Advances in Cultural Psychology: Constructing Human Development

Cultural Psychology in Clinical Research and Practices



Edited by

Audrey S. Namdiero-Walsh

Cultural Psychology in Clinical Research and Practices

Advances in Cultural Psychology: Constructing Human Development

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In the beginning of the 21st century, a new direction has been emerging at the intersection of developmental and social psychologies, anthropology, education, and sociology – which has become labeled cultural psychology. This fits the vast global social processes of most countries becoming multicultural in their social orders, and the World becoming one 'global village' – with the corresponding need to know how different parts of that 'village' function. The knowledge base of developmental psychology and education has become truly interdisciplinary, and its applications in the vast variety of cultural contexts need to be informed about varieties of cultural expectations. In that interdisciplinary synthesis, the knowledge base of contemporary developmental psychology and educational sciences is increasingly international. At the same time, any application of the knowhow of the social sciences in the areas of education and social life in any society remain local. Advances in Cultural Psychology creates an international forum for communicating key ideas of methodology, different approaches to family, relationships, schooling and social negotiations of issues of human development. New perspectives-dynamic systems theory, dialogical perspectives on the development of the self, the role of various symbolic resources in human development, and other new topics of interdisciplinary kind will figure prominently in the book series.

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Cultural Psychology in Clinical Research and Practices

Edited by

Audrey S. Namdiero-Walsh

Independent Scholar and Researcher, Germany



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Audrey S. Namdiero-Walsh is a passionate leader, bridge-builder, and advocate for inclusive dialogue and collaborative approaches. With over 15 years of experience in international program management and strategic partnerships, she has led impactful initiatives across education, public health, and foreign policy, often addressing complex tackling complex and intersecting challenges. She also brings a multidisciplinary approach to her work. Trained as a clinical psychologist and policy adviser, Audrey brings a multidisciplinary perspective grounded in behavioural science and cultural psychology. Her current research at the University of Hertfordshire (UK) explores complexity management and systems change, building on her longstanding interest in how cultural contexts shape psychological practice and systemic transformation. By combining practice and scholarship, Audrey works to co-create solutions that are not only effective and sustainable, but also deeply rooted in people's lived experiences. She believes that meaningful change emerges when individuals and organisations embrace authenticity, foster trust, and engage with cultural diversity as a source of insight and strength.

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Michal Blau, MA in Clinical Psychology, is a psychotherapist and psychoanalytic candidate at the Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie Berlin (APB e.V.) since 2022. She earned her Master's degree in Psychology at the International Psychoanalytic University Berlin (IPU Berlin), with a thesis on misunderstandings in psychotherapy when English is used as a lingua franca. Her clinical and research interests include intercultural psychotherapy, the therapeutic use of foreign languages, conversation analysis in psychotherapy, and the transgenerational transmission of experience and trauma. She has worked with patients with migration and refugee backgrounds in institutional, day clinic, and outpatient settings.

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Catherine Wilson identifies as Queer (gender and sexuality), but does not claim lived experience as a trans person. They are a Clinical Psychologist working on Gadigal land; doing mostly therapy, but also providing

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

CLINICAL ARENAS FOR CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: NEW HORIZONS

This volume is long awaited – cultural psychology needs to be linked with the vast field of applications that the clinical practices call for. And there are many! The domain of heath – starting from personal negotiations of 'my well-being' in contrast to 'there is something wrong with me' – leading to the questions of macro-level societal health risk discourses ('is vaccination dangerous?') are all overdetermined by the manifold of meaning constructions that organize that domain. All reflections upon health emerge in the ongoing processes of meaning making, using various semiotic mediating devices.

An inevitable counterpart of such overdetermination by meaning of our health discourses is the continuing uncertainty of our struggle for health. It is a personal existential struggle of the whole life course. It does not need any psychology – be it clinical or scientific. Health concerns are natural part of life course personal constructions, involving imagination, fears, and appreciation of the very fact that we live, love, and feel into our worlds.

