

A hermeneutic approach to culture and psychotherapy

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Many critics have argued that psychology and the practice of psychotherapy and counseling have failed to fully address the challenges of working with minority group members, immigrants, and those dwelling in non-Western societies. Concepts, interventions, and measures developed in Western cultures are regularly extended to persons in and from non-Western cultures and research findings are interpreted at face value often resulting in an *imposed etic* and a perpetuation of the socio-political status quo (Christopher, 1999; Pedersen, 1991; Prilleltensky, 1994; Sue and Sue, 1990). Kitayama and Markus (2000) note that, 'cultural influences may be quite pervasive, widespread, and powerful in forming the basis of "being" for ordinary people, and, yet, remain elusive for those researchers who have sought to understand them' (p. 123). Part of the difficulty is that the definitions of culture provided in much of the cross-cultural and multi-cultural literature are often brief and tend to lack substantive value (Cole, 1996; Jahoda, 2000; Ratner, 2000). As Maruyama (1992) contends, psychology has not generated the cognitive structures that would allow us to think contextually when we encounter diversity. In addition to needing a comprehensive understanding of the nature of culture and its relationship to the self, psychotherapists must be able to think culturally. Seeley (2000), following Devereaux (1958), maintains that, 'Rather than learning about the stereotypical characteristics of particular cultures, psychotherapists need to become familiar with the general characteristics, categories, and functions of culture per se' (p. 72). Instead of this occurring, Sampson (1993) trenchantly argues that psychology has hastily responded to diversity with what he calls add-on eclectic strategies. Thus, in order to fully address how culture affects psychotherapy, we are faced with two challenges: the first, to define culture in a way that highlights its power and pervasiveness; and the second, to learn to think culturally.

Philosophical hermeneutics provides a nondualistic model of culture and the self. It is also a method for thinking interpretively about cultural meanings and discerning their specific manifestations. Hermeneutics is a framework for thinking about the ways culture permeates every dimension

of our clients' world. As a metatheory for psychology, hermeneutics can also deepen our understanding of how we are thoroughly shaped by culture and how much of psychological theory, research, and practice is influenced by individualism, our dominant cultural outlook.

The term hermeneutics derives from the Greek word for interpretation and is related to Hermes, god of communication who ferried messages between the gods and humans. During the Protestant Reformation, hermeneutics was the theory and method of interpretation and emerged as a means of interpreting the Bible. At the turn of the eighteenth century, Schleiermacher ushered in the contemporary understanding of hermeneutics, when he established a general interpretive methodology for uncovering the original intent of all forms of human communication, not just written texts like the Bible or legal statutes (Palmer, 1969; Richardson, Fowers, and Guignon, 1999). This version of hermeneutics currently influences qualitative research methods (Ratner, 1997; Rennie, 1999; Tappan, 1997), theories of epistemology and clinical interpretation in psychodynamic therapies (Barclay, 1992; Gentile, 1998; Spence, 1993), and narrative approaches to psychotherapy (Frank, 1987; Gergen and McNamee, 2000; McNamee, 1996; Schafer, 1993). The most recent turn in hermeneutic thought, *philosophical* or *ontological hermeneutics*, was instigated by Martin Heidegger's work in the 1920s. Philosophical hermeneutics goes beyond methodology to consider the broader ontological questions about human nature that arise when we acknowledge that interpretation is central to human existence. This iteration of hermeneutic thought is highly influential in contemporary philosophy and social theory but is largely unknown within psychology except for a few notable exceptions (Messer, Sass, and Woolfolk, 1988; Richardson *et al.*, 1999; Woolfolk, 1998). We attempt to redress this shortcoming in this chapter by outlining a hermeneutic model of the self and its relationship to culture. We will also consider how the hermeneutic notion of dialogue can provide a framework for engaging with those from different cultural backgrounds.

A HERMENEUTIC VIEW OF CULTURE: WEBS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Geertz (1973) distinguishes, for the sake of analysis, two different but interdependent aspects of culture: world view and ethos. The world view or *weltanschauung* is the more cognitive aspect of culture that describes and defines reality. World views tell us what reality consists of, what it is composed of, how it works. Our world view provides our understanding of causation: why things interact or operate as they do. It establishes forces, entities, objects, levels of existence, and so on. Ethos, in contrast, is the affective, aesthetic and moral component of human existence. As Geertz

puts it, 'A people's ethos is the tone, character and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude towards themselves and their world that life reflects' (1973, p. 127).

