

## Chapter 2

# Understanding Cultural Contexts and Their Relationship to Resilience Processes

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Social-ecological systems are neither culturally neutral (Smith, Bond, & Kagitcibasi, 2006) nor do they operate at single levels. Instead, they operate at multiple levels that span local contexts and broader global ones (Wright, Masten, & Narayan, 2013). It is, therefore, understood that conceptualisations of resilience, along with the mechanisms that support competent adjustments to adversity, are relative to, and shaped by, the often intersecting cultures that define social ecologies (Masten, 2013; Ungar, 2011; see also Chaps. 1 and 3 of this book).

In this chapter, we consider some of the ways in which both macro- and micro-cultural contexts promote cultural guidelines for everyday living. These processes include, but are not limited to, cultural scripts, national identities, and broad value systems. We then comment critically on the limitations implicit in these processes for explaining resilience processes. Finally we consider how individuals' active navigation of the various cultural contexts they traverse, and critical engagement with their cultural heritage and capital, support a co-constructed process that impacts resilience. This chapter will not, however, explain the complex theories of how cultural allegiances are acquired, how culture shapes learning, comment on how culture and biology are intertwined, or how culture is measured (see, amongst others, Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003; Hofstede, 1980; Lee, 2010; Pagel, 2012). And, while touched on briefly, it also does not explore in detail how

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culture intersects with resilience, or explain how culture matters for resilience, as this is foregrounded in the studies reported in Part II of this book.

## 2.1 What Is Culture?

Defining culture and understanding how it shapes the social ecologies of youths is not simple, given that culture is a construct that defies easy explanation (Chiu, 2013; Jahoda, 2012; Minkov, Blagoev, & Hofstede, 2013). Its history of changing – and somewhat controversial – definitions partly explains this difficulty (see Cole, 2007, 2008, or Jahoda, 2012, for reviews). Disciplinary allegiance (e.g., sociology, anthropology, cultural psychology, cross-cultural psychology, or evolutionary biology) further confounds how culture is defined (Smith et al., 2006). For example, cross-cultural psychologists, like Hofstede (1980), are likely to equate culture with values that can be measured, aggregated, and ascribed to whole nations, whereas Pagel (2012), an evolutionary biologist, equates culture with an innate capacity that advanced human survival. Culture is further associated with groups, or cultural communities, that range in size from dyads and small families, to entire nations (Rogoff, 2011; Smith et al., 2006). Culture is intertwined with race and ethnicity – and the identities these lead to – as well as distinct from them, and this adds to the difficulty of unravelling what culture is (Jenkins, 2013). Culture is sometimes considered destiny or something people are born into (for example, being born into a particular caste in India), but is more often understood as a socially constructed process (Rogoff, 2011). The mutable reality of culture – that is, its transformations within and across generations – along with cultural consistencies over time, is further complicating (Rogoff, 2011).

Given these complexities, we briefly review conventional components that inform and structure culture, before revisiting our understanding of culture in this chapter's conclusion. These classical views have limited utility for explaining how culture matters for resilience as explained more fully in the section on limitations.

### 2.1.1 *Conventional Understandings of Culture*

Endorsement of a shared culture is sometimes explained as a **national culture**. People from the same country are assumed to share cultural practices and values, and encouraged to live out these practices and values. Hofstede's (1980) study comparing IBM employees in over 70 nations is widely attributed as seminal to an understanding of culture-dependent differences and/or similarities across nations (Smith et al., 2006; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). The underlying assumption is that, by virtue of membership in a specific country (or ecology), individuals are exposed to similar learning experiences (or ecological influences – see Greenfield et al., 2003) that encourage allegiance to similar ways-of-being and

-doing, or a “collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 13). By way of illustration, Hofstede (1980, p. 16) reported: “The existence of the American people as a phenomenon is one of the clearest illustrations of the force of learning: With a multitude of genetic roots, it shows collective programming which is striking to the non-American.”

