

# Bridging Universal and Cultural Perspectives: A Vision for Developmental Psychology in a Global World

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**ABSTRACT**—*This article argues that now is an opportune time to draw together the accumulated bodies of knowledge in developmental and cultural psychology in order to build a new vision for developmental psychology scholarship that bridges universal and cultural perspectives. Such bridging requires rethinking (a) the entity of developmental psychological analysis, (b) the scope and meaning of developmental psychology concepts, and (c) the nature of theoretical frameworks. This rethinking will render developmental psychology more broadly valid across cultures and more applicable to local cultural conditions. This is imperative in an increasingly global world where diverse peoples interact more than ever. Although the present focus is on rethinking developmental psychology, conclusions about the implications of bridging universal and cultural perspectives may be of interest in other fields and disciplines addressing psychological thought and behavior.*

**KEYWORDS**—*bridging; culture; development; globalization; psychology; theory*

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Since its inception about a century ago, developmental psychology has had the mission of describing, explaining, and predicting characteristics and processes of human development, as well as applying its knowledge to improve the lives of children and families. Over time, a large and important body of knowledge has accumulated. One legitimate question about this knowledge is how much of it is valid across cultures.

Even in today's globalized world, when it has become easier than ever to cross borders and access information from around the world, it is striking how restricted mainstream developmental psychology remains. For example, a recent analysis examined the nationalities of the samples included in research published in American Psychological Association journals from 2003 to 2007 (Arnett, 2008). For *Developmental Psychology*, *Journal of Educational Psychology*, and *Journal of Family Psychology*, a mere 5%–9% were from Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. The vast majority of samples was from the United States (64%–81%), followed by other English-speaking countries (8%–19%) and Europe (8%–13%). Moreover, during the more extended period from 1988 to 2007—when globalization proceeded with hyperspeed—these numbers remained flat. As Super (2010) has observed, “We are still struggling to get ‘the child’ out of the confines of North America and Europe” (p. 1).

If the intent of developmental psychology were to provide theories and findings with a primarily American scope, then these numbers might not give rise to questions. However, typically that is not the intent, and researchers often assume that theories, methods, and findings apply around the world, without corresponding evidence. If “the child” at the center of developmental psychology is American, how confident can we be in the universal validity of developmental psychology knowledge?

## A TIMELY OPPORTUNITY

Rather than seeing this question in a negative light, it can serve as an opportunity to reframe and expand the mission of developmental psychology. Although research with culturally diverse

samples may be sparse, there is a clear and rising interest in cultural issues. For example, for the second time in a row the *Handbook of Child Psychology* (Damon & Lerner, 2006) includes a chapter on cultural psychology (Shweder et al., 2006), and several other chapters address cultural issues or state that future research must do so. Developmental conferences and job postings also reflect this increasing interest in culture, as do new and upcoming developmental textbooks and special issues of journals (e.g., the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* plans to publish a special issue on “Adolescents in the Majority World” in 2013).

Furthermore, a field of “cultural psychology” has burgeoned in recent decades. It includes scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, communications, education, linguistics, psychology, social work, and neuroscience. Many of their efforts have gone into defining a discipline and generating scholarship that demonstrates how culture is a crucial constituent of human psychology and development (e.g., Chiao et al., 2009; Cole, 1996; Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995; Greenfield, 1997; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 1999; Moghaddam, 1987; Nisbett, 2003; Nsamenang, 1992; Rogoff, 2003; Saraswathi, 2005; Shore, 1996; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990; Super & Harkness, 2002; Valsiner, 1987). By now, the corpus of cultural psychology research has grown enough to prompt the publication of both a handbook and a textbook on cultural psychology (Heine, 2008; Kitayama & Cohen, 2007).

Cultural psychology aims to understand the psychologies of different peoples by means of culturally sensitive theories and methods. In the 1990s, as cultural psychologists focused on carving out a discipline, some separated cultural psychology from cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Stigler et al., 1990). The central argument was that cross-cultural psychology—like cultural psychology—involved the study of peoples of different cultures but that its central aim—unlike cultural psychology—was to document universal psychological phenomena. Critics of cross-cultural psychology also argued that researchers often used concepts and measures developed in the United States without adequately considering their relevance to local conditions. More recently, too, Moghaddam and Lee (2006) questioned the adequacy of the samples included in publications in the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. They documented how use of college student samples has risen radically, from 35% in 1980 to 87% in 2004. As they pointed out, college students outside the United States are often the most Americanized or Westernized segment of the population, and thus comparisons across cultures of college students are more likely to find similarities than research involving participants who are more socioeconomically diverse.