A central aspect of every culture are the presuppositions pertaining to the nature of human beings. A culture's world view establishes what a person *is*. The world view determines what constitutes a person, what a person's capabilities, resources, characteristics and faculties are. It also defines where the boundaries of the person are. Ethos, in contrast, delineates norms, standards or parameters for desirable ways of functioning and interacting. Ethos guides the assumptions about how a person *ought* to behave, interact, think, and feel. Ethos shapes our presuppositions of how a person should grow, develop, mature. It is ethos that suggests or, at times, dictates what we should do with our capacities and faculties. Together, the world view lays out the nature of the person that will develop while ethos guides the direction that development should take.

The aspect of culture that addresses the nature of the person and psychological issues can be referred to as *folk* or *indigenous psychology* (Bruner, 1990; Heelas and Lock, 1981). Folk psychologies account for such things as motivation, emotion, psychopathology, and the self. Folk psychologies are sometimes explicit and well-developed as with the various Buddhist or Hindu theories about the self. But whether or not they have been explicitly developed, they necessarily exist at a preconscious and implicit level where they inform our moment-to-moment reactions to others and ourselves. We could not function without them. Folk psychologies draw upon both the culture's world view and its ethos.

World view, ethos, and culture more generally, function in Geertz's (1973) view as 'webs of significance' that permeate our social functioning and give meaning and coherence to our daily lives. Culture provides meaning and structure that are not innately available given the almost limitless possibilities afforded by the openness or what Berger and Luckmann (1966) termed the plasticity of our nature. Without the constraints the culture provides, we would live in William James's proverbial 'bloomin', buzzin', confusion'. Cultures are thus collective achievements that orient us to life by establishing a common background framework of understanding between people that enables the social and even the physical world to make sense (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Geertz, 1973; 1983). Each culture affords some understanding of human nature and what it means to be human. Geertz (1973) sees culture as a universal requirement of living; in his words, we have a 'pervasive orientational necessity' that culture satisfies (p. 363).

To clarify what Geertz means by 'significance' we have found it helpful to consider how Heidegger (1962) uses the word *signification*. According to Heidegger, the most fundamental aspects of our agency, what he called being-in-the-world, are characterized by care, concern, and signification. In other words thoughts, feelings and actions are infused with deep

assumptions concerning what is real, important, and valuable. The word care here goes far beyond a sympathetic emotional response. Instead, care refers to what we value, what we attend to in life, what we give our time and energy to, and the aspects of reality that we focus upon. The value and worth of things, from this perspective, are defined by what we actually do, how we spend our time. Culture, then, can be thought of not only as webs of significance but also as webs of care. The particular way in which any culture does express itself, the way we have collectively fashioned and constructed reality, reveals what we care about. Our behavior reflects our values, or better yet, *is* embodied values.

ONTOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM: AN IMPEDIMENT TO RECOGNIZING CULTURE'S INFLUENCE

While the dominant cultural outlook in the West is Individualism, anthropologists have explored how individualism may be a 'peculiar idea' (Geertz, 1973) within human history. Cross-cultural psychologist Harry Triandis (1989) estimates that individualism is the cultural outlook for only 30 per cent of the world's population. Ontological individualism casts the individual and culture as distinct and separable from each other, making it particularly difficult for us to grasp how we are shaped by culture. In ontological individualism the person is regarded in atomistic terms that render the person metaphysically separate from others, society, and nature (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985; Dumont, 1986; Gadamer, 1975). Richardson *et al.* (1999) describe this further, 'We tacitly view human beings atomistically as discrete centers of experience and action concatenated in various ways into social groups, struggling to reduce inevitable conflicts with others through negotiations and temporary alliances' (p. 71). Such a self should ideally be 'self-defining' (Taylor, 1975), refusing to rely upon the beliefs, values, and outlooks of others but seizing responsibility for coming to one's own identity. This self is well positioned to freely and rationally treat both itself and the outside world instrumentally, to alter them in desired ways, or, in later permutations of the modern self, to resist social pressure to conform and pursue self-actualization or personal authenticity as it sees fit. Culture, then, can become seen as a potential external threat that can somehow diminish the individual's autonomy or authenticity.

