

The Psychological Foundations of Culture.

Mark Schaller & Christian S. Crandall (Eds.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (www.erlbaum.com). 2004, 384 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

At first glance, it is easy to miscategorize *The Psychological Foundations of Culture* as belonging to the body of literature on cultural diversity. Such a book would consider the impact of cultural processes on an individual's psychology. This one does not, although cross-cultural variants in key constructs such as self esteem and aggression are included here. One might next mistake the volume for an attempt to define culture in its many aspects. This, too would be an error, although multiple and comprehensive definitions of culture are provided throughout the book. In fact, the premise of *The Psychological Foundations of Culture* is the converse of those described above- namely, that culture itself is the product of certain fundamental human characteristics.

This is a novel approach to the question of culture. As contributors Adams and Markus point out, "Studies in social psychology usually do not consider culture directly, as a psychological phenomenon in its own right, but only indirectly, as a source of group-based variation in other psychological phenomena" (pp. 335-336). That this volume exists at all, then, represents a new way of looking at questions of culture. That it comprises a series of rigorously theorized and researched explorations of these questions makes it an informative and valuable reading experience.

This volume is divided into three sections. In the first, *How Cultures Emerge at All*, the contributing authors examine why and how the customs, social norms, rules, and rituals that culture comprises come into being. In doing so, the contributors to this section consider factors such as the awareness of mortality and "death transcendence" as motivators to endorse the prevailing norms of one's culture. Also introduced here is Dynamic Social Impact Theory, a comprehensive explanation of how initially uncorrelated attitudes and beliefs come to co-occur over time, eventually resulting in what we perceive as a coherent and dynamic cultural whole. This comprehensive chapter, written by Harton and Bourgeois, draws heavily on the work of Latané, and is referenced repeatedly throughout the rest of the book.

Section Two, *How Specific Cultural Norms Arise*, addresses the biological, cognitive, and motivational factors that result in the selection and maintenance of group norms. Within this section, a chapter by Crandall and Schaller entitled "Scientists and Science: How Individual Goals Shape Collective Norms" is likely to be of particular interest to the research community. Through a series of well-designed retrospective studies, the authors argue convincingly that the scientific knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next is not necessarily that which is most groundbreaking, has the most explanatory power, or is the most far-reaching in its implications. Rather, the knowledge that survives over time is that which is conveyed simply, easy to understand, and consonant with our already-held beliefs about the world. Further, the authors argue that the scientific questions that are explored at all are influenced by a system that promotes intellectual conservatism and cautious interpretation. Apparently, just as history is written by the victors, science is written by the plain spoken and the grant funded. Crandall and Schaller make a convincing case for the need for us to view our received scientific wisdom in the context in which it was produced, and perhaps to challenge ourselves to be aware of the ways in which our own research questions are shaped.

Finally, the section entitled *How Cultures Persist and Change Over Time* deals with the question of why and how cultural norms are maintained, modified, or discarded. Those versed in

the cross-cultural psychology literature will find themselves on more familiar footing here; this section contains an examination of gender stereotyping, and differences in self concept between inhabitants of Asian and Western cultures. Rather than merely documenting these phenomena, however, the authors in this section examine the question of why subcultural norms and stereotypes continue to exist, even they have outlived their original cultural utility. Of particular interest here is a thoughtful discussion by Prentice and Carranza that explores the question of why people continue to endorse gender stereotypes that are have been essentially unchanged for decades, in spite of the increased prevalence and visibility of both men and women who fail to conform to these stereotypes.

The Psychological Foundations of Culture encourages us to revisit concepts that we may have previously taken for granted. It reminds us that even elements of our culture that we may accept as invariant are the product of individual cognitive and biological processes, and may have changed in function and meaning over time. As such, it invites us to view familiar aspects of our world through a new lens- at times a challenge, but overall a worthwhile one to attempt.

Danielle A. Kaplan, Ph.D.
American Institute for Cognitive Therapy
New York, NY