CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND PSYCHOLOGY
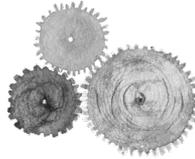
A Christian Engagement

Paul Youngbin Kim

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Introduction

Why and How We Should Study Culture and Psychology in a Christian Faith Perspective

"Why are you enrolled in this class?"

My guess is that you have been asked, and perhaps mildly annoyed by, this question many times during your academic career. At the start of each term in my Cross-Cultural Psychology course, I ask students this basic question on an introductory survey. Some students are refreshingly honest and reply that it is because the class is required for the major; I completely understand this mindset. But some of the other frequent student responses over the years also have been telling: "I want to be a mental health professional and want to work with diverse cultures" and "I want to make myself as competitive as possible for the workplace" are some examples that come to mind. So, among my students, there is shared motivation driven primarily by practical outcomes (e.g., acquisition of skills valuable for a future vocation). And this is a good thing. Consistent with my students' instincts about the worth of studying how culture and psychology relate to each other, the American Psychological Association (APA), in its various guidelines for psychology students, emphasizes the importance of culture, diversity,

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and inclusion. For example, a document highlighting transferable skills for psychology students identifies inclusivity as a vital interpersonal skill, describing it as a skill that leads one to "demonstrate sensitivity to cultural and individual differences and similarities by working effectively with diverse people, respecting and considering divergent opinions, and showing respect for others."[1]

Less frequently, I get student responses that explicitly articulate a Christian faith perspective as motivation for taking my course. My students tend to be divided on Christian faith integration into studying cultural diversity and psychology. In fact, another question on my introductory survey asks students to rate how important faith integration in the class is to them. In my most recent questionnaire, conducted in the spring of 2025, 13 percent rated faith integration as the lowest priority ("not at all important"); only 4.3 percent rated it as the highest priority ("extremely important"). The rest of the group reported varying levels of importance (30.4 percent said "very important," 34.8 percent said "moderately important," and 17.4 percent said "slightly important").

So, from what I can gather, students are in different places when it comes to the study of culture's relation to psychology in a Christian faith perspective. Some desire lots of faith engagement, some want a moderate amount, and others see little value in it.

In this introduction, I would like to put forward some compelling reasons to study culture and psychology in a Christian perspective. I will then provide some initial thoughts on *how* to go about doing that, including some practical suggestions on how to engage the materials in this book. I will wrap up the introduction by articulating how my own cultures have shaped the materials in this book.

Why Culture, Psychology, and Christian Faith?

Broadly speaking, we must study culture and its relation to psychology in a Christian faith perspective because it can help us

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1. Naufel et al., "Skillful Psychology Student," 1.

love our neighbors better, including (and especially) the culturally different neighbors. As you begin reading this book, my prayer is that by the end you will have acquired the knowledge to utilize the tools available in psychology to love across cultural differences. Psychological science demonstrates that it is easier for you and me to love those who are similar to us than those who are different from us (see, e.g., social identity theory, which asserts that we relate to in-group members much more favorably than out-group ones).[2] But Christian love calls us to love our neighbors (Mark 12:31) without qualifications. In the language of this book, we, as learners and appliers of psychology, are called to demonstrate God's love across cultures using the tools available in psychology.

Another reason Christian students must care about the intersection of culture and psychology is that, succinctly put, religion matters. In the language of research methods, various constructs representing Christian faith can facilitate or hinder psychological outcomes; alternatively, these constructs can also moderate an existing empirical association between culture and psychological outcomes.

On the one hand, it is true that Christian faith can hurt. At times, religion can interfere with beneficial psychological outcomes. At various points in this book you will be challenged to grapple with troubling examples of the deleterious role of religion (including Christian faith) and related constructs in the intersection of culture and psychological outcomes. When you and I, as followers of Jesus seeking to faithfully live out the calling to love our neighbors, learn of some of the ways that Christianity can inflict harm, it is an opportunity for genuine self- and communal reflection and, ultimately, repentance.

On the other hand, there are times that Christian faith can help. Again, borrowing the language of research methods, religion is often viewed as a buffer in the stress-distress relation of

2. Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory," 15–17.

minoritized communities.[3] Taking a step back, this protective feature of religion is a reminder of how faithful communities that love their neighbors can be a light for people in stressful situations. In this book, you will see examples in psychology of how certain aspects of Christian faith can help facilitate human flourishing.

In sum, we study the association between culture and psychology in a Christian faith perspective because it allows us to affirm how Christian faith can help improve human lives across or within cultures. We as Christian communities should keep doing what we are doing—if it is helpful for people. But on the flip side, psychology also should lead us to take a hard look at our own Christian communities and how some aspects of the ways we are living out our faith, intentional or not, are falling short of loving our neighbors as God intended.

Finally, we study psychology, culture, and Christian faith because when we elevate marginalized or decentered stories in psychology (and by extension, elevate marginalized *people*), we are demonstrating a tangible love of our neighbors. On the flip side, when stories are pushed to the margins, we fall short of loving the people who are part of those stories. Allow me to use two personal stories here to make my point.

