

CHAPTER 2

CULTURALIZING EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

The critical questions in education involve matters that cannot be settled by universal prescriptions. They demand attention to the cultural forces that shape teaching and learning. Consequently, research findings and generalizations drawn from educational psychology broadly, and motivation theory and research in particular, cannot be taken as general rules that are independent of contextual variation. Instead, they must be understood as being bounded by a host of situated, cultural factors that must be attended to if they are to have any, as William James termed it, practical, or cash, value. In this chapter, the author uses findings and generalizations related to self-efficacy to illustrate the contention that contextually and culturally attentive understandings of individuals are the understandings required to make sense of human motivation and conduct. Such understandings will require shifting emphasis from rule-based instruction to the cultivation of situated judgment in research and in teaching. As the world shrinks and cultural diversity increases, attempting to understand how cultural variations influence academic motivation seems more critical than ever. Culturally attentive views of motivational processes can help us clarify how motivational and self-regulatory strategies are created and develop as a result of differing cultural

practices or differing group membership, as well as how these practices influence our students' school successes and enrich their lives.

One evening while I was a third-year doctoral student enrolled in a seminar on educational research, a fellow student in her first semester of the doctoral program reacted to some research studies that formed the topic of that day's discussion by observing that the findings reported, as well as the contentions made by the researchers, simply did not ring true to her. She had been a classroom teacher for a dozen years and a principal for five, and she used particular examples drawn from her personal experience to explain why the findings and contentions seemed to her counterintuitive. She had worked in inner-city schools in which most students were low achieving and from minority backgrounds, she observed, and although it seemed to her reasonable that the findings and contentions being discussed might accurately describe students in other settings, they did not describe the children in her care, the teachers in her schools, or the families in her part of town.

Her advanced colleagues were quick to point out what they had been carefully taught early in the program. First came the general caution about the logical flaw of attacking a generalization with specifics (as if generalizations can (should) ever be divorced from specifics). The professor, a good-natured soul, then carefully expounded on the admonition (by now very familiar to the advanced students) that all who wish to become scholars in the academy do well to leave most personal experience at the academy's door because students' *entering perspectives* can serve as lenses that too often filter and distort the literature and confound theoretical insights. What was required, the professor pointed out quietly but firmly, were theoretical understandings grounded on sound research findings. Professor and advanced students worked in tandem to convince the rookie scholar that personal experience is problematic in that it tends to offer rather a microscopic (and myopic) view of the important issues at stake. They quoted various scholars to the effect that individuals should often be protected from the influence of experience, for one's own experience has no monopoly on truth, reason, or even reality. Indeed, education requires the overcoming of experience, for education "gives access to thoughts and *theories* that are beyond the scope of firsthand experience" (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983, p. 30; and see Carter, 1993).

The student protested. She had been an educator for many years, and she felt that her experiences had validity. And, she countered, if allegiance to theory and research was so critical and the literature so authoritative, why was there so much ink spilled on the theory to practice incongruence and so much despair at the fact that the literature was, on the whole, so poor that schoolteachers not only avoided it but disdained it? These issues

had been the topic of the first day of the seminar. She argued, with more than a little passion, that the “generalizable” findings under discussion described a world she did not know.

Three years later, I observed that same doctoral student as she taught her own section of first-semester undergraduate preservice teachers. She had given her students an article to read on the evils of extrinsic rewards. One student began to explain how in her high school they had given out certain rewards for reading books and, truth be told, it was her sense that kids were reading more books and actually enjoying them. The now advanced doctoral student cautioned the preservice teacher on the dangers of entering perspectives, preconceptions, preservice teacher beliefs, and generalizations drawn from personal experience. If they were to be receptive to the issues addressed during teacher education, she cautioned her charges, it was essential that they leave their preservice beliefs at her classroom’s door. Students’ entering perspectives, she warned, can serve as lenses that too often distort the literature and confound theoretical insights. What was required, she admonished the neophytes, were theoretical understandings grounded on sound research findings.

At about that same time in my own doctoral preparation, I found myself reading *Acts of Meaning*, in which Jerome Bruner (1990) worried that

a reaction has set in against the narrowing and “sealing in” that are afflicting psychology. The wider intellectual community comes increasingly to ignore our journals, which seem to outsiders principally to contain intellectually unsituated little studies, each a response to a handful of like little studies. Inside psychology there is a worried restlessness about the state of our discipline and the beginning of a new search for means of reformulating it. (p. xi)

Bruner (1990) offered various reasons for the increasing isolation and perceived irrelevance of psychological theory and research. Current fascination with constructivism and social and situated cognition notwithstanding, Bruner contended that psychologists—and educational psychologists are certainly included in this indictment—had become entrenched in “the conventional aims of positivist science with its ideals of reductionism, causal explanation, and prediction” (House, 1991, p. 13; Martin, 2004). As a result, he claimed, psychology had failed to concern itself centrally with meaning and had, in fact, worked quite hard to become a meaning-free science. Instead, the aim of the authors of the many studies populating psychology journals has been to “discover a set of transcendent human universals—even if those universals are hedged by specifications about ‘cross-cultural’ variations” (p. 20). Bruner warned that the hunt for generalizations loose of their cultural moorings—the hunt for universal truths—had permeated most of the research conducted in psychology, just as it had permeated the manner in which its theorists and researchers thought and

the ways they conceptualized the theories they put forth and the investigations they undertook, as well as how its professors professed their discipline's core knowledge and beliefs.

