

The discrepancy between macro culture and individual, lived psychology: An ethnographic example of Chinese moral behavior

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the fact that particular cultural structures, artifacts, policies, and values often do not generate corresponding individual behavior/psychology that they are expected to produce. This discrepancy is troubling to the science of cultural psychology/sociocultural activity theory that seeks to understand the cultural organization of psychology; and it is troubling to policy makers who strive to organize behavior (religious tolerance, diligent work habits, educational learning) through cultural structures and policies. I discuss two explanations for this discrepancy. One is that individual processes contradict cultural influences on psychology. The other explanation is that culture is multifaceted, and cultural factors other than an expected one, are influential in organizing a psychology. I illustrate the second explanation with a case study of moral behavior among Chinese elementary students. These youngsters disobeyed moral teaching in school because they were more influenced by outside influences, ranging from Chinese traditional relations called Guanxi, to modern commercial, privatizing practices. This paper uses individual variations and contradictions in cultural psychology to refine the epistemology and ontology of cultural theory.

Keywords

Chinese morality, macro cultural factors, complexity, social theory, individual variations, ethnography

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It is easy to conclude that cultural psychology's central tenets may be mistaken. The social philosophy that human beings are "cultural animals" whose subjectivity is based in, supported by, organized by, and functional for, structural macro cultural factors seems to be contradicted by individual behavior that contradicts macro cultural factors. For instance, the official, institutionalized, sanctioned, doctrine of the Catholic Church prohibits the use of birth control, yet virtually all Catholics use it. Similarly, despite millennia of Confucianism, and 80 years of Chinese socialist education and propaganda to serve the people and work for the common good, China is suffering a moral crisis that finds daily crimes of self-aggrandizing corruption and cheating. In the U.S., the "war on drugs" has failed to curtail people's use of drugs. Individual behavior/psychology seems to be unrelated to social structures, institutions, values, information technology, and budgets. This is disturbing to the tenets and social philosophy of cultural psychology.

There are two ways to explain and overcome this discrepancy.

1. One way is to argue that culture does not organize psychology (at least not thoroughly). Psychology is a function of individual processes. Consequently, cultural explanations and predictions can never be accurate. For they *overestimate* the influence of culture on psychology. The discrepancy between cultural factors and individual psychology can be solved by minimizing cultural explanations and predictions of psychology, and concentrating on other, individual processes that generate human psychology/subjectivity.
2. A second way to explain the discrepancy between behavior and a particular cultural factor takes the opposite direction. It argues that the cultural perspective on psychology is fundamentally correct. It simply has been too limited. Cultural psychology can explain psychology by broadening and deepening its cultural-ontological and epistemological scope, not by abandoning it. This position argues that the discrepancy between culture and behavior/psychology is more apparent than real. It results from trying to explain behavior/psychology in terms of a particular, proximal cultural factor, when, in fact, cultural influences are broader, more complex, and less obvious. Cultural psychology's deficiency has been its underestimation of culture's influence on psychology. We emphasize that the cultural complexity perspective does not eliminate individual psychological activity. It rather situates individual activity within the parameters of complex, macro cultural factors. We shall explain this using Leontiev's words.

Let us examine these two perspectives in detail.

Individual explanations of discrepancies between macro cultural predictions and actual lived psychology

Valsiner and van der Veer (2014, pp. 162, 155) state

The social nature of the human being is most profoundly demonstrated by his or her development of a unique and adaptive (hence intra-individually variable) way of organizing his/her own self. The objective of human development is the establishment of autonomy as an acting person—indeed in cooperation with others, but capable of breaking any social bonds of moral commendments.

The developing child experiences both individual and socially guided encounters with the world as a singular person, integrated within him/herself.

Ultimately, it is the autonomous, self-organizing individual who decides how to react to any social situation, including whether to participate in it.

Wertsch and Tulviste (2005, pp. 71–72) similarly postulate that individuals use psychological and social tools idiosyncratically to suite their own purposes:

action always involves an inherent tension between the meditational means [tools people use] and the individual or individuals using them in unique, concrete instances... This account allows for innovation because each concrete use of meditational means by individuals... may vary quite radically from previous uses.