Where, then, psychology enters into human lives? And how? What new can it bring to human lives that the tumultuous human history of wars, famines, glorifications of rulers and revolutions, and devastations by epidemics have not produced by default? Human *psyche* has survived the history of its species and become resilient against many – but not all – new challenges. The primary function of the human *psyche* is its strength – resistance against the flow of incoming information, and resilience while proceeding towards one's own goals.

Psychology is a discipline that since its emergence has been characteristically ambivalent about its status between science and social practices. This ambivalence became enhanced in the 19th century when the need for knowledge for the uses in various kinds of social practices grew – while the trajectory of science historically moved into the dominance of the natural sciences (Valsiner, 2012). The result was appropriation by the natural science orientation of the whole history of psychology. Wilhelm Wundt's

administrative act of opening an experimental psychology laboratory in Leipzig in 1879 was made into the key event of the birth of scientific psychology – albeit 50 years later. In parallel – much of the psychological knowhow was lost in the selective representations of the discipline (Cornejo & Maturana, 2025). It was also streamlined to amount to focus on *prediction and control* of behavior – a task that is in principle impossible in the case of all open systems. If that focus were to be taken seriously, psychology would be a science of the prediction of the unpredictable and control of the uncontrollable. Not a very productive basis for a science.

Looking at psychology today, I would posit that it is the science of the basic processes of the functioning of the human soul – usually called *mind* or *self* – in its relationships with the environment. The human mind is hierarchically organized complex structure of psychological processes with high compensatory potentials within the hierarchy. Its different levels of hierarchy entail the unity of the highest creation of the mind itself – from myths, values, prejudices, etc. – down to cognitive problem-solving processes and acts of meaning construction. In their decisions to act, human lives are self-reflexively meaningful. Only at the lowest levels of this hierarchy do we find concrete behavioral acts. And even those become targets for contemplation. Human behavior is a set of actions treated as meaningful.

Psychology is a general science – similar to biology – as it deals with phenomena that exist only in living organisms. All living systems exist due to their constant exchange relations with the environment – be that of oxygen (biological systems), relations to the minds of others (psychological systems), institutions relating to other institutions (social systems, or states relating to other states = political systems). One particular feature – *intentionality of actions* – is unique to the psychology of the human species. Hence psychology deals with basic processes of human intentional actions, their consequences, and the feed-forward from these actions to future actions. The temporal feature – never-ending processes if living towards the future – makes psychology into a fundamental part of developmental science (Carolina Consortium on Human Development, 1996).

Cultural psychology occupies a special place on the mindscape of psychology – it is dedicated to the study of human meaning-making and meaning use in the context of values-based intentional actions. Cultural psychology works at the higher end of the hierarchical structure of the *psyche* – where values of the society intersect with the feelings and lead to meaningful and often passionate actions. As a result, our thinking is guided by affect, and is nonrational in its core.

What is the nature of clinical psychology as a part of psychology at large? It is a vast field of efforts to apply the general knowhow of the discipline that has historically belonged to the expertise of natural healers, palm readers, and shamans. Today it is of course the powerhouse of medical professions and pharmaceutical companies that keep the hold of all features of health

maintenance and improvement – not to speak of their lucrative profits. In the last few centuries psychology has slowly entered into the field of clinical practices and carved out its place in it – two larger domains, diagnostics and therapy – are the locations where clinical psychology has taken its hold. These two differ in their epistemological *foci* – if diagnostics works on the ontological basis (e.g., claims like 'diagnosis X exists as real'), the latter is explicitly developmental. Overcoming an illness is a developmental process. Consequently, cultural psychology can contribute to clinical psychology in two directions. First of all – all diagnostic labels are signs; their representational value needs verification. This is static semiotic representation function.

More importantly, the therapeutic direction in clinical practice is open to the dynamic semiosis side of cultural psychology. Here the invention and use of signs enters into direct relation with the clinical practices and their evaluations. Nowhere else is cultural psychology more important than in the multitude of psychotherapy practices. The latter are examples of secular healing dramatisms. In the present volume the reader can get an interesting overview of ways to re-think various treatment possibilities that cultural psychology makes possible. By raising questions of power, identity, and positionality, various chapters show that culture is not a neutral background for human well-being, but a domain in which privilege and marginalization are reproduced, resisted, or transformed. Clinical work is closely intertwined with issues of social power, and the latter sets up constraints on the application of any basic knowledge in a society. Cultural psychology is a new discipline that is only beginning to find out its limits of applications. This volume can inform all of us more about those.

