

# Comment

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## The Target Is Straw or the Arrow Is Crooked

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In their article "Moving Cultures: The Perilous Problems of Cultural Dichotomies in a Globalizing Society," Hermans and Kempen (October 1998) argued toward valuable final recommendations, namely that researchers examine cultural contact zones and complex cultural identities. Although we heartily agree with these suggestions, their "challenge" to cross-cultural psychology seemed either (a) aimed at a "straw man" or (b) overstated and misguided.

### Aiming at a Straw Target . . .

Hermans and Kempen (1998) attacked mainstream academic cross-cultural psychology, arguing that it conceptualizes cultural differences in terms of strict, stable dichotomies defining homogeneous groups. This portrayal of cross-cultural psychology may well be a straw target. For example, the recent 1998 Silver Jubilee Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology was dominated by research on acculturation—an area explicitly dealing with instability and complex cultural identities in contact zones that are by definition not

culturally homogenous. Similarly, it is important to remember that the large-scale cultural difference studies considered by many to be exemplars for the field of cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Hofstede, 1980) have proposed multiple continuous dimensions of cultural difference, not dichotomies. Individualism–collectivism, the "dichotomy" most often cited by Hermans and Kempen, is but one of many potentially important cultural dimensions widely recognized as continuous, and sometimes conceptualized as more than one continuous variable (see Kagitcibasi, 1997). Further, many authors from this tradition are careful to describe the tremendous within-culture variability and the overlapping distributions across cultures on various phenomena (e.g., Hofstede, 1980).

Hermans and Kempen (1998) also created a straw opponent when they questioned the "basic assumption" of cross-cultural psychology that culture is geographically localized. True enough, geographic location is a manifest independent variable in many cross-cultural studies. Hermans and Kempen, however, fail to recognize that the culture–geography assumption is primarily a methodological convenience rather than a core tenet of the discipline. In spite of the purported trends toward cultural mixing and globalization, culture at present retains a convenient tendency to differ across regions (Hofstede, 1980). As a result, geography, especially in conjunction with other categorical variables such as self-reported ethnicity and birthplace, provides a useful independent variable, often better than continuous cultural variables, which tend to be notoriously difficult to measure (e.g., Peng, Nisbett, & Wong, 1997).

### . . . Or Shooting With a Crooked Arrow

The target would not be straw in at least one sense if Hermans and Kempen's (1998) argument could be interpreted not as a literal statement that cross-cultural psy-

chologists engage in truly dichotomous thinking but rather as an argument that cross-cultural psychologists mistakenly use dichotomous categorical labels in research. Cross-cultural psychologists do use categorical labels, but we believe this use is justified.

Of course, categorical labels can involve considerable fuzziness at the edges of the categories. However, this fuzziness does not make the categories themselves less theoretically meaningful. Consider that it is difficult at dawn to actually pinpoint the exact moment when one can say "the night is over; the day has come." Yet would anyone seriously argue that the concepts of "day" and "night" are thus rendered heuristically meaningless?

Indeed, far from being useless, we propose that categorical operations of culture are psychologically necessary for the progression of knowledge in this area. It is difficult to even conceive of what answers to Hermans and Kempen's (1998) own culture-relevant questions would look like without some kind of (even arbitrary) categorical labels, a point that they implicitly illustrate throughout their article. For example, when considering questions concerning how scientists can understand complex cultural identities, they use explicit categories to do so:

I can speak differentially as a psychologist, a man, a Catholic, a member of a conservative Dutch family, but I can also speak as an American insofar as I am familiar with North American culture. I know this culture from movies, songs, pop art, congresses, and professional contacts. (p. 1118)

What are "psychologist," "Catholic," and "American" if not categorical conceptualizations of different cultural identities? It is important to emphasize that operationally categorizing cultures does not imply that the boundaries between cultures are not permeable. Rather, this practice provides a starting point, without which any understanding of these issues would be exceedingly difficult.

