

CULTURE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY: TOWARD A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

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Despite the growing awareness of cultural differences and the challenges of multicultural counseling, critics have noted that understandings of culture within psychology remain largely cursory. Philosophical hermeneutics help to remedy this situation by offering a comprehensive theory of culture that (a) details how the self is embedded in culture, (b) highlights culture's inherently moral nature, and (c) shows how cultural conflict can be mediated through dialogue. Hermeneutics provides a means of thinking interpretively about cultural meanings and discerning their specific manifestations. It can be utilized by psychotherapists not only to help understand clients from different cultural backgrounds but also to better recognize how the dominant Western cultural outlook—individualism—influences psychotherapy theory, research, and practice.

Multiculturalism has helped us begin to address questions regarding the appropriateness of traditional theories and practices of Western psychotherapy for minority group members, immigrants, and non-Western societies. However, as Jackson and Meadows (1991) noted, addressing and working with cultural differences is complicated be-

cause, "Culture is a vague and elusive concept most individuals seldom explain or consciously think about and evaluate." And yet, it is "imperative," they add, that "counselors engaged in multicultural counseling have an understanding of what is meant by culture" (p. 72). While definitions of culture are provided in much of the cross-cultural and multicultural literature, these definitions are often brief (as little as a sentence or a paragraph) and tend to lack substantive value (Christopher & Fowers, 1996; Jahoda, 2000; Ratner, 2000). The result may be that psychology has responded to diversity with what Sampson (1993) regards as little more than add-on eclectic strategies. Seeley (2000), following Devereaux (1958) argued 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). But more than just needing a comprehensive understanding of the nature of culture and its relationship to the self, psychotherapists must be able to think culturally. As Maruyama (1992) pointed out, psychology has tended to lack the cognitive structures that would allow us to think contextually when we encounter diversity. Strangely, in attempting to understand and work with culture, psychologists have remained largely indifferent to resources in cultural anthropology, including the wealth of theory and research contributed by psychological anthropologists and ethnopsychologists.

The intent of this article is to support and strengthen multicultural aims in psychotherapy by advancing a hermeneutic account of culture. Philosophical hermeneutics provides both a model of culture and how it impacts the self and also a means of thinking interpretively about cultural meanings and discerning their specific manifestations. Hermeneutics can enhance our understanding of how we as therapists are shaped by culture and how much of psychological theory,

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research, and practice is influenced by our dominant cultural outlook, individualism. It also provides a framework for thinking about the world of our clients and how culture permeates every dimension of this world. This can help us not just intellectually know that others may have a nonindividualistic outlook but also give us the ability to discern the impact of these outlooks on the structure of their personalities, families, and lives.

The term hermeneutics originates in the Greek word for interpretation and is related to Hermes, god of communication, who ferried messages between the gods and humans. Hermeneutics initially referred to the theory and method of interpretation and emerged during the Protestant Reformation as a means of interpreting the Bible. At the turn of the eighteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher extended hermeneutics to establish a general interpretive methodology for uncovering the original intent of all forms of human communication, not just written texts. This version of hermeneutics, sometimes called *romantic hermeneutics* (Palmer, 1969; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999) currently influences qualitative research methods (Benner, 1994; Fischer, 1980; Michrina & Richards, 1996; Packer & Addison, 1989; Ratner, 1997; Rennie, 1999; Tappan, 1997; Van Manen, 1990), theories of epistemology and clinical interpretation in psychodynamic therapies (Barclay, 1992; Bouchard & Guerette, 1991; Chessick, 1990; Eagle, 1986; Gentile, 1998; Schafer, 1976; Spence, 1982, 1993), and narrative approaches to psychotherapy (Frank, 1987; McNamee, 1996; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Schafer, 1993). The most recent turn in hermeneutic thought, *philosophical* or *ontological hermeneutics*, was ushered in by Martin Heidegger's work in the 1920s. Philosophical hermeneutics, which goes beyond methodology to consider broader ontological questions about the nature of human beings, has been largely untapped within psychology except for a few notable exceptions (Messer, Sass, & Woolfolk, 1988; Richardson et al., 1999; Woolfolk, 1998).

In this article, I outline a hermeneutic model of the self and its relationship to culture based on an integration of the now classic hermeneutic work of philosophers Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Charles Taylor, and the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. I begin by first summarizing a hermeneutic theory of culture.

Next, I examine how the reigning Western understanding of the person, ontological individualism, makes it especially difficult to grasp how thoroughly we are shaped by culture. I then turn to Heidegger's notion of "being-in-the-world" as an alternative non-Cartesian ontology of the human agent that complements an interpretive view of culture. I also address Taylor's claim that culture is a moral framework that orients us to the good. I then explore how the hermeneutic notion of dialogue can provide a framework for engaging with those from different cultural backgrounds. Finally, I apply these concepts to a cross-cultural case study.