When I was an undergraduate student majoring in psychology, I conducted an independent research project on attitudes toward counseling among international students in the US. It was my first ever research study, and when an opportunity to present the findings at a regional undergraduate research conference came up, I jumped on it. When I arrived at the conference location, I browsed through the titles and descriptions of the other presentations in the printed program, and it struck me how very few presentations focused on cultural themes. In fact, the conference presentations were grouped according to shared themes, but my presentation seemed only tangentially related to the other projects. That was the first red flag. When it was my turn to present, I

3. P. Kim et al., "Religious Coping Moderates."

was nervous, but I was also eager to communicate the importance of the findings with students and professors. Following my presentation, there was time set aside for interaction with the audience. Given what I observed in the student presentations before mine, I was eager for feedback, affirmation, questions—really, any kind of engagement. To my initial surprise, which quickly turned into dismay, what followed instead was awkward silence and averted eyes. No questions, no feedback. The eager people who clamored to speak up in the other presentations, the same folks who had no trouble filling the Q&A times of the other research projects with thoughts on the implications of the findings and affirmation of the students' work, did not appear to see how my findings on international students also mattered. It was then that I realized how alone I was in that large auditorium. I was (and my presentation was) invited to this physical space, but the message conveyed was that what I had to offer was not equal to the value of the other projects. Given the strong cultural emphasis of my study, I couldn't help but wonder if the study of culture was viewed as secondary or peripheral by the attendees.

My second story begins when I was working at a university counseling center. During a meeting, I proposed doing a presentation for students on racial microaggressions. I was excited to present this topic as a clinical outreach because of my own research interests. I thought that education about the topic, and about ways of coping, might help the student body. After I pitched the idea, a colleague looked at me, paused, and asked somewhat dismissively, "What are microaggressions?" Taken aback by this response, I couldn't formulate a solid answer, and the presentation idea got scratched. Afterward, with my peers, I processed how the colleague's response itself felt like a microaggression, that my passion and expertise for talking about the psychological impact of racism had been invalidated.

I share these two stories to illustrate the costs of the marginalization of certain stories. I share them with you as examples of errors to avoid as a psychology learning community. I should

also add that I am grateful my overall journey in psychology has been such that stories like these are the exceptions. I have had many corrective experiences when colleagues and students have supported—*centralized*—the stories I have told through psychology. I will share these examples too. My prayer is that you and I as members of the psychology community always strive to elevate or centralize stories that have been pushed to the edges in psychology; that we would live out the true inclusiveness of Jesus; that we would seek to emulate our God, whose heart is for the brokenhearted (Ps. 34:18); that the glorious vision of every community coming together before God as equals and worshiping him (Rev. 7:9) would be something that can be realized (even if not in full here on this earth) in a tangible way when we honor and center stories that have been previously marginalized.

How Should We Approach Culture, Psychology, and Christian Faith?

With the love of all neighbors as the basis, next I will propose *how* we might implement studying psychology in a Christian perspective. If the overarching goal is the love of all neighbors, I propose that the how of the implementation should be a balancing act. It is, admittedly, a difficult balancing act, but one that faithful Christians looking to improve in loving their neighbors through psychology must be able to do. In this space I would like to propose a few guidelines to keep in mind. When we study how culture, faith, and psychology are intertwined, we must do so with hope, knowledge, humility, and confidence.

With Hope, but Also with Lament

As followers of Jesus, we have genuine hope that all things will be made right. But this hope is not disconnected from the reality of our imperfect world; there is an understanding that we are called to lament the individual and collective suffering that is all around

us. It's the paradoxical perspective that gives Christian communities real, unshakable hope and, at the same time, empathy for the cries of individuals and communities near and far. Indeed, the study of culture and psychology tends to be filled with themes that should trouble us (e.g., social injustices, health and mental health disparities, misuse of psychological research). When you encounter these themes, sit with the troubled emotion(s). Lament the consequences of our sinful world on people and the communities that they are a part of, especially the communities that are marginalized and oppressed. And through it all, reflect on how your hope and lament are intertwined and necessary for a proper engagement in the field of psychology.

Every two years I lead a short-term study abroad in South Korea. In this program, ten or so students from my American institution travel with me to Seoul to take Cross-Cultural Psychology against the backdrop of Korean culture. One of the most powerful activities during this study abroad is when they learn about the girls and women who were forcibly taken as sexual slaves during the Japanese colonial period. Every time my students learn about this collective trauma of Korea, I observe them lament, whether through tears that freely flow or other expressions of sadness and anger. But during their grief, I paradoxically feel hope.

Here is what Emi Ichimura (my TA on the program) and I wrote in a *Christian Scholar's Review* blog: "Hope for validation of other experiences that have yet to be shared. Hope for the recognition of pain held inside. Hope for a better world for young girls and women all over the world. Hope for a world where every tear will be wiped away, and that death and crying and sorrow will be gone (Revelation 21:4)."[4] As you read this book, and as you study how culture, psychology, and Christian faith are related, hold on to the hope we have in Jesus. But also, part of that hope is to grieve and to lament the atrocities and injustices that we see in our world and to work to make them right.

4. Ichimura and Kim, "'Hope, but It's a Complex Kind': Part 1."

With Knowledge, but Also with Attitudes and Skills

Whenever psychologists refer to cultural competence, they typically mean a three-pronged understanding of it: knowledge, attitudes, and skills.[5] Now it should not be a surprise that this book will emphasize knowledge the most; it is a book after all. But it should also deepen your understanding of your own cultural identities and the perspectives and biases that arise out of those identities (i.e., attitudes). Yes, it is scary to think about and even name our own biases and assumptions (it is super frightening for me), but I encourage you not to skip out on doing the quick reflections labeled "pause to reflect" throughout the book. Journaling might also be helpful. Reflecting on your attitudes is consistent with the Christian belief that vast knowledge cannot transform unless paired with a heart that is aligned with God. Without reflection, all that knowledge is like "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1).

