

Response to:
Five Potential Principles for Understanding Cultural Differences
in Relation to Individual Differences

By Paul Rozin

In this article, Rozin examines cultural differences in relation to individual differences. He summarizes his thinking in five principles: “The differences between ‘cultures’ seem ‘bigger’ than the actual differences between the individuals in these same cultures”; “Differences between individuals in different cultures are generally larger in behavior than in thoughts or feelings” ; “Many cultural differences are expressed in individuals in terms of different default responses or interpretations or preferences for the same situation.”; “Much of the effect of culture, and our impression of culture differences, results from the physical/social artifacts (environments, institutions) created by the culture.”; “In the contemporary world, differences between individuals in two cultures will be larger in older generations.” (Rozin 273).

While I hesitate to accept the above observations as principles due to lack of repeated, independent studies, I do see the merit to his arguments. His basis for the first principle is that from the responses in the study between college students in India and that in USA it can be seen that 50% of Americans, agree with the predicted traditional standpoint, and 25% of the Indian college students disagree with predicted traditional answers. The author uses this finding to, “encourage the study of within culture variation in features that are presumed to characterize a culture” (Rozin 275). It certainly seems like the right approach to look deeper into inter-cultural characterizations before determining a standard for expected cultural norm. Especially, in a diverse society with varying influence of cultures, where an individual would participate in a culture but may still be psychologically impacted by other sources such as books, movies, peers etc. In current

times, it is more difficult to delineate the specific impact of culture, especially in a more cosmopolitan setting. For instance, an Indian youth who predominantly likes American movies and music, may resonate with more with American ideals which will guide his thought process differently than his Indian peers. It may still be likely that their behavior may be in tune with the culture they are expected to participate in, but their thoughts and feelings are shaped differently. This would follow the theoretical proposition of second principle, that differences in behavior is greater than in thoughts. The author justifies the possibility by stating that cultures have greater control on behavior through rewards and reinforcements. However, I wonder if the difference is not due to the greater control of culture on behavior but because of culture's deeper but less perceptible control of the mind. Cultures that have vastly proliferated, like the western culture may be subtly but considerably impacting individuals to homogenize thoughts with the behavior difference being reminiscent of legacy culture. Studying completely isolated communities or variation within a cultural framework (ex. different parts of America) would be beneficial in figuring out the exact role of culture and if its control is greater on the mind or behavior, regardless of the culture's emphasis on mental domain.

In explaining the third principle, Rozin uses the example of ability to acquire language skills or similarly, "just as other languages are comprehensible to us, with some attention, so are other cultures" (Rozin 276). Are other cultures really comprehensible to an outsider or do we think we understand them and just accept or reject the notion based on our own mental framework? Could it be that we are truly never able to see the other person's perspective, but we think we do? Humans have a tendency to fill in the gaps of uncertainty with plausible explanations so any gap could be filled with a false sense of acceptance. For instance, the example of Indians understanding and accepting the American viewpoint of happiness being most different from anger and shame

could be an indication of them feeling culturally inclined to “accept all ideas” versus actually getting that thought process. Or it could be that they have been exposed more to American thinking than the other way around which could be one reason why Americans mostly think that they would not have thought in an Indian way. I think greater thought must be given on the influence and a deeper understanding of “how people understand” in different culture would be important in supporting this principle.

For the fourth and fifth principle, I agree that environment and generational differences and that must be understood as cultural differences are being studied. As presented by Rozin, television, globalization and how one views the other culture may affect the adoption of certain cultural norms that cause deviation from the expected beliefs within a culture. An important question one must address while conducting studies on cultural differences, is: *what is the culture those individuals operate in?* Simply assuming, that, a cohort of American or Indian college students would be like each other within the group, might be lacking and will lead to incorrect characterizations of cultural impact on one’s mind and behavior.

Overall, I thought it was an interesting read that made me think about the big picture ideas of cultural psychology but based on lack of research studies conducted, I think it might be more appropriate to claim the five proposed hypotheses over potential principles.