A Model of Culture

Culture as Webs of Significance

From a hermeneutic point of view, culture is constituted by those shared meanings that make social life possible. These shared meanings function as a background set of assumptions and values that structure our existence and orient us through the events of our lives (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Geertz, 1973, 1983). From this perspective, human life is not conceivable without culture, because it provides the common understandings that allows the social world (and to some extent the physical world) to have some sense for us. Culture supplies meaning and structure that is 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 culture, we would live in William James's proverbial "bloomin', buzzin', confusion." Every culture provides some understanding of human nature and what it means to be a person. By doing so, cultures are collective achievements that orient us to life. In Geertz's view (1973) this occurs because culture is composed of "webs of significance" that permeate our social functioning and give meaning and coherence to our daily lives.

To better understand the significance of significance as Geertz used it, it is helpful to turn to the hermeneutic philosopher Heidegger. Heidegger (1962) used the word *signification* to describe our most basic way of existing. According to Heidegger, the most fundamental aspects of our agency, what he called being-in-the-world, presuppose care, concern, and signification. In other words, our behaviors, thoughts, and feelings are underwritten by deep assumptions con-

cerning what is real, important, and valuable. Culture, then, can be thought of not only as webs of significance but also as webs of care. By care he does not mean simply a type of empathic emotional response. Instead, care refers to what we value, what we attend to in life, what we give our time and energy to, the aspects of reality that we focus upon. Our actions, as well as the time we spend on things, manifest what we consider valuable or worthy. The possibilities of cultural expression, of how we live our lives whether it be as dwellers of rain forests or of skyscrapers, are infinite. The particular way in which any culture expresses itself, the way we have collectively fashioned and constructed reality, reveals what we care about. Similarly, our behavior reflects values, or better yet, is embodied values.

The structure of significance, care, and meaning that cultures provide permeates all social practices and institutions. Consider a fast-food restaurant such as a McDonald's. The institution of McDonald's cannot be fully understood except with reference to culture: the organization of a McDonald's, its architecture, its restrictive physical seating, and its menu all make sense only as a product of culture (cf. Ritzer, 1996). For instance, McDonald's embodies our cultural values and presuppositions that time is equal to money, that time and wealth are commodities, and that the more time and money we have the better. Indeed the design of the chairs and tables prevent people from socializing or lingering at any great length, moving them back out into the productive work world as soon as possible (and incidentally freeing up seats for new customers).

If we take this example a step further we can see through cross-cultural comparison that the particular importance we place upon time and money is a key aspect of contemporary Western culture. In India, for instance, time does not tend to have the pressing, urgent, fleeting quality that it does in the West. In part, this is because of the traditional Hindu worldview in which time is conceptualized cyclically instead of linearly. Hindu cosmology, as narrated in the Upanishads, sees the entire universe engaging in cycles or yugas lasting millions of millions of years (Campbell, 1962; O'Flaherty, 1975; Zimmer, 1951). Just as the individual soul is governed by the principle of the transmigration of souls, reincarnating after each cycle of life and death, so too does the entire universe engage in these cycles of life, death, and rebirth.

Because these cycles of the universe are so vast, and because the individual soul is reincarnated time after time, many Hindus consider the phenomenal world of everyday life to be "maya." Usually, the term maya is translated as illusion, thus suggesting that our everyday life is mere illusion when looked at from this larger perspective. However, maya is also associated with the term lila meaning play, sport or drama. Life is, from this viewpoint, a large cosmic play or dance or drama and because life is so eternal and goes through so many changes, it takes on a playful, almost comic quality. Although such a perspective may be difficult to maintain at times, the ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies of our daily lives should not be taken too seriously since they are all a mere speck of dust in the history of the universe. From such a Hindu viewpoint, time and money clearly have a different significance and moral weight than they do in contemporary Western culture where they are treated as commodities.

Ontological Individualism: An Impediment to Recognizing Culture's Influence

Individualism in the United States tends to regard itself as a scientific, rational, or even common sense self-understanding instead of as one self-interpretation among a myriad of others. By portraying the individual and culture as distinct and separable from each other, ontological individualism makes it particularly difficult for us to grasp how we are shaped by culture. Ontological individualism relies upon an atomistic understanding of the person as metaphysically separate from others, society, and nature (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Dumont, 1986; Lukes, 1973). As Richardson et al. (1999) described it, "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). Taylor (1975, 1989) thoroughly documented how this individualism with its emphasis on autonomy and self-responsibility gradually evolved through many centuries of Western history (cf. Baumeister, 1986, 1987; Cushman, 1995). Accompanying the birth of this "self-defining subject" (Taylor, 1975), came a new view of the universe as *disenchanted*—a brute physical domain of discrete objects open to free and objective scientific investigation. The

preceding belief in an ordered and inherently meaningful cosmos in which the individual had a defined place and role gave way, over the last three or four centuries to a sharp split between external objects and subjective experience. This division was meant to liberate both scientific inquiry and the individual from what came to be experienced as the excesses and oppressiveness of church, state, and society. It encouraged the development of a view of humans as separate, autonomous, self-motivated agents living in an indifferent universe. The dominant contemporary American understanding of personhood sees culture as external to the individual, worries that its influence or authority will somehow diminish the individual's autonomy, and insists on individual self-sufficiency, dignity, and rights to prevent this.