Jaan Valsiner
Chapel Hill, NC
November 2025

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Audrey S. Namdiero-Walsh

WHY THIS BOOK, AND WHY NOW?

Clinical Psychology stands at a crossroad. Mental health cannot be fully understood in isolation from the systems (e.g., culture and society) in which people live and make meaning. While the field has expanded globally through evidence-based protocols, digital innovations, and global mental health initiatives, its foundations remain rooted in Western epistemologies, diagnostic categories, and nonindividualised models of care that foster a gateway therapy approach that often fails to connect with patients on an individual basis or even causes harm. The result is a discipline that often struggles to meaningfully engage with the diverse social, cultural, and political contexts in which psychological distress is experienced (Henrich et al., 2010).

At the same time, global debates around equity, decolonisation, and structural injustice have intensified. Movements such as Black Lives Matter, critiques of systemic racism in healthcare (Fernando, 2017), and renewed calls to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems (Dudgeon et al., 2014), highlight the urgency of rethinking how Clinical Psychology and different psychotherapeutic approaches account for identity, power, and culture. Mental health scientists and practitioners cannot afford to remain 'neutral' in the face of these realities. To ignore them only risks reinforcing the very structures of exclusion and inequity that contribute to people's suffering (Summerfield, 2008).

This book situates Cultural Psychology as a valuable framework that broadens our understanding of the mind and illness beyond 'contextual add-ons' while interrogating the political and ethical dimensions of clinical practice. Culture, in this view, is not an optional element but the obligatory ground on which experiences of psychological distress, resilience, and transformation are built. Culture is everywhere and cannot be detangled from an individual. A Cultural Psychology perspective, therefore, provides conceptual and methodological foundations for a Clinical Psychology that is globally relevant, locally meaningful, and socially just (Patel et al., 2018).

ORIGINS OF THE VOLUME

The idea for this volume emerged from a shared recognition among researchers and practitioners of the persistent gap between mainstream Clinical Psychology and the cultural, political, and social realities that shape human suffering. What began as an interdisciplinary conversation across Clinical Psychology, Cultural Psychology, Sociology, and Psychotherapy, developed into this collaborative book volume project. Our shared objective has been to bring together voices that challenge, critique, and extend the field while offering new conceptual, methodological, and practical directions as potential solutions.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

Although the chapters are not organised into formal sections, they can be read as contributing to four interrelated themes that run through the volume.

- *Reframing theory and foundations*: The opening chapters (Chakkarath; Freire, Pereira, Dazzani & Marsico; De Luca Picione, Martino & Lemmo) challenge Western assumptions of illness, introduce semiotic Cultural Psychology, and explore meaning-making processes in clinical and health-related contexts. Together, they set the stage by rethinking how we conceptualize mental illness, health, and its cultural underpinnings, including the sociohistorical and colonial roots of current concepts and practices.
- *Politics, justice, and intercultural practice*: Several chapters position therapy and psychology as unavoidably political. Rhodes and colleagues argue for psychology as activist practice oriented toward justice; de Lima Neto and Guimarães propose an intercultural notion of 'dwelling' grounded in Indigenous Brazilian contexts; Molina and Fossa explore psychotherapy as a cultural dynamic process of meaning-making; and I, Namdiero-Walsh, examine how whiteness, privilege, and racism manifest in everyday discourse by analysing reactions to a White woman's social media reflections during the Black Lives Matter protests. Taken together, these chapters assert that Clinical Psychology must grapple with structural inequities, power relations, and the politics of consciousness, if it is to remain relevant.