In *The Culture of Education*, Bruner (1996) again asserted, with greater conviction this time, that psychologists have not successfully resolved what he believed was a crisis in which, as social scientists, they find themselves. According to Bruner, many have skirted that crisis, minimized it, ignored it, and sometimes even written eloquently about it, but they have not successfully resolved it, either in their theorizing, their research, their teaching, or their way of thinking. And, the discipline may well be developing a new generation of scholars who are either ignorant of the problem, desensitized to it, or disinterested in the matter altogether.

SOME BACKGROUND

Most scholars are familiar with the crisis to which Bruner (1990, 1996) refers. At the end of the 19th century, Windelband (1901) put forward the thesis that the social sciences were caught in a methodological crisis of sorts, one between what he called *nomothetic* and *idiographic* epistemologies. On the nomothetic side, social scientists paralleled human processes with other scientific processes, and they sought to join sciences such as physics in the search for universal human laws that could apply across contexts. On the idiographic side, social scientists believed that knowledge and truth are at the mercy of particular understandings of phenomena, emphasized the limited utility of generalizations, and argued that the best a scholar can hope for is to reconstruct these understandings by way of interpretation.

This was the same distinction that C. P. Snow (1959) later drew between what he referred to as the "two cultures"—literature and the humanities as one and science as the other. Historian Immanuel Wallerstein (1996) likened the typical social scientist to a person tied to two horses galloping in opposite directions. Psychologists, having no culture of their own, were being intellectually torn apart by the struggle between the powerful nomothetic and idiographic stances of the natural sciences or humanities. Thomas Kuhn's (1970) take on the matter was to suggest that psychology was perhaps an immature, preparadigmatic, science.

These two cultures are at the heart of Daniel Dennett's (1987) distinction between the stances that individuals use in their search for understanding each other. The *design* stance of scientific psychology yields descriptions of individuals at a level of abstraction that permits identifying equivalences across contexts. Adopting such a stance results in the creation and promulgation of rule-based, universal principles that individuals can use regardless of local conditions. The design stance differs from the *inten-*

tional stance—the everyday psychological savvy that everyone can be said to acquire as they attend to the particular events and persons with whom they interact. This is the savvy often called *folk psychology* (see Bruner, 1996).

Sociologist Alfred Schutz (1970) illustrated the design stance when he wrote of the knowledge of experts who are at home only in a system of imposed relevances and who accept these imposed relevances as the only intrinsic relevances of their acting and thinking. Experts define problems within their imposed system of relevances, and expert advice reflects merely the suitable means for attaining pre-given ends, without the evaluation of the ends themselves. Consequently, their expertise is rigidly limited. All of which sounds much like Kuhn's (1970) description of the traditional role of the normal scientist. By contrast, those who seek to be well-informed search for solutions to problems in the relevance structures most appropriate to the nature of the particular problem and so are better able to explore various frames of reference as they form "reasonable options."

If Bruner (1996) is correct, there is no longer much of a struggle within educational and psychological research to resolve this crisis of cultures, for theorists and researchers have largely resolved it. Most have chosen to value the universal and to devalue the particular. In doing so, they have adopted Dennett's (1987) design stance of scientific psychology and rejected the intentional stance. And they have accepted Schutz's (1970) imposed relevances as the natural method of developing expertise, and they have eschewed seeking solutions to problems in relevant structures of their own choosing. As a consequence, they may have distorted how meaning is acquired, how truth can better be understood, how research should be conducted, and how psychological scholarship and expertise are best developed, demonstrated, and taught.

For all that psychologists claim to deplore decontextualism, and they do, the quest for universal truths is not only prevalent but deeply entrenched in educational and psychological research, as well as in classes and teacher education programs. Although in these constructivist times no one disputes Austin's (1962) premise that "it takes a meaning to catch a meaning," more than a fair amount of what is taught in education and psychology courses consists of learning how to decontextualize—how to categorize behavior, personality, thinking styles, environmental events, and even self-beliefs in the abstract terms that theoretical formulations employ and on which educational research thrives (Martin, 2004; Pajares & Bengtson, 1995).

Is this a fair indictment of the discipline and of so many well-meaning researchers who daily toil in it? Surely most believe that educational and psychological research and theory, as well as academic instruction, already have achieved the proper balance between universal and particular understandings. The hedging in which scholars so often engage is done to

emphasize that they have already achieved that balance—after all, these days cognition seems to be invariably referred to as “situated.” Bruner (1996) did not agree. He warned:

Do not be consoled by the false claim that psychologists already do [keep an eye on both the universal and the particular and do so with proper regard for how these shaping forces interact in the local situation] and [that they] have always done so. It is simply not so: sociotropes and biotropes still think they are involved in a zero-sum game; most mind-modelers would sooner be caught without their computers than be caught [making] interpretations; and all of them seem to delight in establishing separate divisions of the American Psychological Association where they can have the comfort of speaking only to their like-minded constituency. Psychology, alas, seems to have lost its center and its great integrating questions. (p. 169)