Arguably, individualism is what Bernstein (1978) referred to as the "disguised ideology" of the social sciences in the United States. One source of evidence for this claim comes from what Geertz (1973) identified as the "stratigraphic" concepts of the human being that dominate the social sciences. Stratigraphic approaches portray human existence as a set of onionlike concentric circles, each layer of which is complete and irreducible in itself (Geertz, 1973). The innermost circle is biological, which is encircled successively by the psychological, social, and cultural domains. As Geertz put 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.

Geertz (1973) critiqued the presupposition of these stratigraphic approaches that it is possible to understand the human being stripped of "the trappings of culture." He pointed out that culture permeates human existence so thoroughly that the attempt to separate individuals and culture is incoherent and distorts our understanding of human nature. Moreover, such stratigraphic views of human nature are culturally informed, because they embody and reinforce the individualistic outlook on the self that is characteristic of Western cul-

ture. Within such an individualistic outlook, a person is seen as having a preexisting core that is prior to social and cultural considerations. Geertz helps us to appreciate the irony of discounting the influence of culture that follows from the cultural imperatives of the individualism.

Being-in-the-World: A Culture-Friendly Ontology

The hermeneutic view of culture is well complemented by Heidegger's work on the ontology of the self. In the West, we tend to think of ourselves as separate, autonomous, self-motivated agents set over and against the world of discrete objects. Heidegger (1962) believed such an individualistic self-understanding, exemplified by the type of "I" presupposed in Descartes's *cogito*, is mistaken. In his analysis, this understanding of the human being substitutes a derivative form of being that is a cultural (and I would add developmental) achievement for our most basic or primordial way of being. According to Heidegger, our most primordial self is engaged in the world doing something, or being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962; cf. Bickhard & Christopher, 1994; Campbell & Bickhard, 1986; Campbell & Christopher, 1996).

This way of being-in-the-world is prior to the creation of sharp subject-object boundaries. Heidegger (1962) used the example of the workshop to make the point. If we are hammering we do not really consider the hammer as an object, in an objective sense. Rather, we treat the tool as a continuation of ourselves, not as a separate object. Objects in our world are not primarily a collection of things that we are set over and against, but extensions of ourselves. Indeed, we only come to notice the hammer qua object when it is inappropriate for the job at hand (i.e., too heavy or the wrong type). Moreover, when we are fully engaged in activities, our subjectivity or I-ness recedes into the background; it is the project or goal that stands out while our awareness of self becomes subsumed into the current task. Driving a car is another example. Most of the time we drive without giving conscious thought to all of the various tasks that we are performing. It is only when we do not function seamlessly with objects (or ourselves) that they become problematic for us, that we stop, direct our perception towards them, and "create" them as objects. The importance of this is that we are, in Heidegger's (1962) view, "proximally and for the most part"

engaged with and interacting with the world in a way in which there is no clear self-object or mind-body distinction (p. 37).

We tend to identify with the I, the reflective, conscious, thinking part of us, but this is not primary. Far before we develop our sense of I we are, to use Bruner's (1990) phrase, "expressions of culture." As a child we learn how to interact with others and participate in social practices and institutions. We learn, for instance, how to go to McDonald's, and what is expected of the various participants and actors when we get there. As being-in-the-world we are thrown into cultural practices—actions and behaviors whose significance has largely already been provided by culture. We are born into a drama with cadences and rhythms that were wholly formed before we arrived, and which shapes and defines us before we can 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" (1962, p. 296). Yet through our participation in this story, we perpetuate, and at the same time, reinterpret it. For example, when we go to McDonald's and we order and eat a meal, we participate in and reinforce cultural themes such as "time is equal to money."

This means that we are always already committed to a way of life before we have consciously differentiated a world of self and objects. However, even after we have developed a world of selves and objects, the bulk of our existence is still lived in a world prior to subject and object. We remain, for the most part, expressions of culture even after the development of the I. Consequently, most of what we do is outside of our awareness. As Heidegger (1962) put it,

Ontically, of course, Dasein is not only close to us—even that which is closest: we *are* it, each of us, we ourselves. In spite of this, or rather for just this reason, it is ontologically that which is farthest. (p. 36)

With cognitive maturation, we can, through the process of reflective abstraction (Bickhard & Christopher, 1994; Campbell & Bickhard, 1986; Campbell & Christopher, 1996), develop consciousness of portions of the cultural patterns in which we participate. 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).

