The Gene–Culture Interaction Framework and Implications for Health

Joni Y. Sasaki
York University

Jessica LeClair
University of California, Santa Barbara

Alexandria West
York University

Heejung S. Kim
University of California, Santa Barbara

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Abstract

Based on the framework of Gene–Environment interactions (G × E), the Gene–Culture interaction framework demonstrates that a more complete understanding of thoughts and behaviors relevant to health may come from incorporating both genetic and cultural factors. In particular, genes may interact with culture such that the same genetic predisposition leads to different outcomes depending on culture, and cultural differences on a given outcome may vary depending on genetic predispositions. In this chapter, we first provide an overview of G × E research and some of the underlying biological mechanisms of these interactions. Next we explain the Gene–Culture interaction framework and discuss how culture is an important form of environment to consider that makes theoretical contributions unique from other forms of environment typically studied in G × E research. We then discuss theoretical questions raised by Gene–Culture interaction research and specify how the Gene–Culture interaction framework can be applied to health issues, such as the definition of health, determinants of health, and treatment solutions.
The Gene–Culture Interaction Framework and Implications for Health

Imagine two wine grape varieties across two different climates. While the Cabernet Sauvignon variety may thrive in warm climates, the ideal climate for Riesling is relatively cooler. Knowing when and why grapes produce optimal fruit for good wine requires understanding the interaction of a number of factors, such as grape variety based on genes and climatic aspects of the environment: these grape varieties thrive in either warm or cool climates, depending on their particular variety. Similarly, variation in human thought and behavior relies on both genetic and environmental factors, as well as the interaction between the two. Focusing only on genetics as a source of variation ignores the reality that the same genetic tendency can lead to different outcomes according to the environment. Likewise, focusing on the environment as the sole explanatory force overlooks the fact that the same environment can have different consequences for people depending on their genetic tendencies. In order to make predictions about when or why people think and behave the way they do, it is useful to consider their biological predispositions together with the particular environmental context in which they exist.

Among the many ways in which environments vary, culture—the part of the environment created and shared among social beings and passed down over generations (de Waal, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Herskovits, 1948; Triandis, 2007)—is one important aspect of environmental variation that has only recently been considered together with genes. Cultural psychology is a field that investigates cultural variation in systematic ways and has grown considerably in its breadth of topics and scientific approaches over the last quarter of a century. More recently, the emerging field of cultural neuroscience has built on cultural psychology, tackling questions on culture, mind, and the brain by integrating cultural psychological research with cutting-edge techniques and perspectives from neuroscience (see Kim & Sasaki, 2014 for review and proposed framework of cultural
neuroscience). Using cultural psychology and cultural neuroscience as foundations, our research has examined gene–culture interactions, or the dynamic interplay of genes and culture as they jointly influence psychological outcomes (Kim et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2011). Our perspective is that not only do both genes and culture act as independent sources of influence, but importantly, they also interact to predict various outcomes. Therefore, the gene–culture interaction framework examines how culture can shape the way genetic tendencies are expressed, and also how cultural influences may change depending on genetic predispositions.

Because the gene–culture interaction framework considers the socio-cultural context as one source of psychological variation that interacts with biological predispositions, this framework may be important for understanding the complexities surrounding health within and across diverse societies. In particular, many issues relevant to physical and psychological health, including the determinants of health outcomes, treatments for health problems, and intervention strategies, may vary across cultures. Within any society, there exist groups of people that differ along multiple dimensions. In addition to ethnicity or nationality, which are the most commonly studied dimensions of culture, there are many other forms of culture (Cohen, 2009) that have important health implications, such as religion (Koenig & Larson, 2001; McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000), region (Plaut, Markus, & Lachman, 2002), and social class (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Adler & Stewart, 2010; Plaut, Markus, Treadway, & Fu, 2012). These different forms of culture vary not only within, but also across societies, and therefore, using a cultural perspective can help broaden understandings of health beyond the populations that tend to be studied most (i.e., “WEIRD” participants who are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010a, 2010b). At the same time, there are important individual differences in genetic predispositions, and these predispositions may predict health
outcomes differently depending on the cultural context. Given that genes interact with environmental factors to influence health-related outcomes (e.g., Caspi et al., 2003; Johnson & Krueger, 2005; Kim-Cohen et al., 2006; Larsen et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2009; Schmid et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2006) and that there are cultural differences in how people strive for and achieve a healthful life (Oishi & Diener, 2001; Plaut et al., 2012), the gene–culture interaction framework has great potential for predicting and explaining the complexity that surrounds health issues for diverse groups.

In this chapter, the first section provides an overview of research on gene–environment interactions (Gene × Environment, or G × E) and the biological mechanisms underlying these interactions. Second, we explain the framework of gene–culture interactions (Gene × Culture, or G × C), including how this framework builds on gene–environment research and makes unique theoretical contributions. We also discuss some potential mechanisms of gene–culture interactions, review empirical evidence supporting the Gene × Culture framework, and bridge the framework with a prominent theory in the study of genes and culture—that of gene–culture coevolution. In the next section, we discuss theoretical issues and questions raised by Gene × Culture research, including implications for findings in cultural psychology and issues surrounding covariation of cultural and genetic differences. Finally, we specify how the Gene × Culture framework can be applied to health research. In so doing, we explain the theoretical value of taking a cultural perspective in issues of health, suggest future areas of research relevant to health, and offer insight on how this research has implications for public health policy.

**Gene–Environment Interactions and Underlying Biological Mechanisms**

The framework of gene–environment interactions (G × E) is one that should seem familiar to many psychologists, particularly in social and personality disciplines, and the framework also comes with certain advantages compared to other interactionist models of
behavior. The idea that something about the person (in this case, genes) interacts with something in the environment (such as the social context) is reminiscent of classic work from Person × Situation theory (Mischel, 1990; Mischel & Shoda, 1995), which addresses how personality can interact with situational contexts to influence behavior. Consideration of genetics from a similar perspective raises a number of novel questions and potential implications for psychology. Some of the underlying biological mechanisms of gene–environment interactions, for example, may potentially be incorporated into theories of psychological phenomena. Genetics research also offers a particularly promising way to contribute to an understanding of cultural differences in basic psychological processes, including health-related outcomes.

