

Comment

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The Paradox of Indiscriminate Multiculturalism

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Kim, Sherman, and Taylor (September 2008) argued that patterns of social support seeking shown by Asian Americans and Asians are different from those of their European American counterparts. Kim et al. contrasted the respective psychological influences of growing up in more “collectivistic” (p. 519) Asian cultures versus “individualistic” (p. 519) European American cultures and concluded that Asians and Asian Americans are more comfortable with “implicit social support” (p. 522) than with the “explicit social support” (p. 522) that most European Americans readily seek. Kim et al. went on to trace the implications of this theory for mental health service providers and others interested in appropriately sensitive “intercultural interactions” (p. 524).

Wise as it may be to consider culture, ethnicity, and national origin in the study of individual and group differences and social interactions (Arnett, 2008; Sue, 1999), an attempt to infer from small, mostly college-student samples examined on a handful of variables in a few dozen studies that there are culturally influenced psychological characteristics that are ostensibly universal among some 4 billion peo-

ple of Asian origin (“Internet World Stats,” 2008) is ambitious to a fault.

Kim et al. (2008) acknowledged that those studied “consisted mostly of participants from Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese cultural backgrounds, with smaller numbers of participants from Indian and Filipino cultural backgrounds” (p. 520). Can we really safely assume from data obtained from these “smaller numbers of participants” (p. 520) that well over a billion people in India and of recent Indian descent¹ and over 100 million ethnic Filipinos and their close descendants share feelings about seeking social support that are more or less identical to those of the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese samples whom Kim et al. have primarily studied? Does the same conclusion really obtain for people of all the other Asian cultural backgrounds *not* studied (e.g., Mongolian, Hmong, Georgian, Malay, Thai, Javanese, Russian, Khmer, Punjabi, Pashtun, Tibetan, Kazakh, Tamil, Timorese, Bengali, Tajik, Uzbek—not to mention their recent progeny in America)?

To the extent that Kim et al. (2008) remind us that conclusions about human universals in psychology are all too often developed by Americocentric researchers who ignore potentially important roles played by ethnicity, culture, and even geography in patterns of adaptation (see also Arnett, 2008; Sue, 1999), they provide a useful service to *American Psychologist* readers. Unfortunately, they have committed a complementary error in supposing that science can discern any distinctive traits or behaviors that accurately apply to a class of some 4 billion people of varying ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, a

¹ Indeed, if I believed that such generalizations from small samples to entire cultures were somehow scientifically legitimate, I would argue, contrary to Kim et al.’s theory, that in my clinical experience with many Indian-born, Pakistani-born, and second-generation Indian American and Pakistani American families, there have been strong cultural traditions of trying to resolve marital and family problems by actively and explicitly seeking social support from members of an extended clan.

class defined only by the fact that its members happen to live on (or claim recent ancestry from) the same vast continent.

Under the banner of multiculturalism, the authors paradoxically have lumped the diverse inhabitants of the earth’s largest and most populous land mass and their close descendants in the United States into one of only two “distinctive cultural groups” (Kim et al., 2008, p. 520). Positing Asian universals on flimsy empirical foundations, Kim et al. encourage us to formulate cultural stereotypes that are no less simplistic and misleading than those once purveyed by armchair anthropologists and orientalist of the Victorian era.

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The Irony of Cultural Psychology Research

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One of the challenges of cultural psychology is illustrated when the multiple-

ity of psychological processes that it aims to address becomes a source of criticism. Our article "Culture and Social Support" (Kim, Sherman, & Taylor, September 2008) raises this exact issue, given the comment by Erard (2009). The irony is that the effort to identify cultural diversity in psychology is viewed by some as stereotyping the cultural groups examined by the research.

In our article, we reviewed a number of studies that identified cultural differences in the use and effect of different types of social support among Asians and Asian Americans and European Americans (Kim et al., 2008). We chose these groups to study because their culturally dominant values and social orientation allow for theory-driven hypothesis testing. Across multiple studies using different samples and methodologies, we found reliable cultural patterns. We sought to discuss these differences without privileging any particular cultural pattern.

Essentially, in his comment, Erard (2009) denied the validity of research examining cultural differences. By referring to the research findings as "Asian universals" and "stereotypes" (p. 564), he undermined any effort to include a broader range of cultural experiences. To push his point further, one should note that group experiences are shaped not only by national and ethnic cultures but also by other social categories within national culture, such as social class (e.g., Snibbe & Markus, 2005), religion (e.g., Cohen, Siegel, & Rozin, 2003), and economic activity (e.g., Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008). One can always raise concerns regarding a particular cultural categorization. No doubt, these are valid issues to consider.

But we must ask: What alternative is he recommending? Measure all 4 billion people? Sample from every social category? And if not, should the field abandon cultural research? How would such a perspective advance science? If we accept Erard's (2009) position, then we create the very conditions he purported to decry: an "Americocentric" (p. 564) perspective on the phenomenon of social support that is universal but diversely experienced. Such a nihilistic perspective offers no constructive alternative.

As psychologists, we are aware of within-group variation. Clearly, not every individual in a given cultural group acts and thinks in the same way. We have no doubt, as Erard (2009) noted anecdotally, that many Indian-born and Pakistani-born American families actively

seek social support from each other. In fact, we have no doubt that quite a few East Asians actively seek social support and many European Americans are hesitant to seek social support. However, the question should be whether there is a cultural pattern that informs the field of psychology, not whether there are people in a given culture who *do not* conform to the cultural pattern. The focus must be an empirical one that addresses how people navigate through their social networks to use social support.

We strongly believe that the issues concerning within-culture variation do not nullify the importance of conducting research on culturally based psychological and behavioral patterns. If the perspective offered by Erard's (2009) comment is pushed further, ultimately, there is no room to study collective influence, and the discussion has to be at the level of the individual. Shared group experiences can profoundly influence how individuals think, feel, and act. Recognizing the role of culture is a worthy endeavor.

There are multiple goals for conducting cultural psychological research. One goal is to document different cultural ways of being. The other goal, the one that we believe is of greater importance, is to demonstrate the possibility of psychological diversity that exists among humans in order to encourage others to move away from a basic but flawed assumption that is still quite dominant in psychological research, the assumption of psychic unity (Shweder, 1990).

The irony is that the goals of our research are the exact opposite of those attributed to us by Erard (2009). We have questioned and provided evidence against singular conceptions of social support. We have shown that "universals" of social support may not exist and that mental health services need to be flexibly responsive to the models of social support that exist in different cultures.

We conclude this response by restating the conclusion of our original article, as we believe that the following point describes these goals of ours quite clearly:

"We fully expect that within each cultural context, there are subtly different ways in which people seek, obtain, and benefit from social support from their close others. We hope that the issues raised in this article will lead to future research exploring cultural and psychological diversity in both how people use social support and, more generally, how individuals relate and interact in their social relationships" (Kim et al., 2008, p. 525).

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Reaching the Neglected 95%

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Arnett's (October 2008) eye-opening analysis of articles published in American Psychological Association (APA) journals revealed that American psychology focuses too narrowly on Americans while neglecting the other 95% of the world's population. Arnett's analysis focused on two primary issues. First, he demonstrated that APA journals are dominated by American authors, samples, editors, and editorial boards. Then he demonstrated (quite convincingly) that important demographic differences exist between people in less-developed and more-developed regions and that these differences force us to question how well American psychology represents the whole of humanity. Our comments focus on why American psychologists have become overreliant on American samples, and we provide alternative suggestions for broadening the scope of American psychological research.

Although we agree that American research psychologists typically focus on what they believe to be universal principles and pro-