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The Cultural in the Social: A Reflection on Sociocultural Models Approach

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Abstract

Culture is a critical concept for social psychology in Asia. The sociocultural models approach as exemplified in this special issue is a significant synthesis of the past work and a generative platform for future research. From the perspective of cultural dynamics, this commentary provides what I hope to be constructively critical reflections on this approach and attempts to point to potential directions for future investigation.

The Cultural in the Social: A Reflection on Sociocultural Models Approach

Culture is a critical concept for social psychology in Asia. This special issue brings together a set of papers that collectively present a coherent perspective on culture that is also productive within the contemporary framework of social psychology. Roughly speaking, in this perspective, culture is regarded as a set of models or scripts about being and doing in the world, and it is those models and scripts that shape psychological processes of cognition, affect, and behaviour in culturally informed ways. From this perspective, one of the critical tasks for social psychology is to describe and understand the content of these cultural models and scripts, or sociocultural models, because this can help us explain and predict human thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. It takes an inspiration from cultural psychology of Shweder (1990) and Markus, Kitayama, and Heiman (1996), but develops it further in my view to make it more applicable to broader areas of inquiry, including education, gender, and psychological distress (also see Chiu & Hong, 2013). The collection of the papers in this special issue is a welcome extension of the tradition of reflection and innovation on the cultural in the social in *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* (e.g., Bond, 2013; de Souza, 2014; Hwang, 2005; Kashima, 2005; Liu, 2017; Yang, 2000).

Like many others in Asian social psychology, I too take a view that the cultural is integral to the social. My views are, therefore, highly congruent with Chirkov's (2020) and those exemplified by the papers in this special issue. Nonetheless, in the hope of furthering our conversation on the cultural in the social, what I will attempt here is a reflection on these papers from my perspective on cultural dynamics – formation, maintenance, and transformation of culture over time (Kashima, 2000a, 2014; Kashima, Bain, & Perfors, 2019). I hope I am forgiven for self-citations here – they provide a relevant background for the comments and discussions to

follow. Nonetheless, they will not be repeated in what follows, so as to focus on each article's contribution.

The Cultural, the Social, and the Natural in Psychology

The concept of sociocultural models (SCMs) is central to this special issue. It captures generally domain-specific and culturally-informed ideas and practices that fundamentally underpin psychological functioning. Chirkov (2020) has done a great service to the field by bringing together diverse intellectual traditions and distilling their perspectives into a set of metatheoretical principles about culture that can fruitfully inform principled empirical research on social psychological processes and mechanisms. The intellectual history has pitted the natural science and cultural science models of inquiry, or *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*, which has dogged the epistemological and methodological discourse about the cultural in academic psychology. Indeed, past debates about the epistemological foundations of the so-called mainstream social psychology versus discursive social psychology and the methodological adequacies of quantitative versus qualitative method seem to me to reflect this historical division. It is refreshing to see Chirkov's perspective on sociocultural models and indeed all authors' in this special issue free of this intellectual baggage.

The Cultural and the Natural. Another sign of forward movement is Bonn's (2020) essay, which lists useful, if somewhat abstract and selective, pointers to the neural basis of the acquisition and operation of SCMs. The contrast between nature and culture based on the traditional division of natural and cultural sciences meant that not only research methodology differs between the investigations of the natural and the cultural, but also at times metaphysical distinctions have been made between the brain and the culturally informed mind. In opposition to this traditional nature versus culture paradigm, Bonn characterizes human psychological

functioning as seamlessly natural *and* cultural, aligned with the trend towards *naturalization of culture* (Kashima, 2016). He argues that humans have genetically endowed capacities to acquire SCMs, which provide mechanisms that have enabled humans to construct their niches and adapt to the environment (Laland, Odling-Smee, & Feldman, 2000). Bonn points to emotionally charged sociality as significant underpinnings of the acquisition of SCMs, and mirror neuron systems and default mode networks as neural substrates that enable the acquisition and operation of SCMs in daily activities.