In contrast, nations can, for various reasons, lack a definitive national culture. For example, a study conducted by Norris et al. (2008) with 2,082 South African youth, showed that participants were divided in their allegiance to, and understanding of, a South African culture. Youth who self-identified as being either Black or Coloured were more proudly South African and considered South African culture to be a collectivist one. By comparison, youth who self-identified as White or Indian reported weaker endorsement of their ‘South African-ness’, and associated themselves with individualistic values.

Implicit in this South African example is a tendency to define culture as **a set of (often nationally shared) values**. Cultural values include, but are not limited to, dimensions such as conservatism (Schwartz, 1994), tightness/looseness (as expressions of tolerance for deviance from societal norms – see Gelfand et al., 2011), industry (Minkov et al., 2013), and individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 1980). These values are often used to describe national cultures and explain nations’ behaviours, although they also operate at the level of the individual and of microcultures (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010; Hofstede, 1980).

Individualism versus collectivism is probably the most common approach to explaining culture as a set of national values (Bell, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2003; Harkness & Super, 2012). In the former, the individual is paramount, and directive of how communal onuses are negotiated. In the latter, the collective is emphasized, and given precedence in how obligations are negotiated (Oyserman et al., 2002). Among other processes, the independent or interdependent value systems of individualism and collectivism respectively shape family interactions and expectations (Carlo, Koller, Raffaelli, & de Guzman, 2007), parenting theories and styles (Greenfield et al., 2003), and educational aspirations (Tao & Hong, 2014).

At its most expansive, culture can be defined as global (Ungar et al., 2007). **Global culture** is considered dominant in that it transcends national boundaries in its universal influence. Dominant culture is most typically used with reference to western (a.k.a. American) or ‘Coca-Cola’ cultures (Stevens & Lockhat, 1997). Smith (2012), for example, explained how some Maori youths in New Zealand abandon adherence to Maori culture by assimilating the culture of American youth through dress, language, dance, music and even choice of role models. In this sense, dominant culture is a marker of cultural norms against which other cultures are measured (and often found wanting). When a culture is considered dominant, or, in Bourdieu’s (1986) words, has ‘capital’, its markers (knowledge, values, symbols, etc.) acquire status and are actively reproduced (Kingston, 2001). For example, in the twentieth century, white, middle-class culture was often positioned as the norm, and aspired to, thereby furthering the marginalisation of lower-class or non-white

communities, and non-white youth in particular, as ‘other’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Fine, 1994).

Culture can also be localised or **associated with a specific group** and is then sometimes described as **micro-culture**. Cross-cultural research of resilience processes with 89 youths in 14 globally diverse sites found that youth considered local culture to consist of “all aspects of ethnic, family or community identification that were distinguished from aspects of global culture” (Ungar et al., 2007, p. 299). Returning to South Africa, this point can be illustrated with reference to ethnic cultures, such as that of the Sotho or Zulu people. Within these groups, dyads, families, or local communities could subscribe to a specific microculture with its own vernacular, ethos, and cultural scripts that determine expectations of members of the group (Neuliep, 2012). Kwaito provides a South African example of a microculture. Specifically, Kwaito is considered a musical and lifestyle culture of some, post-Apartheid black youth that emerged from South African black urban and historical cultural norms (Magubane, 2006).

Finally, when culture is associated with a specific group, this has conventionally been race-related. **Race** is a label typically imposed by bigoted societies – something by which people are categorised and often disregarded (Jenkins, 2013; also see Chap. 9, this volume). Being made explicitly aware of one’s race typically leads to heightened affiliation with that race group and its intersubjectively endorsed cultural scripts (Norris et al., 2008). This might explain why youths from dominant cultures (e.g., white youths in North American countries) who are mostly not easily disregarded because of their race are often unaware of their cultural ties (Grossman & Charmaraman, 2009; also see Chaps. 6 and 10, this volume).