Similarly, this book will emphasize knowledge more than skills. This book is not a manual of how to behave properly in cross-cultural settings. However, I do think that some action steps can naturally flow out of the type of attitudinal reflections and knowledge acquisitions that occur through a book like this. I would argue that some action steps are a necessary part of what it means to hope and lament. In part 2 of the *Christian Scholar's Review* blog post that I cited earlier, we wrote about the connection between hope, lament, and action: "Hope is not a passive posture. . . . True hope includes our diligent participation in God's restorative work."[6] My prayer for you as you read this book is that you will see how acquired knowledge and attitudinal change can come together to inspire you to action steps that will help you love your neighbor a little better.

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5. D. Sue et al., "Multicultural Counseling Competencies," 481–83.
6. Ichimura and Kim, "'Hope, but It's a Complex Kind': Part 2."

With Humility, but Also with Conviction

Related to the attitudinal aspects of competence from earlier, a posture of humility is needed when studying culture, psychology, and Christian faith. A bidimensional conceptualization of cultural humility is helpful for our purposes: There is an intrapersonal dimension, which is a person's recognition that they have limitations in their capability to understand the worldviews of other people, and there is an interpersonal dimension, which is a way of relating to other people with an intentional focus on them and without a sense of being better than them.[7] As you study culture and its relation to psychology, monitor your intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of humility. Are you keeping in mind the possibility that you might be wrong in your perspective? Are you checking for any sense of superiority that may creep into your interaction with someone who is from a different cultural background?

Even as I type this next example, I am aware of how my spirit is resistant to the sharing of the story. As a sinful being, my pride gets in the way of disclosing my own shortcomings. But in the spirit of demonstrating vulnerability, here it is.

In a PowerPoint slide describing racial microaggressions, I listed the phrase "alien in one's own land" as a common microaggression, citing a published article.[8] I had used this slide multiple times with my Cross-Cultural Psychology students over the years. But one particular day, a student pointed out that this was dehumanizing terminology and that I should not even make it visible on a PowerPoint slide. She proceeded to share about her family's experience of immigration to the US and how the term "alien" had been weaponized against her and her family members.

Do you know what my initial internal response was? It was one of defensiveness instead of humility. I found myself thinking things like, "But the published literature uses this term." Or, "I have been using this terminology for so long, and no one has

7. Hook and Davis, "Cultural Humility," 72.
8. D. Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," 276.

pointed this out until now." Or, "I am using it as a negative example, not endorsing it, so it is not on me." While these thoughts were jumping around in my head, I also had a counternarrative that nudged me toward a posture of cultural humility. Specifically, I had to remind myself that my understanding of the student's experiences and worldview was limited by my own biases and assumptions. And in my verbal response to the student's comment, I had to practice interpersonal cultural humility so that I did not come across as superior or as having all the answers but instead as deeply honoring her concerns.

But cultural humility does not negate the need for a sense of conviction.[9] At some parts of this book, you might encounter things that you disagree with or at least are uncertain about. In your conversations with other people, you might not see eye to eye. Cultural humility does not mean that personal convictions must be set aside. Instead, articulate your convictions, but always keep in mind the possibility that you might have missed something and that the person in front of you or the contents of this book could help you learn something new about culture, psychology, and Christian faith.

The term "critical lens" might be another way to refer to having a conviction. In a real sense, social scientists like me are trained to critique personal, interpersonal, and cultural dynamics. Professor Alexander Jun recently said on my podcast that "learning to have a critical lens but not a critical spirit" is a delicate balance for Christian scholars, especially those who are in the business of naming and calling out social problems.[10] As you engage in the topics of this book, monitor your spirit and ask yourself this question: Am I utilizing a critical lens right now, or am I feeding into a critical spirit?

With Confidence, but Also with Psychology in Its Proper Place

I encourage you to embrace psychology's ability to answer questions about you and me. In reality, though, Christian communities

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9. McConnell et al., "Including Multiculturalism," 10.
10. P. Kim, "Racism and Total (with a Big T) Depravity."

can foster skepticism of the social sciences, especially when cultural diversity is considered.

I was once sitting in a guidance counselor's office, discussing strategies for submitting college applications. At some point in the conversation, I disclosed to her that I was hoping to major in psychology. In response, the counselor looked at me pointedly and proceeded to let me know that if psychology was in fact what I wanted to study, I should consider applying only to Christian colleges and universities. Her reason? Psychology taught in non-Christian settings (and by non-Christian professors) was not to be trusted.

Has anyone expressed similar sentiments to you, stemming from their assumption that psychology and Christianity are not compatible? Perhaps not to the same extreme as my counselor, but I would guess that you have encountered voices that have tried to nudge you away from psychology or have insinuated that it is not to be trusted.

As you continue to read this book, I encourage you to *trust* psychology—not in the sense that psychology is a flawless academic discipline, and certainly not in the sense that psychologists who conduct research have it right all the time. (If you were a fly on the wall for any of my research team meetings, you would see me regularly admitting something to the effect of "I thought this was the case, but now I see that it should be . . .") But I implore you to trust that the findings psychologists are sharing through their empirical research have merit and will help answer the types of questions that psychology has the capability of answering.

In the important book *Psychology and Christianity: Five Views*, five different views of how psychology and Christianity relate to each other are presented and debated.[11] Briefly, the biblical counseling view argues that mainstream psychology is too secular and that only the Scriptures and Christian theology should inform

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11. Johnson, *Psychology and Christianity*.

psychology.[12] The Christian psychology view argues for a distinctively Christian perspective in understanding human nature.[13] The integration view holds psychology in high regard, but it is also not shy about bringing in Christian perspectives to understand and at times critique psychology.[14] The levels-of-explanation view argues that there are varying levels of explaining our world and that psychology occupies a particular level that is different from the level of something like theology.[15] Finally, the transformational psychology view asserts that what makes psychology Christian is the understanding that "*how* Christians live out their Christianity in the field of psychology and counseling is at least as important as seeking to understand human beings Christianly."[16]

In this book on how culture, psychology, and Christian faith should connect, I am especially drawn to the levels-of-explanation and integration perspectives. That is, you will see me utilizing psychological studies to draw connections to faithful Christian living without necessarily qualifying or critiquing the use of the Bible or Christian traditions (i.e., levels-of-explanation). You will also see me drawing from Christian perspectives to affirm or critique psychology perspectives (i.e., integration). Put differently, I am of the belief that a faithful engagement of culture and psychology should hold psychology in high regard but at the same time make meaningful connections to Christian faith, whether in affirmation or critique.