While I agree with most of Bonn's main points – importance of emotionality and the involvement of mirror neuron system and default networks – I feel obliged to point to somewhat different views about these matters. For example, Bonn's views about emotion appears to be congruent with the notion of basic emotions, which postulates the existence of innate patters of emotions. Although this is a respectable view, there is a controversy with some theorists arguing that emotions are experiences constructed on the fly shaped by social and cultural influences (Barrett, 2017; LeDoux, 2015). While acknowledging a controversy, Bonn apparently takes a position that mirror neuron systems are genetically endowed neural mechanisms that enable imitation and more broadly social learning. Again, although this view has been held by some, there is also an alternative view, which argues that mirror neuron systems may be a *result*, rather than an *enabler*, of social learning, which is enabled by a broader, general purpose learning capability (e.g., Heyes, 2016). Perhaps these quibbles are not essential, however. What is significant may be that a perspective that regards the cultural as integral to the natural and the social for human psychology is represented in this special issue.

The Cultural and the Social. Chirkov's insistence on the inseparability of the cultural and the social is noteworthy (also see Li & Yamamoto, 2020). I agree with this fundamental

proposition that the cultural and the social are ontologically inseparable, but I would like to retain an analytical (or conceptual) distinction between the two. In my lexicon, the cultural is concerned with information, but the social is about the relationships between individual human beings, and groupings and other aggregates that human individuals constitute. I analytically distinguish information relevant to human psychological functioning by the channels of transmission – genetic information is transmitted via genetic means of DNA and RNA, whereas cultural information is transmitted via social means. Furthermore, cultural information can be socially transmitted between those without genetic relationships, not only from the older to younger generations, but also between individuals of the same generation and even from the younger to the older generations. In this sense, the cultural is inseparable ontologically from the social in the process of cultural transmission – the cultural and the social are two aspects of the same ontological process of social interaction, and in this sense they are inseparable.

Nonetheless, I see a value in retaining a degree of analytical distinction. First, by bringing into focus the *information* that is transacted between people, the cultural contacts the information processing metatheory in social psychology and more broadly the cognitive revolution in behavioural science. Notwithstanding Bruner's (1990) criticisms of this tradition from a cultural perspective, cognitive perspectives have provided social psychology with a number of theoretical and methodological tools, which have formed the basis of contemporary social psychological inquiries. As long as a healthy respect for meaning and the content, rather than the form, of information is retained, as is done in the concept of sociocultural models, an analytical distinction between the cultural and the social may also be retained.

Second, by conceptually distinguishing the cultural from the social, it is possible to bring out the difference between cultural identification and social identification. Tajfel and Turner's

(1979) social identity theory is well known – it is concerned with an individual's self-definition as a member of a group. Its theoretical insights and empirical contributions to social psychology can hardly be overstated. Nonetheless, it is possible to conceptually distinguish *cultural* identification from social identification as Hong (2013) did. Imagine a person who admires and identifies with Chinese cultural artefacts such as Confucian thoughts without identifying oneself as a member of Chinese people as a social category. This person's cultural identification is clearly distinct from his or her social identification. More broadly, an analytical distinction between the cultural and the social enables a discussion about the cultural independently of intergroup processes (e.g., Kashima & Gelfand, in press).

Intentionality, Intersubjectivity, and Constitution of Sociocultural Reality

I am in full agreement with Chirkov on the interconnectedness of intentionality, intersubjectivity, and constitution of sociocultural reality. I understand intentionality as a characteristic of human psychological functioning in the way analytical philosophical traditions do – as aboutness as seen not only in intentions in the narrow sense, but also in thoughts, wants, and emotions directed towards something. I too understand intersubjectivity as a state of mutual or collective knowledge, belief, or other forms of cognitive acceptance of a certain informational content. Chirkov's reference to D'Andrade and Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder's reference to Clark and Brennan's discussion about grounding make it clear that intersubjectivity is understood in the tradition of Lewis's (1969) common knowledge and of Clark and Marshall's (1981) common ground (also see Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010). With Chirkov, I would also argue that our capacity for joint or collective intentionality enables us to ensure joint or collective intersubjectivity in our knowledge, beliefs, desires, goals, and emotions. This makes it possible for humans to coordinate our actions to achieve outcomes

which cannot be achieved individually. They include our political institutions like parliament, judiciary, non-governmental organizations, and economic institutions like banks, manufacturing companies, and transport. The capabilities for intentionality and intersubjectivity, which are likely genetically endowed though socioculturally shaped, coupled with our psychological capacities to adapt to thus constructed human niche as a real environment, are surely critical ingredients for humanity's success as a biological species.