- *Identity, language, and the therapeutic encounter*: Other contributions address how identity and communication shape clinical processes. Saase examines therapist self-disclosure and intersectionality; Pang analyses bilingual counselling and linguistic identity; Blau & Spiegel study nonverbal negotiations in intercultural therapy using English as a lingua franca; and Rocha, Dias & Marsico discuss gender identity development and its clinical implications. Collectively, these chapters reveal how identity, privilege, and language are not peripheral, but central to therapeutic meaning-making and clinical relationships.
- *Embodiment, culture, and lived experience*: Finally, several chapters expand the focus of clinical psychology to include the body and lived experience. Kirchner's chapter on yoga highlights cultural healing practices as resources for clinical care. Ulmschneider's work on chronic pain conceptualises suffering as a liminal phenomenon, while Vestbjerg interrogates how 'truth' and 'delusion' are culturally constituted. Together, these studies remind us that mental health is not purely cognitive or emotional but embodied, relational, and deeply cultural.

By weaving theoretical, qualitative methodological, and empirical insights, this volume moves beyond surface-level adaptation and instead advocates a fundamental rethinking of Clinical Psychology through cultural lenses to catalyse the development of individualised treatment approaches that can be more sustainable for anyone, regardless of their background.

EDITORIAL REFLECTIONS

Editing this volume has been both intellectually challenging and deeply rewarding.

What struck me in particular was that though there was a diversity of approaches – semiotic, phenomenological, political, and psychodynamic – all chapters converged on a shared conviction: that culture is not an 'extra variable' but a constitutive force in mind, illness, and healing. Furthermore, by raising questions of *power*, *identity* and *positionality*, the chapters demonstrate that culture is also not a neutral backdrop but a contested space in which privilege and marginalization are reproduced, resisted, or transformed. As a psychologist working across non-Western and global contexts, I found these contributions both affirming and provocative, often pushing me to question my own assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge in clinical contexts.

EDITORIAL REVIEW PROCESS

This book project was initiated in late 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The original volume editors were me (Audrey S. Namdiero-Walsh) and Josephine Jacobi, both clinical psychologists with a strong interest in cultural perspectives in Clinical Psychology. As first-time editors, Josephine and I received guidance and oversight throughout the peer review and editorial process from two senior scholars: Prof. Dr Meike Watzlawik (Professor of Developmental, Educational, and Cultural Psychology at Sigmund Freud University, Berlin) and Prof. Dr Jaan Valsiner (Series Editor and Professor of Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University Denmark).

The editorial review process focused on each submission's demonstration of the relevance of culture in the study and practice of Clinical Psychology. Manuscripts were reviewed both by the editors and Professors Watzlawik and Valsiner for conceptual clarity, originality, and alignment with the volume's interdisciplinary approach.

Biographically, Audrey and Josephine identify as cisgender Black and white women, respectively, with personal and professional ties to Kenya, Ireland, and Germany. Both come from working-class backgrounds and have navigated experiences of upward mobility in professional and academic settings, perspectives that informed their approach to this project and to fostering inclusive scholarly dialogue. Due to unforeseen personal circumstances, Josephine was unable to continue her role in this project as co-editor. Her early contributions to the conceptualisation and development of the volume were nonetheless highly valuable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the contributing authors, who brought scholarly depth, critical reflexivity, and practical insight to their chapters. The determination of many authors to contribute and translate their insights into a foreign language (English) added to the value of this volume. Appreciation is due to Professors Meike Watzlawik and Jaan Valsiner, whose guidance helped ensure the academic rigor and quality of the volume.

I also thank my peer reviewers, Josephine Jacobi and Max Vogel, both clinical psychologists and researchers with the Sigmund Freud University Berlin. Their thoughtful critiques strengthened the contributions in this volume.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the clients, participants, and communities whose lived experiences form the foundation of much of the research in this book. Their perspectives, too often marginalised in mainstream psychology, are central to reimagining the field in more inclusive and equitable ways.