Moreover, I believe that a suspicion of psychology and its connection to cultural themes can impede the very thing that Christian learning communities strive to do, which is to find God's truth in all our endeavors. On the flip side, seeing the value of psychological science in God's good work among his people can be an incredibly liberating and joyful experience.

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12. Powlison, "Biblical Counseling View."
13. Roberts and Watson, "Christian Psychology View."
14. Jones, "Integration View."
15. Myers, "Levels-of-Explanation View."
16. Johnson, "Brief History," 37; see also Coe and Hall, "Transformational Psychology View."

Remember my story about the counselor telling me I should apply to only Christian colleges? As an "obedient" student, I did just that, and I ended up at Calvin College (now Calvin University) for my undergraduate education. Ironically, Calvin opened up psychology to me in a way that no protectionist mentality could. As an undergraduate student I dove deep into learning about psychology, taking stimulating psychology classes with wonderful Christian professors. At no point did any of my professors imply that a narrow version of "Christian" psychology should be pursued or that psychological science should not be trusted. My narrow view of psychology was broadened, my passion for the subject was deepened, and I loved every minute of it. In college I was inundated with the idea that all things in this world belong to God, including all academic disciplines. Until college I had been told that there needed to be a clear separation of the secular from the Christian. Listening to "non-Christian" music was frowned on, and "evolution" was a forbidden word even in biology classrooms. In contrast, studying psychology as an undergraduate student ignited a passion in me, and I recognized the vocation I chose in psychology as being just as sacred as the vocation of a missionary or a priest. This was a liberating process. Even though I had made up my mind to go into psychology, I realized that I was subconsciously ashamed of my field and had received such messaging from other Christians around me. The transformation that took place in me during college freed me to pursue psychology with a renewed zeal, with the assurance that ultimately God is glorified through my work.

I pray for similar confidence for you as you read this book and learn about culture and psychology in a Christian perspective. I pray that, on the one hand, you will understand that psychology's focus is clearly and narrowly defined: the how and why of behavior, cognition, and emotion. Psychology cannot answer what David Myers and Malcolm Jeeves refer to as "life's ultimate questions."[17]

17. Myers and Jeeves, *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*, 11.

On the other hand, I pray that this acceptance of the limits of psychology will free you up to embrace psychological science as a gift from God to be utilized as a tool to make a difference in people's lives. As David Myers aptly writes, "In psychology, we need more Christian scholars not in the stands but down on the playing field."[18]

A Note About My Own Cultural Identities

Finally, I want to briefly share my own personal and professional backgrounds and how they have shaped the contents of this book. Professionally, I am a college professor at a Christian liberal arts institution in the Pacific Northwest (PNW) US. Also, I am trained as a counseling psychologist, and my training emphasized cultural perspectives related to mental health. As such, I feel passionate about the integration of Christian faith and cultural perspectives into all aspects of my teaching. Given my professional roles and passion, I am envisioning that this book will be primarily read by people like my students (and hopefully by my students): undergraduates enrolled in a Christian higher education institution located in the US and taking a psychology class that is intentionally focused on the relation between culture and psychology (e.g., Cross-Cultural Psychology, Multicultural Psychology). Furthermore, because of its purposeful, narrow focus on Christian faith, this book is meant to serve as a *supplement* to more comprehensive textbooks.

In this book you may notice a propensity toward concepts and examples that are especially applicable in the US setting but that also arise from Korean and Asian American cultures. You likely guessed it from my last name—I am of Korean heritage. But in addition to my Korean background, I am also influenced by my "missionary kid" (MK) identity (I grew up in the Philippines as a child of cross-cultural missionaries) and all the cultural correlates

18. Myers, "Steering Between the Extremes," 383.

that come with that identity. My childhood and adolescent years were spent outside the US, but from college on, I have lived in the US and now consider the PNW my home. As we will see in chapter 2, it is important for us to name the personal experiences and perspectives that can shape the work we put forward in psychology.

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What Are We Talking About?

Defining Culture

Culture is a fuzzy construct.

> —Harry C. Triandis et al., "Individualism and Collectivism"

We talk about "culture" all the time. And as the opening quote of this chapter descriptively and aptly captures, we might mean very different things whenever we bring up the word. Just the other day I talked to a friend about *teen* culture (i.e., the culture of my two daughters). To be candid, I might have complained a bit about their culture. In that conversation, I was applying a definition of "culture"—that is, operationalizing it—as *age* dependent. My children are often described as members of the Gen Z culture, whereas I barely make the cut for the millennial cultural group.

Obviously, age and year of birth are not the only determinants of culture, or even the most important ones in most situations. Even though my daughters and I are a few decades apart (and they remind me of this difference regularly), we also have commonalities when it comes to cultures. All of us identify as Korean

Americans, which means that we share in the cultural aspects of being Korean, American, and Korean American. By extension, we are all people of color in the US. We also share in the culture of Christianity.