Wertsch illustrates this in analyzing a dialogue by visitors to the Winter Palace Museum:

Instead of bringing autobiographical narratives into contact with official culture as part of an attempt to enrich the latter, it seems to us that this [narrative] involves an escape from the public memory sphere... These visitors are refusing to engage in the museum's public memory space... It is meaning-making on one's own terms. (Rowe, Wertsch, & Kosyaeva, 2002, p. 106, emphasis added. See Ratner, 2002, chap. 2; Ratner, 2008; Ratner, 2009 for analysis).

Individual meaning-making is additionally espoused in other social sciences and philosophy. Philosopher Judith Butler articulates it in relation to gender identity:

gender assignment, which forms a very intense predicament for those who want to contest the terms of that assignment, or to engage in practices of self-assignment that refute or revise (deviate from) assignment given by others and prior to the formation of my will. The formation of the will in the sphere of gender might be understood as

taking up the task of self-assignment, and we might understand the linguistic register of autonomy here. (Ahmed, 2016, p. 486)

These statements are revealing for their conjoining of description with prescription: individuals factually use and modify cultural tools for their own purposes; they are not structured by these tools. Cultural factors cannot, therefore, explain, describe, or predict psychology in a meaningful manner. Furthermore, individuals *should* do this because it is how they express and develop their individual agency and freedom. It is not simply a descriptive fact of life; it is a positive ethic (ought); it is “the objective of development.” Micro cultural psychology is additionally *preventive, or prohibitive*. It seeks to prevent or minimize macro cultural factors from structuring people’s psychology/behavior. It denounces structuring and regularizing as mechanistic, reified, and conformist; as violating psychological development, freedom, and fulfillment.

From this perspective, cultural psychology cannot explain and predict psychology, nor should it. Individual Psychology can and should explain and predict human behavior because it is factually true, and because it emphasizes the processes central to individual development and freedom.

Complex cultural systems explain individual psychology

The individual-based theory of psychology is rendered plausible by discrepancies between actual behavior, and cultural standards, policies, and expectations of behavior.

However, it is not the only possible explanation for this phenomenon. I would like to propose a different, superior resolution (Ratner, 2015, 2016a). It emphasizes cultural complexity to explain behavioral discrepancies from cultural norms. I will provide an ethnographic example of cultural psychology that lends support to this strategy. Finally, I utilize some remarks of Leontiev to integrate the individual theory with the cultural complexity theory.

The cultural complexity theory maintains that cultural psychology is correct in emphasizing that psychology is based in and organized by cultural factors.¹ Tomasello (2016, p. 643, my emphasis) explains that children are predisposed to learning cultural factors: “children learn from pedagogy not just episodic facts but the generic structure of their cultural worlds . . . Human children do not just culturally learn useful instrumental activities and information, they conform to the normative expectations of the cultural group . . .” Legare & Harris (2016, p. 633, my emphasis) demonstrate that “children everywhere draw on a *repertoire of cultural learning strategies that optimize their acquisition of the specific practices, beliefs, and values of their communities.*”

Given that psychology is culturally organized, the reason that cultural psychologists have failed to adequately explain, describe, and predict psychological activity is that they have failed to comprehend the full complexity of culture in relation to psychology. Their conception of culture has been too narrow and fragmented.

Our approach contends that cultural elements are diverse and numerous; moreover, even individual elements contain contradictory cultural features internal to themselves. This complexity of elements is a Gestalt; they all exist together, influencing each other and individual psychology. Within the cultural Gestalt, certain elements are more dominant than others on particular psychological functions in particular individuals (Ratner, 2017). This explains why individuals in the same culture nevertheless behave differently as they are exposed to different elements of the Gestalt.

It is a mistake to conceive of culture as a set of atomistic variables (as cross-cultural psychologists do) that are expected to act uniformly on members of the culture. When this model fails, cultural psychology is deemed to be inadequate for explaining psychology. Vygotsky corrected this conclusion by espousing the cultural complexity theory that I have articulated. He said: “the relationship between art and the economic conditions generating it turns out to be extremely complex. This does not mean that social conditions do not completely determine the character and the effect of a work of art; it merely shows that they determine it indirectly” (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1925/art1.htm>).

The cultural complexity theory argues that standing on the macro cultural level, it is difficult to predict and explain which of these numerous, contradictory elements of the social Gestalt may structure any particular individual behavior. The actual cultural influences on any behavior are best identifiable as they are reflected and refracted in concrete action of individuals (see Kleinman et al., 2011). Paradoxically, macro influences are best identified on the micro level. This is what differentiates it from sociology.