The long-standing nature–nurture debate focuses on distinguishing the distinct influences of genes versus environment. Rather than treating the two factors separately, the gene–environment interaction (G × E) framework describes the phenotypic effects of interactions between individual genetic variation and the environment. The framework proposes that environmental conditions may moderate the psychological outcome of a particular genetic sequence, or that genetic predispositions may moderate the relationship between the environment and an outcome (Caspi et al., 2002, 2003). In other words, an individual could be genetically predisposed towards a particular psychological outcome, but that outcome may only occur given specific environmental pressures. For example, Caspi and colleagues (2003) found that carrying the short (s) allele of the 5-HTTLPR polymorphism of the serotonin transporter (SLC6A4) gene promoter region increases the likelihood of showing depressive symptoms compared to carrying the long (l) allele, but only when coupled with exposure to life stress (for recent meta-analytic support of this G × E finding, see Karg, Burmeister, Shedden, & Sen, 2011; but see also Risch et al., 2009).
Originally studied in the context of disease susceptibility, genes implicated in environmental sensitivity, such as the s allele of 5-HTTLPR, have been referred to as “risk” genes (e.g., Caspi et al., 2003). Recently, however, such genes have been re-conceptualized as “plasticity” genes, rather than as linked to mostly positive or mostly negative outcomes, in order to highlight the malleability rather than valence of particular genetic predispositions (Belsky et al., 2009). In addition to 5-HTTLPR (Caspi et al., 2003; Cheon, Livingston, Hong, & Chiao, in press; see also Cheon & Hong, this volume), gene–environment interactions have been reported for various other genes, including the gene encoding monoamine oxidase A (MAOA) (Caspi et al., 2002; Foley et al., 2004; Kim-Cohen et al., 2006) and the dopamine D4 receptor (DRD4) gene (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2011; Sasaki et al., 2013). In a study of intervention effects on child behavior, a repeat polymorphism in DRD4 moderated the effectiveness of the intervention (Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2011), suggesting a differential susceptibility to environment inputs dependent on genetic differences. Another study investigating the interaction between the environment and variants of the DRD4 gene found gene–environment interactions on even short-term exposure to environmental conditions: participants carrying 2- or 7-repeat allele variants of DRD4 were more susceptible to the influence of religion priming on prosocial behavior compared to participants without these variants (Sasaki et al., 2013). Across multiple genes and investigations, there is evidence that people with certain genetic variants of “plasticity genes” may be more susceptible to environmental influence in particular domains.

At the molecular level, environmental factors may interact with genes by influencing the regulation of gene expression, which is a crucial link between genes and their phenotypes. Gene expression is the process of synthesizing a biologically functional molecule from DNA, and the
capacity to adapt gene expression in response to physiological changes or environmental conditions is a basic biological mechanism. For instance, in response to being wounded, an injured organism might upregulate the expression of genes relevant to wound recovery (Slavich & Cole, 2013). Similarly, external social factors could activate biological pathways to regulate gene expression. Stress and social isolation, for instance, have long been associated with poorer immune system functioning (Seeman, 1996), and a study examining white blood cells provided evidence linking social to biological factors at the level of gene expression (Cole et al., 2007). In particular, among adults who felt less socially connected, pro-inflammatory genes were upregulated, while anti-inflammatory genes were downregulated, providing molecular evidence for the relation between social isolation and elevated risk for inflammatory disease.

Social signal transduction, first studied in the context of animal models (Robinson, Ferald, & Clayton, 2008), is a process explaining how social conditions might alter gene expression through transcription factors, which are proteins that regulate the transcription of DNA into RNA (Slavich & Cole, 2013). Specifically, social signal transduction emphasizes that subjectively perceived social environment threats may affect hormone and transmitter levels, leading to changes in the activity of transcription factors. For instance, feelings of loneliness or social isolation have been linked to the activation of inflammatory genes and inhibition of antiviral genes (Slavich et al., 2010), and even the mere threat of social loss appears sufficient to alter gene transcription dynamics (Miller et al., 2008). The process of social signal transduction underscores the point that an individual’s subjective perception of social conditions as either threatening or nonthreatening may at times be more influential than what is objectively the case (see also Cheon & Hong, this volume).
Individuals may also vary in their signal-transducing potential depending on differences in their genes. For example, a recent study on the link between environmental adversity and health outcomes examined a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) in the promoter region of the human IL6 gene, which is involved in the inflammatory response (Cole et al., 2010). Particularly within the promoter and enhancer region of genes, genetic sequence variations such as SNPs may alter the binding affinity of transcription factors. This SNP of IL6 inhibits binding of the transcription factor GATA1, which typically activates in response to environmental adversity, and thus, people carrying the low binding-affinity variant of the IL6 gene show an inflammatory response that is unrelated to exposure to environmental adversity.

Behavioral and health outcomes may also be influenced by epigenetics, which are processes that can affect gene expression without altering the underlying genetic sequence (Ledon-Rettig & Pfennig, 2012). Molecular-level processes, such as methylation, or the addition of methyl groups, may prevent transcription factors from accessing DNA, possibly preventing the synthesis of gene products. A key finding on how epigenetic processes contribute to behavioral variation showed that maternal care in rats is associated with differential methylation of the glucocorticoid receptor (GR) promoter region in the brain hippocampi (Weaver et al., 2004, 2005). The offspring of rat mothers who naturally exhibited greater pup licking and grooming behavior showed decreased methylation of the GR promoter region in the hippocampi. Greater methylation of the GR promoter has been found to reduce gene expression and to lead to a greater disposition for anxiety (Meaney, 2001; Weaver et al., 2004).

In humans there is evidence that epigenetic regulation of genes may be involved in various social processes and mental health outcomes. For example, in a study investigating methylation status of a regulator region (CpG island) of the oxytocin receptor gene (OXTR) in
peripheral blood cells and temporal cortex, individuals with autism showed increases in methylation compared to controls (Gregory et al., 2009). The increased methylation of this regulator region was specifically associated with decreased OXTR transcription in an area of the temporal cortex adjacent to the temporal parietal cortex and near the superior temporal sulcus (STS), a brain region implicated in social cognition (Allison, Puce, & McCarthy, 2000; Pelphrey & Morris, 2006). DNA methylation of OXTR may also play a role in individual variation in social information processing. The DNA methylation status of OXTR was found to predict neural activation of areas of the brain implicated in social processing in response to ambiguous social stimuli (Jack, Connelly, & Morris, 2012).

Unlike sequence variations, which are relatively stable across an individual’s lifetime, there is emerging evidence that epigenetic modifications may occur dynamically in response to situational conditions. Immediately following a stressful experimental task, for instance, the methylation status of the stress-associated gene OXTR first increases, and then once the stressor ends, methylation status decreases below baseline (Unternaehrer et al., 2012). Epigenetic mechanisms may play an important role not only for long-term influences of environmental conditions on gene expression, but also for short-term, rapid changes in gene expression in response to situational social stressors. Basic molecular mechanisms that underlie gene expression thus provide a biological pathway for environmental influences to penetrate deeply, altering patterns of gene expression and regulation.