This brings me to a couple important points that Hector Betancourt and Steven López make regarding defining and assessing culture in psychology. They write that as long as "cultural research specifies what is meant by culture in terms that are amenable to measurement," it is fine for psychology to embrace different definitions of "culture."[1] Put simply, culture, when studied in psychology, must be measurable. If I propose a definition of "culture" as some kind of unspoken, unconscious energy but am unable to articulate a method for assessing that unconscious energy, then that definition cannot be taken seriously in psychology. The second implication of Betancourt and López's assertion is that it is vital to define "culture" in psychology clearly so that everyone is talking about the same thing. Otherwise, confusion and misunderstanding might result.

In this chapter I will first discuss how psychology's understanding and application of culture can be enhanced by some fundamental truths of Christianity. After that, I will provide an overview of the commonly used methods of defining "culture" and utilizing it in the field of psychology, along with commentaries from a Christian faith perspective.

Pause to Reflect

How do *you* define "culture"? Don't worry about getting it right or coming up with a polished definition. Simply reflect on what elements are essential to thinking about culture. After you come up with some thoughts, pay attention to how what you emphasized maps onto some of the ideas that are presented in this chapter.

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1. Betancourt and López, "Study of Culture," 630.

Culture and Core Christian Beliefs

Although a comprehensive theologizing about culture is beyond the scope of this book, it is nonetheless important to highlight how a couple fundamental truths in the Christian tradition can enrich and reinforce social science's conceptualization of culture. Drawing specifically from William Edgar's book *Created and Creating: A Biblical Theology of Culture*, I will discuss three truths in connection to culture: people as image bearers, our fallenness, and the need for critique.

The first truth is that culture is developed by God's image bearers.[2] An implication of this truth is that when we engage in a culture outside of our own, we must approach the endeavor with a deep respect for the image bearers who make up that culture. This simple truth is difficult to practice; as we will see later in this chapter and throughout the book, psychological research tells us that cross-cultural interactions are fraught with judgments and attitudes of superiority.

The second truth is regarding our fallenness. That is, the honoring of other cultures must be held in balance with the notion that "because of the fall, culture can and has become sinister."[3] Of course, it must be recognized that if other cultures can go awry because of sin, so can our own culture(s).

Indeed, the recognition that cultural values and actions can go awry is congruent with the Christian worldview that, because of the reality of sin, people have fallen short of what is acceptable before God (see Rom. 3:23). This deep understanding of our sinful nature as people should logically extend to the idea that *collective* sin—the shortcomings of a group of people or culture—is a reality in our world. In the individualistic worldview of Western Christianity, though, we tend to amplify individual sins at the expense of collective ones. In a clever critique of this imbalance,

2. Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 176.
3. Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 177.

Alexander Jun describes this phenomenon as ignoring the "big T" of "Total Depravity" in the five points of Calvinism (TULIP).[4]

Social psychology has revealed compelling ways consistent with Christian theology that people in groups can misbehave. You might have heard about groupthink, the tendency for individuals in a group setting to be hesitant to go against the opinion of the group for various reasons.[5] Social identity theory argues that people evaluate their own in-group more favorably than outgroups.[6] Translated to the language of "culture," this tendency might mean that people are prone to viewing their own culture as superior or more desirable than others' cultures, which in its extreme form can be described as ethnocentrism.[7] Given our tendency toward groupthink and ethnocentrism, it is no wonder that the Bible writers encourage us to counter these group tendencies by elevating others over ourselves (e.g., Phil. 2:3).

So shortcomings of a cultural group should not surprise us, given the effects of our sins. For example, in this book, more than once we will see how a hyperindividualistic application of the Christian faith can result in a justification of wrongdoing. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, in their acclaimed book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, describe how the culture of White evangelicals in the US tends to embrace a "cultural tool kit" characterized by three beliefs. First, there is *accountable freewill individualism*, which is a belief that individuals are responsible for any plights that they might find themselves in. Second, the tool kit includes a belief in *relationalism*, which is the tendency to view social problems such as racism as interpersonal; under this perspective, racism becomes all about how you treat me (or how I treat you). Finally, *anti-structuralism* de-emphasizes laws

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4. P. Kim, "Racism and Total (with a Big T) Depravity"; Rothwell, "What Is TULIP?"
5. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, "groupthink," last updated November 15, 2023, https://dictionary.apa.org/groupthink.
6. Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," 15–17.
7. Pettigrew, "Ethnocentrism," 827.

and policies as contributing factors to difficulties that people might experience.[8]

Disconnected from context, the cultural tool kit might sound attractive and even compatible with the tenets of Christian faith. Individual accountability? Interpersonal understanding of sin? These are things that appear to connect to faithful Christian living.

But sometimes this cultural tool kit and other similar frameworks interfere with empathy for the experiences of others who might be suffering due to factors beyond their individual control. Again, later on in this book you will read examples of how this kind of framework can lead to the invalidation of experiences of other cultures, such as the invalidation of structural racism.

Returning to Edgar's discussion, the third truth is that, because of the imperfection of cultures, a Christian worldview calls us to assess cultures and call out any areas of shortcomings. William Edgar writes about culture, "And although value judgements should be made cautiously, they are surely appropriate."[9]

In psychology we are socialized to be tentative in any value judgments, keeping in mind that the tools available to us in the field of psychology tend to be primarily descriptive.[10] But there are times when psychological science does allow for some firm conclusions and applications, especially when paired with a Christian understanding of human flourishing.