In other words, we need a more comprehensive, more detailed, and more synthetic/organic conception of culture, and we need to study it on the individual level through qualitative methodologies that are sensitive to varying cultural features, in order to apprehend the specific relation between culture and psychology.

The case of Chinese children’s immorality

Xu (2014) conducted an ethnography in Chinese schools to identify the psychological effects of moral training sessions. This research was inspired by the “moral crisis” in China that exists despite strong emphasis on collective morality that is evident in official propaganda and school exercises. Xu looked at these exercises and found them to be ineffective in promoting collective moral behavior among the students. She explained this discrepancy by identifying a different cultural factor that generated selfish behavior in the children.

Xu first identifies some of the institutionalized factors in schools that were expected to encourage moral behavior: Teachers and parents strongly emphasize the virtue of “sharing” (*fen xiang*), and in particular, “equality” (*ping deng*) in sharing. They emphasize these in order to promote altruism and self-sacrifice, a heritage of collectivistic ethics in the socialist era. The standard teaching of parents and teachers is that the child should share equally and indiscriminately with all of

his or her classmates. This takes the form of modeling sharing and praising it. For instance, in the youngest class, for 2.5- to 3-year olds, the teacher has pupils practicing sharing of their snacks and thanking each other for so doing.

Xu then looked at the results of this official training (material culture) on everyday behavior. She found that this training elicited appropriate verbal comments from the children; however, these were contradicted by a lack of sharing behavior. Xu's own son exemplified this contradiction.

One day, right after school, Wandou was playing in the playground when his teacher came to him, gave him a piece of candy, and walked away. He immediately blurted out the slogan, "We should share with our little friends!" I was stunned. He had just started school life two months before, at a time when he could not speak a single word. Now, this 20-month-old boy was spontaneously stating the standard doctrine of his school. Despite this impressive command of the discourse, Wandou did not in fact bother to share with the other two children who were playing right next to him". (Xu, 2014, p. 222)

The tension between collective training and self-centered psychology is complex. In many cases, the pupils acted according to communal moral principles. However, they did not believe in what they were doing. Their ostensible behavior was contradicted by their subjectivity (emotions, thoughts, identity, perceptions):

On December 31, 2011, a little boy named Chengcheng celebrated his third birthday with his classmates and teachers during regular class hours. After singing a "happy birthday" song in both Chinese and English, the teachers divided the cake brought by the parents, first giving Chengcheng a big piece, then distributing the rest of the pieces equally to all the other children . . . It was all going on as expected until Chengcheng saw the school director walking past the classroom. The child came up to his teacher and asked: "Hey, Ms. Xiaoru, didn't you see [the director]? Why don't you give her a piece of cake too? You know you should cotton up to your boss (*tao jinhu*)." (Xu, 2014, p. 222)

Chengcheng's behavioral sharing looked moral on the surface; however, it was actually—psychologically and morally—a form of currying favor with the recipients; it was not genuine, altruistic sharing to please others.

Thus, verbal proclamations about altruism may be invalidated by behavior; and behavior cannot be accepted as evidence of conformity to social policy and practices, because it may conceal conflicting motives and desires. Psychological research must elucidate the latter in order to get at lived culture and psychology.

"Although egalitarian undifferentiated sharing is presented as a self-evident positive norm, children do not actually experience it that way, nor are they really motivated by generalized altruism. Teachers point out that instead of being truly generous with others, children are driven by reputation, in particular getting praise (*biao yang*) from teachers and respect from peers."

As teacher Xiaoru stated: “Most children, or even most adults, do not want to give to others” (p. 231), though they often do in order to pretend to conform to official principles.

A rigorous, analytical methodology is necessary to discover whether behavior is isomorphic with cultural factors, and whether psychology is isomorphic with behavior. Ethnographic methods are necessary to elucidate these relationships. Xu explains this in her study:

Xu confirmed and elucidated this through arranging interesting tasks in school. This methodology is important for pinpointing actual, objective, lived culture. It “unpacked” behavior into finely distinguished acts. These were more indicative of lived culture than the spontaneous sharing in the classroom.