CLOSING

This volume is both a critique and an invitation. It critiques the ways Clinical Psychology has too often neglected culture, politics, and identity. It also invites readers – whether researchers, practitioners, or students-to envision a dynamic discipline that is globally relevant, locally grounded, and ethically engaged. My hope is that these chapters will spark dialogue, unsettle assumptions, and inspire practices that honour the plurality of human experience. Clinical Psychology will only thrive when it embraces culture not as context but as core to the study of mental health.

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CHAPTER 1

CULTURE AND THE SUFFERING PSYCHE: A VIEW FROM CULTURAL AND POSTCOLONIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I will explore, from a cultural psychological and postcolonial perspective, the practices and sociohistorical contexts through which basic and applied disciplines concerned with the study and treatment of the human psyche have developed concepts such as madness, mental or nervous illness, mental or psychiatric disorder, neurosis, or culture-bound syndromes. To this end, I will first distinguish between the cultural psychological perspective and perspectives that dominate the mainstream of the so-called 'psy disciplines.' I will then present Foucault's discourse-theoretical analysis of the intellectual fabrication of 'madness' and the emergence of therapeutic treatments and institutions as an approach that in many respects corresponds with cultural psychological views and interests. This will be followed by a short account of Freud's view of culture as a source of mental illness—a view that, according to Foucault and others, represented the most powerful discourse on this topic in the 20th century. I will then show that many of the current core issues related to this topic originated in the context of colonialism and within the practices that constituted it. Finally, I will encourage the psychological and therapeutic

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sciences to come to terms with their problematic role in these contexts and to contribute to their own decolonisation.

Keywords: Cultural psychology; postcolonial psychology; indigenous psychology; psychoanalysis; suffering; mental health discourse

INTRODUCTION: TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS OF HUMANS AND THEIR PSYCHE

In the field of biosystematics, humans are classified as creatures of nature and products of evolution, and their relationship to other animals, especially primates, is investigated with respect to biological characteristics (e.g., anatomy, physiology, physical maturation) as well as basic behaviours. At least since Darwin's work on the origin of species, this biological classification of humans has had a great influence on modern psychology. The 19th-century founders of academic psychology—fascinated by the scientific paradigm of Newton's physics, its reductionist machine and calculation models, not to mention their predictive power—endeavoured to use the methods of physics and physiology in their own research. Thus, psychophysics, an apparatus-supported laboratory and experimental psychology became formative characteristics of the newly established discipline. This approach required that the human subjects under investigation be studied the same way physicists studied celestial bodies and elementary particles, i.e., as objects. This reductionist view of the human being has largely been preserved: Even today, many psychological subdisciplines focus on stimulus-response patterns, condition-effect relationships, biologistic explanatory models of neuropsychology while applying perspectives borrowed from computer science. The adoption of the scientific paradigm had similar effects on psychiatry, which derived its causal explanations for mental disorders from pathological-anatomical and physiological bases and thereby reduced most psychiatric research to physical sciences. It is certainly no coincidence that psychophysics, with its interest in the relationship between the physical world and measurable sensory representations thereof, is often considered the origin of modern neuroscience. Moreover, psychophysics not only had an enormous influence on academically institutionalised psychology, but also on many of the research programs Foucault called 'psy disciplines', including psychiatry and psychoanalysis (Makari, 2008; Rose, 1996).

Although it can hardly be doubted that this view has had a lasting influence on most of psychology up to the present day, in the 19th century, when it was established, there was already an alternative, but effectively ignored view. It was formulated by Giambattista Vico, Wilhelm von

Humboldt, Johann G. Herder, Johann F. Herbart, and others, including earlier predecessors (Chakkarath, 2003; Jahoda, 1993, 2011). Initially, it gained its greatest visibility in the interdisciplinary 'Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft' ['Journal of Folk Psychology and Linguistics'], a short-lived journal founded by Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal in 1860. One of their aims was to trigger a socio-historical and linguistic turn in psychology. This was to correspond to their view of humans as beings who are not only products of nature, but also of culture, and who create and constantly modify the cultural webs in which they are living by using material *and* mental tools (Lazarus & Steinthal, 1860). Remarkably, Wilhelm Wundt, nowadays considered the 'father of experimental psychology,' was to become the most prominent representative of this alternative view because of his conviction that laboratory experiments alone do not do justice to the historical and sociocultural reality of human life. According to Wundt, to attain an understanding of the object of its research, psychology as a discipline needed to position itself as a 'dual' science between the natural sciences and the humanities with respect to content and methodology. Only then would it be able to understand psychic phenomena not only in their present manifestations, but also in the broader context of their cultural-historical development and the role of the cultural complex in humans' mental and material articulations. Consequently, psychology as a discipline would have to supplement its natural science repertoire with interpretative, hermeneutical procedures and information provided by disciplines like social anthropology and ethnology (Wundt, 1916).