Nonetheless, the boundaries between cultural and cross-cultural psychology have by now become less sharp in terms of both research and organization. Cross-cultural psychologists are showing increased attention to ecological validity and cultural diversity in their research, perhaps partly in response to the cultural psychology critique (e.g., Kühnen, Deutsch, & Boehnke, 2009).

Cultural psychologists are also drawing on cross-cultural work, for example, taking the distinction between individualistic/independent and collectivistic/interdependent cultures developed by Triandis (the “father” of cross-cultural psychology; e.g., Triandis, 1995) and pushing it in new directions (as I describe later). At the organizational level, too, cross-cultural and cultural psychology scholars join common professional societies. For example, 49% of the 2009 members of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychologists self-identified as “cultural psychologists” (Grabenya, 2009).

Here, I will draw on work by scholars who self-identify as cultural psychologists, cross-cultural psychologists, or both, and by scholars who self-identify as “sociocultural psychologists” and “psychological anthropologists.” For two reasons, however, I consistently use the terms *cultural* and *cultural psychology* in presenting my thesis. First, I wish to be clear that cultural scholarship needs to employ ecologically sensitive theoretical and methodological frameworks (including in sampling participants), as cultural psychologists have emphasized. Second, I take psychological findings showing cultural differences to be just as important and useful as those showing cultural similarities.

My thesis is that now is an opportune time to draw together the accumulated bodies of knowledge in developmental and cultural psychology in order to build a new vision for developmental psychology that bridges universal and cultural perspectives. Such bridging requires rethinking (a) the entity of developmental psychological analysis, (b) the scope and meaning of developmental psychology concepts, and (c) the nature of theoretical frameworks. This rethinking will render developmental psychology more broadly valid across cultures *and* more attentive and applicable to local cultural conditions. This is imperative in a world where diverse peoples interact with one another more than ever.

I define culture as symbolic and behavioral inheritances that members of a community share and co-construct (Shweder et al., 2006). Symbolic inheritances involve conceptions of persons, society, nature, and divinity. Behavioral inheritances consist of common or habitual familial and social practices. Culture, then, is *not* synonymous with country or ethnicity but rather describes communities whose members share key beliefs and behaviors. Of course, variation exists between individuals within cultural communities and between cultures in their degree of ideological and behavioral heterogeneity.

My focus here will be on scholarship at the intersection of developmental and cultural psychology in recent decades (e.g., Kagitcibasi, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007), as well as recent bridging work (e.g., Jensen, 2011a). Although I focus on rethinking and expanding developmental psychology, the conclusions I reach about the implications of bridging universal and cultural perspectives may be of interest in other fields and disciplines addressing psychological thought and behavior.

### THE ENTITY OF DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

It is revealing that Super (2010) wrote of “the child” in quotation marks, signaling that the term is not straightforward. From a perspective that bridges cultural and universal considerations, the entity of developmental psychology analysis is not “the child” but rather *individuals across the lifespan who are developing in tandem with one or more changing cultures*. Three dimensions of this definition bear elaboration.

First, the entity of analysis is not “the child.” For traditional developmental psychology, the central goal may be to arrive at universal conclusions about “the child.” No “universal” child, however, takes part in research. Instead, children who are growing up in a particular cultural context at a particular time take part in research. Cultural scholars have for some time highlighted how children develop within cultures, constantly interacting and negotiating with people whose behaviors and rules convey cultural beliefs (e.g., Goodnow, 2011; Wertsch, 1997). Thus, their analyses have often focused on the “dialectical syntheses” (Valsiner, 2011) or “transactional events” (Rogoff, 1990) through which a child develops into an active, skilled member of a particular culture. From a perspective aimed at understanding what children across cultures have in common, it is also necessary to be clear about where and when particular children have been studied in order to build a database on which claims of universality can be evaluated. In other words, knowledge of what is culturally specific and what is universal comes not from studying “the child” but from studying children across place and time.