The basic protocol of the research went like this (*ibid.*, pp. 234–235): Xu asked a child to play a game, gave him or her two candies as a reward, and asked whether he or she wanted to share one candy with another child. If the child was willing to share, she asked whether he or she wanted to use a signed envelope or an anonymous envelope. Also, the children had a choice between two possible recipients. One was presented as a new student who would arrive at the school the following day, while the other was described as a child who would visit the school for only a day.

These alternatives were deduced from the communal, egalitarian nature of moral sharing vs. self-serving individual distinctiveness. If the goal is to treat everyone equally, the visitor and existing student would be equally valuable for communication; moreover a signed and an anonymous donation are equally valuable for this end. If by contrast one is motivated to cultivate relationships, then it matters that one’s gifts should be signed and that the recipients should be valuable partners and in a position for future reciprocation. This would reduce the attractiveness of the temporary visitor. My Figure One depicts this design. (Xu also asked the children to justify their choices and used the opportunity to chat with them about their social life, in particular their experiences of sharing, friendship, and social exchange.)

Interestingly, most children across age groups (almost 100% across all tests) were willing to share with others and used the standard “normative” language to justify this, e.g., “Because it is good to share”; “Because one should share”; and so on. This reflects the fact that these preschoolers, as mentioned above, can readily express the norms fostered by parents and teachers.

However, the children’s choices revealed interesting preferences that deviate from the normative imperatives.

1. Most children (more than 90% across all tests) did not want to be anonymous givers. They wanted the recipient to know who was being generous with them.
2. Most of the younger children (74%) chose to give to a child who would stay in their school rather than to one who would not. The older children who preferred to give a candy to the child who would leave, justified this choice in terms of cultivating new relationships and expanding their social network. For example,

Letter Writing Activity	Altruistic Morality	Egocentric Morality
Sender anonymous	X	
Sender signed		X
Recipient leaving	X	
Recipient staying		X

Figure 1. Morality experiment design.

quite a few said, “I want to share with someone who will not stay, because the gift is like a souvenir and the child will remember me.”

- 60% of the children (especially the older ones) said they expected to become friends with the recipient to whom they had given the candy, suggesting that they did see sharing as a way to cultivate a longer-term relationship.

Instead of increasingly endorsing the egalitarian norm, Xu’s field experiments reveal that as children get older, they become more sophisticated in strategic sharing. Their sharing was mostly designed to advance their own social status, popularity, and support system of friends. This is why they insisted on being recognized for their donation, and why they shared in strategic ways with strategic individuals.

Xu’s ethnography demonstrates that psychology is not transparent in verbal and physical behavior. Sharing can be an expression of egocentric desires for self-advancement instead of altruistic generosity for other people. A rigorous, analytical investigation of behavior is required to elucidate psychological content and meaning. Cultural psychology then identifies cultural factors that stimulate, support, organize, and direct this psychological content (Ratner, 2012).

Contradictory cultural factors generate lived morality of Chinese students

After discovering Chinese pupils’ real moral psychology/behavior, that contradicts their moral training, Xu suggests a macro cultural factor that encourages egoistic morality. This is the indigenous cultural value and practice of *Guanxi*. Guanxi is a social network for exchanging favors and support. Guanxi illustrates the notion that “all altruism is really selfishness.” For one gives (materially, socially, psychologically) primarily to establish binding social relations that commit the receiver to

future reciprocity to the giver (Kipnis, 1997). Guanxi's social obligations are egoistic to the point that they are calculated and managed and monitored in relation to the size of the giver's largesse. Guanxi is pre-capitalist (petty commodity) market exchange. It undermines altruism and genuine cooperation/collectivism. It is additionally egoistic in placing close interpersonal relations and benefits (*Gemeinschaft*) above national interests that are not personal (*Gesellschaft*).

Xu observes that cooperation and sharing in school incorporates these aspects of Guanxi. Three-year old Chengcheng incorporated them in his statement to his preschool teacher to cotton up to her boss, and 'pull the connection' (*la Guanxi*) with her boss.

A broad comprehension of Chinese culture generates additional hypothetical explanatory cultural factors that explain, describe, and predict egoistic moral psychology that Chinese children display. Commercialism, markets, private housing, gated communities, private transportation, glorification of wealth, market economics, competitive job markets, and consumerism lead to egotistical individualism that contradicts moral caring (Kleinman et al., 2011; Yan, 2009; Ratner, 2012, pp. 254–255, 434–442). A total of 750,000 Communist Party members have been punished for corruption from 2012 to 2015. Thousands more political and business officials have been fired and imprisoned for corruption. Cheating and fraud abound as well.

