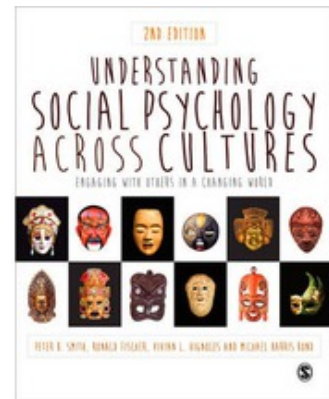


# Smith, Peter B., et al.: *Understanding Social Psychology across Cultures: Engaging with Others in a Changing World*

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*Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

Smith and his colleagues have provided us with a particularly handy and readable overview of the insights of social psychology on the dynamics of culture. The text is not interrupted by, but made eminently readable by the inclusion of text boxes that offer the state of “key research” debates on the various subjects, and “everyday life” vignettes, along with boxes that make bios of the “key researchers” come to life. It is lightly illustrated without the usual abundance of overly complex models, and offers some good visual comparisons as well as even an occasional cartoon that is right to the point. Each contribution ends the set of reflective study questions.



There is a handy table, which positions the various psychological approaches to the study of culture and relates their goals, their focus as well as providing quick examples and indicators of where discussions of these may be found in the pages of the book..

Scientific research in the social sciences, here as in other areas tends to suffer from an overdose of US and Western theory, in turn supported by research samples that tend to be more than two thirds from the same cultures, making it very difficult to extrapolate these findings in a meaningful way and relationship to other cultures. When speaking or the propensity of social studies research on cultures to use US target populations, Ethan Waters, author of *Crazy Like Us*, remarked in a recent article, “...social scientists could not possibly have picked a worse population from which to draw broad generalizations. Researchers had been doing the equivalent of studying penguins while believing that they were learning insights applicable to all birds.”<sup>1</sup> The authors do their best to admit this challenge and call repeatedly for broader perspectives and practices.

It seems obligatory to ask is there such a thing as culture, if so what is it, how do we identify it and how it is transmitted. Hofstede and Schwartz models are visited but also the growing interest in the genetic transmission of culture. In the latter we must assess the forces of environment, both physical and social. Philosophical and scientific assumptions about the nature of knowledge and meaning are often hampered by lack of the mastery of the language and the absence of an indigenous psychology making it difficult for the researcher to understand what can be measured, what to measure and how to measure it. What are the borderlines if any between the individual and the groups the individual is part of at various levels?

The social psychologist is concerned with the shaping of personality. One dominant model is “The Big Five” namely expressions of Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, Extraversion and Openness to Experience. How to isolate and measure as

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psmag.com/magazines/pacific-standard-cover-story/joe-henrich-weird-ultimatum-game-shaking-up-psychology-economics-53135/#!>

well as culturally assign these factors is the topic of many research projects and there is no consensus about their completeness as a model.

Highlights for me in the perusal of the text include:

- A discussion about multiple personalities in bilingual individuals.
- Cultural differences in the function of cognition as well as the generation of motivation and emotion.
- The diversity of childrearing and socialization processes and the level of ownership of the values conveyed by these practices in the passage to adult life.
- Situated cognition – thinking of culture as a set of environmental cues that trigger people to behave in culturally appropriate ways.
- Emphasis on the term "self construal" when speaking of identity and seeing what elements and agency are operative in this process across cultures.

By far the most interesting section of the book for me was the third one entitled "The World in Flux." Here, speech, levels of contact and group behavior are brought together in plausible narrative at every level from individual interactions to intra- and intergroup dynamics. Acculturation, coping with cultural identity threat as well as bicultural identity development and integration are explored, relevant to many of today's burning cultural conflicts. What is the impact of globalization and its subtext of concomitant modernity and economic pressures in the mobility of people and cultural discourse?

In the final chapter each of the authors contributes as an individual from his or her own perspective on "The Unfinished Agenda." This highlights in brief what the book throughout makes clear, namely it is not simply the matter of an unfinished research agenda, but inevitably a human one. Researchers and practitioners need to busy themselves with "the real issues that matter to diverse groups of people." Challenges that face work in this field include:

- Overreliance on the dimensions, generalizations on the higher level measures, as well as ignorance of indigenous perspectives.
- Politicization of cultures and defense of cultural identities leading to grave conflicts.
- Our present struggling state of awareness of the bodily and genetic responses to culture.
- The need for increasingly sophisticated measures and better-defined tools for research.
- Limited self-knowledge of how one's own culture shapes the construction and pursuit of research. This includes the often-siloed cultures of the numerous disciplines that concern themselves with research and development in the cross-cultural field.

There are brief illustrated bios of the authors upfront, and there is an excellent glossary that collects definitions that are also found scattered throughout the pages where they first occur as well as a generous index and abundant bibliography.