Of course, labeling cultures would be useless if, as Hermans and Kempen (1998)

suggested, distinct cultures were disappearing from the earth because of international interconnections or globalization. Hermans and Kempen, however, overstated the impact of these interconnections. Most of their examples refer to interactions that we believe will not significantly reduce cultural distinctiveness: Am I more Chinese if I get Hong Kong Flu? Are Mexican schoolgirls more Greek because they attend toga parties? Are Americans more Arabic because Persian Gulf events affect U.S. gas prices? And, most ludicrous, are people in the Balkans more American because they have been bombed by them? Cultural distinctiveness is not eradicated by these interactions, even if the world can be conceived of as a single civilization.

Indeed, in spite of modern (and primarily first world) communication systems, people are most influenced by those with whom they have personal contact (e.g., Latane, 1981) and are thus more likely to share the beliefs and behaviors of those persons (see Latane & L'Herrou, 1996). It seems, then, that distinct "cultures" should continue to emerge and exist unless all persons interact with an entirely random subset of other persons, with each human interaction being equally likely to occur. As this condition seems unlikely, we feel confident that distinct cultures will continue to exist in a meaningful way.

Although Hermans and Kempen (1998) overstated the effects of globalization and at times argued against a straw man, they did reach some important conclusions. They suggested that culture be studied as it moves and mixes. Berry's (1997) influential acculturation framework may be a step toward this goal—he explicitly included dimensions for both home and host culture and clearly stated that the acculturative process affects both host and immigrant cultural groups. Hermans and Kempen are also correct in arguing that cross-cultural psychologists should attend more frequently to the complexity of self and identity. Triandis (1989) has already hinted at this complexity with his assertion that each individual has multiple selves from which to sample. Admittedly, not all studies would benefit from attending to this type of multivoiced complexity. Nonetheless, we agree that it deserves further attention in cross-cultural research.

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### The Perilous Problem of Neglecting Cultural Realities

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Although I am in total agreement with the concern expressed by Hermans and Kempen (October 1998) about the "perilous problems of cultural dichotomies" (p. 1111), the neglect of cultural realities poses as serious a challenge. In failing to credit cultural identity with a central role in international and national politics, as well as in the everyday lives of people, we are burying our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich. The increasing fragmentation of the world order in terms of groups adhering to some cultural identity or another is an equally, if not an even more astounding, phenomenon than globalization.

Expressed in terms of another aspect of the problem of cultural dichotomies that has been raised by Hermans and Kempen (1998), my concern is about their undervaluing of the local in the course of em-

phasizing the global. The differentiation between the local and the global has, as they pointed out, also been formulated in terms of the distinction between heterogenization and homogenization. In psychology the equivalent distinction has been between relativism and universalism. Of a comparable nature is the search for idiographic and universal lawfulness. Diversity and commonality are two irrevocably related principles that our discipline has to address. So far, attention has primarily been devoted to the search for universal laws, albeit from an ethnocentric Western perspective. I am afraid that an emphasis on globalization will further perpetuate this one-sided orientation in our discipline.

We certainly need to become more knowledgeable about the interactive effects of cultures at the peripheral level, as Hermans and Kempen (1998) pointed out. However, interaction at the peripheral level invariably involves a decentralized minority interacting with a majority culture ensconced in an established socioeconomic-political power base, a power base that encompasses mainstream psychology. As minority representatives have frequently pointed out, power is an important variable in the human equation that is all too often neglected in psychology. Related to the neglect of power as an important variable in human interactions, be it of a political, economic, scientific, or psychological nature, is an unawareness of the ideological base from which we operate in psychology.

Valid as the call for a focus on the contact zones of cultures certainly is, it applies primarily to those instances where the technological advances that make globalization possible are experienced. The concentration of psychology at this level is likely to perpetuate the exclusivity that has inhibited the international development of the discipline and the profession. Despite globalization, the majority of the world's population undoubtedly does not experience its effects firsthand. These are the people about and from whom psychologists have to learn more by indwelling in their frames of reference, not with an approach based on our way of conducting psychology, as has happened too often in cross-cultural psychology, but with an approach that is in keeping with the worldview of the cultures we need to know more about.

"On the one hand, ethnic groups are rightfully concerned about the preservation of their autonomy and cultural identity; on the other, a well-functioning, multi-ethnic, global society requires that we