Advances in molecular biology have greatly increased scientific understandings of the mechanisms through which different social environments lead to changes in gene expression and thus behavior. In addition to investigating potential mechanisms more on the genetic side of the $G \times E$ equation, our perspective is that incorporating a cultural approach in the $G \times E$ framework
adds the richness of cultural content to the environment side of the equation and may ultimately elucidate some of the psychological processes underlying G × E effects.

**Gene–Culture Interaction Framework**

Building on the gene–environment framework, the gene–culture interaction (Gene × Culture, or G × C) approach provides one possible way of reconceptualizing the environment to include the cultural context (Kim et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2011). The “environment” in the G × E framework is a broad concept that can include anything from resource availability and weather variability to social environments in the family and the local society. Types of social environments can then be meaningfully partitioned into the personal environment, or individual variation in experiences and events such as stress in the home setting (e.g., Taylor et al., 2006), and the cultural environment, or beliefs, values, practices, and products that constitute a shared system of meaning, such as the Western emphasis on independence and personal choice (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Although there are many ways to potentially parse the environmental component of G × E, we argue that focusing on the cultural part of the environment, as in the gene–culture interaction framework, is particularly important both theoretically and practically.

Although no one definition of culture is uniformly agreed upon, there are key components that many scientists are likely to endorse. Most would agree that culture is non-biological—that is, non-genetic. Via evolutionary processes, social organisms may be biologically prepared with the capacity to develop culture (Tooby & Cosmides, 1992), and genes and culture may interact (Dressler, Balieiro, Ribeiro, & Dos Santos, 2009; Kim et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Kitayama et al., under review; Sasaki, Kim, & Xu, 2011) and mutually influence each other in processes of gene–culture coevolution (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; Feldman &
Laland, 1996; or dual inheritance: Boyd & Richerson, 1985; see also Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981; Durham, 1990, 1991; Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, & Schaller, 2008; Lumsden & Wilson, 1981) to ultimately shape the neural processes underlying thought and behavior (see Chiao & Immordino-Yang, 2013). Yet at the same time, culture itself can be separated from genes. Although culture influences and is influenced by biological processes, culture itself can be understood as beliefs, values, practices, and products that are socially created rather than genetically inherited by living beings (de Waal, 2001). Once socially created, these environmental features must then be socially transmitted to others and passed down over multiple generations such that they are maintained well beyond the lives of their original creators (Berger & Luckman, 1966). These characteristics, some have argued, are among the hallmarks of culture (de Waal, 2001; Geertz, 1973; Herskovits, 1948; Triandis, 2007).

Culture exists not only outside the self in the form of cultural products, or tangible, public representations such as art and media, but also inside the mind (Cohen, 2009; Kim & Markus, 1999; Shweder, 1995). In our approach, the gene–culture interaction framework incorporates both aspects of the cultural environment. Thus, consideration of culture as a form of environment provides an understanding of how an individual’s own beliefs and values are shared with others, and how these mutually shared meanings allow people to interpret events and understand their experiences. Shared meaning constitutes an important part of culture that is unique from other forms of environment and is one of the main strengths of considering cultural and psychological factors in G × E research.

**Mechanisms of the Gene–Culture Interaction Framework**

Although the biological mechanisms of gene–culture interactions have yet to be clearly elucidated, some of the known biological mechanisms of gene–environment interactions may
suggest possible mechanisms linking the cultural environment to genes. One way of conceptualizing culture is as socially shared patterns of mental processes and psychological responses, which can be applied to the process of social signal transduction. Just as the subjective perception of social conditions can affect patterns of gene expression (Slavich & Cole, 2013), differences in cultural expectations and norms could potentially affect perceptions of social situations and thus the way genes are expressed. For example, in the case of seeking social support, European Americans are more likely to confide in close others in distressing situations and directly ask for help compared to Asian Americans, who may be relatively more concerned about burdening their social networks (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, 2008; Taylor et al., 2004). Thus, the same social situation—seeking social support—could be perceived as more or less threatening depending on the cultural context (Taylor, Welch, Kim, & Sherman, 2007). One possibility is that such cultural variation in subjective experience could manifest in cultural differences in the activity of gene expression.

Cultural meanings, practices, and patterns of interactions could also have implications for epigenetic processes. Epigenetic differences in the genomes of monozygotic twins, for instance, have occurred as a function of accumulated exposure to divergent life experiences (Fraga et al., 2005). Such epigenetic modifications result in different behavioral and health outcomes—in this case, differences between twins in disease onset. Similarly, individuals engaged in different cultural contexts may be systematically exposed to varying experiences that contribute to epigenetic change. For instance, a study comparing Asia and North America found that the cultural environment of the United States offered more frequent and potent opportunities to exert influence on one’s surroundings, compared to Japanese cultural environments, which provided more opportunities for adjusting to the situation (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). A
lifetime of exposure to varying experiences could potentially result in culturally differing patterns of methylation, epigenetic modifications that in some cases may be transmitted across generations, providing an inheritance mechanism for the impact of environmental factors (see Franklin & Mansuy, 2010).

From the perspective of differential susceptibility, individuals may exhibit differences in their genetic predisposition to methylation, and thus be more or less sensitive to environmental influences (e.g., Huang, Perry, & Laux, 1999). In a study of adults with traumatic experiences, increased methylation leading to decreased gene expression was found to moderate the association between serotonin transporter gene polymorphisms and depressive symptoms (van IJzendoorn, Caspers, Bakermans-Kranenburg, Beach, & Phillbert, 2010). The short variant of the 5-HTTLPR gene predicted more feelings of unresolved loss but only when methylation levels were low. Thus epigenetic processes, such as methylation, may operate at the interface of environmental exposure and psychological outcomes.

**Evidence for Gene–Culture Interactions**

Evidence for gene–culture interactions relevant to health outcomes comes from studies investigating a variety of genes and psychological processes. Building on the idea of environmental susceptibility, gene–culture interaction research focuses on genes that have been implicated in environmental sensitivity and predicts that particular genetic variations will alter an individual’s susceptibility to environmental influence. In a study of the interaction between variants of the 2A serotonin receptor (5-HT2A) and depressive symptoms, the perception of one’s family as a prototypically “good family” in Brazil negatively correlated with depressive symptoms (Dressler et al., 2009). The effect was enhanced for those individuals carrying the AA variant of 5-HT2A, as compared to individuals with AG or GG variants. Another study, which
investigates gene–culture interactive effects on psychological well-being, found that religiosity was associated with greater well-being for those genetically predisposed to be environmentally sensitive (i.e., those carrying the GG variant of a particular oxytocin receptor gene polymorphism), but only for those from a cultural context where religion tends to provide more frequent opportunities for affiliation (Sasaki et al., 2011).