Internalization-Externalization Dynamics and Individualized SCM. I agree with Chirkov in regarding intersubjectivity and subjectivity as complementary two sides of the same coin. The process of sociocultural constitution involves the continuous cycle of internalization of intersubjective sociocultural models and externalization of subjective understanding, experience, and reflection of the sociocultural models.

Li and Yamamoto (2020) provide an excellent illustration of how the seemingly universal process of internalization-externalization is at once a mechanism for cultural diversity and its maintenance in the context of mother-child interaction. After reviewing Li's empirical research on cultural differences in Western and East Asian learning processes, they reported a highly informative discourse analysis of European American and Chinese American mother-child interactions, expertly illustrating how intentionality and intersubjectivity play out in the enactment, transmission, and reinforcement of sociocultural models of learning socially *in situ*. What is striking about Li and Yamamoto's work is that, although sociocultural models of learning are about *individual learning*, i.e., how individuals learn their individual knowledge and skills (e.g., reading, violin playing), the psychological orientation towards learning itself is *socially learned*. In the context of research about cultural transmission, individual and social learning are often clearly distinguished (e.g., Boyd & Richerson, 1985). However, what Li and

Yamamoto showed is that even individual learning is indirectly and profoundly a form of social learning in the case of human cultural transmission.

As the internalization-externalization cycle continues, however, Li and Yamamoto's analysis also shows that an individual shows some deviation and diversion from the canonical form of learning in the mother and child's sociocultural milieu. This is perhaps expected as their research was concerned with problems about learning. No matter. Their analyses show that these issues and deviations are negotiated and resolved in a way that was acceptable and appropriate in their sociocultural context. Still, it seems reasonable to surmise that such variations around the canonical form would be remembered and occasionally reflected upon to provide a basis for more personal and individualized experiences about the sociocultural model. As both Li and Yamamoto as well as Chirkov noted, there exists a more personalized and individualized component to sociocultural models, which may even be unique to a given individual. Chirkov seems to believe that human autonomy enables this type of personalized reflection or criticism. It may be so. But, equally, the existence of a different and alternative possibility enables individuals to be (or become) autonomous by providing an opportunity to choose between the canonical sociocultural model and a variant on the theme. It remains to be seen whether human autonomy and alternative vision are mutually constitutive, and if so how.

Variability of Sociocultural Events and SCMs of Deviancy. In a way, Li and Yamamoto's research capitalized on the likelihood that the operation of SCMs tend to be most clearly discernible when things do not go as the SCMs suppose (e.g., when children do not do what they are supposed to do, for example, not reading or not practicing violin). This is Boski's (2020) point, and more on this later. At any rate, these variations are dealt with and settle into the ordinary course of daily life (e.g., loving mother-child relationship) as noted earlier. But, other

variations may go beyond what may be regarded as ordinary sociocultural events. Many of these extra-ordinary events may have occurred due to stochasticity, but others may be due to complexity. There are many causal factors that are responsible for generating sociocultural events – some are human-caused, but others are of non-human origin – and so they may be difficult to explain by ordinary SCMs. Some sociocultural events are so different that they may be regarded as belonging the realm outside the ordinary.

In pointing to the existence of cultural models of deviancy, Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder (2020) raised an intriguing question about the boundary between what is "normal" and what is deviant. Given that most empirically examined SCMs are ordinary people's enactment, description, and explanation of a certain domain of sociocultural activities (e.g., learning), they are mostly about SCMs of normalcy in Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder's terminology. In contra-distinction, there are SCMs of deviancy, they have argued.

