

# CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract:** *This text highlights the increasing importance of cultural variables in psychology, and also of its possible applications in the school environment.*

*It clarifies aspects pertaining to cultural psychology, which examines psychological processes in their cultural context. It thus becomes interdisciplinary and, by appealing to other disciplines in the area of social sciences, enables the integration of social variables into individual ones.*

*The potential for application in the school environment is worth developing in a more explicit manner, taking into account, on the one hand cognitive development and on the other hand intergroup relations and intercultural communication, as well as social, school and clinical psychology.*

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology, international psychology, national psychology.*

## A. Introduction.

Relatively recently specialists have tended to increase their attention to cross-cultural psychology<sup>1</sup>. Several periodicals have dedicated a special issue to this subject, thus: in the spring of 1994, *The Family Psychologist* dedicated an issue to cultural diversity and the need to alter traditional approaches in psychology; in April 1994, *The Counseling Psychologist* focused on the controversy regarding its definition and components; in 1991, *The Journal of Counseling and Development* dedicated an issue to

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<sup>1</sup> Cross-cultural psychology here evokes an ample reality. It encompasses what Berry (1994) calls cultural psychology – both the study of the relations between cultural belonging and psychological variables, what he terms ethnic psychology, and the study of the relations between psychological variables and belonging to a particular ethnocultural group integrated in a nation, as well as the analysis of the nature and the effects of the relations between these two groups. By extension, cross-cultural psychology also includes the study of the relations between persons or groups belonging to different nations, as well as the phenomena deriving from them.

multiculturalism, presenting it as the fourth force in counselling; in July 1996, *La Revue Canadienne des Sciences du Comportement* published a themed issue about ethnic relations in a multicultural society. *American Psychologist* has dedicated, since 1996, a column to international psychology. *The International Journal of Intercultural Relations* had already approached the study of the influence of culture on behaviour, communication, group phenomena, interpersonal and intercommunity relations, when, in May 1997, it published a special issue dedicated to the formation of psychologists under the heading *Training global psychologists*. Furthermore, in 1998, *Revue Quebecoise de psychologie* published a themed issue – cross-cultural psychology. All these concerns point to the fact that cultural variables are becoming increasingly important in psychology.

From this historical evolution we can state that **cross-cultural psychology examines psychological processes in their cultural context**. It enables us to overcome the view of ethnocentric psychology which developed in a western context. And so **its possible applications in the often multicultural school environment can increase**.

When defining intercultural approaches in education sciences, Dasen (2000) mentions three types of studies:

1. the study of the phenomenon within a single culture, the object of the study being the influence of culture on the phenomenon or the interactions between the phenomenon and culture;
2. the comparative study of a phenomenon within several cultures;
3. the study of the processes entrained by the meeting of persons of different cultural origins, when two or more cultures meet.

Thus, cross-cultural psychology is interdisciplinary and relates to other social sciences which enable the association of variables at the level of society and individual characteristics. As a result, the first two types of approach lean especially toward ethnology (or cultural anthropology) while the third leans toward sociology and social psychology, seeking to establish itself as an autonomous discipline, centred on the study of cross-culturality (Camileri, 1995; Clanet, 1986, 1990; Denoux, 1985, 1995). The first type is often termed *cultural psychology* and corresponds to a relativist stand which excludes or seeks to avoid comparisons. Researchers siding with the second type (e.g. Berry, Poortinga, Segall and Dasen, 2002; et al.) consider the comparative method to be essential if we wish to build a non-monocultural and therefore likely ethnocentric psychology (Dasen, 1993). The psychology of cultural contacts – the third of the above-mentioned types – should be implemented through the comparison between different

cultural contexts in order to demonstrate what is universal and what is contextual (what relates to the social and economic context) in psychological processes.