Gene–culture interactions have also been shown for health-relevant behaviors, such as emotion regulation. Kim and colleagues (2011) compared emotion regulation approaches between the United States, where expressivity is more highly valued, and Korea, where suppression is valued more. Koreans with the environmentally sensitive variant (GG genotype) of the oxytocin receptor gene (OXTR) reported using more emotion suppression than those with the AA genotype, while European Americans showed the opposite pattern. Overall it seems that through engagement in different cultural systems, individuals genetically predisposed to environmental sensitivity are the ones to most strongly adopt the particular psychological and behavioral patterns supported by a culture for certain psychological phenomena (Kim & Sasaki, 2012, 2014). Likewise, when comparing across multiple cultures, the most culturally divergent patterns of behavior relevant to a gene of interest appear to emerge among people with environmentally sensitive predispositions.

**Bridging Gene × Culture with Gene–Culture Coevolution**

Although the gene–culture interaction and gene–culture coevolution perspectives both investigate the relationship between biological and cultural variation, they address different aspects of this relationship, and there are some interesting points that arise from comparing these perspectives. Gene–culture coevolution theory (also known as dual inheritance theory) provides an explanation for the macro-level interactions between culture and genes by applying a
Darwinian selection framework to culture. The theory proposes that similar to genetic variants, features of a culture could increase individual fitness and be transmitted through social learning in a system of inheritance not unlike genetic inheritance (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; Feldman & Laland, 1996). Thus cultural features, which serve as adaptations to local environments and conditions, could evolve much like genes evolve. Such cultural evolution may have been particularly important in the history of human evolution because cultural practices could have allowed for adaptation to environments at a pace much faster than allowed by genetic evolution alone.

According to gene–culture coevolution, cultural systems contribute to selecting environmental pressures under which genetic evolution occurs. One classic example is the coevolution of dairy-farming practices and the lactase gene. The ability to digest milk proteins usually disappears after childhood. However, there is an association between a history of dairy farming and the frequency of genetic variants related to lactose tolerance in a population (Beja-Pereira et al., 2003; Myles et al., 2005), suggesting that the development of cultural practices supporting dairy farming and milk consumption contributed to evolutionary selection favoring alleles for adult lactose tolerance. Another example comes from research investigating the association between individualism–collectivism tendencies and the serotonin transporter gene polymorphism 5-HTTLPR (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; see also Mrazek, Chiao, Blizinsky, Lun, & Gelfand, in press, for gene–culture coevolution evidence of cultural tightness vs. looseness and 5-HTTLPR as explained by historical ecological threat). Previous studies have demonstrated that regions with historically greater pathogen prevalence tend to be more collectivistic (Fincher et al., 2008). Chiao and Blizinsky (2010) report that the cultural value of collectivism, which enhances social connectedness, is associated with a higher frequency of the s allele of 5-
HTTLPR, which has been linked to anxiety and mood disorders in certain populations. The development of collectivistic practices may have evolved to reduce exposure to environmental pathogens, and thus may have also strengthened selection pressures for the s allele of 5-HTTLPR if it buffers susceptible populations against genetic predispositions for affective disorders (see also Way & Lieberman, 2010).

The theory of gene–culture coevolution is complementary with the gene–culture interaction framework in that the two approaches operate at different levels of analysis. Gene–culture coevolution focuses on the macro-level evolutionary processes shaping cultural norms and genetic variants. In contrast, the gene–culture interaction framework addresses how culture and genetics interact to influence behavioral and psychological outcomes at the individual level. Through gene–culture coevolution processes, a particular adaptive cultural value may become common within a population, creating selective pressures for a particular genetic variant. However, genetic variation will still exist in the population. The gene–environment interaction framework explains how individuals within the same cultural context might think and behave differently depending on their genetic predispositions. For example, there may be a region-level correlation between the prevalence of the s allele of 5-HTTLPR and collectivistic values (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010), while at the individual level, s allele carriers versus l allele carriers may be influenced by cultural norms differently, as predicted within the gene–culture interaction framework.

Research on gene–culture interactions is new, yet the perspective holds great promise for illuminating the processes underlying genetic and environmental influences on behavior. Investigations in molecular biology may inform understandings of underlying biological mechanisms, while cultural research may contribute to predictions about underlying
psychological mechanisms. By bringing these two perspectives together, Gene × Culture research may offer a more complete picture of the process through which cultural information, both inside and outside the head, can interact with genetic information to lead to different outcomes.

**Theoretical Issues and Questions Raised by Gene × Culture Research**

As an emerging area of research, gene–culture interactions raise a number of important issues with theoretical relevance. First, there are some general patterns of results from Gene × Culture research that may have implications for cultural psychology. Second, research on genes and culture raises interesting questions about genetic frequencies in different populations. Especially for addressing issues related to health, the combination of both genetic and cultural considerations holds great potential. Yet at the same time, the Gene × Culture framework represents a departure from more classic cultural perspectives in some ways and raises important questions to be addressed.

**Implications for Cultural Psychology**

Gene–culture interactions offer a way of understanding not only how genetic predispositions may manifest themselves differently depending on the cultural context, but also how cultural factors may influence people differently according to individual differences at the level of genes. This framework nicely captures how the content of culture can inform research in the realm of biology and behavioral genetics. Yet that is not to say that the influence of culture is unvaried. Genes may constrain the effects of culture by providing people with a range of possible traits or behaviors, and the environment, including culture, can then select from that range of possibilities to lead to a particular outcome.
Gene × Culture findings have shown that some well-known cultural effects seem to occur more for people with certain genetic predispositions than others. Cultural differences in emotional support seeking (Kim et al., 2010a) and emotion regulation (Kim et al., 2011), for instance, emerge among people with GG and AG genotypes of OXTR but not AA genotypes. In addition, previously found cultural differences in locus of attention (Choi, Koo, & Choi, 2007; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001) appeared only for GG and CG genotypes of 5-HTR1A, not for CC genotypes (Kim et al., 2010b). This general pattern of results may have implications for cultural psychology more broadly because it is possible that many previously discovered cultural differences are stronger for those with certain genetic predispositions than others. Although it is probably not the case that a single gene leads people to be more or less culturally normative across all traits and behaviors, one possibility given our Gene × Culture findings and other Gene × Environment research is that sets of genes (e.g., oxytocin-related genes) may be related to culturally normative responses for specific outcomes (e.g., socio-emotional sensitivity). This means that cultural differences on these outcomes may be more pronounced for people with certain genetic predispositions than others, but across outcomes, there should be no relationship between cultural normativity in general and any one set of genes, consistent with insights on why cultural differences are not always reducible to individual differences (Na et al., 2010).

