Looking for Love:
A Cross-Cultural Perspective Teaching Module
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In an attempt to promote an appreciation for diversity among individuals in general and within the study of psychology in particular, there is an established trend in the teaching of psychology for the inclusion of the cross-cultural perspective. A particularly important lesson to communicate to students is the value of the cross-cultural perspective as both a research tool and a framework for achieving a greater understanding of the differences among people (cf. Jahoda & Krewer, 1997). As a research tool, cross-cultural comparisons are important as a means of testing and verifying the generalizability of psychological processes, principles, and dynamics found in one culture to others (cf. Triandis, 1994). As a framework for achieving a greater understanding of the differences among people, the cross-cultural perspective “… makes visible the systems of meanings and practices—the language, the collective representations, the metaphors, the social scripts, the social structures, the policies, the institutions, the artifacts—within which people come to think and feel and act” (Cross & Markus, 1999, p. 380). In support of this reasoning, the purpose of the present teaching activity is to provide instructors with an in-class demonstration and the necessary supporting lecture material to introduce a discussion of the cross-cultural perspective.

Procedures

Supplementary Lecture Material: Getting Started

Instructors can start this activity by introducing students to two fundamental concepts in the study of the cross-cultural perspective: individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Such introductory remarks should include a brief definition of the individualistic and collectivistic cultures and examples of their characteristics features. The following information, along with the references provided, can be used to help instructors begin to development some supplementary lecture material on individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures: Two Fundamental Frameworks for Understanding Diversity

**Individualistic Cultures: “The Squeaky Wheel Gets the Grease.”** Individualistic cultures, such as North American and Western European countries, tend to be characterized by a cultural perspective that emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual’s personal characteristics, needs, and motives as the focal point of predicting and understanding the individual’s actions (cf. Cross & Markus, 1999). In contrast to collectivistic cultures, individualistic cultures place more emphasis on the expression and satisfaction of the individual’s needs than on conformity to public norms (Triandis, 1989, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2001). These cultures might be described as “complex” societies because people have considerable societal flexibility to
join many different groups and exercise a wide range of choices in the expression of various social roles. For example, in American societies, while parents might have certain expectations of their children to go to college, the children are relatively free to choose a major that reflects their personal needs and interests. Such complex, individualistic cultures are exemplified by the proverb “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.”

**Collectivistic Cultures: “The Nail that Stands Out Gets Pounded Down.”** Collectivistic cultures, such as Japan, India, and China and other Asian cultures, tend to be characterized by a cultural perspective that places less emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual’s personal characteristics as the focal point of predicting and understanding the individual’s actions and more of an emphasis on the person’s identification with a group, such as family, country, occupation, or caste, and the expectations, duties, and roles associated with being a member of a group as the principal source for understanding the individual (Cross & Markus, 1999). These cultures might be described as “tight” societies because of the high expectations they place on people to conform to societal values, roles, and norms (Carpenter, 2000; Triandis, 2001). For example, even though she may not like studying economics, a young Japanese college student may pursue a career as an economist to fulfill the wishes of the elder members of her family. Such tight, collectivistic cultures are exemplified by the proverb “The nail that stands out gets pounded down.”

**Looking for Love: The Investigation of Personal Ads as a Cross-Cultural Research Tool**

After discussing the characteristic features of the individualistic and collectivistic cultural perspectives, the instructor can initiate a discussion of cross-cultural research. An interesting example of a cross-cultural comparison is the examination of “personal ads” as a research tool to illustrate how the cultural characteristics of individualistic and collectivistic cultures serve to influence the nature of information people include in these ads (Cross & Markus, 1999, p. 378).

The first two ads were placed in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a typical general daily newspaper appearing in a large, metropolitan city:

28 SWM, 6’1”, 160 lbs. Handsome, artistic, ambitious, seeks attractive WF, 24-29, for friendship, romance, and permanent partnership.

Very attractive, independent SWF, 29, 5’6” 110 lbs., love fine dining, the theater, gardening and quite evenings at home. In search of handsome SWM 28-34 with similar interests.

These second two ads which were placed on the same day in the *India Tribune*, a California newspaper
with a readership of primarily immigrant families from India.

Gujarati Vaishnav parents invite correspondence from never married Gujarati well settled, preferably green card holder from respectable family for green card holder daughter 29 years, 5’4”, good looking, doing CPA.

Gujarati Brahmin family invites correspondence from a well cultured, beautiful Gujarati girl for 29 years, 5”8”, 145 lbs. Handsome looking, well settled boy.

Interpreting the Ads: A Cross-Cultural Comparison. The first two ads reflect the characteristic features of the Western, individualistic cultural perspective by focusing on the uniqueness of the individual and emphasizing the individual’s personal characteristics (e.g., independent, ambitions) and personal interests (e.g., enjoys theater and gardening). The second set of ads reflects the collectivistic perspective by focusing on information emphasizing group membership, such as placing the name of the family instead of the individual in the ad, indicating the family’s region of origin in India (e.g., the state of Gujarati), and the caste of the family (e.g., Vaishnav, Brahmin).

Facilitating In-Class Discussion: Some Suggested Questions

Instructor can use the following questions to facilitate some in class-discussion on various aspects of life in individualistic and collectivistic cultures (references in parentheses are source material for the discussion question):

- In which culture would you expect a greater degree of happiness? Why? (Diener, Diener, & Diener, 1995)
- In which culture would you expect a higher crime rate? Why? (Triandis, 1994)
- How might students in such cultures react differently to personal success and failure? (Lee & Seligman, 1997)
- How and why might individuals in these two cultural have different orientations to dealing with time? What would be an easy way to examine cross-cultural comparisons to time orientation? (Levine & Bartlett, 1984)

Discussion

This teaching activity poster is designed to provide a self-contained teaching module to illustrate the cross-cultural perspective in psychology. It can be used to illustrate how the concepts of individualistic and collectivistic cultures can serve as conceptual frameworks for understanding cultural differences among individuals and as a simple example of cross-cultural research. This activity can be used in such courses as introductory psychology, social psychology, personality psychology, and psychology of adjustment, as well as any other course where the cross-cultural perspective in psychology is discussed.

Estimated time for lecture, cross-cultural research illustration, and class discussion: 20 to 30 minutes
Cross-Cultural Perspective

References