Bridging the cultural and universal perspectives, scholars have begun to write of “childhoods,” (Nsamenang, 2011) “adolescences,” (Larson, Wilson, & Rickman, 2009) and “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2011). For example, Larson et al. (2009) argue that adolescents across the world face important common psychological tasks, including identity formation and emotional preparation for adult roles. At the same time, important psychological characteristics and processes that surround these tasks vary widely across cultures, including the extent of emotional upheaval, the degree of separation from parents, and the nature of relationships with peers. By pluralizing phases of the life course, scholars are forging a developmental psychology where the entity of analysis is not the child, but children; not the adolescent, but adolescents; not the emerging adult, but emerging adults.

Bridging cultural and universal perspectives, there is a second way in which the entity of analysis is not “the child.” Anthropologists and sociologists habitually study adults. One reason is that adults are the most knowledgeable in the ways of their culture. Another way to put this is that adults, more than children, are enculturated. A specific illustration is the well-known phenomenon of dissonant acculturation among immigrants (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Adults who immigrate adopt fewer of the psychological and social characteristics of the new culture than their

children do. The explanation is that children are more malleable, less set in their ways, less culturally socialized. The implication for developmental psychology is that it is inadequate, even misleading, to study children far more often than adults. Conclusions about universal development that largely rest on research with children fail to take into account that even if cultural socialization starts prenatally (Hepper, 1996), it becomes more pronounced with age. In other words, children represent an easier test when looking for universality, whereas adults represent an easier test when looking for cultural diversity. It is necessary, then, to study individuals across the lifespan when bridging universal and cultural perspectives.

A third dimension of my definition of the entity of developmental psychology analysis pertains to cultural change, and here research on immigration is also illustrative. Research has demonstrated that adults who immigrate to a new society retain many of the ways of their culture of origin, but it is an open question, for example, how much an 18-year-old who immigrates to the United States today would be similar, in mode and degree of acculturation, to an 18-year-old who immigrated 25 years ago. Certainly, the former is likely to have grown up with far more awareness of the English language and American customs and worldviews long before immigrating (Jensen & Flanagan, 2008). In short, cultures change, and developmental psychology needs to take such change into account.

### THE SCOPE AND MEANING OF DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY CONCEPTS

Bridging cultural and universal perspectives entails both broadening and deepening developmental psychology concepts. With respect to broadening, the study of development in diverse cultures consistently leads to the discovery of new concepts. On the basis of extensive research on learning, for example, Li (2011) has argued that a focus on developmental goals such as questioning, communication, pride, and self-esteem derived from research with European Americans must be broadened to include goals such as diligence, perseverance, moral self-perfection, and contributing to society in research with Chinese children and adults. Similarly, Rothbaum and Wang (2011) have proposed supplementing a European American focus on acceptance of the self with a concept of acceptance of the world in research with East Asians. With respect to the development of the self, research indicates that in African cultures the self is understood not only in individual physical and psychological terms but also in social, ancestral, and spiritual terms (Nsamenang, 2011). The scope of developmental psychology concepts, then, expands when research includes diverse cultures.

Bridging cultural and universal perspectives not only adds to the number of psychological concepts, it deepens them. Scholarship on the developmental goals of independence and interdependence provides a good illustration. A first step was indeed a broadening: Researchers observed that apart from

independence—a traditional focus in developmental psychology—interdependence, a highly valued goal in many cultures, also requires attention (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Subsequent steps have involved deepening the research on these concepts, for example, addressing how both can exist within cultures (Raeff, 2010), how they intersect (Kagitcibasi, 1996; Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2008), how their development involves both similar and different processes (Phinney & Baldelomar, 2011), and how each concept has multiple meanings depending on the cultures under study (Greenfield, 2010).

### THE NATURE OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

If the entity of analysis is individuals across the lifespan who are developing in tandem with one or more changing cultures, and if psychological concepts are broadened and deepened, the result is a need for new kinds of theoretical frameworks. Theories need to add multiple kinds of psychological concepts (such as interdependence and independence). They need to encompass multiple meanings for these concepts (e.g., interdependence as interpersonal relationships and as collectivism). They need to incorporate how the development of psychological concepts may follow different developmental trajectories in different cultures (Jensen, 2008). And they need to account for the fact that cultures change (e.g., through globalization; Jensen, 2003) and that some developmental phases may appear only under certain historical circumstances (such as emerging adulthood in cultures with economies that necessitate lengthy education).

