussing what aspect of the culture is represented by the sample. In the same way, intracultural comparisons are often neglected in favor of intercultural comparisons. Furthermore, single variables are studied without taking into account possible functional relations between these and other variables relevant to development. Here, cross-cultural research has an important task: to discover functional units of development and functional relationships which are yet unknown in Western culture. To summarize, cross-cultural research can be very useful for studying development as a process of complex interactions between the self and the environment, including the role of individuals who actively structure parts of these interactions and who thus influence their own developmental processes and outcomes.

See also: Human Learning, Evolution of Anthropological Perspectives; Perspectives on Culture, Cognition and Education; Development of Motivation

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