The question we have set out to answer in this brief review of certain aspects of cross-cultural psychology is to what extent can they be useful in school? We are not aiming at an exhaustive answer, rather at an answer through examples from specialist literature – the volumes including the papers presented at the Congress of the Association for Cross-cultural Research (ARIC) edited by Sabatier and Dasen (2001). We will thus approach the following issues from the point of view of cross-cultural psychology and its applicability in the school environment:

1. child development;
2. social psychology and cross-cultural communication;
3. social cognition and the central role of categorization;
4. self-esteem, the drive behind social behaviour;
5. social attribution errors;
6. overcoming egocentrism and discovering the Other;
7. negotiation and mediation competencies;
8. school psychology and cross-cultural clinical psychology.

All this in order to encounter a corrective approach to the problems we will have identified, from a multicultural perspective, of course.

## **B. Child development**

One of the fields of major interest for school teachers is that of child development, especially within differentiated pedagogy, which requires the in-depth knowledge of every pupil. In a culturally heterogeneous classroom, the contribution of cross-cultural psychology is therefore essential. Several approaches are possible. The first type of approach consists of documenting child development in a certain society through ethnographic methods. We thus have examples of data about the African child collected either from repatriates or through African psychologists, or about the Indian child, the Japanese child, etc. In the comparative approach, the classification focuses especially on special ages, such as the early preschool stage or adolescence, or on examining the various aspects of the child's developmental balance: motor, affective, cognitive, social, etc.

Limiting ourselves to cognitive development, we can state, on the basis of comparative studies, that basic cognitive processes are universal (with the exception perhaps of Piaget's stage of formal operations, which seem to require secondary-level schooling), but that they apply to different

contents depending on the context, on what is valued (and adaptive) in every culture. The distinction competence-performance is important as far as the development of cognitive abilities is concerned, where cultural differences are already present but only have to do with rhythm (meaning age) of acquisition, while at the level of certain performance, a certain cognitive process may seem absent. We can also state that useful cognitive abilities develop more often and more rapidly. The implications of this observation for teachers are manifold. For instance, the performance of a child who does not fully embrace *school culture* (we shall return to this concept) – which does not particularly mean that they come from a distant area, since the same applies to differences of social class – risks not measuring up to the level of their teachers' requirements. This does not mean that the child does not possess the desired abilities, only that they are not able to put them to use in the school context. It is thus desirable that we search for means of helping the child express their abilities in this new context.

Cross-cultural psychology also advises caution as far as the use of standardized tests for selection and orientation are concerned. The notion of *culture free* test is in fact a contradiction in terms, impossibility. It claims that evaluation through testing can be more objective than school marks. It has been agreed, however, to adapt these tests and establish standards on the basis of the targeted population and to exhibit caution when interpreting their results.

The use of standardized tests in comparative studies in laboratories or schools has often proved to be problematic, especially in unschooled populations. Therefore researchers have tried to study cognitive processes in natural or day-to-day situations. This is how the field of *quodidian knowledge* studies has developed, often at the intersection between cross-cultural psychology and sociocultural psychology inspired by Vygotsky.

The theoretical reference points used in cross-cultural psychology of development have been listed in several publications. Especially noteworthy is the concept of *development niche* proposed by Super and Harkness (1986, 1997) which makes use of a system with three components – physical and social contexts, educational practices and parental ethnotheories<sup>2</sup> – which interact with each other and with the

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of ethnotheory refers to the fact that, in all societies, adults have social representations about what a child is, how and why they develop, how their progress is evaluated and what the ultimate stage of this development is.

developing child. The studies have been carried out especially on the parents' representations (Brill, 1999; Harkness and Super, 1996), but they apply to teachers as well; this theme relates to the study of the attitudes and values of teachers and other professionals, especially that of cultural diversity.

This concept brings us to the notion of **school culture**. The school or the classroom in fact shares their own culture. This culture is, on the one hand, explicit (rules, curricula), but also, on the other hand, implicit and unconscious. We are therefore referring to hidden curricula, which has led to countless studies in educational anthropology in the USA and in micro-sociology in France.

### **C. Social psychology and cross-cultural communication**

What happens in a classroom? Certainly, information is exchanged, knowledge is passed on. But something else happens as well: relationships are negotiated, identities are formed and transferred, a classroom being made up of individuals, it becomes more than the sum of their individualities. Inside a classroom, there are interactions and often confrontations – between identities, between teachers and pupils, between the sexes, etc.