Cheating on the national university entrance test (gaokao) has become so prevalent that the CCP passed a new law in 2015 that included imprisonment in jail for up to seven years for cheating. Some cities use drones to catch people using radios to broadcast answers to gao kao test takers. Peking city has deployed 8 police to each of the city's exam sites to monitor for cheating. This cheating is encouraged by the great importance that educational and occupational leaders grant to the gao kao for determining admittance to prestigious universities and jobs. The competitive college and job markets generate immense pressure on families to do anything possible to achieve top scores on the gaokao (Hernandez, 2016). This is an important macro cultural factor that contradicts moral training (It exemplifies the pathology of social norms, Ratner, 2016b).

The commercial, competitive untying (*songbang*) of social bonds has reached such a critical level that the government has passed a law requiring adult children to visit their parents during the year, and to financially support them when in need. As with all laws, this one demonstrates the failure of social relations to produce pro-social behavior. (If social relations did generate appropriate pro-social behavior, laws would be unnecessary.) In addition, many public service workers are leaving government work for the private sector where they can earn higher salaries from private profit (China Daily, 15 October 2015).

Internal and external cultural-psychological complexity

Our cultural analysis of psychology reveals an important complexity in cultural factors that bears on individual psychological phenomena. Cultural complexity

exists among its diverse factors—e.g., school vs. consumerism. We may call this “external complexity”. Cultural complexity also exists *within* particular factors. Guanxi contains both the element of sharing and the element of egoism within itself. We may call this “internal complexity.”

Internal and external complexity of cultural factors deepens our understanding of the cultural organization of individual psychological phenomena. They direct us to adopt a comprehensive view of culture in order to understand its full character and elements. Singular, one-sided, fragmented, superficial observations of culture make our explanation, description, and prediction/expectation of individual psychology incomplete and often wrong. This was the case when social leaders related moral behavior to school training. They did not consider other macro cultural factors that bear on moral psychology in contradictory ways.

The error of cultural narrowness and fragmentation creates the false impression that culture is not adequate to explain psychology and that individual processes are the more important explanation.

A comprehensive understanding of culture eliminates the discrepancy between culture and psychology. Psychology is explained, described, and predicted by cultural factors. Behavior that contradicts an expected norm is explained and predicted by internal and external cultural complexity. This pertains to groups and to individuals. Different groups of people who occupy different positions in the system of cultural factors reflect different exposures to different factors in their between-group behaviors (demographically distributed). (see Gladwell, 2008 for a fascinating analysis).

The complex cultural system also accounts for intra-individual variations in psychological expression. Individuals are exposed to different combinations of social factors, and this difference in social experience accounts for intra-individual contradictions in behavior. A case in point is idiot savants who excel in certain competencies while lagging in others. Howe (1990, 1999) has demonstrated that this intra-individual difference in competencies is directly related to the manner in which caretakers encourage and support the competencies that become exceptional, and neglect other competencies which become retarded.

Vygotsky (1994, p. 176) traced this differentiation and complexity of psychology to the macro cultural level: “The various internal contradictions which are to be found in different social systems find their expression both in the type of personality and in the structure of human psychology in that historical period.”

A bottom-up epistemology for comprehending top-down ontology of cultural psychology

It is difficult to know all the diverse factors and characteristics of cultural factors that organize the ways individuals actually act. A correct cultural understanding of psychology/behavior is difficult to achieve from “top-down,” i.e., from structural cultural factors, because material culture is vast, diverse, complex, contradictory, and obscuring. Chinese market socialism contains education for collective morality

in schools and in propaganda that is contradicted by egoistic consumerism and profit-seeking. *Guanxi* contains sharing elements and instrumental elements. How can one predict which elements will be most influential in generating morality?

Similarly, Western medicine is internally contradictory in containing the ethic of money-making alongside the ethic of serving the patient. Which of these contradictory elements most affects a doctor's treatment of a patient is difficult to predict from the sociological level of the elements themselves.