Time and again, the field of Völkerpsychologie ('folk psychology'), established in the 19th and early 20th century, has been viewed as the forerunner of all recent psychological undertakings that view humans not only as biosystematically classifiable natural beings, but also as cognitively, especially linguistically, highly developed and distinctively creative cultural beings who, as such, differ considerably from other beings. Any adequate approach to studying humans must therefore do justice to the particularities of this special being (Tomasello, 2019). At the beginning of the 20th century, this insight was captured by psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers when he wrote that, whenever the object we study is the human being and not the human being as a species of animal, we come to understand that psychopathology cannot be seen as a mere branch of biology, but needs to consider itself part of the humanities, too (Jaspers, 1963/1913).

However, even though some psychological approaches now pay more attention to interdisciplinary perspectives as opposed to narrow natural science perspectives, these differences between the two paradigms outlined above still show up between so-called *culture-sensitive, culture-informed* and *culture-integrative* approaches.

A CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTION OF CULTURE AND PSYCHE

The different approaches, internationally sometimes referred to under the collective term 'culture-inclusive psychology', are disciplines such as psychological anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, intercultural psychology, transcultural psychology, cultural-historical psychology, postcolonial psychology, indigenous psychology, and cultural psychology.[1] All these approaches aim—in their very own ways and to varying degrees—to revise internationally established psychological theories, which are highly influential for a variety of reasons, on the basis of intercultural competence, critical reflection on their inherent Euro- and Americentrism, and the academic cultivation of cultural humility. Without delving deeper into the methodological differences between and similarities of these approaches, and before focussing specifically on the cultural psychological perspective, I will just name two key differences between cross-cultural and cultural psychology:

a. the way in which they conceptualise the relationship between humans and culture, and
b. the extent to which they—dependent on these conceptualizations—move away from the natural science paradigm to perspectives taken in the humanities and social sciences to study psychological phenomena.

These differences refer particularly to the distinction between two methodological perspectives: cultural psychology—at least in its European variant—has a primarily ideographic and qualitative orientation, while cross-cultural psychology, which is Anglo-Saxon in origin, operates primarily nomothetically and quantitatively. The latter conceptualises culture as a complex set of external variables (e.g., social preferences for certain norms and standards of 'normality', self-concepts, societal orientations such as individualism or collectivism, rules of emotional expression, educational goals) that, to a certain extent, affect individuals from the outside and stimulate certain psychological processes on the inside. Cross-cultural psychologists assume that internal phenomena can be adequately measured by means of tests and/or behavioural observations to create datasets on the basis of which hypotheses are tested using various statistical tools. In order to subject results and theories to a supposedly even tougher test and thus to better argue for their universal validity (keyword 'psychic unity of humankind'), individuals from different countries or different ethnic groups are compared to each other. Here, 'culture-inclusive' essentially means that cultural phenomena are taken into account in psychological research, but

mostly within a methodological paradigm borrowed from the natural sciences.

In contrast, cultural psychology does not conceive of culture as an external set of variables independent of human beings, but rather as an integral and co-constitutive component of the human psyche. Here, 'culture-inclusive' refers to a conception that is sometimes characterised by the phrase 'culture in mind' (Cole, 2003; Valsiner, 2007). It owes much to Max Weber's (1904/2012) sociological expansion of the concept of culture and its more recent reception, for example, by Clifford Geertz (1973), who spoke of culture as a semiotic web of meaning. Although it would be misleading to portray cultural psychology as a unified research field with widespread agreement on theories and methods, in the following, I will identify several commonalities of different cultural psychological perspectives to describe a theoretical and methodological framework within which cultural psychology has moved in recent decades (for a more detailed description, see Chakkarath & Straub, 2020).