*As the scientific study of the ways in which people perceive, influence and relate to one another,* social psychology seems to be what helps us understand relations established in school. Situated at the intersection between psychology and the social, social psychology is a vast field which regroups several communities of researchers working on a complex set of problems with the help of different methods. However, there are no publications in social psychology which approach the field of education. Even so, some manuals offer a good introduction to social psychology and enable us to appreciate its relevance to school contexts.

On the other hand, practitioners implementing measures for the improvement of social interactions rarely plan their interventions having taken into account the information provided by social psychology.

Another interesting contribution is that of intercultural communication, which examines the role played by culture and especially cultural differences in the processes of interpersonal and intergroup communication. The question which this new discipline is trying to answer is: what happens when two people belonging to different cultural groups start to communicate? As far as our study is concerned, the specific question which this discipline could answer is: what happens when a

teacher belonging to the majority culture interacts with their pupils, some of whom belong to minority culture groups.

Tapernoux (1997) has shown the disappointment felt by a teacher when confronted with cultural differences in their school activity. This disappointment increases the less prepared a teacher is for these aspects: teachers' professional culture is in fact often based on individuals' equality and the rejection of intercultural particularities. According to Tapernoux, teachers risk confronting racism not only in the school or social environment, but also between pupils or even their own racism. Why is it that cross-cultural encounters have never been obvious? Because they force us out of our habits, our automatisms. Continuing communication as though it did not exist means taking on the risk of possible misunderstandings which could lead among other things to the end of the relationship. But even more profoundly, a cross-cultural encounter sometimes calls into question our own identity and sense of self-worth, our own vision on life.

Social psychology and cross-cultural communication can thus help us better understand the complex dynamic of cross-cultural encounters.

#### **D. Social cognition and the central role of categorization**

Do we really see the same reality that others see? Social cognition (Yzerbyt and Schadron, 1996) represents the way we selectively perceive persons and their behaviour. By analogy with the process of visual perception we can say that reality is constructed and reconstructed in all three stages of social perception: in the phase of selecting the information (we see what we want to see), in the phase of interpreting the information (which depends less on the behaviour observed than on the reading key applied), as well as in that of storing the information (which is not stored equally, but with varying degrees of accuracy and accessibility). Thus, it is hardly surprising that misunderstandings can be the result of a false perception of reality.

Categorising, i.e. the process through which we structure the environment, especially by constructing social categories such as *pupils of immigrant origin*, or *pupils of modest condition*, is the central process which orientates our perceptions and fundamentals our behaviour and communication. Social cognition analyses the process of social categorization and its products, stereotypes and prejudices, which enable us to understand its functions (especially the expansion of available information, since the information acquired from a member of the

category can be used for other members of the same category), while we only tend to see its negative aspects (inappropriate generalizations, fixed categories). What is interesting is the process of observation, when, in order to maintain our system of categories, we unconsciously exaggerate the differences between categories (for example the perception of immigrant pupils as brighter than the native ones in a classroom) and to minimize the differences inside categories.

Cross-cultural social psychology studies, and especially those focusing on social cognition and the processes of social categorization, are therefore an essential help to those looking to carry out an efficient fight against phenomena such as discrimination and racism. Apart from empty speeches about the fight against stereotypes and racism, there are also initiatives with clearer and more efficient actions, such as the Franco-German Youth Office (OFAJ), an institution whose mission is to enable relations between young French and German people through exchange programmes. The politics of these exchanges contrasts deeply with the *cross-cultural training*-type American methods. According to the latter vision, good communication is first and foremost interaction without conflict, in which every participant strives to avoid any disagreement and which satisfies all parties. OFAJ's approach encourages people to work with prejudice and conflict, not to avoid them but to explain them. Although it is a long and often demanding and risky process, open cross-cultural communication is fully worth this price.