Geertz (1973) offers a powerful example of this underlying individualistic influence when he identifies the 'stratigraphic' concepts of the human being that dominate the social sciences. Like Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model of the person, stratigraphic approaches portray the human being as a set of onion-like concentric circles, each layer of which is complete and irreducible in itself. The innermost circle is biological, which is encircled

successively by the psychological, social, and cultural domains. As Geertz puts it:

Strip off the motley forms of culture and one finds the structural and functional regularities of social organization. Peel these off in turn and one finds the underlying psychological factors – ‘basic needs’ or what-have-you – that support and make them possible. Peel off psychological factors and one is left with biological foundations – anatomical, physiological, neurological – of the whole edifice of human life.

(p. 37)

The implication is that the psychologist can focus exclusively on the psychological ‘circle’, leaving the levels of social and cultural organization to sociologists and anthropologists. While these stratigraphic approaches do provide accounts in which culture is addressed, the downside is that culture can become mere extraneous context. Models and theories that take this approach potentially adopt and reinforce the supposition that the individual is ontologically prior to the social; that it somehow makes sense to think of the individual as a biological entity existing independently of society and culture. Geertz (1973) challenges the notion that it is possible to understand the human being stripped of ‘the trappings of culture’. In his view, culture permeates human existence so thoroughly that the attempt to separate individuals and culture is incoherent and distorts our understanding of human nature.

A HERMENEUTIC VIEW OF THE PERSON: BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

In the hermeneutic view, individualism is not just one cultural self-interpretation, it is an interpretation that is in error. Heidegger (1962) takes issue with the common notion of ourselves in Western cultures as separate, autonomous, self-motivated agents set over and against a world of discrete objects. He argues that this notion substitutes a derivative form of being that is a cultural achievement for our most basic or ‘primordial’ way of being. Heidegger described our most primordial self as engaged in the world doing something or ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger, 1962; cf., Bickhard, 1994). In contrast with Descartes, Heidegger (1962) does believe we are most fundamentally, or most of the time, the type of ‘I’ presupposed in Descartes’ *cogito*.

We tend to identify with the ‘I’, the reflective, conscious, thinking part of us. However, according to hermeneutic thinkers, we are, to use Bruner’s (1990) phrase, ‘expressions of culture’ long before we develop a sense of ourselves as an ‘I’. As children we learn patterns of interacting with others

and we participate in social practices and institutions. In Heidegger's language we are 'thrown' into cultural practices – actions and behaviors whose significance has largely already been provided by culture. We are born into a social drama whose cadences and rhythms were wholly formed before we arrived, and which shapes and defines us before we are able to recognize ourselves as individuals. In Heidegger's words, 'the Self of everydayness is the "they." The "they" is constituted by the way things have been publicly interpreted' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 296). Through our participation in these social patterns we perpetuate, and at the same time, reinterpret them.

Being-in-the-world is prior to the creation of sharp subject–object boundaries. Heidegger (1962) draws this out through his example of the workshop. Objects in our world are not primarily a collection of *things* that we are set over and against, but more fundamentally, in phenomenological terms, they are extensions of ourselves.

Within our Western world view we tend to think of values and meanings as subjective possessions which we take up and leave behind as they suit us. The ontological assumption is that as beings we are first and foremost physical objects and agents in the world. Culture and values are overlaid onto this presumably more fundamental notion of agency. However, according to Heidegger, 'we do not, so to speak, throw a "signification" over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it' (Heidegger, 1962, p. 190). Heidegger challenges this fact/value split by effectively arguing that the creation of a world that has facts set over and against values actually presupposes a certain notion of the self. Moreover, he argues that this very self that the fact/value dichotomy relies upon can not be ontologically our most fundamental way of being in the world. Instead, for Heidegger we are 'proximally and for the most part' beings that participate in social practices that presuppose particular meanings and values that precede us (Heidegger, 1962, p. 37).

The pervasiveness of culture, indeed its necessity, means that our lives are informed by some set of cultural assumptions about what it means to be a person, and what kind of person it is good to be or become. Heidegger (1962) sees these assumptions as central to the human condition for as he puts it, 'in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it' (p. 32).

With cognitive maturation, we can, through the process of reflective abstraction (Bickhard and Christopher, 1994), become conscious of portions of the cultural patterns in which we participate. While we can develop partial, provisional perspectives that allow us to reflect on our culture, we unavoidably take on the meanings implicit in these practices prior to awareness. We are partly constituted by our cultures, which means that it is not possible to fully detach ourselves. Any distance that we get from our culture is always temporary and provisional (Gadamer, 1975). One consequence is that we can best know ourselves 'not by inward-turning and

introspection' in the manner of Descartes, 'but by catching sight of ourselves as we are engaged and preoccupied in everyday contexts' (Guignon, 1984, p. 232). Although each individual has a somewhat unique life history and a particular perspective within the culture, nevertheless, the individual's life history unfolds within the possibilities set forth by the shared background meanings that cultures provide. As a result, our own individual uniqueness, according to Taylor (1989), consists largely of variations on important cultural themes and aspirations. And, the very wish to really separate oneself from one's culture is a uniquely modern, individualistic phenomenon.