This is a significant point. Many cultures include ideas and practices pertaining to the non-normal or the *extra*ordinary. I surmise that those ideas and practices for non-normality are used in the face of those non-normal events that defy SCMs of normalcy. Put differently, if and when an event occurs that cannot be explained in terms of an ordinary SCM, people evoke cultural ideas and practices for non-normalcy, i.e., SCMs of deviancy. People perhaps explain those extraordinary events that they regard are of non-human origin in terms of supernatural powers, but others that they regard as human-caused in terms of conspiracy theories or extraordinary powers of individuals. Intriguingly, many cultural rituals seem to be a conventionalized and sanctioned way of setting aside an extraordinary time and space (Rappaport, 1999), where ordinary SCMs are suspended and perhaps SCMs of deviancy seem to be routinely activated.

Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder's (2020) contribution focused on those cases of variations pertaining to human experiences and actions, i.e., psychological functioning. Distinguishing the dimension of normalcy vs. deviancy and that of valorization vs. devalorization, they convincingly argued that deviancy and devalorization are not coextensive, and give rise to different types of responses. Those who suffer from psychological distress seek help differently depending on how they understand their extra-ordinary experiences. Others respond to extra-ordinary psychological functioning differently depending on how they understand them within the two-dimensional space spanned by the normalcy-deviancy and valorization-devalorization dimensions. Devalorized deviancy would be stigmatized, but valorized deviancy may even be celebrated. Most importantly for psychology as profession, clinical psychology may need to engage in different types of help provision depending on how extra-ordinary psychological functionings are understood by the sufferers and those around them.

Methodology for SCM Research. SCM research uses an entire spectrum of empirical research methods. From ethnography, systematic observations, and discourse analysis to semi-structured and structured interviews as well as surveys, field experiments, and controlled experiments, all contributors agree that the right method should be used for the right research question without prejudice for or against particular types of research methods. This is a refreshing state of affairs. Given the long history of debate – futile in my opinion – it is a welcome trend to move forward the research agenda on SCMs.

At this juncture, I found myself very much intrigued by, and in agreement with, Boski's (2020) argument for the use of experimentation in SCM research. As I understand it, he argues that, to provide evidence for the operation of SCMs, at least two conditions for observation are necessary and this can be achieved by cultural experiment in the most systematic and principled

way. One condition is set up to observe what tends to happen when the circumstances are *congruent* with an expected SCM, but the other condition introduces circumstances that are *incongruent* with the SCM. In the case of a Polish request-compliance SCM for manual handling of heavy objects, an instructor requesting men to move a heavy object is SCM congruent, but an instructor requesting women to move it is SCM incongruent. Boski argues that the operation of SCMs can be discerned by examining how people respond to SCM congruent and incongruent circumstances. In particular, he surmises that SCM congruent circumstances are more likely to induce SCM congruent behaviours (e.g., compliance to request), less surprise, and more favorable meta-normative responses (e.g., greater liking of the instructor) than SCM incongruent circumstances. Indeed, largely supportive evidence came from his twenty-year long, intriguing, but by his own admission rather unsystematic, "May I ask two ladies…" experiment as well as a more rigorous experiment with Polish and English undergraduate students.

Boski's reasoning is inspired by Gerfinkel's ethnomethodology, but arguably, there are other traditions of experimental research that have an analogous logical structure if not the same experimental procedure. Take Kahneman and Tversky's judgmental heuristics research. Here, an experimenter set up conditions in which a normative, rational theory of judgment and decision making (e.g., probability theory) prescribes a certain behaviour, but a descriptive theory of judgmental heuristics (e.g., representativeness heuristic) predicts a different behaviour. So, for instance, in one condition, an outspoken and assertive Linda is said to be a bank teller, but in another condition, an identically described Linda is said to be a feminist bank teller. Many people said that the feminist bank teller Linda is more likely than the bank teller Linda (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983), presumably because the former, feminist Linda, is more congruent with the SCM of outspoken and assertive feminists. What made this ultimately impactful was the fact that

a highly intuitive judgment, which is congruent with researchers' SCM (in this case, a stereotype of feminist bank teller, if you will), violates the normative standard of rationality, which prescribes that the conjunction of two sets (those who are BOTH bank tellers AND feminists) should be smaller than one of the two sets (e.g., those who are bank tellers).