The strength of cultural factors must be elucidated from psychological research on individuals. Research such as Xu's, will probe the content of cultural factors (and elements) in the behavior of individuals. It will ask specific questions about the importance of various cultural factors on the individuals' desires and behaviors. It will also elicit free verbal and behavioral expressions of morality and the treatment of others, which can be objectively analyzed for cultural content. Xu did this in comparing children's moral behavior to *Guanxi*. Research will pose experimental tasks to identify the subtle motives of the subjects, as figure one outlines, to ascertain whether they are isomorphic with particular cultural factors (e.g., school training). Lack of isomorphism with an expected factor precipitates a search for other organizing cultural factors. Additionally, research will compare specific behavior/psychology among people exposed to different degrees of cultural factors (Ratner, 1997). This program reveals the relative strength of cultural factors on organizing psychological phenomena.

Because cultural factors which organize psychology are externally and internally contradictory, we must be sensitive to the fact that lived psychology is often contradictory, rather than simple. Any cultural factor is modulated and mediated by other factors, and this multifaceted character forms multifaceted psychological phenomena (Aarseth, Layton, & Nielsen, 2016). Bourdieu emphasized that culturally formed "habitus" of subjectivity are internally contradictory in this sense. We have seen that the morality of Chinese children is contradictory in that it includes sharing-that-is-egoistical-and-instrumental rather than altruistic. Conversely, egocentric behavior takes the form of overt sharing.

Cultural ethnographies demonstrate that individuals reveal and reflect the relative power of diverse, contradictory, complex, obscured cultural factors. Individuals do not determine the strength of material factors on their behavior. Two-year-old Chinese children do not rationally decide which factors (e.g., moral codes) to follow and which to reject. On the contrary, their desires are shaped by the relative power of macro cultural factors that impinge on them.

It is social leaders who determine the relative strengths of macro cultural factors by allocating resources to them. The Chinese Communist Party privatized social relations, housing, transportation, land, consumerism, and the job market, in place of collective relations that could draw people toward recognizing common interests and acting collectively.

Ethnographies look up from individual lived activity to apprehend broad, macro cultural structuring of activity. Ethnographies are a bottom-up epistemology that apprehends the top-down ontology of cultural psychology. The epistemological

gaze that *understands* the formation of psychology reverses the ontological processes that *generate* psychology. It traces the result back to its cultural origin. Behavior that is expressed in individual acts does not originate in those acts. Individual behavior is analogous to the shadows in Plato's Cave that have their origins outside the cave. This is why Vygotsky (1997, pp. 325, 326) said

Not a single science is possible without separating direct experience from knowledge... If in psychology, appearance and being were the same, then everybody would be a scientist-psychologist and science would be impossible. It is one thing to live, to experience, and another to analyze.

No science can be confined to the subjective, to appearances...

Cultural psychological research reveals unexpected cultural origins of psychological phenomena, and unexpected psychological effects of cultural factors. These deepen our understanding of psychology and culture. To learn that market socialism generates egoistic moral behavior is an important insight into morality (and psychology in general)—i.e., that it is infused with commercial exchange, self-enhancing calculation, individualism, alienation, and fragmentation of market exchanges). It is also an insight into the cultural factor—i.e., that market socialism is self-centered and instrumental, rather than altruistic, supportive, or cooperative. The market elements overpower the socialist elements. These cultural and psychological insights are an important contribution to culture theory, social policy, and social change (Ratner, 2017).

Mechanism

The cultural formation of psychology is often rejected under the belief that it reifies behavior and mechanically determines it (see Wertsch, 1998). It is therefore important to correct this objection. Vygotsky explained how socialization actually stimulates psychological activity:

If we understand the content of thinking to be not simply the external data that comprise the subject thinking at any given moment, but the actual content, we will see how, in the process of the child's development, it constantly moves inward, becomes an organic component part of the personality itself and of separate systems of its behavior... This new content does not enter mechanically into the thinking of the adolescent, but undergoes a long and complex process of development... Convictions, interests, world view, ethical norms and rules of behavior, inclinations, ideals, certain patterns of thought—all of this is initially external and becomes internal specifically because as the adolescent develops, in conjunction with his maturation and the change in his environment, he is confronted by the task of mastering new content, and strong stimuli are created that nudge him along the path of developing the formal mechanisms of his thinking as well... (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 42)

Further disabusing socialization/internalization of mechanistic elements, Vygotsky (1998, p. 43) said

Class psychology cannot, of course, be created by external imitation. The process of its formation is undoubtedly deeper. Class psychology in the child is created as a result of his working with those around him, or as a result of common life with them, common activity, common interests . . . In the process of solving [common life problems], class psychology develops.