**Covariation of Cultural and Genetic Differences**

One intriguing question comes from observations combining cultural differences in psychological and behavioral tendencies with differences found in the distribution of specific genotypes across ethnic groups, such as people of East Asian versus European ancestry. Interestingly, many of the genes that have been commonly studied in psychology, such as 5-HTTLPR, OXTR, and DRD4, have drastically different genotype distributions across ethnic
groups. Sometimes these divergent genotype frequency distributions correlate with documented differences in cultural norms (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; Mrazek et al., in press). Yet when one considers the general set of psychological tendencies associated with any given polymorphism, the way in which genotype distributions within a cultural group align with their documented psychological tendencies vary considerably.

For instance, compared to groups with European ancestry, East Asian samples tend to have a much higher frequency of the 5-HTTLPR polymorphism’s allele, which is associated with stress reactivity (e.g., Caspi et al. 2003). East Asians are also known to be more avoidance oriented than North Americans with European cultural backgrounds (Heine et al., 2001; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). Thus, the fact that the environmental susceptibility genotype of 5-HTTLPR is more common among people from East Asian cultures, which emphasize interpersonal influence (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2003) and the value of group harmony (Kim & Markus, 1999), seems to make sense intuitively.

At the same time, the G allele of OXTR rs53576 polymorphism is far more common among European Americans than among East Asians (e.g., Kim et al., 2010b; Kim et al., 2011). Given the association of the OXTR G allele with social bonding and affiliation (e.g., Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2008; Rodrigues, Saslow, Garcia, John, & Keltner, 2009; but see also Bakermans-Kranenburg & van IJzendoorn, 2013), as well as with greater environment susceptibility (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007), it may seem counter-intuitive to see a higher frequency of G alleles among European Americans, who are from cultural contexts that tend to emphasize independence and individualism, than among East Asians, who are from cultural contexts where interdependence and collectivism are fostered.
To further complicate the matter, different variants of DRD4 polymorphism (i.e., 2-repeat and 7-repeat alleles) in different ethnic groups are associated with similar functional and psychological characteristics (Reist et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2004), but the frequency of these respective environment susceptibility genotypes are roughly compatible between European Americans and Asians (e.g., Kitayama et al., under review; Sasaki et al., 2013).

Genetic profiles of different ethnic groups are no doubt the result of natural selection processes and specific challenges posed by the regional environment, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address how particular genes come to be more frequent in one ethnic group than another. In the present chapter, we focus on what we can learn from the observation of diversity in genetic distributions among different ethnic groups and future research questions that may be inspired by these observations.

Given that the frequencies of genotypes for these susceptibility genes differ greatly, and sometimes against what seems to be the intuitive association with cultural tendencies, one can reasonably infer that cultural tendencies cannot be simply explained as averages of phenotypic tendencies of populations. That is, the frequency distribution of OXTR genotypes (Kim et al., 2010a, 2011) probably does not explain why East Asians are more interdependent than European Americans. To the extent that there is any relationship between genotypic distributions and cultural tendencies, the relationships will be considerably more complicated, as proposed by other theoretical models such as gene–culture co-evolution and gene–culture interaction. For example, there is recent evidence to suggest that DRD4 variant may moderate the cultural difference in independent versus interdependent social orientations such that 2- or 7-repeat allele carriers tend to have greater independence for European Americans but greater interdependence for East Asians (Kitayama et al., under review).
An additional point is that it is not always clear how specific the associations are between a gene and its psychological correlate. For example, stress reactivity is often discussed in relation to 5-HTTLPR, although it is by no means the only gene that is associated with stress reactivity. There are other genes, such as OXTR (Rodrigues et al., 2009) and MAOA (Caspi et al., 2002), that influence one’s sensitivity to environmental distress. Thus, while there seems to be some genetic specificity in the associations with different social behaviors, strongly inferring conceptually distinct and exclusive psychological outcomes from specific genes should be done with caution. Rather, there may be sets of genes with distinguishable, but overlapping functions that predispose individuals to certain domains of socio-cultural influence. It will be useful to adopt more reliable ways of investigating genetic influence, such as a polygenic approach examining the link between a trait and multiple genes and a pleiotropic approach examining how a single gene may be linked to multiple traits.

Moreover, considering gene–culture interactions in the context of genotypic distribution differences in ethnic groups raises the question of why sometimes only a small genetic minority in a cultural group seems to embody culturally normative tendencies. For example, the s allele of 5-HTTLPR is relatively rare among European Americans, and the G allele of OXTR rs53576 is relatively rare among East Asians, when both genotypes seem to predispose people to be more susceptible to cultural influences. For this question, we propose that there are at least two possible answers.

One possibility is that the maintenance of culturally normative tendencies may be shaped by multiple genes in conjunction with each other. Examination of multiple polymorphisms in combination, including genes that are more or less common in a given population (e.g., G allele of OXTR or s allele of 5-HTTLPR among East Asians), is likely to yield a more normally
distributed genetic profile at the cultural group level (cf. Belsky et al., 2013), evening out skewed distributions of each polymorphism. In other words, the genetic basis of cultural susceptibility itself is probably similarly and normally distributed among many cultural groups. Given that, it would be unwise to infer that any single gene is responsible for a broad range of cultural differences or that a gene or even a group of genes are responsible for a broad category of social behaviors, such a cultural conformity, without further specifying the exact processes. It is more likely that a particular gene or set of genes predispose each individual to be sensitive to a small aspect of cultural environment, and only as a whole, we may be able to see cultural patterns.

This issue of single gene research is not limited to research in cultural genetics. The single gene approach has been fruitful in leading the initial examination of the excruciatingly complex process of genetic influence, allowing investigators to formulate theory-driven predictions in a relatively parsimonious manner. However, the field is moving toward looking at how multiple genes together influence psychological and behavioral tendencies. Yet, there is currently no clear model to examine multiple genes in conjunction with each other. It is unclear if the genes function in additive, interactive, or compensatory ways, though there are some notable efforts to deal with this issue. For example, Belsky and colleagues (2013) selected multiple genes based on Genome-wide Association Studies (GWAS) discoveries and examined how they predict particular health-related behaviors, such as smoking and obesity, using an additive model. Also, Genome-wide Complex Trait Analysis (GCTA; Yang, Lee, Goddard, & Visscher, 2011) was developed to address the “missing heritability” problem as a way to utilize GWAS data for estimating and partitioning complex trait variation. Although these models offer promise, to date there has not been a compelling study using multiple genes along with environmental input to predict social behaviors. As the field moves forward, there will no doubt
be empirically and biologically informed ways to examine multiple genes to further uncover the role of genes and environment in shaping social and cultural behaviors, and researchers will then be able to answer questions with greater certainty.