And this is not Bruner’s (1996) indictment alone. Psychology’s enthusiasm for discovering and disseminating the universals of human cognition and conduct independent of their particular meanings has long been called into question by members of its own discipline (Cronbach, 1975; Eisner, 1991, 1993; Feyerabend, 1993; Gage, 1989; House, 1991; Martin, 2004; Molden & Dweck, 2006; Packer, 1985; Thomas, 1997), by members of other disciplines (Blum, 1990, 1994; Larmore, 1987), and even by the audience for whom most of the rules are ultimately intended—classroom teachers, school administrators, educational policy-makers, and parents (Baker, 1998; Kennedy, 1997). These voices have argued either that educational and psychological theorists and researchers have strayed too far in the direction of favoring universal understandings or that they continue to be pulled by competing views of how they should think about their discipline and about the world, how they should conduct their investigations into personal and social reality, and how they should educate students.

The gist of the critics’ discomfort clusters around two contentions. The first is that the formal, universal principles gleaned from educational and psychological research and theories are not authoritative, largely irrelevant, problematically narrow, and typically inaccessible to the very audience that researchers seek to inform (Kennedy, 1997). Martin (2004), for example, writes that “conceptions of personhood that flow from psychology into education are frequently narrowly individualistic, highly simplified, and impossibly unproblematic” (p. 187). And his cautions are consistent with Bruner’s (1996) concern that claims to the effect that modern psychology has indeed achieved the proper balance between universal and particular understandings of educational and psychological concerns are simply unfounded. When social factors are considered in these conceptions of selfhood put forth by educational psychologists, Martin writes, “they mostly are framed as variables that mediate or influence what is pre-

dominately a highly individualistic pattern of development" (p. 188). For Martin, sociocultural, political, and moral constitutions of personhood typically go ignored in educational psychology.

The second contention is that situation-specific understandings of individuals are the understandings required to make sense of human conduct (Blum, 1990, 1994). When formal principles do trickle down to practice, Fenstermacher (1979) warned that, despite their best intentions, school practitioners tend to convert them into mechanistic rules for action. One need only look to the self-esteem research-to-practice debacle to witness the appalling state of affairs that such misapplication can bring about (Kohn, 1994). Dewey (1929) suggested that these principles end up being used as "recipes," and he wrote that the use of these recipes is especially antagonistic to education, for when research findings are reduced "to a rule which is to be uniformly adopted, then, only, is there a result which is objectionable and destructive of the free play of education as an art" (p. 14).

Is the discipline's enthusiasm for universal understandings real? If it is, is it warranted? Should educational psychologists be concerned by the manner in which they help develop and promulgate the generalizations that form the core of the theories they profess and the research findings they disseminate? Are they sufficiently attentive to the particulars of situations—to the local conditions—in the creation and dissemination of these theories and of research findings? Should these matters cause them to be plagued by more than a small measure of insecurity about their research (the "neat little studies," as Bruner, 1996, called them), about their teaching, about their discipline, and about their understandings of how people teach, learn, and live?

It well may be that the indictment that Bruner (1990, 1996) and others have leveled against educational and psychological theorizing is one that most educational psychologists suspect may be true of the mother discipline of psychology, perhaps even true about educational psychology *in general*, but not true about themselves *in particular*. No doubt each believes that her or his own particular efforts are relevant, balanced, situated, and meaning-*full*. But if the indictment has merit, both for the discipline and for many of its members, if it is not mere hyper-talk, if educational psychology has lost its center and its great integrating questions, how should it go about reclaiming that center, how should it navigate between the two cultures, or better yet establish its own culture, and how can educational psychologists rise to the challenge of reestablishing relevance, balance, situated understandings, and meaning to their (our) discipline? Of special significance, how should educational psychology research be envisioned and conducted? And how should students be taught to think about the things they learn?

GOD AND THE DEVIL, GENERALITIES AND DETAILS

Alfred North Whitehead is credited with the aphorism that “we think in generalities, but we live in detail.” In their academic disguise as generalizations, theoreticisms, formalisms, or universal principles, the discovery and dissemination of the generalities inherent in human cognition and conduct form the central aims of psychology. As a consequence, the discovery and dissemination of these generalities as they relate to educational processes and practices are the central aim of educational psychology research and teaching.

At the heart of this process is the creation and promulgation of psychological theory and its accompanying tenets, hypotheses, precepts, and principles. Educational psychologists not only think in generalities, they research, teach, and converse in generalities. They are our stock in trade. And we realize their logical limits. Recall William James’s (1907/1975) assertion that psychology is the art of grasping similarities among phenomena and thus forging perceptual patterns and conceptual categories out of the flux or chaos of existence (Leary, 1992). The discovery of these measures of central tendency—the similarities, patterns, and categories—is not only a noble pursuit but perhaps the only one available to us. Could we function otherwise? Could we conduct the neat little studies, propose the elegant theories, write the authoritative texts, teach, converse, think, and profess?