MULTICULTURALISM AND INTERCULTURAL CONTACT

Cross-cultural interactions entail the intersection of multiple cultures. First, there is the culture of therapy. Every aspect of the therapy process including assessment, diagnosis, treatment goals and objectives, and interventions are influenced by culture. All these aspects of counseling and psychotherapy, in addition to concepts of mental illness and psychological well-being, theories of personality, and both normal and abnormal development, rely on presuppositions about the nature of what the person is and what the good or ideal person should be (Christopher, 1996, 1999, 2001). The situation becomes more complicated when we realize that the values and assumptions underlying professional theory and practice are situated within and exist along side the cultural values and assumptions manifested in different parts of society. The culture of therapy is influenced by Western culture but is not synonymous with it. It is informed by what Taylor (1989) terms the *moral sources* of Western culture. But psychology reinterprets these moral sources and these reinterpretations in turn influence Western folk psychology. The psychoanalytic notion of defense, for example (which originally had roots in Judeo-Christian beliefs), is now part of American culture. There is thus a dialectical relationship between professional psychology and folk psychology, and there is a dialectical relationship for therapists between their professional theoretical commitments and their cultural orientation as shaped by their own family and socio-economic group. In a sense, all counseling, even when the counselor and client are of the same ethnicity or share other variables of diversity, is cross-cultural. Throw in a client from a widely different culture and it's a real mess. But however messy this situation is, it is inescapable.

Some examples of the complexity of the issues are provided by several Japanese graduate students who completed training in the United States. When we interviewed these students about their training experiences they independently raised questions about cross-cultural applicability of Murray

Bowen's notion of differentiation which plays an influential role in marriage and family therapy. Bowen defines *differentiation of self* as 'the difference between people in the proportion of life energy prone to be invested and bound in relationships' (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 68). Level of differentiation is passed down through family generations although the degree of emotional separation achieved may vary slightly in family members. A lower level of differentiation indicates that more energy is bound in a relationship such that togetherness needs are stronger and individuality is not as well-developed. In a relationship where two people are not well differentiated, more reactivity, emotionality and anxiety will be present. When a person is more highly differentiated, more of her energy is directed toward her own functioning.

Trying to achieve a higher level of differentiation or more solid (basic) self means increasing one's capacity for emotional detachment or neutrality. More detachment or neutrality depends on changes in thinking. Such changes are reflected in the ability to be in emotional contact with a difficult, emotionally charged problem and not feel compelled to preach about what others 'should' do, not rush in to 'fix' the problem, and not pretend to be detached by emotionally insulating oneself. Improving one's ability to contain these emotionally driven urges is contingent on developing a way of thinking that can counterbalance them (p. 108).

Differentiation is a compelling concept for many therapists. However, it appears to draw upon an individualistic moral vision that possibly limits its potential universal applicability. The Japanese students struggled with the notion of differentiation on a number of levels. One of them, Yoko, stated:

Originally I was confused about the concept. How can I assert who I am without offending anybody? Is that being selfish almost if I have high sense of differentiation, and say this is what I need, this is what I want you to do, this is my boundaries.

This confusion had a number of important implications for our students. Perhaps most significantly, it raised deep questions for the students about how to live their own lives. Yoko continued:

I still struggle with being differentiated, like pursuing my own dream and addressing my own needs. I want to stay in the US and pursue counseling but what about my parents? I'm sure my mom will get disappointed if I tell her I chose to stay in this country. But is it selfish to stay in the US? I feel guilty . . . How much is selfish? How much is respecting myself? It's confusing to me. It feels not right for me to just say 'this is my life.'

