

Counting the Costs of Failures of Personal and Cultural Continuity

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Baldwin's [1901] *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* contains the following warning on the topic of culture: 'This field of investigation, however, is so extremely comprehensive, and requires for its successful pursuit such specialized methods, that it cannot be included in the science of psychology as ordinarily interpreted.' Some measure of a century's worth of progress toward including culture can be found in the research summarized in Kwak's contribution to this volume.

Kwak's review centers on the question of whether or not immigrant families experience more intergenerational disagreement and difficulty than do non-immigrant families. At the outset, there appear to be good reasons to suspect that they might: 'For immigrant adolescents, once they find themselves in the new society of settlement, the enculturation process is interrupted and takes a different course; it now includes an acculturation process as well.' This combination of enculturative and acculturative forces 'can leave them in an unfavorable position for further personal development'. Kwak concludes that immigrant families do not necessarily experience higher levels of disagreement, and attributes this, in part, to differences between individualist and collectivist cultures and to differences in the valuation of individual autonomy and family embeddedness within different ethnocultural groups. Harmonious family relations are the result of certain characteristics of the culture of origin, coupled with a commitment to family embeddedness and 'their collective efforts to overcome the adverse conditions facing them once they migrate'.

I have no intention of taking issue with Kwak's conclusion – a better understanding of the ways in which young persons and their parents adapt to a new sociocultural context can only, as Kwak argues, be had by taking just the sort of multilevel, multinational approach that she advocates. What I hope to do instead, is to extend the scope of her discussion of the role of culture in adolescents' developing conceptions of self and the relative costs of disruptions to the process of personal development. In doing so, I plan to draw upon parallels between the literature reviewed by Kwak and related work that I have been involved in and to use this as an occasion to highlight the important contributions that Kwak's analysis makes toward furthering our understanding of key issues in the area of cultural psychology.

Baldwin's caution about the study of culture was likely founded on what Lazarus and Steinthal [1860] earlier described as the 'human paradox' of being both the *creator* and the *creature* of culture. In our own more contemporary efforts to understand the intersection of culture and development, we still find ourselves struggling with the 'fundamental boundlessness' and 'magnificent simultaneity' of person-culture relations [Fuhrer & Josephs, 1998, p. 286]. Kwak joins in this conceptual struggle by attempting to characterize intergenerational family relations in different sociocultural settings, and, while succeeding in many ways, the 'human paradox' provides an obstacle. I am concerned with the way individualism is equated with autonomy and independence, and then set in opposition to collectivism, embeddedness and interdependence. I recognize that her aim is to address 'all three levels of the interactional contexts – self, family, and society' and 'cultural differences at both individual and cultural group levels', but I have strong doubts about the best way to characterize and comfortably move between these levels of analysis.

My doubts are by no means unique. It is difficult not to agree with Oyserman et al. [2002] that the terms individualism and collectivism have become 'bloated' and 'are often used to explain almost any cultural or cross-cultural difference'. Critics have argued that it is a false dichotomy [Miller, 2002]; that it focuses attention on attitudes and values at the expense of more dynamic practices and associated mental processes [D'Andrade, 2001; Kitayama, 2002]; that it fails to capture the core of culture by relying on survey methods that assess only declarative self-knowledge, rather than more tacit procedural competencies [Bond, 2002; Fiske, 2002], and that it leads us 'dangerously close to minimizing individual agency in favor of cultural determinism' [Gjerde & Onishi, 2000, p. 219].

If we abandon a strict dichotomy and take a more dimensional approach, and accede that collectivism is not the polar or natural opposite of individualism, and that 'all societies socialize for both individualism and collectivism' [Oyserman, et al., 2002], we find little in the way of real comfort: 'When graphed together [on individualism and collectivism], the nations that have been studied form a globular cluster' [Fiske, 2002 p. 78]. But heterogeneity within nations (and even within cultures) is to be expected, and that is not the problem. The problem arises when one attempts to move from characterizing nations or cultures to the level of individuals. As Kitayama [2002] put it, the problem is that 'personal values are not cultural values writ small. Nor are cultural values personal convictions writ large' (p. 93). If we want to know, as Kwak does, 'how various aspects of the self can be identified with different cultural systems' then assuming that parents who migrate from a collectivist nation are more strongly motivated to maintain family cohesion than their new individualist neighbors, or that adolescents in either culture are motivated only by a desire for autonomy or independence (but not embeddedness or interdependence) will not prove particularly helpful. One of my concerns with Kwak's analysis is this: even if intended as shorthand, talk of 'individualism versus collectivism', and 'autonomy versus embeddedness', and 'independence/autonomy sought by adolescents and interdependence/embeddedness expected by their parents', only works to further stir up what are already muddy waters.