An additional possibility is that much of the culture-specific norms have not been stable for long enough to be reflected directly by a set of genes. The time frame for genetic divergence among ethnic groups is more than 40,000 years (Bowcock et al., 1991). Thus, much of the genetic composition of each ethnic group seems to predate certain components of the established culture, at least in terms of cultural values, institutions, and assumptions based on specific historical antecedents. Of course, as research on gene–culture coevolution shows, cultural practices may have a detectable influence on genetic distribution in specific cases (e.g., Beja-Pereira et al., 2003) within a relatively brief evolutionary time frame. Nevertheless, it is likely that changes in thoughts and behaviors at the individual level, and even cultural practices and norms at the group level, are much more malleable and quick-paced than changes in genetic characteristics of populations. Given that, the link between genetic profiles of a particular ethnic group and their cultural characteristics may be fairly unstable, and this is an important possibility to keep in mind.

The ways in which genes and culture are related with each other are numerous, as shown in this very brief review. At the moment, much remains unknown in terms of how genes work to eventually lead to traits, and there are a number of caveats to consider in formulating new theories. The field will benefit in the future from combining multiple perspectives, including psychology, behavioral genetics, population genetics, and anthropology, to address questions about the mind and behavior.

**How Can the Gene × Culture Framework Be Applied to Health Research?**
Due to the growth of cultural psychology, there is now a relatively large body of research to draw upon for investigations on health using a gene–culture interaction perspective. In this final section, we discuss cultural research relevant to health, promising avenues of future research, and implications for public health policy.

**Culture and Health**

Cultural differences exist even in basic psychological phenomena, many of which have important implications for understanding what people consider healthful and how they ultimately achieve positive health outcomes. For instance, it is well known that social relationships have strong implications for health (Cohen, 2004), and this general link may be true in every culture. The meanings embedded in relationship contexts, however, may vary across cultures and thus have relevance for understanding a range of health-related issues, from the way people draw on their social networks to cope with difficulties (Kim et al., 2008) to the extent to which one’s well-being is contingent on others (Plaut et al., 2012). In addition, given that certain genes or sets of genes may be linked to social sensitivity in particular contexts (e.g., Bartz, Zaki, Bolger, & Oschsner, 2011b), it may be especially useful for gene–health research to consider the cultural contexts that shape norms and expectations in social relationships.

Research from a cultural perspective has also shown more directly that there are cultural differences in health outcomes, the willingness to seek different kinds of treatment, and the effectiveness of different treatments. Given that perceived discrimination contributes to health disparities (Major, Mendes, & Dovidio, in press; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009), it is important to consider intergroup dynamics for investigations on culture and health. For instance, it is well documented that people from lower social class contexts tend to fare worse than those from a higher social class on certain health outcomes, in part due to
greater exposure to stress and other health-debilitating risks (Williams & Collins, 1995; see Matthews & Gallo, 2011 for review). In addition, minorities may seek mental health treatment less than majority group members, even after acculturating to a new culture (B. Kim, 2007; Mills, 2012), and for those who do seek medical care, there is evidence that ethnic minorities tend to receive lower quality treatment on average (Williams & Sternthal, 2010). Some minority groups, such as Black Americans, continue to face lower average life expectancies compared to White Americans, even after taking social class into account (Williams & Sternthal, 2010), raising the possibility that minorities may face greater health risks due to perceived discrimination. Yet some immigrant groups, such as those with Mexican backgrounds, tend to have equivalent or better health outcomes than the mainstream White population, despite the fact that they face greater risk of poverty and low-quality health care (a phenomenon termed the “Hispanic Paradox;” Markides & Eschbach, 2005).

People from different cultures may also show different symptomatology for mental health problems and have different beliefs about treatment (Ryder, Ban, & Chentsova-Dutton, 2011). Studies of people with depression across cultures have found that the Chinese tend to somaticize depression symptoms more than Westerners (Chang, 1985; Tsai, Simeonova, & Watanabe, 2004), and European Americans who are depressed tend to show decreased emotional reactivity, whereas East Asians who are depressed show heightened emotional reactivity (Chentsova-Dutton et al., 2007). When it comes to support seeking, people from Japan tend to be less likely to seek support from close relationships and from professional services compared to Americans, and this difference may be explained by cultural differences in willingness to disclose problems (Mojaverian, Hashimoto, & Kim, 2013) and relationship concerns, such as disrupting harmony or saving face (Taylor et al., 2004). In addition, a longitudinal study of pregnant women found
that the Japanese, compared to Americans, are more likely to experience certain positive pregnancy outcomes when they believe that close others have control over decisions surrounding their pregnancy (Morling et al., 2003). These findings emphasize the importance of understanding how culture may shape the expression or presentation of certain health conditions, as well as how beliefs about appropriate treatment may have consequence for health outcomes.

From the perspective of cultural neuroscience, a more complete picture of how people conceptualize health, make decisions regarding their health, and ultimately achieve positive health outcomes may come from examining the interaction of cultural and biological factors (e.g., Chiao, Cheon, Pornpattananangkul, Mrazek, & Blizinsky, 2013). Gene–culture interactions may be a particularly promising area of research within cultural neuroscience that explains diverse psychological responses (Sasaki, 2013). For example, recent research suggests that situating the individual within an intergroup context may potentially have implications for health, and that people with certain genotypes may be more sensitive to stressful features of this context than others. More specifically, research by Cheon and colleagues (in press) found that people who had prior negative contact with outgroups and perceived that the social world is dangerous were more likely to report intergroup biases, but this relationship was stronger for carriers of the more stress- or threat-sensitive s allele of 5-HTTLPR compared to those homozygous for the l allele. This research highlights the importance of considering how an individual perceives the self in relation to other groups in an intergroup context, as well as one’s genetic predispositions to be sensitive to stress in this context.

Genes represent one component of biology but are certainly not the only important factor to consider for questions surrounding health. As a field, cultural neuroscience examines the complex ways in which culture and biology interact (Chiao & Ambady, 2007), and it is crucial to
consider specific findings of gene–culture interactions within the context of cultural neuroscientific frameworks more broadly in order to understand health disparities (Cheon, Mrazek, Pornpattananangkul, Blizinsky, & Chiao, 2013; Chiao et al., 2013). A recent review of cultural neuroscience (Kim & Sasaki, 2014) proposes a framework for understanding how genetic and environmental inputs affect psychology via neural processes and how culture shapes these processes at multiple levels and is constrained by the processes of evolution. Because it is clear that culture plays a role in health outcomes in multiple ways, the next challenge for future research is to incorporate a cultural approach while anchoring findings within a broader theoretical framework.