Another related approach comes from my own work on narrative retellings of stereotype congruent and incongruent information. In one of the studies, Kashima (2000b) made a story about a man and a woman who exhibited gender stereotype congruent and incongruent behaviours, and asked each participant to retell this story for another fellow student from memory. A participant who received this retold story was then again asked to reproduce it for another fellow student, etc. This procedure continued for five generations. Bartlett (1932) called this experimental paradigm the method of serial reproduction. In Kashima's experiment, averaged across serial reproduction chains, stereotype congruent behaviours were more likely to be reproduced in retold stories than stereotype incongruent information, and by the end of reproduction chains, stories ended up with largely stereotype congruent information. Similar results were obtained through conversational serial reproductions of different stories as well (Kashima, Lyons, & Clark, 2013). Arguably, these findings are a special case of *conventionalization* (Bartlett, 1932), in which information communicated through multiple minds that share the same SCMs become largely congruent with the SCMs.

These findings support Boski's theorizing about cultural experiment, which states that SCM congruent circumstances are more likely to generate SCM congruent reactions than SCM incongruent circumstances. However, it may be further extended in light of Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder's conceptual distinction between the dimensions of normalcy and valorization. In particular, I wonder whether they may systematically relate to emotional and behavioural

responses to sociocultural events differently. For example, normalcy may prompt approach orientations, but deviancy, surprise and avoidance orientations. Nonetheless, these orientations may be moderated by valorization. Devalorized normalcy may trigger anger – approach-oriented negative emotion – and action orientations of punishment or perhaps correction. However, devalorized deviancy may trigger fear or disgust – avoidance-oriented negative emotions and action orientations of avoidance. On the other hand, valorized normalcy may generate happiness and appreciation of life, but valorized deviancy, awe and distant respect. Of course, these are only speculations, and require further empirical investigation.

Folk Theory, Scientific Theory, and Constructability of Reality. Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder's discussion points to a tension between folk theories and scientific theories, and the significance of SCMs in the sociocultural construction of psychological health and distress. SCMs embody ordinary folks' ideas about and practices in the world, and scientific cultural-clinical psychology needs to take this into consideration because SCMs of normalcy and deviancy at least in part constitute what those who suffer from mental ill health and those around them think, feel, and do. Despite this, however, I would think that there are some aspects of mental ill health that are largely independent of SCMs and their ways of construing and reacting. An example would suffice to make this point – someone with a traumatic brain injury would have some impairment in cognitive functioning whatever SCMs may say. Scientific cultural-clinical psychology would have to be informed by relevant scientific insights *despite* the SCMs, even if scientific theories contradict SCMs. More generally, SCMs and scientific theories can be largely congruent, but may provide contradictory understandings and suggestions for action. How should one decide which insights should be taken more seriously?

My tentative suggestion is to consider the dimension of *sociocultural constructability*, the extent to which the referent of a sociocultural model can be socioculturally constructed. As noted by Chirkov as well as Chentsova-Dutton and Ryder, cultural information may take a form of declarative knowledge (i.e., what something is) or a form of procedural knowledge (i.e., how something is done), but like Chirkov, I also believe these two forms of cultural information are often rolled into a declarative-procedural configural form, which we activate as we engage in routinized activities. As we go about our daily life in line with our SCMs, our sociocultural realities are constructed. Take Li and Yamamoto's example of learning. However mothers and children understand learning, the end result may include the affective bonding between a mother and a child as well as the learned skills – they be reading or violin playing. These constructed realities are as real as one can get. They surely constitute a reality. Boski's research on gender roles give another example. To the extent that men get up and carry out the task that an instructor has asked to do, the very fact that it is men who performed the task remains real. These are socioculturally contractable facts. Here, SCMs must be taken very seriously indeed.