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). It is true that 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 culture provides. According to Taylor, our own individual uniqueness consists largely of variations on important cultural themes and aspirations (Taylor, 1989; cf. Sugarman & Martin, 1995). Parenthetically, the very wish to really separate oneself from one's culture is a uniquely modern, individualistic phenomenon. I turn now to examine how culture provides an understanding of the self.

Culture as Folk Psychology

Every culture relies upon certain presuppositions about the nature of the human being. To have some understanding of human nature, the nature of the person, and the nature of the self would seem to be a universal requirement of living, what Geertz called a "pervasive orientational necessity" (1973, p. 363). For the sake of analysis we can think of the aspect of culture that is concerned with the nature of the self and with what contemporary Westerners would call psychological issues as *folk psychology*. Bruner (1990) defined a folk psychology as

a set of more or less connected, more or less normative descriptions about how human beings 'tick,' what our own and other minds are like, what one can expect situated actions to be like, what are possible modes of life, how one commits oneself to them, and so on. (p. 35)

A folk psychology is the popular, often implicit, understanding of such things as motivation, emotion, psychopathology, and the self. It draws upon both the culture's worldview and its ethos.

Worldview and ethos are, according to Geertz, two different aspects of culture. The worldview is the more cognitive aspect of culture that describes reality. It tells us what is involved in our reality, what reality consists of, what it is composed of, how it works. Our worldview provides our common understanding of causation: why things interact or operate as they do. It tells us about forces, entities, objects, levels of existence, and so on.

A culture's worldview establishes what a person is. It determines what constitutes a person, what a person's resources and faculties are, where the boundaries of the person are. In philosophical terms, the worldview shapes the reigning ontology of the person.

Ethos, in contrast, is the affective, aesthetic, and moral component of human existence. As Geertz put 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" (Geertz, 1973, p. 127). Ethos contributes to an understanding of what a person should be or become. Ethos provides the ethical dimension, the assumptions about how a person ought to behave, interact, think, and feel. Moreover, ethos guides our understanding of how a person should grow, develop, and mature. Ethos suggests or, at times, dictates what we should do with our capacities and faculties. It defines the direction in which such growth and development should proceed. Within philosophy, ethos corresponds to those questions concerning the nature of *euzen*, the good life.

We can summarize this by stating that folk psychologies, by drawing on both worldview and ethos, contain not only an account of what a person is but what a person should be. Or as Bruner noted, a folk psychology "summarizes not simply how things are but (often implicitly) how they should be" (1990, pp. 39–40). One implication of this view is that just as worldview and ethos are always intertwined within the webs of meaning and significance that make up culture, so do they intertwine in our understandings of human nature and of our own identity. This means that the moral or ethical is entailed by our understanding of the self. Taylor (1989) went so far as to argue that "Selfhood and the good, or in another way selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes" (p. 3). One way to think further about the relationship of the psychological and the moral is to view folk psychologies, and culture, as based on moral visions.

Moral Visions

I use the term *moral visions* to refer to the constellations of cultural values and assumptions that constitute our understanding of the nature of the person and of the good life. The term moral vision attempts to recapture the centrality of the moral, ethical, value-related dimension of our ex-

istence. Bluntly put, moral visions establish our sense of what the self is and what the self should be. Implicitly or explicitly, moral visions inform us about what is deemed higher, deeper, or more worthy—that which gives us strength, integration, wholeness, vitality, dignity, and goodness—and directs us in how we can embody these ideals (Taylor, 1989). Conversely, our moral visions define what we should avoid, resist, or oppose, both internally and externally. Moral, in this sense, does not mean simply what is seen as right or wrong, but our deepest understanding of what is good, worthy, and desirable (Brinton, 1987). For example, the good or ideal person in Anglo-American society is frequently characterized as rational, autonomous, and authentic, and as a result it is important to avoid irrationality, dependency, and inauthenticity. In contrast, the defining characteristic of the ideal person in Confucian Chinese society has been *filial piety*—being a dutiful son or daughter—and disrespect for one's elders is anathema. Moral vision, by blending issues of ontology and ethics, is a way of talking about human reality that moves away from the modern Western predilection to sharply dichotomize fact and value.

Taylor (1989) has referred to the moral visions held by cultural groups as *inescapable moral frameworks* that orient us to what is worthy and provide direction in approaching those ideals. These frameworks are seen as inescapable because they form a *moral topography* or moral space within which our identities take shape and our aims and ideals are intelligible (Taylor, 1987). Even such apparently amoral or antisocial individuals as gang members can be shown to be animated by moral visions and a sense of the good person and the good life (Christopher, 1996; Schmitz & Christopher, 1997).