The perspective Yoko expresses draws attention to a different way of thinking about the person. For this Japanese student the dualistic Western

manner of dividing up psychological reality into subjects or objects, self and other, does not capture her folk psychology. She is literally pointing to a different conception of the self. Markus and Kitayama (1991) have called this the *interdependent* construal of the self which they define as 'seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings and actions of *others* in the relationship' (p. 227). As an example of an interdependent sense of self, Fajans (1985), in her fieldwork with the Baining in New Guinea, writes, 'the social actor is not a rigidly defined and delimited entity' for 'the boundaries of the individual and the definition of the person are neither permanent nor immutable, but alter and adapt in specific contexts' (p. 381). As Yoko describes it:

In this country, you have your needs, your dependence, your freedom, and others. Those two components, making me. In Japan there is a middle, a third part. My needs, and others' needs, like my family's needs, and this middle part is like combined. Something like I cannot neglect. This interdependent sense of self stands in contrast to *independent* construals of the self that are marked by relatively sharper contrasts between self and other. These different notions of what the self is inform any understanding of the demand that different needs have upon oneself. Indeed, in this case they shape the very understanding of whether the needs are mine or another's.

For Yoko, these needs in the middle or third part do not fit neatly into a dualistic framework of 'my' needs or 'their' needs. Failing to recognize this and the legitimacy of the middle, a Western counselor could easily pathologize Yoko's experience and disregard the serious claim that the middle has on her.

One of the implications of different senses of the self is the way they frame our understandings of emotions, as well as how emotions are experienced and expressed. A hub around which the practice of therapy revolves is the stance we should adopt towards our emotional life. In Western cultures, as Taylor (1989) and Foucault (see Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983) point out, the person is understood to be a being with interiority and depth. Western folk psychologies treat emotions as private and personal things that come from within, often deep within. Americans commonly discuss 'having' emotions, being the owner or possessor of them (cf. MacPherson, 1962). In contrast, much of emotional life in collectivist cultures focuses on other people. People in collectivist cultures are more likely to use external cues (such as the social setting) to interpret their emotional experience, rather than looking within as Westerners do. The focus of emotions is often interpersonal or intersubjective – people share in or participate in emotions, rather than 'having' them in an individualistic sense (Heine, Lehman,

Markus, and Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama, Markus, and Kurokawa, 2000). As Mesquita (2001) describes, 'Emotions in collectivist cultures are expected to stress and reproduce the self in relation to others or the self in relation to the world, whereas emotions in individualist cultures are assumed to underline and amplify a bounded, subjective self' (p. 68).

Yoko mentioned struggling with guilt around her desire to be more independent. In Japan she would use the word 'zai-aku-kan' which roughly translates as 'sin', 'bad', and 'feeling'.

It is a negative emotion. If I did not feel zai-aku-kan for leaving my family to live my own life, it would mean almost as if I did not care about my family at all. Considering all of the things they have done for me (it's called 'onn'), if I did not feel zai-aku-kan for excluding them from making decisions about the course of my life, it could mean I am selfish and I do not value a family bond. . . . If I feel zai-aku-kan, they will know immediately that I care about them, that I'm not being selfish. That they're included in my decision, so I'm connected with them.

Zai-aku-kan seems to carry a different connotation than guilt – it has more an interpersonal quality and function. It seems likely to us that most Western therapists would see her guilt as something negative to be overcome. From a Japanese perspective, however, Yoko's guilt would be appropriate. It is a testament to the fact that her sense of self is interdependent, intertwined with the hopes, aspirations, and desires of her family members. To not feel this sort of guilt would be seen as pathological – a kind of detached and disconnected attitude that would make her almost inhuman. Thus, feeling zai-aku-kan is a sign of virtue, a marker of the good person. From Yoko's standpoint, the worst possible situation would be to make a decision that goes against her family's wishes and then to not feel zai-aku-kan. A therapist working with her, or with clients with similar issues, who attempted to reduce the guilt or help her to differentiate from her family would be failing in an important way to understand her very sense of self. For Japanese clients, working toward integration and connectedness with their relationships and larger social system would be more congruent with their cultural values (Tamura and Lau, 1992).

DIALOGUE

Gadamer's (1975) notion of hermeneutic dialogue provides a framework for thinking about what occurs when cultures clash. Dialogue for Gadamer is the genuine attempt to understand and appreciate another cultural group based on what he termed a *fusion of horizons*. The metaphor of a horizon is used by Gadamer to stress the inherent limitations of human under-

standing. Because human knowledge is always interpretive and based on prejudgments or prejudices, it is also always perspectival, partial, and fallible, embedded within a historical community. Our understanding always occurs within a particular horizon. However, this horizon is never fixed. It is continually being formed in our ongoing interaction with our traditions as well as those of others.