## 2.2 Interactive Macro- and Microsystemic Cultural Contexts: Some Explanations of Process

There are numerous approaches to explaining how cultural contexts guide human development and behaviour (see Greenfield et al., 2003; Harkness & Super, 2012; Smith et al., 2006). One of these is to view culture as a powerful macrosystemic influence that shapes identities and value systems at global, national, and local levels, along with transactions at the micro-level of a social ecology. This view is premised in Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory which views people as embedded in ecologies of interdependent micro- through to macrolevel systems. Despite this interdependence, however, the macrolevel is likely to ‘set the tone’ of the sub-systems nested within it (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Broadly interpreted, this would mean youth are members of a global social ecology with a dominant culture (Ungar et al., 2007). From this perspective, dominant global culture could, potentially, exert a powerful macrosystemic influence. Interpreted less broadly, the macro-context would be youths’ membership of nations and/or dominant (ethnic) groups with characteristic cultural scripts

(Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Either way, the culture of the macro-level (global/national) promotes norms, values, beliefs, and practices – often implicitly reflected in groups’ ethnotheories (e.g., of child development – Greenfield et al., 2003; Rogoff, 2011) – that can advance or constrain positive development at the micro-level (Levitt, 2012).

Macro-sociocultural influences shape the structure of microsystems (e.g., extended versus nuclear families), as well as microsystemic goals, morals, orientations, interactions, and socialisation patterns (Bell, 2011; Smith et al., 2006). The culture of the microsystem in turn shapes children’s development and behaviour, how resilience processes play out, and even how resilience is characterised. To illustrate, preliminary findings from the Pathways to Resilience Study, South Africa (see [www.resilienceresearch.org](http://www.resilienceresearch.org)) show that black youth from a traditional, rural South African community are likely to be considered resilient if they attach to a supportive network (not a nuclear family) and behave in ways that show respect for traditional, ancestral values endorsed by their rural community (Theron, Theron, & Malindi, 2013). In comparison, youth in more individualist urban settings are ordinarily considered resilient if they show increased autonomy and engagement in pathways that will lead to fiscal independence from both family and state (Lesko, 2001).

Constructive norms and practices shape micro-level transactions in ways that support youth to adapt well to their sociocultural life-worlds. As such, the stage is set for children to become well-functioning members of their sociocultural ecology (Bornstein, 2009). However, this mostly requires consensus within a group about the value of such norms, goals, beliefs, and practices (Chiu et al., 2010). Shared endorsement promotes an ‘intersubjective reality’ (Chiu et al., 2010, p. 483. Then, there is a sense of a common or ‘overarching value culture’ (Schwartz, 2014, p. 43). Put another way, intersubjectively connected individuals perceive a collective interpretation of their mutual life-world, which informs a cultural script that shapes their being and doing (Smith et al., 2006; Schwartz, 2014). As Jenkins (2013, p. 141) explained, intersubjective cultural scripts offer: “insight, understanding, and interpretation . . . it is not simply food, clothes, music, and religion – it is the answer to the questions: Why these clothes? Why this music? What is the purpose of religion?”

Guidelines for constructive adaptation, or survival, are implicit in the values and practices that cultural scripts promote (Bornstein, 2009; Jenkins, 2013). For example, a traditional African cultural script includes black African youths’ duty to kin, both in terms of their meeting the pro-social expectations of older kin, and being an example to younger/future kin. This duty to kin ideally nudges youth toward making constructive life choices. Theron and Theron (2013) reported that for some black South African youth pursuit of tertiary education was a way of fulfilling such duty. Commitment to tertiary education was prompted by cultural esteem of university degrees, partly because of South Africa’s political history of excluding black African students from universities, and partly because of tertiary education being associated with upward trajectories. Parents’, grandparents’, older siblings’, ancestors’, and teachers’ interactions with youth communicated an expectation that

youths make their families, communities, and the collective of black Africans proud by achieving a tertiary education. In this way youth would also be good role models to younger/future kin. This intersubjective endorsement of education as valuable influenced these youths' agency and shaped how they adjusted to hardship.

