

Beyond the West: Cross-cultural Differences in Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the cross-cultural limitations of prominent developmental theories proposed by Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg, which have traditionally guided understandings of psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development. Although widely applied, these theories are rooted in Western, individualistic paradigms that may not account for the complex cultural, social, and economic realities of non-Western societies. Through an exploration of cultural influences on psychological constructs such as conformity, locus of control, religious bonding, and the expression of psychological distress, this paper highlights the need for a more culturally nuanced understanding of human development. Particular attention is given to how collectivist cultures interpret developmental milestones, express mental health symptoms, and experience microaggressions differently than their Western counterparts. By addressing these cultural divergences, the paper advocates for a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach to developmental psychology that reflects the diverse experiences of individuals across global societies.

Keywords: development, theories, Erikson, Piaget, Kohlberg, culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The study of human development has been significantly shaped by the foundational theories of Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg. Each of these theorists proposed stage-based models that seek to explain critical aspects of psychological growth across the lifespan, offering structured frameworks for understanding how individuals evolve cognitively, emotionally, and morally. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development [1] consists of eight distinct stages, each defined by a central conflict that individuals must resolve to progress healthily through life. These conflicts, such as trust versus mistrust in infancy or identity versus role confusion during adolescence are rooted in the interaction between the individual and their social environment. The successful resolution of these conflicts contributes to the development of a well-adjusted personality and a coherent sense of self [2].

Piaget's theory of cognitive development [2], on the other hand, focuses on the evolving nature of a child's thinking processes. He proposed four stages: the sensorimotor stage (birth to 2 years), where infants learn through sensory experiences and actions; the preoperational stage (2 to 7 years), characterized by symbolic thinking but limited logical reasoning; the concrete operational stage (7 to 11 years), where logical reasoning begins to emerge in concrete situations; and the formal operational stage (from 12 years onward), marked by the development of abstract and hypothetical thinking. Piaget emphasized that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, highlighting the importance of experience and maturation in cognitive growth [2].

Building upon Piaget's work, Kohlberg developed his theory of moral development [3], which outlines how individuals progress in their understanding of morality. He proposed three levels of moral reasoning, pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional, each divided into two stages. At the pre-conventional level, moral decisions are based on consequences and self-interest. The conventional level emphasizes conformity to social rules and the importance of maintaining social order. The post-conventional level,

which not all individuals reach, involves the recognition of universal ethical principles and justice that may transcend societal norms. Kohlberg's theory has been influential in understanding how people justify moral choices, especially in educational and legal contexts [3].

Together, these theories have contributed extensively to developmental psychology by offering insights into how individuals think, behave, relate to others, and make ethical decisions across various stages of life. Their structured, stage-based approaches provide practical frameworks for application in fields such as education, counseling, and child development. Despite being widely accepted and followed theories of development, Erikson's, Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories have cross-cultural limitations. All three theories describe psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development as different stages. However, this description of each stage of all the three theories can be observed to be based on a western, liberal, and individualistic understanding of people, their lives, society, and their values. Even though these theories are applied across various cultures, they might not be appropriate for all cultures as various other factors like culture, ethnicity, values, and conformity may play a role in traditional and developing countries.

The stages of Erikson's theory offer a general linear succession, which might not always be the case in various tribal cultures or migrant groups [4]. As an individual's social surroundings and environment shape their development, not all individuals may develop in the manner described by Erikson. In developing and less developed countries, the various socioeconomic factors and struggle for survival may change the course of development for most. For example, for migrant groups, identity crises and role confusion could be a concern during adulthood and may continue through the course of their life. Isolation may be considered positive, and intimacy might not be given importance until adulthood in many Asian countries following Buddhism. Psychosocial development cannot be the same for individuals with different social surroundings. Piaget's theory of cognitive development has been observed to be applicable in most countries. However, various factors that are considered in the theory can affect the cognitive development of an individual. Scarcity of resources and malnutrition being a significant concern in many less developed and developing nations can affect a child's cognitive and overall development. Moreover, in countries where an individual's main aim is survival, they are left with very few opportunities of exposure, which can help in their development to attain the formal operational stage. In many tribal and ethnic groups, cognitive development might be understood differently than explained by Piaget.

The moral development of an individual is influenced by the values, social norms, and the level of conformity. Morality can be viewed differently in different cultures. Something that might be moral in the West can be considered highly immoral in Asian countries. In most studies conducted to understand moral behaviour, the definition of morality is understood from a western standpoint. Individualism and liberalism being prominent in the West, the same moral values do not apply to other countries that are collectivistic in nature. Religion, tradition, ethnicity, conformity, and social norms influence an individual's morality in most nations.