All psychological phenomena are intrinsically and interdependently related to cultural contexts, ways of life, language games, and discourses. Cultures are to be understood as practical systems of signs, symbols, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes inherent in action, inaction and omission. These systems enable humans, for example, to give meaning and significance to their world, to history, to themselves, to what they consider their own or view as foreign, to this world and the hereafter, to good and evil, life and death, nature and culture, the normal and abnormal. When people think, feel, hope, despair, judge, acknowledge, love, betray, despise, accuse, defend themselves, lie, hate, forgive, suffer, get angry, etc., they do and experience this in a corresponding network of culturally woven and interconnected supplies of interpretation, meaning and understanding.

With regard to the role of these systems in the human ability to act in a structured and purposeful way, culture can also be described as a field of action (Boesch, 1991). As such, culture—through its orientation systems—opens up possibilities for action, but it also draws normative (e.g., moral) boundaries that are difficult to overcome. Culture induces actions, but also regulates and controls them, just as it structures perceptions, intuitions, anticipations and emotions that initiate and accompany our actions. Since people constantly move between various fields of action, culture is both a structure and a process.[2]

Cultural change may also be continuous, but that does not mean the cultural network of meaning can be shaken off or completely replaced, not even after one leaves it voluntarily (or involuntarily) and becomes acquainted with a 'foreign culture'. Only against the backdrop of a familiar culture does the unfamiliar seem foreign, the supposedly disordered chaotic; only against the background of the familiar does the unfamiliar

become a challenge. Belonging to several cultures at once is not only possible, but rather common, especially since most societies are culturally quite differentiated and may become even more diverse due to comprehensive globalisation and migration processes.

Cultures thus fulfil manifold and complex orientation functions for subjects who are able to act on the basis of their physical, linguistic, emotional and cognitive endowment and need cultural orientation to find their way through highly complex, often overlapping and permanently changing human life worlds.

The cultural psychological understanding of human beings and culture outlined here implies at least two things:

1. Psychological research that focuses on the human being in his or her indissoluble connectedness with his or her natural environment must be conceived as an interpretative science or as a cultural science within the humanities, and consequently as an interdisciplinary psychology. Since humans—together with their practices and ways of experiencing—are integrated, occasionally even 'entangled', in historically grown and socio-culturally transmitted systems of symbols, knowledge and interpretation, diverse narratives and discourses, a predominantly qualitative, reconstructive and interpretative repertoire of methods is required for the investigation and analysis of these connections. These include autobiographical-narrative interviews, group discussions, participatory field research, ethnographic approaches, and various procedures of text, discourse, image, film, and artefact analysis.
2. Cultural psychology also aims to reveal general structures and rules along which people create meaning in their cultural life worlds (Bruner, 1993). It sees these general facets, for example, in the universal significance that culture has for the genuinely human. However, unlike cross-cultural psychology, for example, it is not methodologically bound to pursue claims of universality. Unlike cross-cultural psychology, it gives importance to varying images of humankind, including human ethnicity, sex and gender, youth and age, body and mind, health and illness. Above all, cultural psychology is interested in investigating the psychological role of languages, language games, modes of communication, thinking styles, time concepts, world views, and associated problems of translation, interpretation, and explanation. Thus, it views the assumption of a 'psychic unity of humankind' as too presuppositional and as resting upon inappropriately simplistic conceptions of humans and culture and a correspondingly reductionist methodology. Instead, cultural psychologists assume that there is 'unity in diversity'. Thus, from a cultural psychologist's

perspective, deviations from the norm are likely to be found universally in all cultures and societies, and it would be quite surprizing if what was considered normal (or deviant, respectively) in one culture or society was widely considered normal (or deviant, respectively) everywhere. As for the connection between culture and disease, cultural psychologists assume that the ways in which individuals suffer and become ill from their culture may well be similar sometimes, but that culture-specific paths to suffering and even so-called culture-bound syndromes may also develop.[3] Moreover, a cultural psychological perspective assumes that where there is talk of human psychological suffering, this talk as well as the suffering itself is deeply embedded in culture as a practical system of signs, symbols, knowledge, beliefs, interpretations, and attitudes. Furthermore, it assumes that these complex interrelationships cannot be adequately understood if we pursue them exclusively using methods of biology and neurology.