That said, my purpose is not take issue with the 'I/C' distinction, but rather to focus on disruptions to personal and cultural identity. In doing so, I will draw from

a program of research that my colleagues¹ and I have been engaged in concerning how it is that young persons of different ages and different cultures come to understand their own personal persistence in the face of inevitable developmental and sociocultural change. This research focuses upon the particular sociocultural context of Canadian Aboriginal² (or 'First Nations') youth and the ways in which the costs of disruptions to personal and cultural persistence can be counted, not in strained family relations, but in acts of suicide.

Studies of the sort I will describe may seem out of place in a discussion of research on family relations, but there are three points of convergence with the work that Kwak reviews that serve to further illustrate the ways in which studies of enculturation/acclulturation can further our understanding of development and culture. The first concerns the context in which the self develops: 'A national society provides the ground, or general context for enculturation, for family socialization practices and for adolescent self-development.' In keeping with my discomfort with the 'I/C' distinction, however, I would argue that the narrower 'general context' provided by membership in a cultural group is both deeper and more formative than nationality. At least, this is what I hope to illustrate in describing our work with Aboriginal youth.

The second point follows largely from the first and references our shared conviction that the 'construction of self is built from one's enculturation context'. But here, I will stress that the blueprint for this construction is not an abstracted national/cultural standard, but rather a more hardscrabble local invention fabricated from materials that are immediately at hand in one's sociocultural environment. More importantly, though, I agree with Kwak that the family plays a pivotal role in this construction. As Harré [2000] notes, persons are social constructions: 'They are artifacts, manufactured according to certain patterns and principles by other people [and] generally speaking, families are the main people factories.' More broadly, I will argue that the structure of selves is constrained not by the shape of national or culturally sanctioned models, but by certain design features that are constitutive of what it means to be a person in *any* context or culture.

The third point of convergence concerns the special circumstance of finding oneself tugged by both enculturative and acculturative currents. Though it has been argued that the seas of adolescence are always and forever tempest tossed, there can be little doubt that, as Kwak suggests, living 'in two cultures' (whether through immigration or cultural domination) 'can leave [adolescents] in an unfavorable position for further personal development'. The hard problem that Kwak presents, is to understand just how these sometimes opposing forces operate at the level of individuals, families, cultures and nations to shape and foster or thwart self-development.

¹The program of research described in this commentary has a long history and has included a shifting set of contributors all of whom are (or were) graduate students working with Michael Chandler at the University of British Columbia. These include: Lorraine Ball, Michael Boyes, Suzanne Hala, Darcy Hallett, Bryan Sokol, and myself.

²The term 'aboriginal' refers to indigenous people in general, while 'Aboriginal' is meant to reference specific groups within Canada. The Aboriginal peoples of Canada consist of three distinct groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The First Nations were once termed 'Indian'. The Inuit were formerly referred to as 'Eskimo'. The Métis trace their origins to marriages between the First Nations and European settlers.

One way to address this problem is to contrast immigrant and non-immigrant groups on the assumption that only the former face both enculturative and acculturative forces. An alternative approach is to study groups that share citizenship but claim membership in different cultures. This is the route that my colleagues and I have taken in our studies of Canadian mainstream and First Nations youth. In particular, we have been interested in how these young persons solve the paradox that arises from the fact that our ordinary understanding of the concept of ‘person’ or ‘self’ includes two seemingly contradictory features: selves ‘embody both change and permanence simultaneously’ [Fraisie, 1963, p. 10]. On the one hand, we understand that persons change – often dramatically so – over the course of their development. Yet, on the other, persons must somehow persist as continuous or numerically identical individuals, and be understood, as Locke [1694/1956] famously put it, ‘as the same thinking thing in different times and places’. A conception of the self that did not include this standard of personal persistence, or that otherwise failed to meet Flanagan’s ‘one self to a customer rule’ [1996, p. 65], would simply fail to be recognizable as an instance of what we ordinarily take selves to be [Cassirer, 1923].

As foundational as continuity may be to a workable definition of self, we are not born into the world with arguments at the ready concerning how persons can both change and yet remain ‘the same’. What we have found is that during adolescence, the average young person can be expected to step through a series of five different and increasingly complicated (and we would argue logically adequate) ways of warranting their own persistence in time. Further, although everyone is obliged to find *some* means of understanding their own persistence in time, there is no reason to suppose that we would all settle upon precisely the *same* solution strategy. That is, even if the problem of self-continuity turned out to be one of those rare-bird transcultural and transhistorical universals of human development, the procedural means for accomplishing personal persistence might still be free to vary from one culture to the next. In fact, our research shows that, cutting across the different levels of reasoning, there are two general default strategies for approaching this problem that appear to be associated with participants’ cultural background.

