2.4: Different Cultural Factors Affecting Personality

Since culture pervades every aspect of our lives, the number of cultural factors that we might examine in the study of personality is quite large. However, there are a few major factors that stand out, and that have been the subject of significant research in the field of psychology. Thus, we will take a brief look at four major factors that will come up repeatedly throughout this book: religion, race, gender, and age.

Religion as a Cultural Influence

...religion in its turn exerts the most decisive influence upon all groups and systems of culture, from science and the fine arts to politics and economics. Without knowing the religion of a given culture or group - their systems of ultimate values - one cannot understand their basic traits and social movements. (pg. 228; Sorokin, 1947)

The essential importance of religion was also recognized by Abram Kardiner and Robert LeVine, both of whom, as noted above, studied anthropology and psychoanalysis (see Kardiner, et al., 1945; LeVine, 1973). As we will see in the next chapter, the recognized founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, also placed great emphasis on the influence of religion and religious symbolism (though he did not believe in God).

Despite the importance of religion, as perhaps the most significant cultural factor, there is variation in the extent to which formal religious beliefs and practices are a part of the routine life of people in different cultures (see Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). Since most psychologists were not emphasizing cultural factors as an essential aspect of the early development of the field (leaving that to anthropologists and sociologists), and given Freud’s powerful and convincing arguments against religion (see Chapter 3), it is not surprising that psychology has not focused on the influence of religion on personality. But that is changing, and despite the role that religion has played in many political battles and outright war (as has been the case in the Middle East for thousands of years!), religion and spirituality are also recognized as potentially favorable aspects of psychological development in general, and personality development in particular, in the
field of positive psychology (Compton, 2005; Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Snyder & Lopez, 2005).

Given the importance of religion as a cultural determinant, and the emphasis on culture in this book, we will examine the influence of religion on personality development throughout this textbook.

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\)

*Religion/spirituality appear to be the most significant cultural factors affecting people’s lives and personal development. Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Yoga, Christianity, and Judaism, taken together, represent the religious or spiritual traditions of some 5 to 6 billion people, most of the world’s population. Shown are some of the author’s copies of the Holy Bible, Holy Quran, Discourses of the Buddha, Yoga-Sūtra, Bhagavad Gita, and the Tao Te Ching.*

**The Question of Race and Ethnicity as Cultural Influences**

At the very outset we must face three possible alternatives as we consider the concept of race: 1) there is such a thing as race in mankind; 2) there is not such a thing as race in mankind; 3) even if race in mankind exists, it can have no significance save as people think of it and react to their conception of it. (pg. 38; Krogman, 1945)

Although religion may be the most significant cultural factor, the concept of race has probably existed even longer, and it is certainly the most visually obvious factor. But is it really? The fact is that there is no clear answer to the question of what actually constitutes race (Krogman, 1945; Linton, 1936, 1955; Sorokin, 1947). Although most people quickly think of three major races (White, Black, and Asian), and many of us would add a fourth category (Latino), studies have suggested that there may actually be as many as thirty-seven distinct races (see Matsumoto & Juang, 2004). In addition, genetic studies have suggested that there is more inter-group variation than there is between-group variation, further suggesting that race is nothing more than a social construction. As an alternative to race, some people use the term *ethnicity*, which identifies groups according to commonalities such as nationality, culture, or language. This fails to solve our problem, however, since the concept of ethnicity suffers from the same problems as the concept of race (Brislin, 2000; Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Miller & Garran, 2008; Whitley & Kite, 2006).

Although the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably with culture, they are quite different. The United States, for example, has large populations of people from different races, ethnic groups, religions, and nationalities, but they all contribute to the greater cultural identity of “American.” Indeed, the very concept of America as a “melting pot” defies the use of racial or ethnic characterizations of the American people. This argument goes both ways, of course. We cannot simply refer to people who live within the boundaries of the United States as American, and expect that they are similar in every other cultural respect. Although this may seem rather confusing, that is exactly the point. Critical thinking must always be applied to personality theories and their application in broad ways. This does not mean they are not useful, just that we must be careful in our interpretations of people’s behavior and personality if they are from another culture.