**Future Research on Gene–Culture Interactions**

There are many ways to conceptualize culture (Cohen, 2009), and future research on gene–culture interactions should thus explore other methods of examining culture in addition to using cultural group comparisons. For instance, measures of subjective experience may be one way to consider culture in investigations. As previously described, a Gene × Culture study of cultural consonance, or the degree of match between one’s own life and the broader shared culture, found that lower cultural consonance was associated with greater depressive symptoms, and this was especially the case for people with a potential genetic link to depression-related conditions (Dressler et al., 2009). This study raised the important point that disparities between subjective experiences and the norms prescribed by the broader culture can have implications for health outcomes.

Other cultural psychological approaches include cultural task analysis to test implicit indicators of cultural differences (Kitayama, Park, Sevincer, Karasawa, & Uskul, 2009), continuous measures of educational attainment to measure social class as culture (Grossmann &
Varnum, 2011), and cultural priming to test causal effects of cultural information on psychological outcomes (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Oyserman & Lee, 2008). Cultural priming may present an especially promising future direction for gene–culture interaction research because it allows for causal inferences about the relationship between cultural information and an outcome for people with different genetic predispositions (see Sasaki et al., 2013 for \(G \times E\) example of environmental priming in a laboratory setting). All these examples of cultural approaches could potentially be used in conjunction with the Gene \(\times\) Culture framework.

Future research should also examine the mechanisms through which Gene–Culture interactions occur, and the Gene \(\times\) Culture framework may provide good opportunities to address this issue. The framework of G \(\times\) C, like that of G \(\times\) E, makes predictions about moderation by formalizing how the same genetic predisposition can be linked to different outcomes depending on one’s culture, and also how the same cultural background may predict different outcomes depending on one’s genetic predisposition. As Baron and Kenny (1986) explained, the best moderators are those that suggest possible mediators, revealing something about the underlying mechanisms involved in a psychological phenomenon. Culture is a moderator with such potential, as there have been numerous cultural psychological studies that ultimately revealed mediating processes. In research on culture and motivation, for instance, Heine and colleagues (2001) initially established an interaction between a situation (receiving success versus failure feedback) and culture (Japan versus North America) on task persistence and additionally showed that the interaction seemed to suggest motivation as a potential mediator. More specifically, they showed that North Americans seemed to experience greater motivation following success (vs. failure) feedback, allowing them to persist more on a task compared with Japanese participants.
On the other hand, Japanese participants seemed to be more motivated by failure than success compared with North Americans. Furthermore, cultural differences in motivation were explained by between-group differences in lay theories about the utility of effort. Since cultural differences in a given outcome (e.g., task persistence) pointed to differences in an underlying process (e.g., motivation) and revealed potential explanations for cultural differences (e.g., lay theories), this example illustrates how a cultural approach can be useful for elucidating basic psychological processes.

A similar approach can be used in the context of health for Gene × Culture research. As an example, one of our previous Gene × Culture studies described above found that culture moderates the link between OXTR and emotional seeking among those who experience greater distress (Kim et al., 2010a). This finding of cultural moderation could potentially illuminate social processes in relation to oxytocin more broadly because it suggests that people who may be predisposed to be more socially sensitive only directly seek more emotional social support in cultural environments that endorse this behavior as appropriate. Although initial oxytocin findings seemed to suggest that higher levels of oxytocin generally encourage people to socially connect with others in positive ways (Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005), later research has demonstrated that oxytocin can also have negative effects, particularly in the context of ingroup–outgroup competition (Declerck, Boone, & Kiyonari, 2010; De Dreu, Greer, Van Kleef, Shalvi, & Handgraaf, 2010) or for individuals lacking optimal resources to deal with social stressors (Bartz et al., 2010a, 2010b, 2011a). In reality, the influence of oxytocin is complicated and should therefore be applied with caution (Miller, 2013). The social effects of oxytocin appear to be highly dependent on aspects of the context and the individual (see Bartz, Zaki, Bolger, & Ochsner, 2011b for review), and on top of that, our research suggests that
oxytocin may lead people to interact with others in ways that are sanctioned by the socio-cultural context (Kim et al., 2010a, 2011; Sasaki et al., 2011).

These Gene × Culture findings further support theories about how social support processes may not function in the same way across cultures, and more broadly, they demonstrate that genetic predispositions may manifest themselves in different ways according to what is normative in the cultural context. As in the case of the culture, OXTR, and emotional support seeking study described above (Kim et al., 2010a), the act of seeking emotional social support can have different meanings depending on the cultural context (see Kim et al., 2008 for review of culture and social support processes). Gene × Culture research demonstrates that the relationship between genetic predispositions and behaviors may depend on the cultural meanings of behaviors rather than actual behaviors per se.

**Implications of Gene × Culture Research for Public Health Policy**

The utility of Gene × Culture research goes beyond the advancement of theory and development of new methodology; it also has practical applicability to health issues, particularly in its ability to inform public health policy. In this section we will explore how Gene × Culture research can be applied to the policy areas of defining health and developing goals for public health policy and providing effective care in a targeted, cost-efficient manner. In so doing, we will also discuss implications and potential recommendations based on past studies and identify questions for future research to address.

**Defining and delivering health.** Before developing policy, public health policymakers around the world should address the questions: What constitutes optimal health? And how is it best fostered in a given population? Answering these questions is far from straightforward, and much research on cultural differences strongly suggests that peoples’ responses to these
questions can vary in important ways. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) recent emphasis on addressing “social determinants of health,” or social factors that contribute to health inequities around the world (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008), is consistent with this idea that effective public health policy must take the socio-cultural context into account. The WHO also defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2003), yet across cultures, the meaning of well-being might vary greatly. For example, a study of conceptions of health in New Mexico and Colorado found that Hispanic villagers highly emphasized fulfilling role obligations according to one’s age and sex, and the primary repercussion of illness was that it interfered with the ability to fulfill one’s obligations, not that it affected the sick individual (Schulman & Smith, 1963). When addressing the concept of health among First Nations or Aboriginal North Americans, a common model is the Medicine Wheel, which depicts health as a holistic balance among social, mental, physical, and spiritual elements—the latter being a factor that does not commonly appear in Western concepts of health (Roberts, Harper, Tuttle-Eagle Bull, & Heideman-Provost, 1998; Waldram, 2006). Further, cultural variation also exists in the conception of a specific component of health—that is, mental or subjective well-being (Fulmer et al., 2010; Oishi & Diener, 2003; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). Lay concepts of subjective well-being in Western cultures often tend to center on the “pursuit of happiness” and avoidance of unhappiness for oneself (Diener & Diener, 1995; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). In some Eastern cultures, however, subjective well-being is achieved through fulfilling role obligations, and finding a balance between happiness and unhappiness (Lu, 2005; Suh et al., 1998; Uchida & Kitayama, 2009). These findings suggest that public health policy aimed at highly maximizing the population’s happiness may increase the psychological well-being of a Western population,
but may not have the same effects in an Eastern population, where such policy may be less appropriate.