### **E. Self-esteem – the drive behind our social behaviour**

A major theory in social psychology, the theory of social identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), points out the driving role of self-esteem in our social behaviour. According to this theory, the individual makes comparisons between the different social categories they have constructed, comparing the groups they identify with to other groups. When the group to which the individual belongs is at an advantage, the social identity created is a positive one, essential to their self-esteem. When the comparisons put them at a disadvantage, the individual applies a series of strategies in order to reclaim a positive social identity. They can reject the devalued group to which they belong and tend to join the valued group. But they can also strengthen their identification to the devalued group and associate themselves with fellow group members who share its failure in order to reverse the situation within the group. The theory of social identity defines these strategies, as well as the conditions in which they are applied.

*These cross-cultural social psychology studies are also relevant in the case of school failure in certain categories of pupils, as well as in the case of violence in school.* We can thus understand which psychological needs are met by these types of behaviour and conceive an adaptive pedagogical response. Bringing to our attention the tension that is constantly experienced by individuals between the contradictory needs of inclusion and differentiation, or in other terms, between the need to be similar and the need to be different, Brewer's (1991) explanations help us understand why a certain pedagogical activity which targets for instance valuing the identification with one's original culture can often correspond to the pupils' needs, but sometimes fail to do so. Understanding the role of comparisons between social categories in building positive self-esteem also enables the preservation of the observation that cultural identities, as well as the qualities of another, are essentially and irrevocably different. Identities and differences are thus constructed within a relationship, a rapport whose geometry changes according to the categories used in comparisons.

#### **F. Social attribution errors**

Social attributions, i.e. the explanations we give for individuals' behaviour, are another important field of study in social psychology (Beauvois and Dubois, 1984). Two types of attributions can be distinguished: internal (the individuals' behaviour is explained through one's own characteristics or actions: intelligence, effort, laziness, etc.) and external (the individuals' behaviour is explained through external causes: chance or luck, favourable situation, etc.). Studies have shown that our attributions are influenced by our social identifications. As shown by the example of the pupil's behaviour in class in the table below, we all too easily attribute behaviour perceived as negative (devalued) to internal causes when the individual belongs to another group, while at the same time favouring external attributions for persons from our own group. Conversely, behaviour perceived as positive (valued) is attributed internally for a member of our own group and externally for a member of another group.



Table: examples of attribution errors

	Valued behaviour, e.g. <b>the pupil gets a very good mark in an exam</b>	Devalued behaviour, e.g. <b>the pupil rarely does their homework</b>
Pupil perceived by the teacher as being part of the same group	<b>Internal attribution -</b> <i>They are very well prepared and this is the result of their work</i>	<b>External attribution -</b> <i>They have problems at home</i>
Pupil perceived by the teacher as being part of another group	<b>Internal attribution -</b> <i>They were lucky this time</i>	<b>External attribution -</b> <i>They are not interested in learning</i>

These attribution errors are largely unconscious and their function is that of preserving a positive social identity by valuing the group to which one belongs at the expense of other groups. Undoubtedly, these observations cannot be without significance for teachers, for whom the evaluation of pupil is such an important task.

### G. Overcoming egocentrism and discovering the Other.

The need to secure positive self-esteem does not fully explain, however, the attribution errors we make in our social encounters. Our ethnocentrism is implicit; it is the individual's tendency to decode information starting from their own frame of reference rather than by seeking to understand the behaviour in its original context. This is where cross-cultural communication comes into play, with multiple studies showing the influence of cultural differences on communication behaviour. Knowledge of other cultures enables the formation of correct attributions, giving behaviour the meaning it has according to the person producing it and not to our own culture. Nevertheless, this discovery of other cultures is preceded by the attempt to de-centre ourselves from our own culture which we tend to prioritize, without forgetting that we also have our own culture. Reflecting on our own enculturation, as well as on the complex and subtle influence of our culture on the ways in which we think and act, should lead to our avoiding the culturalist excesses of the enthusiasm incited by the discovery of cross-cultural difference.