This may seem like a rather tall theoretical order, but it is also an invigorating one. It opens up the possibility of new theoretical conceptualizations. Here, I will provide three examples of theories pertaining to very different areas of developmental psychology that illustrate this new bridging idea.

Goodnow (2011) described ways to reconceptualize Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of developmental contexts in light of cultural considerations. Her approach expands on the original model by adding contexts it left out, such as religious institutions. She also deepens the original model by highlighting overlap among contexts, such as family and work. Finally, she introduces flexibility by opening up to a reordering of the traditional nested contexts and to the possibility that orderings depend on culture. Drawing on research showing that ethnic minority children often have an early awareness of broader societal conditions and what opportunities are open to them (Raffaelli, Carlo, Carranza, & Gonzales-Kruger, 2005), Goodnow proposes that “we might well reverse the usual arrangement of layers placing the ‘outside world’ at the center and asking how effects radiate out to family life” (p. 82). Goodnow's proposals exemplify a new way to configure theories—as shifting Venn diagrams rather than an immobile nested doll—when taking into account both universal and cultural research on human development.

Another example of how to reconceptualize theory when bridging universal and cultural considerations involves a recent “tem-

plate” model (Jensen, 2011b). Building on a large body of research on moral reasoning from different disciplines, this theoretical approach charts patterns of moral development across the life course in terms of three Ethics: an Ethic of Autonomy (individual needs and rights), an Ethic of Community (care and responsibility for others), and an Ethic of Divinity (injunctions from sacred texts and concerns with spiritual purity). The Ethic of Autonomy, for example, is predicted to emerge early in development and to stay relatively stable across adolescence and into adulthood, even if the specific types of autonomy concepts that persons use are likely to some extent to change with age (such as individual desire for reward when younger vs. concern with individual rights when older). The model, however, incorporates flexibility in that it accommodates to the prevalence of the three ethics across cultures and time. For example, the theory highlights that whereas concerns with autonomy emerge early in development across cultures, reasoning in terms of this ethic quickly reaches high levels in some cultures but not others depending on the extent to which a culture encourages or suppresses a focus on individuals. With respect to historical time, the theory includes a prediction that in cultures with an emerging adulthood phase, one might expect an uptick in autonomy due to the self-focused nature of this period (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). A template approach suggests a conceptual model for building developmental psychology theories that bridge universal and cultural considerations. The approach does this by incorporating conceptual breadth (such as three kinds of ethics), depth (such as diverse types of reasons within each ethic), and developmental trajectories that accommodate to culture.

A third example of bridging comes from work on the development of spatial cognition, which may be differentiated along two broad types. An egocentric frame of reference is where the location of an object is determined in relation to the self (“the cat is to the left of the house” from the perspective of the self). An allocentric frame of reference is where the object is located either in relation to another object (“the cat is by the front door of the house”) or based on cardinal-direction-type systems (“the cat is on the west side of the house”). Recent research has found that different types of apes (bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) and children younger than 4 tend to use allocentric spatial cognition. Research findings with older children and adults, however, show that their spatial cognition is tied to cultural background. In one study, for example, Namibian ≠ Akhroe Hai||om 8-year-olds and adults were found to use allocentric reasoning, whereas Dutch 8-year-olds and adults used egocentric reasoning (Haun, Rapold, Call, Janzen, & Levinson, 2006). On the basis of this and other experiments, Haun and his colleagues argue that the development of spatial cognition conforms neither to a blank slate nor to a nativist uniformitarian thesis (Haun, Rapold, Janzen, & Levinson, 2011). Instead, they propose a “cladistic approach” that “recognizes the powerful impact that language and culture can have on our shared primate cognitive biases” (Haun et al., 2006, p. 17568).

This approach, then, traces the development of spatial cognition along one universal allocentric pathway in human children until somewhere between 4 and 8 years of age. However, trajectories diverge after this age period: Members of some cultures remain allocentric, whereas others adopt an egocentric frame of reference. This line of research and theorizing has yet to incorporate a focus on recent historical changes. However, it is an interesting question how spatial cognition might develop in places that come to incorporate cultural and linguistic features associated with each of the two frames of reference. The use of English, for example, is tied to an egocentric frame. With English language use growing rapidly worldwide, might new developmental trajectories emerge? Borrowing concepts from work on cultural identity development and biculturalism (e.g., Jensen, Arnett, & McKenzie, 2011; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997), might some school-age children and adults come to code-switch between allocentric and egocentric frames of reference depending on context, or might new hybrid frames emerge? Haun and colleagues' work provides another model for bridging universal and cultural findings where one common pathway in early development splits into different subsequent trajectories. It also supports the earlier point that research focusing on young children is insufficient because it can lead to premature conclusions about what constitutes universal human development.