But Whitehead’s observation that we think in generalities is followed by the coda that we live in detail. Good psychology, no doubt, is of the type in which the generalities that comprise thought are drawn from and reflect accurate interpretations of the details of everyday life. But generalities can also be drawn from poorly constructed renditions of the details that comprise people’s life, or even constructed relatively independent of such details. This would be the case in situations in which details—in which lived experiences—are devalued, ignored, or considered irrelevant for the purpose of inference. Or, situations in which details are lumped together and aggregated to produce results and contentions that bear but passing resemblance to the details from which they were drawn. And therefore, applicable to no one. As Molden and Dweck (2006) cautioned, “by attempting to describe only the average, one runs the risk of describing nobody in particular” (p. 192).

As a small boy growing up in Spain, I had a tendency to try to complete my schoolwork as quickly as possible so as to create time for the important demands of play. Invariably, this meant that in my great haste I would overlook critical aspects of the particular assignment at hand—the minus sign in a mathematics equation, the critical comma in a compound sentence. One day, my teacher, an old Jesuit priest who was troubled by my haste,

leaned over me and whispered softly, "*Manolito, el diablo esta en los detalles.*" The Devil is in the details, he said.

I have always had a vivid imagination, and I was only seven years old, so you can imagine that the image of the Devil lurking in the details of my academic work was not an easy one to dispel. It was one thing to tell me to be more careful. That, I could have more easily understood. But to tell me that the Devil's hand was at play in the fields of my schoolwork, that seemed both confusing and deeply troubling. And so the image and phrase remained with me—the Devil is in the details. Years later, when I was an elementary school student in the United States, carelessness as a result of haste still often got the better of me. One day, in a scene reminiscent of the one that had taken place years earlier in Spain, a nun leaned over my shoulder and, as had my Jesuit teacher, whispered, "*Frank, be more attentive. God is in the details.*"

That was disconcerting. For years I had been wrestling with the troubling enough notion that the Devil was in my details. Suddenly, and without warning, I had to deal with the idea that both God and the Devil resided in those pesky nooks and crannies of my academic work. By now, I have heard each of those expressions used many times in many contexts, as probably have you. No doubt what my teachers were trying to tell me, each in his and her own way, was that knowledge and ignorance, truth and deception, goodness and mischief were all potentially present in my schoolwork. Their admonition seems clear to me now: unless I paid attention to the details of my work, I would not come to fully understand matters that were clearly important to understand, whether those matters emanated from the construction of proper sentences or the knowledge of historical facts or, much later of course, the interpretation of statistical results.

DETAILS, GENERALITIES, AND ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

I am grateful to the editors of this volume, which focuses on academic motivation, for permitting me to travel such a long distance in this chapter without addressing this area. I come to it now, however, to illustrate my contention that contextually and culturally attentive understandings of individuals are the understandings required to make sense of human conduct. To do so, let me use findings from my own line of inquiry: self-efficacy beliefs in academic settings.

Results of investigations during the past 25 years have amply demonstrated that students' beliefs about their academic capabilities, their self-efficacy beliefs, powerfully predict those capabilities (Bandura, 1997; Pajares & Urdan, 2006). In fact, self-efficacy is typically as good a predictor of academic success as are previous achievement or general ability (Pajares

& Kranzler, 1995). That is self-efficacy's central and most essential generality. We also know that students have a tendency to overestimate their competence, that is, to believe that they can do more than they can actually do (Pajares & Miller, 1994). Relatively strong self-efficacy, even to the degree of believing that one can do more than one can really do, is considered a good thing because it provides individuals with the impetus necessary to surmount obstacles and attempt tasks that are slightly above their actual capabilities. In essence, then, it is widely acknowledged that self-efficacy beliefs predict the academic outcomes with which they are compared and that most students are healthily overconfident about their capabilities.

However, when African American students are asked to provide self-concept judgments or self-beliefs of capability, they are, on average, more overconfident about what they can actually accomplish than even European American students (Graham, 1994). Researchers have postulated various reasons for this phenomenon, including the possibility that such high self-beliefs represent a type of posturing in the face of academic difficulties. In these studies, academic self-efficacy beliefs can be poor predictors of academic capabilities.

Indeed, African American youngsters also seem to differ regarding the import that they give to the sources of self-efficacy beliefs. Social cognitive theory posits that mastery experience, which is to say the interpreted results of one's own accomplishments, should be the strongest source of information for the formation of self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997). However, in the face of low academic performance and social and economic disadvantage, African American students' attempts to maintain positive self-regard may lead them to give more credence to social persuasion—that is, the feedback and encouragement they receive from significant others—than to the interpretation of mastery experiences (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Parents of African American children, compared to the parents of European American children, provide higher estimates of their children's cognitive abilities and higher predictions of their children's school achievement, irrespective of actual performance (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990). If African American parents are communicating these beliefs to their children, then these powerful social persuasions may be a stronger source of self-efficacy information for African American children than is their interpretation of mastery experiences.

Researchers have also reported that the overconfidence of European American girls is considerably lower than that of European American boys (Pajares, 1996). These girls tend to provide judgments of self-efficacy that are more consistent with what they are actually capable of accomplishing than are the judgments of boys. Nel Noddings (1996) once observed that, when girls make self-efficacy judgments, they are giving you their promise.