One of these strategies aims to defeat time by making a villain of change and seeking sameness in those features or aspects of the self that have managed to endure despite change in other quarters. These ‘Essentialist’ strategies range from claims about concrete aspects of the self remaining constant across time (one’s name or favorite activity) to increasingly abstract notions of personality traits and enduring souls. Though such claims differ in the level of abstraction at which they are pitched, they all trade upon the heartfelt conviction that, at some more or less subterranean level, some structure, some essential feature, has remained unaffected by what are seen to be more trivial changes to surface layers of the self. The second strategy is to abandon all hope of winning the point that change is always and only apparent, and to concentrate instead upon functional or narrative connections between admittedly different installments of one’s identity. Such ‘Narrative’ solutions trade on the altogether different prospect that sameness can be found in change when one’s life is rendered in some followable storied form. Of course, not all of the young persons who employ this strategy are equally skilled at doing so: the youngest seem to confuse ‘chronology’ with ‘plot’ and simply string events to-

gether like beads on a string. Still, the types of narratives on offer range upward in sophistication from maturational, cause-effect plots through to convictions that the only real 'plot' to one's life is that of an endless series of attempts to interpretively re-read the past in light of the present.

These Essentialist and Narrative strategies are strongly associated with culture: 80% of mainstream Canadian youth employ Essentialist strategies while nearly 70% of First Nations youth make use of Narrative strategies. This data pattern is consistent, we argue, with certain deep-running features of Euro-American and Aboriginal cultural traditions. Contemporary Western culture, it is said, has its roots in what Polkinghorne [1988] has called a 'metaphysics of substance' in which truth is always buried at some depth and talk of hidden essences naturally abounds. By contrast, conceiving the problem of self-continuity in more narrative or interpretive terms is not only consistent with the oral traditions of Aboriginal groups, but with a more thoroughgoing 'metaphysics of potentiality and actuality' [Polkinghorne, 1988]. Euro-American cultures, then, tend to promote structural or essentialist strategies, whereas First Nations communities support more narratively based, or functional approaches to the problem of personal persistence. What the majority of adolescents drawn from these groups have to say about such matters reflect these same contrasting cultural inclinations. To return to the first point of convergence, the context of self-development that matters in this case, is culture rather than nationality.

One might assume that First Nations youth who employ Essentialist practices – those who behave in culturally 'inappropriate' ways – represent failures of enculturation or accelerated acculturation. That is, like immigrant youth who do *not* delay autonomy, or immigrant parents who loosen the reigns of familial obligation, such cases indicate a loss of commitment to the culture of origin. If that were so, then we should expect Essentialist First Nations youth to be less intensely committed to their Aboriginal culture than their First Nations peers who adopt Narrative strategies. This is decidedly not the case. Essentialist and Narrativist First Nations youth show equally high levels of commitment to Aboriginal culture. The distribution of these different strategies, then, is neither determined by cultural membership, nor obviously tied to a sense of allegiance to one culture or the other. Instead, this 'epidemiology of representations' [Sperber, 1994] defies simple 'us' versus 'them' dichotomies. My point in trotting out these findings is to underscore the dangers of equating cultural with personal values and 'counter-cultural' ideas with cultural loss. A second point of convergence with Kwak's review comes in the fact that, just as all adolescents must establish their own self-concept, persons (and cultures) are all equally obliged to solve the problem of continuity, but different persons (and different cultures) need not employ the same solution strategies.

But if measures of commitment to culture fail to discriminate between Aboriginal youth who employ culturally consistent vs. inconsistent forms of reasoning, then what are we to make of the overall cross-cultural difference? Perhaps these different conceptions of self-continuity are just peripheral to matters of culture or otherwise merely trivial. Two other sets of findings from our research argue strongly against these dismissive possibilities. Both concern failures of continuity: one at the individual level, the other at the level of culture.

To date, among the more than 500 young persons who have taken part in our studies, only those who are also known to be suicidal routinely fail to find reasons

why they themselves or anyone else could be understood to persist through time [Ball & Chandler, 1989]. It appears that failures of self-continuity – losing the ability to connect one’s past and present to some anticipated future – uniquely mark actively suicidal young persons in ways that other predictors such as depression and suicidal ideation do not. At the individual level, then, this form of self-development failure can prove deadly.

