CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION: PROFILE OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

Jacob A. Belzen*

Abstract

Cultural psychology and psychology of religion have a good deal in common: being major fields at the inception of psychology, they have become marginalized during the 20th century, but are both returning to the fore in impressive ways. Although there is increasing attention to religion in cultural psychology, the cultural psychological approach is hardly yet applied in psychology of religion. This paper distinguishes three variants in cultural psychology, reviews contemporary research in cultural psychology, and then turns to cultural psychological approaches to the study of religion. The paper points out the interdisciplinary character of cultural psychology of religion, discusses some current cultural psychological theories and their application to religion, and presents a number of examples of recent empirical research projects.

Keywords: Psychology of religion, cultural psychology, theory, research.

From a historical perspective, the fields of cultural psychology and of psychology of religion have a good deal in common. They both were prominent in the days that psychology developed into an independent branch of scholarship, they both suffered from the narrowing down of perspectives in psychology, they both enjoy a recent come-back (cf. the almost simultaneous publication of handbooks for cultural psychology by Kitayama & Cohen, 2007, and Valsiner & Rosa, 2007, and of a handbook for psychology of religion by Paloutzian & Park, 2005). The similar history led, however, to a major change in their relationship: whereas initially they were related (e.g. in the work of Wilhelm Wundt, the founder of psychology, cf. Belzen, 2005), nowadays there is not much of an overlap between the two fields, and a new rapprochement needs to be brought about, to the benefit of especially the psychology of religion. (The handbooks on cultural psychology each devote one chapter to religion; the handbook on psychology of religion has nothing on cultural psychology.)

* Author Note: Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Jacob A. Belzen, Professor of psychology, University of Amsterdam, Oude Turfmarkt 147 NL-1012 GC Amsterdam, The Netherlands, Europe.
E-mail: belzen@hum.uva.nl

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With these few sentences, a number of issues have been introduced already. Whereas a review of the histories of both fields may be interesting but is not strictly necessary at this place, definitional questions have to be addressed and the claims made in the introducing sentences need to be substantiated. To readers of the *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, psychology of religion may be expected to be fairly known. Cultural psychology, on the contrary, will need to be introduced here.

After presenting a short overview of the variety of forms in which cultural psychology consists, the current paper will briefly discuss what cultural psychology is and what it is not, and present a brief review of some contemporary results from empirical research. Next, just a few of the current theoretical approaches will be presented, especially in their relevance for work in the psychology of religion. Finally, some examples of current efforts in cultural psychology of religion will be mentioned.

**What is Cultural Psychology?**

Like psychology in general, cultural psychology is a rather broad, heterogeneous enterprise to which many well-known psychologists have made significant contributions. It is important to realize from the onset that cultural psychology is not a psychology entirely different from other kinds of psychology as developed during the discipline’s past, nor is it one of its separate subdisciplines or simply a field of application. Broadly stated, and at this point without much specification, cultural psychology is an approach within psychology that is trying to describe, to investigate and to interpret the interrelatedness of culture and human psychic functioning. It is the part of psychology that tries to take serious the perhaps seemingly trivial observation that both culture and human psychic would not and cannot exist without one another, and that therefore culture is a major factor in all meaningful human conduct and on the other hand traces of human involvement can be traced in all expressions of culture. Culture is here understood as a system of signs, rules, symbols and practices that on the one hand structures the human realm of action, and on the other hand is being (re)constructed and transformed by human action and praxis. It may be instructive to divide cultural psychology at large in different variants (that are obviously not entirely independent from one another, and that can not all be dealt with in depth in this paper).