Boys, on the other hand, are often thought to be "self-congratulatory" (Wigfield, Eccles, & Pintrich, 1996). Like African American boys and girls, European American girls also may be more attentive to social persuasions as a source of their efficacy beliefs than are European American boys, who, as theoretical tenets would suggest, attend primarily to their mastery experiences.

Findings also suggest that American gifted students tend toward overconfidence to a much lower degree than do their regular education peers (Pajares, 1996). As is the case with girls, gifted students tend to provide efficacy judgments quite consistent with their competence. In these studies, confidence judgments predict academic capabilities very strongly. But gifted American girls have a tendency to *underestimate* their competence. And there is evidence to suggest that many gender differences in academic self-beliefs may actually be a function of the stereotypical beliefs about gender that students come to hold, beliefs that are *culturally* acquired (Eisenberg, Martin, & Fabes, 1996). For example, gender differences in variables such as moral voice tend to disappear when gender stereotypical beliefs are accounted for (Harter, Whitesell, & Kastelic, 1998). Girls who report a strong masculine orientation do not differ in their expression of their moral voice from boys with a similar orientation.

Special education students in self-contained special education classes overestimate their capability even more strongly than do students in nearly any other group. Students with learning disabilities frequently have difficulties accurately evaluating their academic skills and predicting their performance. Indeed, the efficacy beliefs of students with learning disabilities may be miscalibrated, resulting in insufficient preparation and poor performance. In these studies, confidence judgments tend not to predict academic capabilities at all, and Klassen (2006) has suggested that these may well be situations in which excessive self-efficacy may be problematic and even maladaptive.

In his review of self-efficacy studies from a cross-cultural perspective, Klassen (2004b) found that efficacy beliefs tended to be lower for students from non-Western cultural groups than for students from Western groups. Moreover, in some cases the more modest self-efficacy beliefs expressed by the non-Western students tended to be more predictive of academic outcomes than were the higher self-efficacy beliefs of the Western students. Klassen (2004a) posited that immigration status and political factors also may serve to modify the mean efficacy beliefs of a cultural group. And he found that optimistic self-efficacy beliefs did not, as social cognitive theory would posit, necessarily translate into higher performance for all cultural groups.

Cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism also powerfully influence the relationship between social and academic self-efficacy beliefs on the one hand and academic achievement and social factors on

the other (Oettingen & Zosuls, 2006). Kim and Park (2006) argued that existing psychological and educational theories that emphasize individualistic values (e.g., innate ability, intrinsic interest, self-esteem, even academic self-efficacy) cannot explain the high level of achievement of East Asian students. Instead, the Confucian-based socialization practices that promote close parent-child relationships are responsible for high levels of self-regulatory, relational, and social efficacy. Self-regulatory efficacy is a powerful predictor of students' academic performance. In these cultures, relational efficacy—the confidence that young people have in their familial and social relations—as well as social support received from parents have a powerful influence on students' academic performance. In addition, the lower levels of self-efficacy beliefs found in some collectivist groups do not always signify lower subsequent performance, but are instead reflective of differing construals of self. Indeed, self-efficacy may be more “other-oriented” in some non-Western cultures, particularly Asian cultures, than in Western cultures (Klassen, 2004a).

There are other conditions under which self-efficacy beliefs do not perform their predictive role in human functioning. In prejudicially structured systems, for example, students may find that no amount of skillful effort will bring about desired outcomes. In such cases, students may possess the necessary skill and high self-efficacy required to achieve, but they do not achieve because they lack the incentive. The influence of self-efficacy beliefs on performance will also be weakened if schools lack the effective teachers, necessary equipment, or resources required to aid students in the adequate performance of academic tasks. When social constraints and inadequate resources impede academic performances, self-efficacy may exceed actual performance not because students *do not know what they believe they know* but rather because *they are prevented from doing what they know how to do*.

So, as these findings illustrate, generalizations to the effect that self-efficacy beliefs predict this or that outcome or correlate with this or that other construct are complicated by a number of contextual and cultural factors and should not be taken as general rules about self-efficacy that are independent of contextual variation. I have little doubt but that researchers from other theoretical homes could offer similar cautions and caveats about their own motivation constructs. They would no doubt agree with me that research findings must be carefully understood as being bounded by a host of situated factors that must be attended to if the constructs themselves are to have any, as William James (1907/1975) termed it, practical, or *cash*, value.

CULTURALIZING ACADEMIC MOTIVATION

In a book entitled *Mr. Palomar*, Italian author Italo Calvino (1985) shares with us the contemplations, often befuddlements, of a man reflecting on the nature of the world and of his place in it. On one occasion, Mr. Palomar stands on a shore, looking at the sea, trying to isolate, to read, a wave, as one might read a textbook or theory book or article. Consistent with James' (1907/1975) view of the role of psychology, Calvino explains that Palomar is simply trying to grasp the similarities of waveness and to forge perceptual patterns and conceptual categories, not even out of the flux and chaos of a roaring ocean, but out of the calm and gentle tranquility of an orderly sea whose surface is barely wrinkled. Palomar wants to know the truth of a wave because, as Calvino explains, only by knowing the wave "can he begin the second phase of the operation: extending this knowledge to the entire universe" (p. 8). Palomar is unsuccessful. Just as he thinks he might be getting somewhere with this wave, there "is a breath of east wind that stirs the sea's surface" (p. 7). God (or is it the Devil?) is in that breeze. Palomar loses patience and "goes off along the beach, tense and nervous as when he came, and even more unsure about everything" (p. 8).