The spatial metaphor is important for Taylor because he argues that our relative position in this moral space allows us to orient ourselves to the good within our way of life. We learn to love the goods at the heart of our moral vision and see them with admiration and awe, all of which empowers us to try to embody them. We can see the direction we must pursue in order to more closely approach the good life, and we can discern how far we are from it. Our relative position in this moral space helps to define our identity because, in Taylor's view, identity is based on one's sense of location in one or more moral visions.

To help us get in touch with the moral sources in our cultural frameworks of meaning, Taylor utilizes a *via negativa*—using an example of what something is not to help make clear what it is. He does this by suggesting we all have a sense of what it means to feel “out-of-joint.” Taylor (1987) writes:

This is conceptually expressed in a host of ways: as being lost, or condemned, or exiled, or unintegrated, or without meaning, or insubstantial, or empty, to name some categories. Corresponding to each of these descriptions of breakdown is some notion of what it would be to overcome it, to have integration, or full being, to be justified, or found, or whatever. But more, there is a notion of ‘where’ this integration, fullness, etc., might come from, what might bring it about. . . . In other words, these different, often indefinite and tentative sense of what integration consists of incorporate notions of where it might be found, in the sense of where the strength lies, where the sources or resources are situated, which could bring integration, or fullness about. (pp. 300–302)

Taylor focuses primarily upon explicating the moral sources of Western culture. However this framework assists us to see that different cultures have not only different understandings of what the person or self is (Shweder & Bourne, 1984) but also different understandings of the good or ideal person. One way to think about this is that the coordinates of the moral topographies in which the self is situated are marked out by different goods that vary across cultures.

Cultures and Moral Visions

Part of what it means for us to be enculturated is that we adopt the values and meanings of our culture. Within our Western worldview we tend to think of values and meanings as subjective possessions that we take up and leave behind as they suit us. In a sense, we assume the self precedes not only culture, but also values. Our common ways of speaking reveal this: we talk of having values, not of being values. This in turn implicates the fact-value dualism of Western culture. Values and culture are, to invoke Descartes’s language, *res cogitans*, things of the mind that are not of the same level of certainty, and hence do not have the same epistemological and metaphysical status as *res extensa*, physical objects (note: the current rankings of certainty are the opposite of Descartes’s own). 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” (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 cannot 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 (1962, p. 37). Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987) captured how these values and assumptions are implicitly communicated through our social interactions:

[M]orally relevant interpretations of events by local guardians of the moral order (e.g., parents) are typically presented and conveyed to young children in the context of routine family life and social practices. Those moral premises are carried by the messages and meanings implicit in the emotional reactions of others (anger or disappointment or “hurt feelings” over a transgression). They are carried by the verbal exchanges—commands, threats, sanction statements, accusations, explanations, justifications, excuses—necessary to maintain routine social practices.” (p. 73)

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) saw that assumptions as central to the human condition, for as he put it, “in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (p. 32). These are moral or ethical questions, because they help to define what is worthy or desirable in living. Although final or certain answers to these defining questions about the good do not appear to be possible, the one thing we can be sure of is that we live some answer all the time, at every moment (Sandel, 1984). This can be seen most clearly in the question of identity (Taylor, 1989). The answer to the question “who am I?” must include some understanding of what is of crucial importance to the individual, of what is indispensable to one’s identity. Cultures provide the range of answers to the question of identity and what matters in living.

The predominant moral vision of American culture is a certain kind of multifaceted individualism (Bellah et al., 1985; Sampson, 1988). Individualism prescribes, for Americans, not only what the self is but what the self should be or become. Numerous authors have documented the

ways in which individualism permeates psychology (Christopher, 1992, 1999; Christopher, Christopher, & Dunnagan, 2000; Cirillo & Wapner, 1986; Cleary, 1999; Cushman, 1991, 1995; Fowers & Richardson, 1993, 1996; Frank, 1978; Greenberg, 1994; Kirschner, 1996; Lambeth, 1995; Richardson, 1989; Richardson & Guignon, 1988; Roland, 1996; Rubin, 1997; Sampson, 1977, 1988, 2000; Spence, 1985; Sue & Sue, 1990; Sullivan, 1986; Taylor, 1985; Waterman, 1981, 1984; Wolszon, 1998; Woolfolk & Richardson, 1984).

In contrast, non-Western cultures are usually shaped by a variant of what cross-cultural psychologists now refer to as collectivism (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Kim, Triandis, Kagitçibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994; Triandis, 1995). Collectivist cultures are characterized by moral visions that frequently have interdependent views of the self (Geertz, 1973; Moore, 1968; Munro, 1969). For instance, whereas individualistic moral visions stress independence, separation, and turning inward to discover the true inner self, collectivistic moral visions stress harmony with others and finding one's proper role within the extended family and the social order (Hui, 1984, 1988; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Kim et al., 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Terms such as *individualism* and *collectivism*, while useful for making broad generalizations, also carry risks because of the wide variety of cultural groups and outlooks that are collapsed into these two cultural types.