Distress in Western versus Non-Western Countries

People from different countries express themselves in different ways. In western countries, people tend to psychologize, whereas, in non-western countries, they tend to somaticize their distressing symptoms. This has been observed to be true in various studies across different western and non-western countries [4]. This might be due to the difference in the cultural norms of these countries. The non-western countries studied are collectivistic in nature. The people in these countries give much importance to the social community and interpersonal relationships. Expressing emotions and the affective symptoms of psychological illness such as depression can be considered self-centred and can be detrimental to social relationships. Expressing physical symptoms of distress is more acceptable in these cultures as physical symptoms do not affect the relationship between people and are often treated with care and concern from others.

As a result of the social norm, people may tend to somaticize their distressing experiences. Moreover, these effective symptoms might not be absent but expressed rather subtly and might be underreported. People from non-western countries such as China tend not to acknowledge their psychological symptoms and focus only on their bodily sensations [4]. The social norms of western countries do not condemn the expression of psychological symptoms, unlike non-western countries. There is greater understanding and awareness of the distinction between physical and psychological symptoms in western compared to non-western countries.

People may understand and are able to differentiate between their somatic and psychological symptoms better. In non-western countries, people might lack this understanding. There is a strong belief in some non-western countries about the integration of the mind, body, and the soul, where all symptoms are grouped together.

Most of the non-western countries have a lot of stigmas around mental health and illness. The lack of awareness among people and stigmatization of mental illness could also be a significant factor contributing to the differences in expressing distressing symptoms between countries. People in non-western countries avoid talking about mental health issues and would rather keep it to themselves due to the fear of being stigmatized. Physical symptoms, on the other hand, are accepted, and treatment is provided. Culturally, these people are also not used to be expressive generally. They tend to be less expressive of their negative feeling, such as sadness or guilt. Lastly, non-western countries lack primary mental health care resources, making it difficult for individuals to seek treatment. In countries like India, there are very few trained mental health professionals compared to the country's population.

Microaggressions

Microaggression is a behaviour, verbal or non-verbal, that acts as a stressor to marginalized and minority groups by targeting them. It is a discriminatory behaviour that could have been performed intentionally, unintentionally, or accidentally. The individual might not intend to hurt the person or even their group. They might not even consciously hold discriminatory thoughts and beliefs about the group. More than often, acts of microaggression are so unconscious and indirect that they go unnoticed by all while still leaving the one at the receiving end feeling distressed and emotionally hurt. As compared to upfront discrimination, microaggression could be difficult for people to identify and stand up against.

The term microaggression was coined in the year 1970 by a psychiatrist at Harvard University. Chester Pierce, the psychiatrist, used the term to describe the minor and subtle put-downs witnessed by African Americans regularly [5]. Over the years, it has been understood that microaggression is not just limited to a specific group, but individuals from all minority and marginalized groups experience it at least once in their lifetime. These groups include any group of people that do not belong to most of that state, society, or culture. The dominant groups tend to exercise this intangible power over the others. Today, these marginalized groups can include ethnic groups, people belonging to the various tribes, women, individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, religious minorities, immigrant, and migrant groups.

Microaggression could be observed when people crack jokes that could be offensive to a particular community and may further justify their actions by emphasizing that they were just joking. Another example is when an individual comments or compliments another. For example, an individual saying, "You are a good driver for a woman." The individual's intention might be to compliment the woman; however, it is discriminatory towards the whole gender. When individuals refuse to acknowledge or validate another's life experiences, they do not promote equality rather than undermine their experience.

An example of this is when people refuse to acknowledge that racism exists or the need for feminism today. Microaggression could also be non-verbal, where an individual behaves differently with a person from a particular marginalized group. For example, when an individual avoids sitting beside a person of color or a person belonging to a particular religion in public transport. Another common example is when people belonging to a marginalized group are not served or treated with respect at café's or restaurants.

Conformity in collectivist and individualist cultures

Like all other factors, conformity also varies based on the culture of a country. Individualistic and collectivistic cultures differ majorly on the conformity of their people. A lot of research comparing conformity in collectivistic and individualistic cultures has concluded that people from collectivist cultures tend to be high on conformity compared to individualist cultures [4]. People from individualist countries like America and Europe have been observed to conform less to the social norm than from collectivist nations like China. This might be due to the difference in the attitudes of individuals from both cultures. People from collectivistic cultures give a greater value to the rules and norms of society. They, therefore, tend to value conformity more. In contrast, people from individualist cultures give value to individual identity and independence more.