Micro and macro cultural-contextual influences potentially coalesce to form a heritage culture that shapes being and doing. However, when micro and macro cultural influences, or even global and national/ethnic cultural influences, are at loggerheads, the absence of intersubjective culture could complicate youths' adjustment to their life-worlds. For example, in post-Apartheid South Africa, many black families choose to send their children to schools in formerly white suburbs. Although this potentiates better education, it also privileges English above African languages and strengthens (Western) individualistic values above more traditionally African, collectivist ones (Ramphele, 2012). Thus many black youth have come to associate Western ways-of-being and education in English with success and affluence (Stevens & Lockhat, 1997). Many black youth without access to similar opportunities, and/or those committed to more traditional African micro-cultures (such as Kwaito), consider westernizing black youth to be turning their backs on their heritage culture. They often use the term 'coconut' to discriminate against black youth whom they regard as behaving like, and aspiring to be, white people (Rudwick, 2008; see also Williams, Aiyer, Durkee, & Tolan, 2013 for a similar process in the USA). 'Coconuts' are seen to espouse an alien cultural script.

Similarly, from her emic perspective as a Maori woman, Smith (2012) argues that the traditional Maori culture of indigenous youth in New Zealand is being undermined by the influence of global culture. Youth, and in particular, marginalised youths who are typically the focus of resilience research, must navigate the intersection of global and local culture. Because there are cultures within cultures, more-often-than-not this intersection is complicated by additional micro cultures to which youth may belong. Where these various cultures are disparate and contradictory – in other words, where intersubjective culture takes more than just one form – youth necessarily have to find ways of resolving these contradictions so as to successfully integrate the ways in which multiple cultural influences inform their lives into a coherent whole (Ungar et al., 2007).

### **2.3 Interactive Macro- and Microsystemic Cultural Contexts: Some Limitations for Explaining Resilience Processes**

Understanding culture as intersecting, competing, or complementary macro- and microsystemic influences can explain how social ecologies are shaped in ways that support/hinder resilience processes. There are, however, limitations to such understandings. From a social ecological perspective, resilience is a process of adjusting well to hardships that involves decisive inputs from youth and their culturally-

oriented life-worlds (Masten, 2013; Ungar, 2011). Interpreting **heritage culture** as micro and/or macro contextual influences implies that youth and others are passive recipients of culture. Such a perspective undercuts the salience of human agency in processes of development and resilience (Gillespie, Howarth, & Cornish, 2012). It is probable that well-adjusted youths and their relational networks do not “mindlessly act on the implicit cultural scripts evolved from their interactions with the shared ecology” (Chiu et al., 2010, p. 483). Similarly, explaining **global culture** as a template, originating at macro-level, that informs proximal level transactions, does not account for heterogeneous responses to macro level scripts (Chiu et al., 2010). For example, traditionally African societies socialise children to be deeply spiritual and to respect ancestral practices. Ancestral rituals are considered supportive of resilience processes (Dass-Brailsford, 2005; Denis, 2007). Despite the promotion of ancestral beliefs and practices as a template for successful living, some black Africans choose to disregard this as a pathway to resilience (Theron & Theron, 2013). In their response, they exercise agency and show that enactment of cultural heritage involves ‘selecting, editing and refashioning’ (Bornstein, 2009, p. 149).

As made apparent in Norris and colleagues’ 2008 study of ‘South African’ culture, descriptions of culture as **national** are also challenging. This is mostly because nations are comprised of multiple groupings, or sub-cultures, that coalesce around shared interpretations of common life-worlds which might or might not be compatible with that of the macro-culture (Gillespie et al., 2012). In addition to race (as in the South African study by Norris et al.), these could include groupings relating to profession, sexuality, social class, tribal affiliation, ethnicity, and so forth. Modern nations are also increasingly multi-cultural, given growing numbers of migrants (Masten, Liebkind, & Hernandez, 2012). Depending on socio-political and socio-historical context, such sub-cultures could be marginalised and/or stereotyped and their cultural scripts neglected/disrespected in explanations of resilience processes (Bell, 2011; Jenkins, 2013; Smith et al., 2006).