All of this *work* is involved in understanding, deliberating, practicing, and correcting cultural routines—e.g., of consumerism, sports, work, and school.

Leontiev adds that socialization of cultural practices includes personalizing them through individual experience. “When the products of socio- historical practice, idealized in meanings, become part of the mental reflection of the world by the individual subject, they acquire new systemic qualities . . . In this second life of theirs, meanings are individualized and “subjectivized” only in the sense that their movement in the system of social relations is not directly contained in them; they enter into another system of relationships, another movement. But the remarkable thing is that, in doing so, they do not lose their socio-historical nature, their objectivity” (Leontiev, 2009, p. 411).

This affords a valuable integration of personal processes and cultural processes. The personal processes that the individual theory emphasizes contain distinctive features that are not directly cultural; however, they are personal extensions of the cultural. They complicate and enrich the social. They do not circumvent or replace cultural influences on psychology. This is the dialectic of the personal and the cultural.

Conclusion: The progressive politics of cultural psychological science

A broad understanding of cultural psychology empowers people to understand and improve their culture—its complexity, contradictions, and structure. In China, the cultural psychology of morality indicates that broader, macro cultural factors overpower school training for collective morality. To realize collective, cooperative morality “market socialism” (which is a contradiction in terms) must be replaced by Marxian socialism without markets, or with limited markets and limited competition, that will draw people together in collective activities (The Netherlands does not rank schools. This eliminates stressful competition for higher status). The traditional Chinese custom (or indigenous “fund of knowledge”) of *Guanxi* should also be scrutinized for its egoistic elements, and its provincial, self-serving (self-protective) reciprocities that contradict broad social policies which are based upon objective conditions for the broader social good. *Guanxi* could then be refined and reframed to promote national (*Gesellschaft*) interests rather than purely local (*Gemeinschaft*) interests. (Previous CCP regimes attempted to reduce *Guanxi* and promote social class and national interests. However, CCP national policy was often less

trustworthy than local Guanxi; Kipnis, 1997, pp. 158–164.) This kind of macro cultural analysis of, and solution to, egoism and corruption is more fulfilling than punishing perpetrators. Punishing perpetrators without improving the macro conditions that generate the behavior only leads to more violators and more punishment.

The macro cultural approach to social improvement can be extended to other psychological phenomena such as educational psychology, or child rearing. Cultural factors that impede educational psychology would be identified through cultural psychological research, and this would lead to changing those factors through cultural policies. Of course, to be effective, the research would need to take into account, and modify, the full internal and external complexity of cultural factors. The irreducible complex of ontology, epistemology, culture, agency, and politics involved in this task has been introduced in this article. Additional development of this complex is necessary to fill out the perspective of macro cultural psychology.

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Note

1. Wertsch's study of American students' understanding of American history reveals cultural organizing of historical narratives and understanding. In a study of college students' essays about the origins of the United States, he found deep cultural structuring of narratives. All the students in his sample believed that the founding events in American history were motivated by a quest for freedom.

No matter how much or how little the subjects seemed to accept and agree with this narrative tool, they all used it in one way or another . . . [Even] subjects [who] conveyed that they were resisting the quest-for-freedom narrative, in the end still employed it. In fact no student even attempted to employ another narrative tool in any extended way . . . In such cases, individuals may try to resist the ways in which such cultural tools shape their actions, but they are often highly constrained in the forms that such resistance can take. (Wertsch, 1998, pp. 107–108)

Their uniform response was not the coincidental result of individual processes. It was systematically organized by macro cultural collective representations of American origins (e.g., history textbooks).

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Author biography

Carl Ratner has worked in the area of cultural psychology for four decades. He has worked to link the variety of psychological phenomena to culture, and he links culture to politics. He is interested in the political basis, features, and function of psychological phenomena. He also explores the political basis, features, and function of the discipline of Psychology. Ratner draws upon these political aspects of psychology and Psychology to identify political changes in society that are necessary for enriching psychological phenomena and for enriching the discipline of Psychology. Ratner also utilizes research on cultural psychology to refine the epistemology and ontology of culture theory.