Although ethnicity and race may be of questionable value as cultural factors, there are two critically important issues that...
arise from them. A common problem in cross-cultural research is that of ethnocentrism, the belief that one’s own culture has the right beliefs and practices, whereas other cultures have wrong beliefs and practices (Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Whitley & Kite, 2006). Such value judgments interfere with the objectivity of cross-cultural research, and can have negative effects on intercultural communication. The other, very serious problem is that of racism. As noted in the quote above, race is very real if people believe in it and act according to their perception of it. We will examine racism later in the textbook. For now, consider the following quote from a recently published book entitled *Racism in the United States: Implications for the Helping Professions*:

Racism has evolved as a persistent part of the human condition. Its obstinacy and intractability are frustrating and at times baffling. We live in a world in which most nations have signed United Nations declarations of human rights and claim to be democracies, yet racial and ethnic conflict abound. (pg. xvii; Miller & Garran, 2008)

**Gender and Culture**

Gender has been the subject of a wide range of studies, from pop-psychology books like *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray, 1992) and *Self-Made Man: One Woman’s Journey into Manhood and Back Again* (Vincent, 2006) to such ominous sounding titles in academic psychology as *The Longest War: Gender and Culture* (Wade and Tavris, 1994). In 2005, the president of Harvard University suggested that one of the reasons there were so few women in math and science fields was that they lacked the intrinsic aptitude. The subsequent uproar led to the end of his presidency at Harvard, and a renewed effort to examine the reasons why few women succeed in math and science careers. An extensive study, led by former APA President Diane Halpern came to no specific conclusions, due to the complex interactions of a variety of factors, but in so doing made it clear that no blame can be placed directly on inherent/genetic ability (Halpern, et al., 2007; see also Barnett, 2007).

Gender is a distinctly cultural term, representing the behaviors or patterns of activity that a given culture or society expects from men and women. It is perhaps most commonly used to address differences between males and females, with an underlying assumption that sex differences lead to gender differences. However, apparent sex differences may actually be cultural gender differences, and cultures and societies exert significant influence on gender roles from a very early age (Brislin, 2000; Matsumoto & Juang, 2004; Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Still, some cultural factors may also have a basis in biological reality. For example, males are typically larger and stronger than females, so it makes sense for males to do the hunting and fight the wars. Women become pregnant and then nurse the infants, so it makes sense for them to provide early childcare. How this led to man have greater control and prestige in society, however, remains unclear, especially since that is not universally the case (Wade & Tavris, 1994). In addition, older men often become involved in childcare after their hunting/warrior days are behind them, further complicating the issue.

Among the differences between men and women that seem to be fairly common across cultures, and which may stem from sex differences, are aggression and emphasizing relationships. Men are typically more aggressive, and women seem to focus more on relationships with other people. In accordance with these tendencies, women typically defer to men, particularly in situations that may be confrontational. It also leads to conflict between men and women due to their difficulties communicating, hence the popularity of John Gray’s book suggesting that men and women are from completely different planets. Given the status of men, the challenges that these gender differences create for women were not typically given a great deal of attention. However, Karen Horney (see Chapter 8) and more recently the women of the Stone Center Group (see Chapter 9) have made great strides in changing that situation. Not only have the members of the Stone Center Group provided a number of collected works on the psychology of women (Jordan, 1997b;
Aging within a Cultural Context

Age is used as routinely as sex to divide the people in a society. All societies recognize at least three age groups: child, adult, and old. Childhood is typically further divided into young childhood and adolescence. Each group has different rights, responsibilities, roles, and status (Linton, 1936; Sorokin, 1947). Sometimes, these can come into conflict. For example, among the Comanche, as with most Plains tribes in North America, the adult male was expected to be a warrior, whereas the old man was respected for his wisdom and gentleness. Transitioning from being a warrior to being an old man was very difficult, and Comanche men often hoped to die in battle in order to avoid the transition. Those who were forced to make the transition became very dangerous adversaries for the young men transitioning from childhood to adulthood, and often the old men would kill the young men when they could (out of sheer envy). Moving even beyond old age, into death, there are many societies in which the dead remain in the minds of the community members, and deceased relatives and heroes are even worshipped. In some cultures, the relationship with those who are dead is a very important part of daily life (Linton, 1936).

Throughout history, as societies have changed, so have the ways in which they treated and cared for (or did not care for) aged individuals. Although modern industrialization is correlated with a significantly longer lifespan, such dramatic cultural changes favor the young people who can more readily adapt to the changes. In addition, industrialized societies typically shift some of the responsibility of caring for the aged from the family to the state. Curiously, this removes the responsibility of caring for aged persons from the very family whom those aged individuals had cared for and raised themselves! The one area in which aged members of the community are likely to retain their leadership status is religion, and the rituals associated with it (Holmes, 1983; Johnson & Thane, 1998; Schweitzer, 1983).