You might recall that during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a dramatic increase in the number of hate incidents directed at Asians and Asian Americans.[11] My colleague Brittany Tausen and I decided to empirically examine White college students' awareness of, or *ethnocultural empathy* for, the difficulties of their Asian and Asian American peers during the COVID-19 pandemic.[12] Our

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8. Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 76.
9. Edgar, *Created and Creating*, 10.
10. Myers and Jeeves, *Psychology Through the Eyes of Faith*, 6–11.
11. Yellow Horse et al., *Stop AAPI Hate*.
12. For more on ethnocultural empathy, see Y. Wang et al., "Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy."

research found that empathy of White students for their Asian American peers was related to how much their peers voiced their concerns about the injustice.[13] In other words, examples of activism set by friends were impactful in increasing ethnocultural empathy. Even though this was a correlational study, Dr. Tausen and I felt comfortable speaking up about the need for more changes in the culture of our participants (i.e., White culture) to include more intentional contact with and exposure to how their peers were engaging in activism. As Christian scholars, we kept in mind the biblical call to "mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15). If a cultural group of Jesus followers is made aware of a deficit (e.g., a lack of ethnocultural empathy) in relating to a group that is oppressed, then they should take reasonable steps to address that deficit. In this particular research study, then, our critique of the lack of intentional exposure to activism in the culture of our participants was a "value judgment," one that we put forward cautiously, and hopefully hospitably, but also with conviction—as it was something that we felt compelled to do on the basis of Christian principles.

Next I will provide brief overviews of several frameworks for thinking about culture in psychology.

Identity Groups

One way to think about culture is to think about groups that share a culture. Groups share a culture on the basis of country, language, ethnicity, gender, disability, and sexual orientation.[14] I would also add religion, socioeconomic status, and geographic location to that list. If I were to identify my own identity groups for the categories that I just listed, they would be as follows:

Country: South Korea and the United States
Language: English and Korean

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13. P. Kim and Tausen, "White College Students' Ethnocultural Empathy," 308.
14. Matsumoto and Juang, *Culture and Psychology*, 17–19.

Ethnicity: Korean, Asian, Korean American, and Asian American

Gender: cisgender male

Disability: able-bodied

Sexual orientation: straight

Religion: Christian

Socioeconomic status: middle class

Geographic location: PNW region of the US

Pause to Reflect

Take a moment to think about *your* responses to the listed categories. Are any of the dimensions difficult to respond to? Easy? What might your ease or difficulty say about the type of cultural socialization, or the lack thereof, that you have experienced?

When it comes to the various identity groups, it is also important to recognize that these groups do not operate in parallel; rather, the groups influence and interact with one another. This notion is referred to as *intersectionality*. Kimberlé Crenshaw is recognized as the scholar who coined the terminology to describe the need to examine racism in relation to gendered experiences.[15] In cultural psychology, gendered racism is an important area of research that examines how some contemporary forms of racism might also reflect gender bias.[16]

We can also think of intersectionality as the interaction between Christianity and one or more identity groups. As for me, my Christian culture intersects with my geographic location of the PNW region of the US. A readily observable example is that PNW folks are devoted coffee drinkers. (Many of my Seattle friends proudly wear the label of "coffee snob.") Every Sunday, when I look around during worship, I can usually pick out several people

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15. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins."
16. Williams and Lewis, "Gendered Racial Microaggressions," 368–80.

sipping coffee, something I did not see when worshiping in other parts of the world; in fact, when I was growing up, I was taught it was unholy to eat or drink during service. In contrast, my current church even has a coffee stand in the lobby where churchgoers can come and fill and refill their coffee cups before, during, and after worship.

The coffee example is a rather innocuous example of intersectionality. But what if multiple identity groups coming together results in an unfavorable outcome with a real impact on people? Later on in this book, you will see an example of how racism and Christian culture can come together to influence experiences and perceptions.

Subjective or Objective Culture

Another way to conceptualize culture is to think about the distinction between *subjective* and *objective* cultures.[17] Objective culture includes physical things, such as the food that you prefer, the buildings that you occupy, the narrowness of your roads, and so on. In contrast, subjective culture consists of elements that are internalized and shared among a group of people, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, and practices. These components might be a bit more difficult to identify and describe than aspects of objective culture. If it is not already obvious, psychologists are primarily interested in studying subjective culture.

My former students and I once conducted a research study illustrating both objective and subjective cultural elements: We examined the psychological implications of depicting Jesus as a White or non-White person. Have you ever paid attention to the images of Jesus used in your church materials (e.g., in sermon illustrations or printed bulletins)? More pointedly, have you ever noticed if Jesus is portrayed as a White or non-White person?

17. Triandis, *Analysis of Subjective Culture*; also see Matsumoto and Juang, *Culture and Psychology*, 21–27.

Next time you are at church or browsing through your church website or social media, see if you can pick up on how Jesus is depicted.

Images of Jesus are an objective element of culture—they are physical things (e.g., photos). In contrast, the main findings of our study related to subjective aspects of culture. For instance, although our sample of Asian American college students studying at a Christian university tended to recognize on "paper" (more accurately, on an electronic survey) that Jesus was a non-White person, they nonetheless favored White Jesus images over non-White ones; they were quicker to link positive words with White Jesus than with non-White Jesus, and vice versa for the negative descriptors. This tendency was especially true for those students who claimed that they were neutral and unbiased when they engaged topics related to race. There is so much more to say about the study findings, but for now, let's bring it back to defining "culture"—the study was an apt illustration of objective and (especially) subjective elements of culture.[18]

Pause to Reflect

Take a few moments to think about an identity group that you belong to. Can you list some aspects of your culture that are objective? What about subjective aspects? Which aspects were easier to list for you, and why might that be?