Moral visions are never univocal and generally have a number of elements that do not easily mesh together to form a single perspective on the good life. This is particularly true in modern, pluralistic societies. For example, there is no single version of individualism. Bellah and his colleagues identify four main strands of individualism in American culture with the two predominant ones being utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 1985). They see utilitarian individualism as linked to the instrumental spirit originating in the sixteenth-century Enlightenment and later personified through the figure of Benjamin Franklin and his advocacy of rationality, efficiency, self-initiative, and self-interest. The essence of utilitarian individualism is that it "takes as given certain basic human appetites and fears and sees human life as an effort by individuals to maximize their self-interest relative to their given ends" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 336). Expressive

individualism, on the other hand, emphasizes the individual's artistic and creative potential and is epitomized by Walt Whitman. Drawing on the Romantic reaction to temperament of the Enlightenment, expressive individualism regards the good life as one "rich in experience, open to all kinds of people, luxuriating in the sensual as well as the intellectual, above all a life of strong feeling" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 34). "Each person," in this variant of individualism, "has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 333). Bellah et al. noted that that dual emphasis on utilitarian and expressive individualisms in the United States constitutes an uneasy alliance. For instance, we are likely to adopt the mantle of utilitarian individualism while in the world of work and then to try to discover the expressive self in the privacy of our home and family life (see also Taylor, 1985). In the contemporary United States, there is no one framework of meaning that commands loyalty from the entire society. All of our conceptions of the good are contested. Nevertheless, adopting some framework is necessary for identity development and maintenance.

Multiculturalism and Intercultural Contact

All cultures take a stand on the question of what it means to be human and what counts as a good life. If we take the claims of these moral visions seriously, we are often faced with apparently irreconcilable and incommensurable differences across cultures. The evident impossibility of establishing an ultimate perspective from which cultures could be observed, described, and evaluated implies that assertions about human living are all culture bound and therefore cannot have any truth or validity outside of the culture in which they originate. If we acknowledge that there is no God's eye or Archimedean standpoint, we seem to be forced to see truth as radically relative (Bernstein, 1983).

Yet we do not typically experience our lives as relative. Our everyday experience confirms the insights of Heidegger, Geertz, and Taylor that as human beings we care deeply about our form of life, are compelled by its social practices, and are constituted by its shared meanings. As Americans, for instance, we generally take for granted the truth and validity of our ideals of individual autonomy, authenticity, tolerance, and individual rights. What often gets missed during intercul-

tural contact is that members of other cultures see their own ideals and moral visions as intuitively obvious as well. When the way of life of the Other is seen as inferior we are often misunderstanding and rejecting what the other culture takes to be a worthy way to live. In other words, it is a serious rejection of the truth claims inherent in that culture's moral vision. There are certainly times when our considered opinion would dictate that we must disagree with some specific aspects of another culture, but we first need to recognize them as legitimate claims to truth. Gadamer's (1975) notion of dialogue provides a means of taking this crucial first step to bridge cultural differences.

Gadamerian Dialogue

In Gadamer's view dialogue 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 understanding. As he saw it human knowledge is always based on prejudgments or prejudices and is always perspectival, partial, and fallible, embedded within a historical community. As a result our understanding always occurs within a particular horizon, which is the range of vision that includes "everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point . . ." (1975, p. 269). This horizon is never fixed, but is continually being formed in our ongoing dialogue with our traditions and with other forms of life. The closed horizon is thus an abstraction because the horizon is actually something into which we continually move and that moves with us. At the same time, our particular vantage point is the only possible basis for our judgments, perceptions, and actions. Thus, as Gadamer saw it, being limited to a particular point of view is not just a mark of our incompleteness, but a condition of our humanity.

The fusion of horizons that Gadamer advocated goes well beyond the simple effort to understand the Other and requires the development of a common understanding and a shared language of the situation under consideration. This means that we take the other's perspective seriously, as having potentially valid and important things to say to us. Thus, openness goes beyond respectful tolerance and grants the other perspective provisional authority to challenge our own views. Developing a shared outlook means that our former under-

standing of what life consists in and what is worth pursuing may become but one possibility among others. Genuinely and openly engaging in this exploration does not mean we reject the idea of standards or ideals in a relativistic manner. Rather, 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" (Taylor, 1992, p. 67).

This alteration in our views can occur in several ways. We may find that some aspects of another culture serve to complement or enhance our own way of life. Or we may discover some elements in another way of life that can help us to reinvigorate or reclaim certain parts of our traditions that have been neglected or distorted. It is also possible that this dialogue might illuminate certain areas of incompleteness or incoherence in our form of life that we had not seen before. A response to this sort of lacunae in our practices and self-understandings may be directly informed by this cultural contact. We may find that incorporating some components of another form of life may be seen as a clear gain in the quality or effectiveness of our own culture. Such intercultural dialogue is understood as mutual and ongoing and extends beyond verbal conversation to commerce, arts, and entertainment.