In *Invisible Cities*, Calvino (1974) envisions a conversation in which Marco Polo describes to the Great Kublai Khan the Roman arch, an architectural wonder at that time unknown in the East. To describe the arch, Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.

"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.

"The bridge is not supported by one stone or another," Marco answers, "but by the line of the arch that they form."

Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds:

"Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."

Polo answers: "Without stones there is no arch." (p. 80)

Clifford Geertz (1983) argued that knowledge and action are always local, always situated in a network of particulars. Action and cognition cannot be disjoined from the situation in which they occur. Universals and particulars each operate locally. As Freire (1970) observed, "human beings *are* because they *are in* a situation" (p. 109). Indeed, James (1902/1990) went so far as to suggest that "a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas, however deep" (p. i). And if universals cannot be understood without attending to the particulars that comprise them, particulars themselves cannot be understood independent of the context within which they take place (McLellan & Martin, 2005; and

see Packer, 1985). However elegant the insight or telling the action, neither can be understood fully beyond the natural boundaries provided by the local, situated, cultural conditions in which it is embedded. Or beyond the mental boundaries provided by the previous understandings that individuals bring to novel information and with which they endeavor to make sense of it. However elegant the arch, it can never be appreciated fully without taking into account the stones that comprise it, support it, create it. And understanding the stones will require not only geological expertise about their nature and composition but social, cultural, historical, and political understandings about their construction and their constructors. It really does take a meaning to catch a meaning (Austin, 1962).

But does this mean that generalizations, as universal understandings, are best abandoned altogether? Are we better off assuming that there are no universals in mental functioning, no universal themes to the human condition? I think not. The human condition is a shared condition. Their idiographic sensibilities notwithstanding, art, music, literature, cinema, and the humanities would all be trivial without the common chord. Imagine a classic novel without a universal theme. Culture itself represents in part the transmission and dissemination of acquired habits of functioning that groups of individuals share *in common*. Indeed, without attention to formal principles, psychology becomes anthropology, descriptive rather than predictive.

But is there some way to bridge this gap between principles and particulars in educational psychology? Is there a way to achieve a balance between the meanings obtained from research and theory on the one hand and the meanings obtained from the details embedded in local conditions on the other, especially since God and the Devil reside in those details in equal measure? Is there a way of conceiving an educational psychology interested in meaning but that avoids the hardening of the arteries caused by overdependence on universal truths while also evading the potential relativism and triviality that a narrow focus on particulars can bring about? Do we have to give up theorizing scientifically about a construct in educational psychology if we give up the idea of the universal purity of that construct as embedded in one particular situation?

The idea that psychology must be trapped between two cultures, even the idea that the two cultures are contradictory, is shortsighted. It seems to me possible to restructure our understandings of how we construe personal and social reality, just as it seems to me possible that these re-understandings can reflect with some fidelity the universal and particular nature of human action and thinking. It also seems to me possible that these re-understandings can provide a *meaning-full* foundation for our research and for our teaching. Of course, it seems to me also unlikely that we can

restructure these understandings if we cannot alter our assumptions about the inherent supremacy of universal understandings.

Bruner (1990, 1996) argued that the struggle between particularism and universalism actually represents an *antinomy*, an apparent contradiction between reasonable alternatives, rather than a contradiction *per se*, and he contends that a view of psychology that cannot contain both particulars and universals is deficient and misguided. Complex processes must be understood as having situational and universal properties, and within each of these properties evolutionary, historical, social, cultural, and interactive components.

Kuhn (1970) argued that scientific revolutions are often brought about by something resembling a Gestalt shift, a shift in point of view, rather than by the discovery of some previously unknown reality. Perhaps the task before educational psychologists is as simple and complex as shifting their perspective from a focus on the primacy of universal truths, even from a focus on bridging the gap between universal and particular understandings, to a focus on the cultivation of judgment and the refinement of taste. Not simply on the cultivation of judgment, of course (we all strive for judgment of a sort), but on the cultivation of situated judgment. Kant (1781/1965) viewed

judgment [as] the faculty of subsuming under rules; of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule . . . although admirable in understanding [an individual] may be wanting in natural power of judgment. He may comprehend the universal in abstracto, and yet not be able to distinguish whether a case in concreto comes under it. (p. 177)

Lawrence Blum (1994) suggested that “discerning which action best instantiates a given principle requires judgment about the particularities of the situation” (p. 39). Elliot Eisner (1991) called this process the refinement of sensibility that increases one’s ability to construct meaning within a domain.