In most collectivist cultures, deviating from the social norm can lead to social isolation for the individual and be socially punitive. In the western individualist cultures, the social norms are not as stringent and breaking them does not lead to social isolation as people understand the individual choice, unlike most collectivist cultures. The social order might create fear in people of collectivist nations and may compel them to conform to the norm. This fear does not play a role in individualist nations. The difference in conformity can be observed in a survey conducted wherein subjects from Asia emphasized obedience and conformity values compared to subjects from West Europe who valued personal freedom and independence. Another example focusing on the differences in conformity in the cultures can be understood by knowing that individuals from the US tend to focus on goals that are independent and self-governing, whereas Japanese people tend to align and focus on being like others around them [4].

Another essential factor to be noted is that people from collectivist nations give emphasis to their in-groups. In collectivist nations, there are distinct in-groups and out-groups in society. The in-group of a person comprises of all the people that they share a close interpersonal relationship with. This would include their family, relatives, and close friends. Conformity is higher in in-groups than in out-groups, which comprises of all other people of the same society. No such distinction between in-groups and out-groups seems to exist in individualist nations.

Locus of Control

Individuals from Western countries tend to display an internal locus of control, whereas individuals from other non-western countries tend to display an external locus of control. One factor for this could be the individualistic nature of Western countries. When individuals from a country value independence and individual identity, they tend to attribute failure and success both to themselves. They avoid attributing events to the situation or other external factors. Whereas in a collectivist culture, which most non-western countries follow, individuals believe in collective responsibility and tend to attribute events to external factors.

Individuals from western countries also tend to believe that they can control their lives due to the kind of upbringing they receive from their parents and learn from the cultural environment they are surrounded by. They believe that they are responsible for events in their life and therefore act accordingly. There is a common belief that everyone is directly responsible for their action and should act accordingly. When they attribute events in their life to themselves, they tend to have a higher internal locus of control. In many non-western countries, there is a strong tendency to attribute events to external factors. This belief tends to originate from the strong belief in destiny and other intangible sources like supernatural forces. In countries like India, mental illness is still attributed to witchcraft, unlike the western countries.

Moreover, in western countries, most people are self-dependent and independent of external factors and influences. They do not tend to rely on external factors, which gives them another reason to attribute events in their life to themselves. They might also be suspicious of external forces like the government and tend to take more responsibility for events in their life. However, this could also lead to an attributional error in individuals from western countries as some factors might realistically be due to external factors, and internal attribution of those could cause distress to the individual. A balance between internal and external attribution needs to be maintained to avoid distress. There have been studies that indicate that there is no distinct pattern of locus of control between western and non-western countries [4].

Religious Bonding

Religious bonding is expressed through the participation and practice of religious rituals and practices specific to the religion an individual follows [6]. It refers to the bond created between the individual and the inner self through the practice of these rituals. The highest form of religious bonding is when an individual, through their religious bonding, becomes independent of and overcomes all limitations that they experience of their physical existence. This allows the individual to have a higher perspective for all their personal problems and concerns and understand them better while remaining detached from it. They are able to perceive the transcendent reality.

These religious practices that are used to express religious bonding vary across various religions and cultures. These could include the practice of personal and individual prayer, attending the church, performing rituals,

prayer in the temple or the mosque, reading the religious scriptures, and meditation. These practices can also include the supernatural experience of visions or a trans like states in some cultures. These practices may vary from individual to individual and from country to country. Despite belonging to the same religion, there could be variations in how religious rituals and practices are followed in different cultural groups. However, despite the differences in how individuals express their religious bonding, the bonding may manifest itself similarly across cultures and countries. The purpose of the highest form of religious bonding is to help individuals attain something like self-actualization and become self-transcendent. Not all religious people indulge in religious bonding. The ones who do inculcate these rituals and practices in their everyday life, maintain the bond they have created with their almighty or higher power. This helps them gain perspective with others and themselves.

CONCLUSION

The examination of widely accepted developmental theories, such as those proposed by Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg reveals significant limitations when applied across diverse cultural contexts. These theories, grounded predominantly in Western, individualistic frameworks, may not adequately account for the cultural, social, and economic variations present in non-Western and collectivist societies. Developmental processes are not universally linear or uniform; rather, they are deeply influenced by environmental factors such as cultural values, socioeconomic conditions, religious beliefs, and communal expectations. Similarly, the expression of psychological distress, the experience of microaggressions, and the dynamics of conformity, locus of control, and religious bonding all demonstrate considerable variation between individualistic and collectivist cultures. For instance, while Western societies encourage overt psychological expression and value internal locus of control, non-Western cultures often emphasize somatic expression and external attributions rooted in communal or spiritual belief systems.

These cultural distinctions underscore the importance of contextual sensitivity in psychological research and application. A one-size-fits-all model of development or behaviour fails to reflect the lived experiences of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, while foundational, traditional psychological theories must be critically evaluated and adapted to ensure cultural relevance and inclusivity. Such culturally responsive approaches can foster more accurate understandings of human behaviour and contribute to more effective mental health practices, education systems, and social policies across global contexts.

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