The fusion of horizons that Gadamer advocates is not simply a well-intentioned effort to understand the other. It requires the development of a common framework of understanding of the situation in question. To achieve this shared outlook requires us to take the other's perspective seriously and grant it provisional authority to challenge our own views. Often this can be psychologically demanding as it requires us to temporarily bracket our former understanding of what life consists in and what is worth pursuing. However, dialogue does not mean that we need to embrace relativism. Instead, as Taylor (1992) observes, we necessarily come to a transformed set of standards 'that we could not possibly have had at the beginning. We have reached this judgment partly through transforming our standards' (p. 67).

The resolution of these cultural differences and the personal conflicts they engender will clearly not be an easy or straightforward process. However, we believe that recognizing the complexity of what is involved might help to provide some relief for those who are confronting different degrees of acculturative stress or culture shock. To realize that cultural differences often entail very different assumptions about the nature of the self as well as about the nature of the good person and good life can help to normalize the emotional stress that often arises. Through our sensitivity to these issues as therapists and supervisors we might be able to help normalize what can be a traumatizing transition by helping to engender a more compassionate outlook. In effect, we can model to clients and supervisees an attitude of 'Well, who wouldn't feel *x* when your whole sense of self is at stake.' In our opinion pursuing counseling training in a different culture is one of the most personally challenging tasks conceivable. Not only is learning the subtleties of a second language critical, but trainees must also come face to face with the different moral visions implicit within the culture of counseling. Our Japanese students have attested to how difficult this can be.

Some of the resolution of the issues our students brought to light may occur through a process of renegotiating the meaning of critical terms used in personal evaluation such as selfishness and respect. For Yoko, coming to a working definition of selfishness and respect will be a critical but conceivably lifelong process. Recognizing it as such and imbuing it with moral meaning instead of just experiencing her struggle as a personal shortcoming may be an essential aspect of finding inner peace. In other words, we are all living in a time of cultural change. Moral visions are being contested in every quarter. For those who are living bi-culturally these contested moral

visions are ever salient and they are inescapable. Helping people to realize that this is a concomitant part of globalization and intercultural contact can help to relieve the unnecessary suffering that can come from personalizing these issues.

Yoko described being trapped by her situation, having ‘no answer to it’. To some degree American culture and the therapies that uncritically build upon it may lack the resources to help Yoko cope with a situation that does not have readily apparent solutions. The emancipatory thrust of the American ethos emphasizes the elimination of suffering and even freedom from unhappiness, as is promised in much of the popular psychology literature. Some critics have referred to how this cultural outlook can result in a kind of tyranny of happiness (Held, 2002; 2004). Such a one-sided emphasis on emotional satisfaction and happiness tends to neglect, as Frank (1973) thoughtfully commented, other, more traditional, possibly worthwhile values or virtues such as ‘the redemptive power of suffering, acceptance of one’s lot in life, adherence to tradition, self-restraint and moderation’ (p. 7).

In Japan, Yoko described being socialized to tolerate difficult situations, situations where people might feel trapped. Instead of emphasizing liberation from pain and suffering, Japanese culture regards the ability to ‘hold the struggle’ as a sign of maturity (see also the distinction by Weisz, Rothbaum, & Blackburn (1984) between primary and secondary control). In this sense ‘bad’ feelings aren’t bad – they are a part of life. It is learning to live with bad feelings, unmet needs, unwanted constraints, and so on but to do with poise and dignity that sets off the virtuous or mature person. Yoko poignantly captured the point when she said in Japan, ‘childhood ends early’.

CONCLUSION

In the hermeneutic perspective on culture, moral visions are essential to and inescapable in human living. Hermeneutics emphasizes that individuals are far more thoroughly embedded in and shaped by culture than is ordinarily recognized. If we are not aware that our perspective is limited by the horizon of our own moral visions, the other’s outlook and behavior can appear pathological, mistaken, distorted, or even evil to us. It is only through the willingness to have our own cultural ‘givens’ questioned through dialogue that cultural differences can be bridged and we can avoid being ‘culturally encapsulated’ (Pedersen, 1991).

Cross-cultural contact offers us one of the best and most profound opportunities to reflect on what we take for granted. Intercultural dialogue will not result in wholesale changes or accommodations in either cultural viewpoint. One’s way of life is prior to self-consciousness and it is not easy

to alter cherished beliefs and deeply ingrained social practices. However, the mutuality of genuine dialogue can allow an authentic interplay of cultural values that allows participants to reflect on, affirm, and at times, revise their understanding of who and what we are and how we should live. There is great potential for personal and cultural advancement in such endeavors, but we can only find out how much there is to gain by putting our values and assumptions at risk in the play of ideas.

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