David Gutmann, an early gerontologist with an interest in the effects of aging on personality, has focused his career on studying men in four cultures: a typical American population (to the extent that there is such a thing), the Navajo in the United States, both Lowland and Highland Maya in Mexico, and the Druze in Israel (see Gutmann, 1987, 1997). One of the most interesting realities that he begins with is the recognition that the human species is the only one in which aged individuals remain active long past their reproductive prime. What possible evolutionary advantage does this offer our species? Gutmann believes that our elders fill unique roles in society, thus providing essential benefits to the extended family and the community, particularly for the young. Indeed, Gutmann points out that it is uniquely human to favor the ends of the lifespan, both childhood and old age, over the middle of the lifespan, when reproductive fitness is at its biological peak. As we noted above, however, the transition into old age is not always easy, and this leads to some unique changes in personality associated with aging.

The beginning of old age is marked by the maturity of one’s children, such that the adult individual no longer needs to provide care for their children. Thus, both men and women can begin to express those aspects of their personality that were set aside in order to mutually facilitate raising children. Consequently, there is often a relaxing, or even reversal to some extent, of gender roles. A particularly significant change for men who no longer have the physical strength to be warriors (or to engage in the physical labor of their community) is the manner in which they seek mastery over their lives. Young men have the ability to seek active mastery, they strive toward autonomy, competence, and control. Older men must seek passive mastery, through adaptation and accommodation. The oldest men must rely on magical
mastery. The world becomes one of potential providers and potential predators. They rely on primitive defense mechanisms, and wish fulfillment becomes synonymous with reality. Their relationship to the world is marked by feelings of vulnerability (Gutmann, 1987, 1997). It is easy to see how they would rely heavily on religion, and the promise of a supernatural being for protection and eternal reward, thus inclining them toward an involvement in religious practice that would naturally lead to a degree of respect, or at least acknowledgement, as religious leaders. Of course, the degree to which a society provides for its oldest members, such as through retirement benefits, would have a significant effect on this aging process. Nonetheless, Gutmann found evidence for these changes in mastery style amongst men in mainstream America as well as in the Navajo, Maya, and Druze cultures.

Discussion Question: To what extent have religion, race, gender, and age been important factors in your personal development (either currently, or in the past)? Which do you expect will be the most important in your future development?

Addressing the Degree of Cultural Integration

Adding to the complexity of culture’s role in shaping our personalities are two important factors. First is the degree to which an individual is integrated into their culture, and vice versa. As Sorokin points out, it is exceedingly rare that an individual is either totally integrated into their culture or not integrated into it at all (Sorokin, 1947; see also Kardiner, et al., 1945; Linton, 1936). Thus, culture provides a framework within which individual variation is possible, but at the same time there will always be some consistent basis for understanding the people within a given culture. This becomes particularly important when considering cross-cultural research, since it may be reasonable to make some general assumptions about an individual from another culture, but we must also be prepared for their own unique variation as a person in that cultural group.

A second important factor is that cultural phenomena do not exist in isolation. Both gender and race/ethnicity, for example, influence how one adapts to the aging process (see, e.g., Arber, Davidson, & Ginn, 2003; Barrow, 1986; Calasanti & Slevin, 2001; Cool & McCabe, 1983; Holmes, 1983). Gender also interacts with race/ethnicity in determining one’s reactions to group psychotherapy (Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, & Parker, 1998) and/or adapting to life as a minority student on a majority campus (Levey, Blanco, & Jones, 1998). Religion is considered to be such an important factor in the African American community that its role has been the subject of special interest (see, e.g., Belgrave & Allison, 2006; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Obviously many more examples can be found, the point being that as an individual develops, with multiple cultural factors influencing them, and each factor being integrated to a great or lesser degree, the potential for individual personality differences is extraordinary, even when the overall effect of the specific culture, or society, is to guide its members toward certain underlying tendencies that become characteristic of that culture’s members.

Discussion Question: Are you, or is anyone you know, distant or unintegrated with your family’s culture or that your community? If so, what sort of problems does that create for your identities? If none, does your cultural integration provide a sense of integrity?