### H. Negotiation and mediation competencies

Awareness of the errors of social perception and attribution, understanding the role of categorisation and social comparisons for self-

esteem, awareness of one's own cultural frame of reference, as well as the discovery of other cultural frames of reference, all these prove to be essential to the better management of cross-cultural relations within the micro-society that is the classroom. However, this is not enough, negotiation and mediation competencies are also necessary. As Camilleri shows, it is about the negotiation of a contract of association which enables a common way of functioning: „The cross-cultural is a place of creativity, enabling the transition from culture as product to culture as process. There is a dialectic movement here whose success is necessary: for if certain cultures become a kind of corset, permanently shutting individuals inside consecrated systems, they can only isolate them from one another, petrified in their proud system.” (Camilleri, 1993)

In fact, most cross-cultural formation processes stop halfway to their destination, limit themselves to discovering cultural differences. These trainings therefore give the false impression that teachers need only better understand other cultures in order to value them. This aspect, however, does not bring us close enough to cross-cultural communication and ethnocentrism often turns into exoticism. McAndrew (1999) has elaborated a training model aimed at persons who work in schools managing situations of conflicting cultural norms and values. The objective of this training is not to increase tolerance or some vague cross-cultural openness, but to establish actual points of reference which enable the negotiation of reasonable adaptations which allow everyone to function in the school environment.

Cross-cultural communication studies can provide a number of useful resources as far as mediation competencies in a cross-cultural context are concerned. Gudykunst's (1995) perspective is noteworthy, analysing cross-cultural communication as the management of the uncertainty and anxiety generated by the ambiguity resulting from cross-cultural encounters. In fact, according to this author, the main cause of difficulty in cross-cultural communication is not sharing the same cultural codes and frames of reference, as well as the difficulty in predicting subsequent actions (e.g. *How should I say hello?*) and then in giving meaning to the interlocutor's behaviour. According to Gudykunst, individuals differ as far as their level of tolerance for uncertainty is concerned, as well as their level of anxiety. When the level of uncertainty and anxiety exceeds the person's tolerance threshold, communication is disturbed, especially since the individual then makes excessive use of stereotypes, minimising the importance of individualised information contained by the situation. To conclude, it would seem that both social psychology and cross-cultural

communication have a lot to offer toward the understanding of the cross-cultural dimension in school. In any case, good management of cultural diversity in school requires an approach based on a good understanding of the issues we wish to resolve.

### **I. School psychology and cross-cultural clinical psychology**

One of the important tasks of a school psychologist is the evaluation generally carried out with the help of a battery of tests. However, given that the school population is not homogeneous, a series of questions arise about their use in different cultural environments, whether it is for the evaluation of cognitive or socio-affective function. Reflections in this field focus on the universality of psychic functioning, the tests' cultural appropriateness and, consequently, its validity in evaluating persons belonging to different cultures.

#### **A third way**

Approaches which tend to overcome the culturally neutral or equitable alternative have several common characteristics:

- taking into account the influence of the context when taking a test;
- caution as far as interpreting, identifying symptoms and making a diagnosis are concerned, resulting from the fact that normality vs. pathology is different from one culture to another;
- emphasis on a person's way of functioning, their expression and creativity, more than on their adequacy to the expected answer;
- the need for a minimum of anthropological knowledge which can, on the one hand, enable the recognition of the Other's differences, as well as, on the other hand, ward off a reduced and stereotypical vision of the Other's culture;
- the need for the clinician to be aware of their own cultural belonging.

This third way can consist of using the existing tests with the above-mentioned reservations and adjustments.

### **Conclusions**

The field of cross-cultural psychology is, undoubtedly, too vast for us to be able present it in such a limited space, having already had to simplify and leave out multiple edifying examples, as well as countless references. But our approach can be looked at as an invitation to knowledge, to long-term research in this generous and modern field.

We would also like to note the existence of an association grouping

researchers and practitioners, the Association for Cross-Cultural Research (ARIC) in France, which publishes its studies in the *Espaces interculturels* collection at L'Harmattan. The association is pluridisciplinary, with many members being psychologists or people interested in education.

Thus, *any human behaviour must be examined in the socio-cultural context in which it occurs, if we truly wish to understand it.*

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