The following critical statement made by a group of psychiatrists on the current state of their discipline, published in an editorial in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, may help to clarify the standpoint that I will take on this subject in the subsequent sections:

> Psychiatry is not neurology; it is not a medicine of the brain. Although mental health problems undoubtedly have a biological dimension, in their very nature they reach beyond the brain to involve social, cultural and psychological dimensions. These cannot always be grasped through the epistemology of biomedicine. The mental life of humans is discursive in nature. (Bracken et al., 2012, p. 432)

CULTURE AND SUFFERING

Foucault on Discourses and the Creation of Mental Maladies

Physical and psychological suffering have been conspicuously important (Porter, 2002) themes of human reflection since the earliest documents were written. In the ancient tragedies and epics, philosophical, religious, and historical treatises, the most diverse works of art, in jurisprudence, anthropology, medicine, psychiatry, and psychotherapy, human suffering and reflections on how to alleviate or even overcome pain, misery, unhappiness and other sorts of suffering have always been central themes. In all societies, suffering has played a key role in shaping individual and collective memory, and hardly anything has left more discursive and hurtful traces than the experience of events that have caused great misery. Suffering is a

theme that has mercilessly and violently carved itself into the cultural fabric of societies and individuals. This metaphorical way of imagining culture as something that physically engraves itself into one's flesh incorporates an idea that reflected a quasitechnical conception of the mind well before the emergence of modern psychophysics. Aristotle compared the mind to a 'boatsman' who navigates the psychophysical vessel across the sea. Plato and other ancient thinkers described memory as analogous to a 'wax tablet' into which experiences are etched, but in which they also become obscured over time. Descartes, comparing the development of psychological sensations to processes set in motion by the interplay of parts of a clock, proposed the idea of 'mind-body machines'. Finally, Freud, who revisited Plato's metaphor with his 'mystic writing pad' as well and proposed the 'hydraulic model' of the psyche, found that the condensation of dreams results in images resembling those created by copying the prints from photographic plates over each other. He also illustrated the subtle communication between the psychoanalyst's and the patient's unconscious by using the analogy of the telephone. More recently, psychologists have adopted cybernetic models to describe psychological thinking using technology-based metaphors. The mechanistic conception of mind and soul has also become deeply ingrained in our everyday language, for example, when we find that our mind is not 'functioning properly'. These are just a few examples of how historically and socio-culturally evolved interpretations, illustrations and associated ways of speaking are incorporated into the fabric we have previously described as culture. Taken as a whole, they are important aspects of discourse, which in turn are important struts in the scaffolding of any culture. The concept of discourse is certainly one of the most popular concepts in modern social and cultural sciences, which has also led to different uses not only in philosophy and science, but also in everyday language. Even Michel Foucault, who initiated the academic triumph of the concept, did not present a consistent definition of 'discourse'. However, it is possible to convey the extent to which the concept has an analytical potential related to the cultural psychological perspective introduced above. There is another good reason to point out the role that culturally deeply rooted discourses play in our context of discussion: Foucault's discourse- and cultural-theoretical perspective on the history of the assessment and treatment of mental illness has greatly contributed to the critical self-evaluation of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists that led to institutional reforms in Europe since the 1970s.

Generally speaking, a 'discourse' is a set of statements and assumptions, descriptions, problematisations, and judgements. Discourses determine ways of speaking and thinking that are available to people during a certain historical period, but which also change and generate follow-up discourses that can intertwine with other discourses and thus form communicative webs on which our thinking and speaking depend, but from which they can