Culture as Multidimensional, Shared, and Relatively Permanent

Despite the different definitions of "culture" that exist in psychology, some commonalities tend to be emphasized in defining it. These commonalities are illustrated in this particular definition

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18. P. Kim et al., "Beliefs About Jesus's Race," 333–51.

from Jeffery Scott Mio, Lori A. Barker, Melanie M. Domenech Rodríguez, and John Gonzalez: "The values, beliefs, and practices of a group of people, shared through symbols and passed down from generation to generation."[19]

Three essential aspects of culture are contained in this definition. First, culture includes multiple dimensions or domains, such as "values, beliefs, and practices." In everyday life, we often discuss culture as if it were *solely* behavior or action. What music do people listen to? What food do they eat most often? Which language(s) do they speak? In contrast, a fuller understanding of culture includes a consideration of internal aspects, such as values and beliefs. I will return to this important idea of multiple domains in chapter 6.

Second, culture is shared among a group of people. Think about it. If you were to create a culture but were the lone member of the cultural group, then you would not have really started a culture. A community of people is needed. And how do the people within such a community share a culture? As the definition notes, through *symbols* that represent their culture.

Third, culture is relatively long-lasting. It is transmitted from one generation to the next. So a culture that does not include transmission and is short-lived (e.g., pop culture) is different from the type of culture that psychologists and other social scientists are interested in studying. If you identify as a Swiftie (a diehard fan of Taylor Swift), I hate to break it to you, but that pop cultural identification is not the type of "long-lasting" culture that psychologists are interested in studying.

Let me provide several examples of what these three elements of culture might look like when they come together. First, let's focus on the behavioral versus values/beliefs distinction. In the Christian faith context, the behavioral aspects of religion are emphasized and readily identifiable. Everett Worthington and his coauthors created a measure called the Religious Commitment Inventory-10

19. Mio et al., *Multicultural Psychology*, 8.

(RCI-10), which captures an individual's participation in religion. The RCI-10 asks about behavioral aspects of religious culture, such as engagement in faith literature and giving money to the church.[20]

Internal aspects of religion are also studied extensively in psychology. I want to briefly highlight one aspect of religion that has been influential in my own research: religious coping. Kenneth Pargament, Margaret Feuille, and Donna Burdzy argue that people of faith can utilize religion to cope with life's difficulties in several different ways. They can trust God, but they can also doubt God. They can utilize their faith to make meaning of their situation, or they can despair that their situation is God punishing them.[21] Whatever the type, many aspects of religious coping focus (but not exclusively) on beliefs and values that may not be externally visible.

Similarly, a measure of religiosity, the Duke Religious Index, assesses religion with external measures (e.g., attendance in religious meetings) and internal ones (e.g., subjective spiritual experience).[22] Both are important aspects of Christian culture.

Certain *values* might also be associated with the Christian faith. The Faith at Work Scale includes questions about the meaningful application of religion at work, such as the perception of one's skills as a God-given gift.[23] Again, this perception is an internal aspect of religion but still very important.

Pause to Reflect

Can you think of other examples of values and beliefs that contribute to or help define Christian culture?

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20. Worthington et al., "Religious Commitment Inventory," 84–96.
21. Pargament et al., "Brief RCOPE," 52–56.
22. Koenig et al., "Religion Index," 885–86.
23. Lynn et al., "Faith at Work Scale," 236.

Second, the fact that culture is shared by a group of people and transmitted over time is consistent with Christianity's emphasis that faith should not be practiced in solitude. Indeed, the Bible is full of reminders that relational connection to other people is a necessity of the Christian faith. There is a call for believers to be "like-minded" (Phil. 2:2). Passages exhort believers to a life that is harmonious with one another (e.g., Rom. 12:6; 15:5). These passages and many more reflect the importance of believers being in a relationship with one another through shared beliefs and actions.

And third, symbols exist to represent Christian culture. The most obvious symbols are actual drawings and objects that are associated with Christianity. During a recent study abroad to South Korea, one of my American students told me that she was looking for a crucifix to give a family member back home in the US. Despite my initial worry that she would not be able to find what she was looking for, the student eventually found a crucifix in a bookstore of a large cathedral in Seoul; this symbol of Christian faith was something that transcended national boundaries.

But more than literal objects represent Christian culture. In fact, our Christian tradition makes it clear that beyond things like the crucifix, certain actions can represent—symbolize—Christianity. "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" might be such a "symbol" of following Christ (Mic. 6:8). Taking care of the marginalized (James 1:27) might be another powerful representation of Christian faith.

To reiterate, the ideal understanding of culture includes seeing it as (1) both internal and external, (2) communally experienced and expressed through meaningful symbols, and (3) taught and absorbed across multiple generations. The practice of *seh bae* in the Korean culture is a great illustration of all three aspects. Seh bae is a practice of bowing—not a half bow but a full bow that involves the upper body going all the way down to the floor— during every major holiday, such as New Year's Day. It is typically

the children who bow to those who are older. The children wear colorful *hanbok* (traditional Korean clothing) when they bow. In return, the recipient of the bow gives words of blessing and affirmation accompanied by a cash gift. Seh bae and all the associated elements certainly comprise specific actions or behaviors. But underlying this practice are the cultural values of respect for the elderly and of the older generation's responsibility to take care of the younger folks in return. Moreover, the bow itself is a symbol, but so are the literal symbols drawn on the *hanbok* that children wear, symbols that stand for things like good health, wealth, long life, and so on. The colors can also represent different aspects of Korean culture (e.g., social hierarchy). Finally, seh bae is a cultural practice that my wife and I, as Korean Americans, learned from our parents when we were growing up. Furthermore, we teach our own children how to seh bae, and they participate in this ritual every major holiday. So far, they tell us that they will also pass on the tradition to any future children.