Beyond considerations of the definitional components of health, cultural psychological research also sheds light on differences in the ways to achieve optimal health. For example, Eastern cultures’ emphasis on balance and dialecticism might apply to attitudes toward health and the desired goals of public health. In research on topics such as emotional experience (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009), reasoning and logic (Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001; Peng & Nisbett, 1999), and self-concept (Heine & Lehman, 1997; Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2010), it has been shown that Asians tend to be more tolerant of contradiction, think of events in terms of cycles rather than linearly, and place importance on the balance of opposing forces which are viewed as mutually dependent. It is possible, then, that learning to accept illness and disability when they occur is an important part of achieving health in some Asian populations. The issue of achieving optimal health is further complicated by the possibility that cultural differences in certain phenomena may be moderated by genetic predispositions (Kim & Sasaki, 2014). Thus, policy aimed solely at eradicating illness and disability may be incomplete, missing important differences in cultural attitudes and beliefs and the possibility that these cultural differences could potentially vary by genes.

Yet it is also important to consider the individual differences that exist between people within a culture. People may have certain predispositions in terms of their biology, personality, and behavior, and thus, it will be important for public policy to allow for flexibility in accommodating within-group variation. For example, individual differences in extraversion versus introversion have been linked to a dopamine receptor gene, DRD2, with carriers of the A1 allele being significantly more extraverted than non-carriers (Smillie, Cooper, Proitsi, Powell, &
Pickering, 2010). People who vary on levels of extraversion would likely also differ in the types of situations and behaviors that best foster social and mental well-being (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003; Moscowitz & Coté, 1995). In terms of health policy, what may contribute to optimal health for a more extraverted A1 allele carrier, for instance, may not work as well for someone without this allele. It is a further possibility that genes may express themselves differently depending on a person’s cultural environment (e.g., Kim et al., 2010a), and thus, a thorough understanding of how best to promote the health of a population may require policy that takes both individual predispositions and cultural influences into account.

**Providing effective, efficient care.** Whether implemented at the local, regional, or national level by governments and institutions, public health policy aims to promote health and prevent disease and illness in a population. Due to the spread of health-related ideas and tools around the world, people are sometimes faced with the challenge of adapting policy that has been imported from other populations. Yet, effective policy involves far more than finding a one-size-fits-all prescription for well-being. Policy must be tailored to fit various types of populations, within which there will be differences in genetic predispositions and cultural backgrounds. Although a highly personalized care system may be ideal for allowing each person in a society to strive for better health in their own way, the reality is that public health policy is bound by limited resources and is therefore under pressure to maximize its efficiency. Negotiating a balance between the ideal of effective, personalized care and the limitations surrounding its provision is a difficult challenge for public health policymakers, but helping to do so may be one of the greatest promises of Gene × Culture research.

There is much public interest in genetics as a potential tool to identify health risk factors. While such an approach brings a lot of promise, Gene × Culture findings caution against the
assumption that genetic associations with health outcomes are uniform. The findings of Gene × Culture research provide a more nuanced understanding of how multiple factors interact in relation to health outcomes, and this knowledge can be used to create more streamlined policy that delivers effective care while limiting the waste of resources. By its mandate, Gene × Culture research investigates micro- and macro-level influences on the individual in order to predict outcomes. But it goes beyond an additive model of these influences, demonstrating how one level moderates the other and uncovering information about potential mediators. In doing so, this research clarifies when predictions based solely on genes or culture are likely to be qualified due to an existing interaction. In terms of health policy, this means preventing the misappropriation of resources that can occur when genes and culture are considered in isolation. To give a hypothetical example, imagine that Japanese policy based on genetic studies conducted in Germany led to individuals with a particular gene being identified as at-risk and given an intervention, when in actuality, that gene was not a risk factor given the cultural environment in Japan. Another example would be a scenario in which certain cultural elements in the U.S. were found to account for a higher prevalence of a disorder in that country, so an intervention policy aimed at widespread change was enacted, even though only people with certain genetic predispositions would be negatively affected. In both situations, the efficiency and effectiveness of policy is compromised by considering genes and culture separately rather than adopting a Gene × Culture perspective. Of course, there will certainly be cases when a person’s genes or culture alone may predict a large portion of the variance in certain health outcomes, but Gene × Culture research can help predict when any particular association is qualified due to the interaction of genes and culture.
Utilizing a Gene × Culture framework can be effective for addressing health issues related to etiology, course, and outcome in different cultures. Clinical depression has been associated with certain genetic precursors, such as the presence of a short (s) versus long (l) allele of the 5-HTTLPR polymorphism, depending on the environment—having an s allele puts one at higher risk of depression if coupled with environmental risk factors, such as loss, interpersonal conflict, or a stressful childhood environment (Caspi et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2006). As Maselko (this volume) explains, various risk factors in the early environment may biologically calibrate a person in a way that can prove maladaptive and increase risk of neuropsychiatric disorders in later life. However, the prevalence and manifestation of depression and other mental health disorders show considerable variability between nations and between groups within nations, suggesting that cultural factors may also play a role in a person’s susceptibility (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010; Kleinman, 1982; Maselko, this volume; Tsai & Chentsova-Dutton, 2002; Yang & Benson, this volume). In fact, as Yang and Benson (this volume) note, clinical diagnoses based on culture-specific symptoms may be more appropriate for determining the actual prevalence of certain disorders. Yet it is not enough to know about the genetic and cultural influences on depression independently if one hopes to predict its occurrence. As discussed in this chapter, genes and culture sometimes interact and therefore should be considered in concert. This has been shown to be the case in depression, as the presence of the s allele of 5-HTTLPR is actually associated with lower prevalence of the disorder in more collectivistic cultures, perhaps due to the buffering effect of collectivistic cultural values (Chiao & Blizinsky, 2010). Thus, a thorough understanding of how and when not only genetic and cultural factors but also their interactions predict health outcomes can be instrumental in developing effective, efficient policy.
Conclusions on gene × culture research and public health policy. Genes play an important role in determining health risks and outcomes. As such, in matters of how to protect and promote the health of a population, genetic research provides indispensable recommendations about how to create good policy. Yet it is important to realize that public health policy is a part of culture—it is an institutional force that shapes and is shaped by the values, norms, and beliefs of a people. Changes made to public health policy change the cultural context in which a population lives. Given that cultural research investigates how the cultural context affects health, it is clear that cultural research on health may have important recommendations for effective public health policy. However, it is not enough to consider genetic and cultural influences on health in isolation and then utilize the information in an additive fashion to create policy. In many cases, it is likely that genes and culture interact with each other to influence a person’s health, and only future research will be able to tell when this should be expected. Therefore, the Gene × Culture framework promises to provide a richer understanding of health for people across diverse societies.
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