However, the initial openness of the dialogic process must be tempered by a complementary process Gadamer (1975) termed *application*. Application involves a critical testing of the knowledge gained through openness to see if it really offers us a better way to make sense of our situation. The rigorous application of our newfound understandings to our own concrete situation helps us to decide which of these insights to retain and which to set aside. The application of what we learn from the other will always be modified by our own concrete circumstances and historical background rather than by being ingested whole. Yet continued openness can help to counteract the tendency to be too narrow in our application. Having provided an overview of how philosophical hermeneutics can be helpful in understanding and approaching cultural differences, I attempt in the last section of this article to ground some of these ideas through a case study.

Clinical Application

Working with clients from other cultural backgrounds provides continual opportunities to be-

come aware of not only how we are influenced by moral visions but also how they shape the therapy process. Assessment, diagnosis, treatment goals, interventions, and concepts of mental health and illness, as well as underlying theories of personality and development, are all influenced by culture—more specifically, by presuppositions about the nature of the person and the good life (Christopher, 1996, 1999; Christopher et al., 2000). The process of psychotherapy entails an encounter among a number of moral visions—that of the field, of a particular theoretical orientation, of the therapist, and of the client. The hermeneutic perspective developed in this article provides opportunities to reflect on what is at stake in these encounters. Moreover, it also helps to take into account what can vary as a result of culture and how these specific cultural differences are manifested or expressed.

An East Asian international student who went by the name Simon came to the university counseling center after a year of being in the United States. He indicated that he had difficulty interacting with others, had low self-esteem, could not concentrate in his studies, and as a result his grades were slipping. Simon declared that he wanted to be able to be more assertive in his interactions with others. He compared himself unfavorably with others, especially his American roommates, and believed he needed to be more like them instead of being plagued with self-doubt. Simon described himself as lonely. He did not feel connected to his American classmates but at the same time did not want to socialize with international students from his homeland because he thought they were too conservative by not being modern or open to new ideas.

How as therapists are we to view Simon's struggle to be more assertive? Do we accept Simon's struggle at face value and work with him on assertiveness? If so, do we do so because we view assertiveness as an unquestionable good, something that all people see as desirable? Or do we accept his goal of assertiveness because the role of the therapist is to remain objective and neutral, facilitating the client's goals without imposing our own?

On the other hand, assertiveness might also be seen as a problematic goal if we have been exposed to any number of the stage models of ethnic minority development that are common in the multicultural counseling literature. For instance, such stage models of identity development main-

tain that many minority ethnic groups begin at a "conformity stage" (Sue & Sue, 1990) or a "passive-acceptance stage" (Jackson, 1975) in which they identify with and prefer the values and lifestyle of the dominant culture. Development in these models should lead to a stage of integrative awareness or internalization in which the ethnic minority member achieves a positive self-image and sees that each culture has its desirable and undesirable attributes. Simon's low self-esteem and desire to be assertive, considered from the outlook of these models, might be seen as evidence of an attempt to appropriate the dominant culture and dismiss or denigrate the value of his indigenous culture.

Multicultural as well as postmodern theorists have sensitized us to the ways ideological influences shape the therapy process, including its goals and objectives. Assertiveness, from these perspectives, cannot be assumed to be a universally endorsed trait or collection of behaviors. Rather, it is a particular value accompanying a particular construction of the self that has emerged in Western cultural history in response to specific historical circumstances. While assertiveness is frequently assumed by Western therapists to be a constitutive component of mental health and well-being, is also related to both utilitarian and expressive individualism. With utilitarian individualism assertiveness provides the method by which individuals can most effectively or efficiently try to have their needs met. In expressive individualism, the process of expressing or manifesting our inner thoughts and feelings is itself viewed as a desirable goal that is partially accomplished by asserting ourselves. If assertiveness is so rooted in the moral visions of modern Western culture, then uncritically teaching non-Western ethnic minority members assertiveness potentially becomes a form of cultural imperialism or what cross-cultural psychologists term an "imposed etc." Therapists influenced by this line of thought may find themselves uncomfortable teaching a non-Western client like Simon to become "Western" or adopt Western behavioral responses.

From the hermeneutic outlook developed in this article each of these potential responses and their underlying rationales entails a moral vision. There is no objective or neutral position from which to respond to Simon (cf. Christopher, 1996; Richardson et al., 1999). For instance, while models of ethnic minority identity develop-

ment help delineate the challenges and issues such clients may face, they also posit an end-state that may itself be somewhat culturally circumscribed. The final stages in these models often revolve around respect, openness, and tolerance for cultural differences; while these values are arguably very important, especially to democratic societies, they are not universal values, as many fundamentalist groups, both Western and non-Western, make abundantly clear (Fowers & Richardson, 1994).