#### **NEW DIRECTIONS IN CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, AND BIOLOGY**

Haun and colleagues' work is an illustration of a mushrooming that is occurring around the intersection of culture and the environments of groups, psychological development, and biology. Another specific example comes from recent research on IQ. In 1971, Scarr proposed that the heritability of cognitive ability might vary with socioeconomic status (SES; Scarr-Salapatek, 1971). Within the last decade, this hypothesis has found support as samples of twins from diverse SES backgrounds have become available. Turkheimer, Haley, Waldron, D'Onofrio, and Gottesman (2003) and Turkheimer, Harden, D'Onofrio, and Gottesman (2009) have found that for U.S. twins growing up at the lowest levels of SES, shared environment rather than genes contributes to practically all of the variation on IQ measures. The reverse, however, is the case for twins growing up at middle to high levels of SES. Here, variation in IQ scores is overwhelmingly accounted for by genes, not shared environment. As they observe, "If ... the biometric parameters underlying variation in important psychological constructs change as a function of SES, then many conclusions that have [previously] been reached ... may be seriously biased" (Turkheimer et al., 2009, p. 95). This bias—to use Turkheimer and colleagues' word—may be only the tip of the proverbial iceberg, given that socioeconomic (and related cultural) variation occurring within the United States is much narrower than what is found worldwide.

Scholars are addressing how biological mechanisms operate in tandem with culture at a number of levels. For example, culture–gene coevolutionary work includes consideration of how culture (such as dairy farming) can influence gene frequencies in groups (such as selection for the genotype for adult lactose absorption in dairy farming communities; Laland, Odling-Smee, & Myles, 2010; Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Work on probabilistic epigenesis addresses how infants are born with a repertoire of possible developmental trajectories, each with different end states, and interactions with the environment lead to the pursuit of some trajectories over others. This creates differences not only between individuals but also between cultural groups (Gottlieb, 1998, 2007). Also, recent work on biocultural constructivism further proposes that human evolution has selected for "plasticity" (e.g., Henrick, 2008) of trajectories. Even when a person is launched on a developmental trajectory as a result of gene–environment interactions, there is still room for some alteration of both the path and the end state. Li (2007) argues that genetic activities and neural mechanisms themselves possess "remarkable plasticity awaiting sociocultural context to exert reciprocal influence on them and to be 'coauthors' of mind and behavior" (p. 540). Developmental psychology theories aiming to bridge universal and cultural perspectives might fruitfully draw on new and emerging work on evolution, genetics, and neuroscience.

#### **CONCLUSION: NEW SCHOLARSHIP FOR A GLOBAL WORLD**

The world's population is about 7 billion. By 2050, the prediction is that the global population will be 9 billion, with nearly all of the growth occurring in developing countries. There is also an unprecedented flow across cultures of people, ideas, and goods. With increasing migrations, worldwide media, and international trade, diverse peoples interact with one another more than ever. With these interactions come changes to cultures and the psychological development of their members. In a world of changing demographics and increasingly interconnected cultures, developmental psychology also needs to change.

Bridging holds the promise of new theories that are neither one size fits all nor one for every culture, but rather flexible and travel-worthy (Jensen, 2011a). The research I described above suggests that manifold psychological phenomena would benefit from being examined and reconceptualized by bridging universal and cultural considerations. The work I have described here alone covers phases or stages of the life course, family and other collective contexts, acculturation, conceptions of self and world, motivation and learning, moral reasoning, spatial cognition, and cognitive abilities.

By means of bridging theories, developmental psychology will become able to fulfill its mission of describing, explaining, and predicting the development of humans in a manner that will be valid across cultures. It is also by means of such theoretical

approaches that developmental psychology may add to its universalistic aspiration the equally important mission of describing, explaining, and predicting development within diverse cultures. Both missions are important for the advancement of knowledge. Both are also important to improving the lives of children and families in ways that have relevance to local conditions. The vision I have proposed here for developmental psychology bridges the universal aspirations of the past century with the cultural realities of our new global world.

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