However, there are some things that are not socioculturally constructable. For example, I believe the current scientific consensus is that humans cannot have direct access to other humans' conscious experiences. I could not possibly *read* or directly *experience* what someone else may be feeling or thinking although an SCM in many parts of the world may say such capacities do exist and some individuals have a special gift for them. Extending a similar notion, some SCMs may even say some individuals have a special ability to influence others adversely, e.g., causing illness by cursing or contracting with an evil spirit. Suppose further that a man may indeed feel ill with high fever and many symptoms of a viral infection, think that this is due to his enemy's curse, and this belief makes him feel even stronger distress, anxious about his social

standing and his future in the community. This is a more nuanced case. Depending on which aspects of the illness one focuses on, relevant SCMs may need to be more or less taken seriously. The reality of viral infection is not affected by the SCMs of cursing and a supernatural evil spirit – it is not socioculturally constructable. Yet, I believe that his distress about an enemy's curse is real and his worry about his standing in his community too is likely real – these are socioculturally contstructable facts, I would argue. Here, SCMs need to be taken very seriously indeed whatever scientific theories of microbial infection may say.

More generally, there may be some facts in the world that are more or less socioculturally constructable. At this stage, it is difficult to say *a priori* which kinds of facts are more constructable than others, and only scientific research and scientific theories can answer this question. However, I hope I am forgiven for offering some pointers. For example, what Hacking (1995) called human kinds, categories and concepts about humans, may be more constructable than other types of natural kinds. Cultural stereotypes and prejudice based on social category memberships can construct a social reality of inequality and discrimination. Similarly, Haslam (2016) has suggested that the concept of mental illness may have changed over time due to sociocultural processes, and psychological treatment of mental illness may have changed with it. The label and categorization of mental illness, or SCMs of deviancy generally, can indeed construct the sociocultural reality of deviancy, its treatment and potential stigma, and possible discrimination and psychological distress. Human-made artefacts such as institutions like government, legislature, and judiciary are likely more constructable than others though perhaps may be less so than some human kinds. With changes in technologies and infrastructure, some things may become more socioculturally constructable. Again, these are all speculations that require further scientific investigation and theorizing.

What seems to me to be important about sociocultural constractability is that it sets the limit of sociocultural change at a given time. Boski's discussion illustrates this. As he noted about Polish and English undergraduate students, they both responded well to gender-neutral requests although Poles were more inclined to favor the request more aligned with their traditional SCM of gender roles than that is less so. Although the Polish gender-based request-compliance SCM may be still in place, to the extent that many, if not all, aspects of the gender roles are socioculturally constructable at the present time, there is a possibility of sociocultural change towards gender equality. Nonetheless, how such sociocultural changes may be effected remains a different issue all together. Future SCM research and theories may be able to speak about a possibility or otherwise about change, as well as how to do so.

Further Issues and Concluding Comments

All in all, this special issue extends the continuing evolution of metatheory, methodology, and substantive research for social psychology in Asia by bringing the cultural in the social under careful scrutiny. I believe sociocultural models as culturally informed and socially transmitted ideas and practices for thinking, feeling, and acting within a specific domain of sociocultural activities provide a generative conceptual apparatus for social psychological research not only in Asia, but also across the globe. It is a privilege to have been given a chance to comment and reflect on this set of papers.

That said, there is one more issue of significance that I should touch on. It is the question about how SCMs are to be conceptualized and represented as a theoretical construct. Let me explain. In some papers, Romney and Batchelder's (Batchelder & Romney, 1988; Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986) cultural consensus theory was mentioned approvingly, and a network-based approach (Schmittmann et al., 2013) was also referenced as an alternative. At one

level, these are alternative approaches about how to represent a measured psychological construct. Cultural consensus theoretic approaches would regard an SCM as a latent variable and treats individual differences as "errors", whereas network-based approaches would be an attempt to avoid a commitment to the existence of a latent sociocultural model that is a correct, accurate, and true representation of a culture or a cultural domain. Some have charged that the treatment of a psychological construct as a latent variable essentializes the psychological construct (Borsboom, Mellenbergh, & Van Heerden, 2003), and if so, using cultural consensus theory as a way of representing an SCM may be seen to imply an essentialist stance on culture. This resonates with Aunger's (1999) criticism of cultural consensus theory (but see Romney's, 1999, rebuttal). Whether the essentialist charge is warranted, and whether a network-based approach provides a generative alternative, are issues that need to be addressed in the future.

It is clear that vibrant conversations are likely to continue about the cultural in the social in *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*.

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