

Culture as Situated Cognition

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Numerous studies document cross-national differences in cognitive processes, suggesting that people from different cultures and societies think differently. How are these results to be interpreted? One possibility is that cultural syndromes are based in distal cultural features such as philosophy, religion, or language and that these features have direct current consequences for values, relationality, self-concept, well-being and cognition. While initially plausible and certainly congruent with some approaches to cross-cultural difference, a number of studies suggest that 'distal' features, such as a society's philosophical tradition, do not exert direct effects. Instead, they exert an influence by making one or another *cultural mindset* more likely to be used in the moment. A *cultural mindset* is a mental representation containing culture-congruent content, procedures, and goals. Experimental research demonstrates that small and seemingly incidental features of a situation can cue different mindsets and that once cued, mindsets influence which goals, content and process knowledge seem relevant to the task at hand. A variety of situational primes all work in the same way. In fact, merely reading a short paragraph that primes a collective or individual mindset is sufficient to influence people's reasoning strategies in ways that parallel differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Such temporary influences are difficult to reconcile with approaches that locate cultural influences in distal societal features and extended socialization processes. Instead, they suggest that cultural differences may be better conceptualized within a framework of adaptively tuned situated cognition. I'll present relevant experimental and meta-analytic findings, outline implications of these findings for the conceptualization of culture and discuss implications for basic and applied research, including implications for surveys and cross-cultural comparisons.