I confess that initially this case placed me in a difficult position with respect to my own values. Having spent a number of years critiquing Western culture and learning about the moral visions of non-Western traditions, my tendency was to focus on the limitations of assertiveness and the individualism it manifests and supports. Moreover, I was troubled to see someone from a cultural tradition as rich as Simon's almost eager to forsake this heritage to become Western. While conscious of the problems associated with romanticizing the Other (Said, 1978), I nonetheless felt a sense of reservation about helping Simon with his stated goals.

Using the moral visions framework developed in this article I attempted to engage Simon in dialogue to understand why it was important for him to be assertive as well as to reflect on the cultural significance of assertiveness in both his local culture and in the United States. I did this in part by helping him to consider assertiveness as a moral stance entailing a particular interpretation of the good life. In the process of jointly questioning the meaning of assertiveness, a major shift occurred for Simon with the insight that he had good reasons for his struggles and self-doubt. Realizing that not only had family-of-origin issues made being social and assertive challenging for him, but also that he was facing acculturation issues complicated by a language barrier, he began to "cut himself some slack." He came to appreciate the difficulty entailed for an introverted Asian student to feel fully integrated into American college life at a rural Western university in which diversity is relatively rare, largely ignored, and generally undervalued. In short, he allowed himself to struggle and began tentatively to believe that perhaps it was okay to make mistakes while learning about interpersonal relationships. Reducing some of the iterative levels of stress and pressure that weighed on his social and academic performance resulted in striking improvements:

his concentration markedly improved, he changed his major to a field that represented a compromise between his interests and his family needs, and he reported feeling considerably better about himself and his life.

By the end of our time-limited course of therapy, Simon reassessed the value of assertiveness. As he gained acceptance and understanding for himself, the importance he attached to assertiveness diminished. In a sense assertiveness was an idealized solution to the initially unacceptable and intolerable struggle of acculturation. Upon grasping the enormity of the task of acculturation, he ceased blaming himself for being in the midst of the struggle, and subsequently the need to escape it via assertiveness became less compelling. Nonetheless, Simon came to the decision that he did want to learn more about being assertive. He framed assertiveness as an important skill to have while living in America. Yet he also recognized its limitations at both social and personal levels. For instance, he observed that despite our assertiveness, many Americans struggle with loneliness, isolation, and a sense of emptiness in ways that are rare in his own culture. And at a personal level, he discovered that while assertiveness is useful in some situations, he did not need to become an "assertive person" but rather a person who could be assertive at certain times.

My own initial discomfort and uncertainty was also transformed. I came to see that my own initial knee-jerk reaction against assertiveness presupposed an individualistic background of meanings that Simon did not have. Simon wanted to be assertive as a way of accomplishing such interdependent or collectivistic goals as belonging and connection. It was for him less about a way of instrumentally getting his needs met, or about expressing his inner self, than it might have been for someone with a more individualistic outlook and sense of self. By engaging in hermeneutic dialogue, my understanding of assertiveness evolved. While maintaining a critical awareness of how assertiveness could perpetuate an isolating and self-serving individualism, I discovered by being open to Simon's experience that assertiveness was not some monolithic entity that exists independently of its context, that it could be, as in Simon's case, employed in the service of an interdependent self. This discovery reinforced both the importance of an interpretive perspective on culture and cultural differences and also Devereaux's reminder to attend to the "general char-

acteristics, categories, and functions of culture per se" (Seeley, 2000, p. 72).

Conclusion

In summary, the hermeneutic perspective on culture views shared moral visions as essential to and inescapable in human living. Moral visions are central themes running through the drama of culture and combine to help constitute the total web of meaning and significance we call culture. Hermeneutics also emphasizes that individuals are far more thoroughly embedded in and shaped by culture than is ordinarily recognized. The cultural construction of the person entails a compelling account of what life should be about for the individual, which is unconsciously absorbed and embodied. Although cultural meanings are taken up by individuals, these meanings cannot be reduced to subjectively held values. They are intersubjectively defined and maintained ideals, assumptions, and aspirations that are embodied within social practices. Consequently, we are deeply committed to our cultural perspectives on what is worthy in living because they have shaped our very identity. This commitment is prior to any conscious reflection or confrontation with another cultural outlook. Cross-cultural contact not only reveals important differences in how individuals think, feel, and act, but in what they aspire to.

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. Because we are immersed in the background assumptions and practices of our own culture, it is natural for us as therapists to assume much more than we can ever fully recognize or articulate. 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).

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. Cross-cultural contact offers us one of the best and most profound opportunities to reflect on what we take for granted. If we enter the dialogue with sufficient openness and present our own point of view with clarity, it is possible that the conversation can significantly enrich both points of view

by transforming and enhancing our understanding of the good. This mutuality can allow a genuine 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. The combination of an openness to the truth claims of the Other and a willingness to place one's own sense of what is worthwhile at risk may be the first step in truly learning from intercultural contact and growing from the wisdom of all traditions. 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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