Failures of continuity also occur at the level of whole cultures and are similarly associated with suicide risk. But here, mindful of the dangers of moving from the individual to the cultural level of analysis, I need to be especially clear about how the concept of continuity can be made to apply to both persons and cultures. Taking a cue from Overton [1998], and wishing to avoid ‘split positions’ that would have us imagine one of these is either the opposite or derivative of the other, continuity should instead be seen to constitute ‘a broad-based mechanism of development that itself differentiates into [individual] and social-cultural manifestations’ [Overton, 1998]. On this view, failures in cultural continuity should prove just as hazardous as failures of self-continuity.

Given the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, no one could seriously doubt that the continuity of Aboriginal culture has been compromised. Coupled with the fact that the Aboriginal population of Canada has the highest suicide rate of any identifiable cultural group in the world [Kirmayer, 1994], ‘testing’ the relation between continuity and suicide hardly seems necessary. But these two facts actually work to obscure the real truth of the matter. That is, although all Aboriginal cultures have suffered and had much of their culture stolen from them, they have not responded to these assaults in identical ways. Some communities have been able to rebuild or rehabilitate a connection to their own cultural past with more success than others. Similarly, the existence of over 600 distinct First Nations groups within Canada renders talk of a higher rate of suicide within ‘the’ Aboriginal population an arithmetic fiction that blinds us to the cultural diversity of these communities. What is needed, then, is some way of mapping variability in suicide rates that characterize these cultural groups onto measures of their separate struggles to resist the history of acculturative practices that threaten their very cultural existence.

In our epidemiological studies of youth suicide in British Columbia, we have observed not only dramatic variability in suicide rates within First Nations communities, but that variability in these rates is strongly associated with enculturative successes and with efforts to reestablish the continuity of cultural transmission [Chandler & Lalonde, 1998]. Our measures of ‘cultural continuity’ include efforts to regain legal title to traditional lands and to re-establish forms of self-government, to reassert control over education and the provision of health care, fire, and policing services, as well as steps to erect facilities within the community devoted to traditional cultural events and practices. Success on each and every one of these measures is associated with a decrease in the rate of youth suicide. For example, within First Nations communities that have restored systems of self-government, the relative risk of youth suicide is 85% lower than in communities that have not. The risk is 52% lower within communities that control education – and the list goes on in similar fashion. Much more important, not just for the present purpose, but for Aboriginal youth, is the cumulative effect of such successes. When rates are calculated based on the total number of factors present, a clear step-

wise function emerges: where none of these marker variables are present, the youth suicide rate is 10 times the provincial average; where all six are present, the rate falls to zero. Rates of suicide, then, are indeed higher among Aboriginal groups, but they are not uniformly high, and variability in these rates is strongly associated with indexes of cultural continuity. Continuity matters. And it matters to both individuals and cultures. The trick, of course, is in identifying what qualifies as 'persistence' at these different levels of analysis.

Though research on self-continuity may seem rather removed from the issue of immigrant family relations, the two are clearly linked and both must deal with this same difficult trick. Efforts to maintain and transmit 'core cultural values [that] serve as guiding principles in people's lives' within potentially inhospitable cultural contexts are involved in both cases. The complications of immigration in Kwak's case, or of cultural domination in our own, demand that we 'tackle both the impact of the sociocultural context [and] the extent to which the practice of their own culture is possible'. Both can work special hardships on adolescents. In Kwak's analysis, the fundamental issue is an autonomous identity. In our own work it is a continuous identity. The third point of convergence, then, is our shared belief that studies of these populations offer a privileged view of the impact of the sociocultural context on adolescent development. What we really need to know, as Kwak points out, are the 'different weights given by the ethnocultural groups to the characteristics of the larger society as well as the individual family's interaction with these characteristics'. Given the 'magnificent simultaneity' of person-culture relations, however, any attempt to document the complex dynamics of enculturative and acculturative forces in the lives of adolescents and their families demands careful attention to multiple levels of analysis. As Kwak's analysis, and our own research makes clear, the simultaneous consideration of individual, family, and cultural factors is much easier said than done. The 'human paradox' haunts us all.

In the end then, and despite minor and in-house differences of opinion, I fully share Kwak's vision of where the field ought to be heading. Progress obviously depends on efforts to understand how particular sociocultural environments influence enculturation and development. Realizing this mutual goal will require more than Baldwin's imagined 'specialized methods'. We should, as Kwak urges, move beyond 'studies limited to immigrant groups which have settled in a small number of Western countries' and 'evaluations of a few national groups in terms of a bipolar dimension of individualism and collectivism.' Kwak's review highlights not only how far we have come in our attempts to understand differences within and between societies, but more importantly, where we need to go. Baldwin, I think, would be pleased at our progress.

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