Pause to Reflect

Choose one cultural identity. Think about the practices, values, and beliefs that make up that cultural identity. How are they shared among a group of people? What are the symbols? And is there intentional transmission across generations?

Sources of Culture

Yet another way to think about culture is to focus on the *sources* of culture. David Matsumoto and Linda Juang argue that we can think of culture as originating from various domains: group life, environments, resources, and the evolved human mind.[24] Briefly, group life is the notion that there are some key advantages to living

24. Matsumoto and Juang, *Culture and Psychology*, 8–13.

as a group (e.g., being able to share the burden of work). Environments include aspects such as what your land looks like in shaping cultural practices. For example, here in my hometown of Seattle, there is a culture of not going out during the rainy season—we informally refer to it as our hibernation period. The category of "resources" refers to how lack or abundance of materials can directly lead to some cultural practices and values. Finally, the "evolved human mind" refers to how human beings are born into this world with predispositions that will help with survival, such as the social need to connect with other people.

Out of this list, I want to circle back to resources as a determinant of culture and connect this to Christian faith. Matsumoto and Juang write that, in general, lacking resources can lead to a culture of dependence, whereas having plenty can naturally lead to more independence.[25] This makes sense. When nothing is lacking, there is no need for dependency on others; when there is a dire need, turning to others for help is an important survival skill.

When my father was a baby, his mother was older than the typical mother of a baby, and as such, she did not have the physical ability to breastfeed him. I should add that my father's family was poor, which meant that the purchase of baby formula was not an option. My father's life was at real risk because there was no one in the family to feed him.

Can you guess what ended up happening? His mother went door to door in her village, pleading with nursing mothers for their help. And many women stepped in to breastfeed my father. It took a literal village to keep my father alive.

Here is my father, in his own words, capturing the power of interdependence in dire circumstances: "We had little, but our hearts were rich. We were lacking in resources, but the generosity and kindness overflowed. Whenever I returned to my hometown as an adult, I would hear from the older women in the village, 'I nursed you when you were a baby.' Initially, these moments were

25. Matsumoto and Juang, *Culture and Psychology*, 10–11.

awkward, and I was embarrassed; but eventually I came to cherish these moments when I could be reminded of the beauty of human connection and care."[26]

This book features multiple references to the Christian emphasis on our connectedness to one another. Acts 4:32 describes the early church in this way: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." This type of selflessness, in a real way, was out of necessity—remember, lack of resources means having to depend on others—and it achieved what it intended to achieve. Verse 34 declares "that there were no needy persons among them." Similarly, the connection between resources and dependence on one another is captured in the commandment in Leviticus 23:22: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you." Again, this is a picture of how people who need resources can directly benefit from those who have them in the first place.

Key Takeaways

1. When discussing culture in psychology, it is important to be precise in articulating what kind of culture you are referring to.
2. Understanding key truths in Christianity (e.g., the sinfulness of people) can enrich psychology's engagement of culture and related constructs.
3. Cultural identity groups can help us name the groups that we belong to. Intersectionality should also be considered when identity groups are discussed.

26. Tae Hyun Kim, online communication to author, October 18, 2024.

4. "Subjective culture" refers to beliefs and values, whereas "objective culture" refers to physical aspects of culture.

5. Religion as a culture is long-lasting, encompasses internal and external components, and is shared among many people using symbols.

6. Not having much (or anything at all) can translate to a culture of dependence on others.

Activities and Discussion Questions

1. Browse through other published definitions of "culture." Textbooks in multicultural, cross-cultural, and cultural psychology are good sources for this exercise. What do you notice about these definitions in terms of their similarities? Do any key differences strike you? How might you critique the definitions from a Christian faith perspective?

2. Does one have the freedom to *choose* a culture? Why or why not? What is the role of other people in cultural identification? That is, is cultural identification legitimate only if others ascribe it to you?

3. How does your environment (e.g., ecology) shape your culture? What about resources?

4. Think about *one* of your identity groups. How does your group/culture illustrate the reality of our fallenness? How does it exemplify the image of God?

Case Study

Brenda grew up as a child of American missionary parents. Her parents were cross-cultural missionaries in Botswana, but outside of short visits, she did not spend a significant amount of time in

the country. Instead, her parents enrolled her in a boarding school for foreign students in Germany, where she studied for over ten years. During her school years Brenda was surrounded by peers from all over the world; many (but not all) of them also identified as missionary kids. After she graduated from high school, she was accepted to a Christian liberal arts institution located in Florida. Because her parents were originally from Florida, and many of their extended family still lived there, Brenda and her parents agreed that this college would be a good fit for her. But Brenda's adjustment to the US/Florida was challenging. Even though on paper she was an American citizen, American values, beliefs, and practices felt unfamiliar to her. Indeed, learning to live in the US felt like learning a whole new language. In one of her classes, as part of a first-day-of-class introduction, the professor asked each student to quickly share where they were from. Brenda felt a familiar sinking sensation in her stomach as her classmates began sharing their responses. How were her classmates able to answer this complex question so easily and so quickly? As her turn approached, Brenda felt her mind going blank, and she ran out of the classroom with tears filling her eyes.

1. How would you describe Brenda's cultural background? How does the concept of intersectionality help you understand the complexity of Brenda's cultural experiences?
2. If you were Brenda's professor and you were made aware of how your introductory question triggered a distressing response, how might you go about addressing this with Brenda? What if you were a classmate who became aware of Brenda's response? A friend?
3. How does the understanding of culture as multidimensional, shared among a group of people, and long-lasting help you comprehend Brenda's experiences? How about culture as subjective versus objective? What about culture being shaped by resources you may or may not have?
4. How can Christian perspectives help someone like Brenda who is experiencing cultural adjustment?