If we understand the role of *conditional knowledge*, the knowledge that involves understanding when, why, and under what conditions declarative or procedural knowledge should be used, would it not suit psychology to apply this knowledge to its own inner workings? Exercising this sort of judgment is attended by a moral imperative, as Blum (1994) makes clear: “Knowing how to apply the principle, how to pick the best among the possible actions instantiating the principle involves a moral capacity beyond the adoption of, or recognition of the validity of, the principle itself” (p. 39). In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1998) wrote that “it is an easy matter to know the effects of honey, wine, hellebore, cautery, and cutting. But to know how, for whom, and when we should apply these as remedies is

no less an undertaking than being a physician" (Book V, 1137a). Bruner (1996) similarly suggested that the critical questions in education involve matters that cannot be settled by universal prescriptions, for "they demand case-by-case-judgment" (p. 70). Calvino (1985) cautions that individuals should "keep their convictions in the fluid state, check them instance by instance, and make them the implicit rule of their own everyday behavior, in doing or not doing, in choosing or rejecting, in speaking or in remaining silent" (p. 112).

Thus, one solution lies in shifting emphasis from rule-based instruction to the cultivation of situated judgment in research and in teaching. In the classroom, this would involve working to help students appreciate the usefulness and limitations of universal understandings as well as the relevance, importance, and potential mischief of the details of their particular experiences. Effective professors of education and of educational psychology recognize that the process of moving their students from novice to expert requires precisely that cultivation of judgment. Initial over-reliance on particular understandings drawn from personal experience must gradually make way not for over-reliance on universal understandings gleaned from research but for an appreciation for, and understanding of, the myriad factors at play in human functioning. Students come to understand that there is personal experience that is irrelevant for the purpose of inference and personal experience that provides insight about the human condition, that what is true for one's own self need not be true for others, and that we need some way to better appreciate what is true for others. Ultimately, they come to realize that this exercise in judgment requires understanding that both empirical and theoretical principles are the starting point, and not the culmination, in the search for truth. Recall Lee Cronbach's (1975) caution that "when we give proper weight to local conditions, any generalization is a working hypothesis, not a conclusion" (p. 125). Effective instructors also instill in their students what William James (1899/2001) called the "fighting impulse" required to challenge theory, research findings, and even their professors when any of them formalizes or trivializes the complex issues that form the content of the discipline or when the lived experience of these scholars in training is devalued.

Perhaps there is something in all this that can also speak to the squabbling regarding the value of quantitative versus qualitative psychological understandings. Ironically, as Kenneth Hammond (1966) has astutely observed, generalizations are actually incompatible with nomothetic theorizing, and scientific laws are never derived through statistical analysis. Kurt Lewin (1935) warned that researchers who accept the ideology of accumulated observations and generalizations drawn from statistical results have already deviated from a strictly nomothetic path. "If all the relevant conditions are known, or rather if all disturbing influences are eliminated, only

one observation is needed to ascertain a general law," which is what nomothetic thinking is really all about (Brunswik, 1943, p. 266; and see Lewin, 1935). What characterizes good science is that it tries to elucidate something particular about a phenomenon, something related to other phenomena that also have to do with particulars. Shifting emphasis from the accumulation of facts and the pursuit of universals to the cultivation of judgment offers psychology an opportunity to overcome its derivative and divided character and to place the study of human functioning within an integrated view of the study of all material reality (Connelly, Arkes, & Hammond, 1986).

What steps can be taken to "culturalize" educational psychology? As Sandra Graham (1994) observed in her review of motivation in African American students, developing an educational psychology that reflects with some fidelity the cultural variation of human action, cognition, and motivation is not altogether easy. A culturally attentive educational psychology faces a number of responsibilities.

- First, and most obviously, a culturally attentive educational psychology regularly includes social and cultural groups in research programs and agendas, traces the course of human functioning in social/cultural contexts, avoids formalistic principles about groups and group membership, and depicts group differences accurately.
- A culturally attentive educational psychology is sensitive to the dynamics of failure but at the same time avoids the deficit model of educational research. Far too much of this research has focused on the characteristics of individuals who have adopted maladaptive strategies and de-emphasizes the characteristics of those who engage adaptive behaviors and those who surmount obstacles and persist in the face of formidable risks.
- A culturally attentive educational psychology does not only acknowledge but centrally focuses on the complex relations between the cultural background, social class, and economic factors embedded in social structures. It grounds its understandings in the socialization practices of differing environments.
- A culturally attentive educational psychology would be as interested in discovering root causes for the statistical relationships it reports and promulgates as it would be in discovering the relationships themselves. Answering these *why* questions would require rather a powerful reorientation in the discipline's present methodological tastes.

Culturalizing educational psychology is made easier when research is ecologically grounded (Bronfenbrenner, 2006; Rogoff, 1995). Educational psychologists continue to show impatience with modes of inquiry and analysis not reducible to quantities and not assessable statistically. William

James (1897/1956) once spoke quite directly to those of us who traffic nearly exclusively in numbers:

I, for my part, cannot but consider the talk of the contemporary sociological school about averages and general laws and predetermined tendencies, with its obligatory undervaluing of the importance of individual differences, as the most pernicious and immoral of fatalisms. (p. 262)

Clearly, motivation researchers would be well served by placing greater emphasis on ecologically grounded investigations and less on survey-type studies, giving greater value to sound qualitative efforts and less to decontextualized quantitative methods that serve little function other than to confuse lay readers and practitioners and to provide fodder for psychometricians in search of a problem (Robinson, 1993; Roziek, 2003).

Nearly all current motivation theories can be criticized for emphasizing rational cognitive processes leading to motivation and behavior, although such processes are often not used because people's "folk psychology" results in more fallible and optimistic decisions (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Moreover, students' academic achievement is too complex a matter to permit the contention that such achievement is caused by any particular motivation construct at any particular time in a particular place for any particular student or group of students. These constructs neither need be the *prima causa* of achievement in any particular case nor the magic elixir that can make all kids work to their full potential. Students perform differently in school for many reasons (Gustaffson & Undheim, 1996; Snow Corno, & Jackson, 1996), and familial, social, cultural, and historical variables play a powerful hand in the academic outcomes that students will attain (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996), for such outcomes are deeply dependent on the local conditions that cultural variation creates.

Earlier in this chapter, I used findings from self-efficacy research to show that generalizations about academic motivation are complicated by various factors and should not be taken as general rules that are independent of contextual variation. To do so, I used studies that had focused on the self-efficacy beliefs of African American students and of special education students or that had analyzed data as a function of gender or of academic ability. But African American students or special education students or girls or boys or gifted students or any other definable group of students do not represent some monolithic entity that thinks and behaves independent of the times and places in which, and the people with whom, they find themselves. As must all individuals, they too must be understood in light of their local conditions.

Neither studying individuals in specific groups nor analyzing data as a function of group membership constitutes cultural attentiveness, nor do

these practices suffice in providing the contextual understandings required. Rather, educational theorists and researchers will have to give greater attention to the sociocultural (including historical, political, familial, and school) structures and practices that foster or impede the academic functioning of students. McLellan and Martin (2005) call for an interpretive, hermeneutic psychology comfortable with various methods of inquiry, "including the uncovering of what is present and what is not present, tacking between the specific and general contexts and understandings, and the inclusion of moral and political contexts as necessary contexts of the psychological object of study" (p. 75). To have confidence in contentions made and generalities proffered, interpretations made from the findings obtained from any particular study should be tested against interpretations made from data gathered in similar contexts using similar methods.

All this is not to argue that educational psychologists do not already have a reasonably good handle on how motivation works, what its defining features are, and what things can be done to better motivate students. Rather, it is to say that what is required is greater attention to, and deeper understandings of, how to foster the psychological, sociocultural, and political processes and practices that work to maximize such motivation. Reading Vygotsky (1929, 1935/1978) requires attending to Vygotskian cautions regarding the critical importance of social, cultural, political, and historical factors in the learning and development of individuals.

Finally, it will be wise to move away from efforts to provide universal prescriptions for educational problems and issues. The critical questions in education involve matters that cannot be settled by universal prescriptions. They demand attention to the cultural forces that shape teaching and learning. Our students' learning, cognition, motivation, and achievement are always situated in a network of sociocultural particulars.

As the world shrinks and cultural diversity increases, attempting to understand how cultural variations influence academic motivation seems more critical than ever. Culturally attentive views of motivational processes can help us clarify how motivational and self-regulatory strategies are created and develop as a result of differing cultural practices or differing group membership, as well as how these practices influence our students' school successes and enrich their lives.

A CLOSING MEMORY

I was in the 5th grade when I got my first pair of glasses. They were most uncomfortable. One day, during social studies class, I found myself assiduously adjusting them, the way I've seen so many kids do. First I placed them

carefully on the desktop so as to gauge the precise location of the misalignment. I then picked them up and began bending the ear pieces, trying to get them to align just right, narrowing the nose bridge, twisting the lens casings.

Sister Margarita, clearly curious about my engineering efforts during her class, walked toward my desk at the back of the room and inquired as to what it was I thought I was doing. I explained patiently that my glasses just didn't fit right. I had carefully shaped them so that they were perfectly symmetrical—the ear pieces in perfect alignment, both ends making precise and equal contact with the flat desktop, the nose bridge perfectly *arched*. I was certain I had created the perfect vision delivery device.

But I was miserably frustrated because they still felt off balance on my face, one side clearly lower than the other.

What else could I do, I asked.

Sister Margarita wore eye glasses. So her advice was no doubt borne of years of living in the eye-glass-wearing culture. She looked me over with some scrutiny, leaned toward me conspiratorially, and whispered, "You should account for the shape of your head."

I keep that thought carefully in mind when I read research findings and theoretical treatises, or when I attend conference presentations in which authors and speakers promulgate theoretical dictums or, present research findings about matters of consequence that they seem so certain they know are so, and present them in ways that leave the clear impression that they are so for us all. That they fit all our heads. As William James observed, "the desire to formulate truths is a virulent disease" (Simon, 1998, p. 309).

Although the lesson from the episode with Sister Margarita has had a beneficial influence on my life and, I hope, on my habits of thinking, I must confess that at the time its influence was not quite so beneficial. After Sister Margarita pondered my problem and scrutinized my head and my eye-glasses for a few seconds, she informed me that one of my ears was lower than the other, and that I should adjust my glasses with that minor deformity in mind. I spent my middle school years with my head ever so carefully tilted so no one would notice. Even the most contextual insights have their unintended consequences. But that is a theme for another chapter.

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