Explaining culture as a **belief or value system** that is common to a culture-sharing group (at micro or macro level) is also risky if it offers a dichotomous and or rigid interpretation of values and beliefs (Greenfield et al., 2003; Omi, 2012; Oyserman et al., 2002). Most typically, contrasting values (such as independence and interdependence) co-exist along a continuum, and are prioritised differently. For example, in traditionally individualistic societies, children are taught to share. However, the emphasis on learning to share is typically less than in collectivist groups, where sharing is taken for granted (Greenfield et al., 2003). What’s more, culturally-esteemed values (e.g., interdependence) do not necessarily enable resilience processes consistently, or uniformly. Obligations to the collective (e.g., duty to the family), for example, are associated with resilience processes for a variety of reasons (see Cameron et al., 2013; Ferguson, Desir, & Bornstein, 2013; Theron & Theron, 2013). For example, Ferguson et al.’s (2013) study of the cultural orientation of early adolescents in rural Haiti from deprived circumstances reported a strong sense of youth obligation to the running and upkeep of their family home without any expectation of payment. This strong sense of duty directed adolescent

agency and protected them against despair at their deprivation. However, obligations to the collective can be obstructive of resilience processes if they are experienced as oppressive (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Tao & Hong, 2014).

Lastly, value systems, like the cultures they are associated with, are **fluid**, as are people's allegiances to these systems. For example, there is a growing global trend towards individualistic values (Schwartz, 2014), often in association with increased wealth (Hofstede, Garibaldi de Hilal, Malvezzi, Tanure, & Vinken, 2010; Oyserman et al., 2002). Moreover, the power of an intersubjective, macro culture of values is likely to be less powerful than that of proximal, often co-existing, micro- cultural communities (e.g., families, organisations, ethnic groups, and religious bodies – see Schwartz, 2014).

In summary, using membership of a bounded culture-sharing group, be it national, ethnic, or socioeconomic, etc., in a rigid manner does not offer an understanding of culture that can usefully explain resilience processes. In Rogoff's (2011, p. 15) words:

Culture is often treated as a set of static ethnic “boxes” – such as Latino, African American, Asian – that individuals “belong in”. And they can belong in only one box. All people “in” an ethnic box are assumed to be alike in an enduring and essentially in-born fashion. This is a rigid form of predestination.

Implicit in such categorisation, are deficit approaches to culture that foster stereotypical explanations of vulnerability and resilience processes (Gillespie et al., 2012), as is routinely seen in some studies of African American and Latino males (Williams et al., 2013). Similarly, bounded groups (such as Americans or Muslims) are often cast as incompatible, limiting exploration of how multicultural contexts support resilience processes (Sirin & Gupta, 2012). Compartmentalising cultural membership also obscures within-group processes that threaten resilience. For example, American Chinese adolescents report being made vulnerable by alienation from non-Chinese peers, but also Chinese peers (Qin, Way, & Mukherjee, 2008). Cultural adherence can therefore serve as a protective component of resilience, or can jeopardise resilience processes, underscoring the importance of researchers and practitioners giving careful consideration to the role of culture in resilience processes. Explaining resilience processes in terms of allegiances to broad culturally-dependent value systems, without interrogating the complexities and dynamics of such value systems, would be at best superficial and at worst, marginalising and harmful. Just as Collins (1999) has urged feminist researchers to account for the complexity of the matrix of domination within which women live, so too should resilience researchers account for the matrix of cultural experiences.

## 2.4 An Alternative Understanding: Culture as Capital and a Co-constructed Process

Arguing against a deficit model of culture, Yosso (2005) urged us to consider the cultural capital implicit in the heritage cultures of youth in marginalised and vulnerable communities. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992), Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg (1992), and Olmedo (1997), she advocated recognition of the wealth of “communal funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez & Moll, 2002; Gonzalez et al., 1995) available through culture. Yosso explained that cultural wealth includes six forms of capital: (i) aspirational (maintaining hopes and dreams), (ii) navigational (the capacity to manoeuvre through social and psychological spaces by drawing on both individual agency and social networks), (iii) social (networks of people and community resources that provide support and assistance), (iv) linguistic (intellectual and social skills attained through multilingualism), (v) familial (a broad understanding of kinship that includes extended family and community and the continuity of community history, memory and cultural intuition), and (vi) resistant capital (behaviour that challenges or resists oppression and inequality). These dimensions of cultural capital provide youth with strengths and capacities that are often overlooked, because they differ from dominant, mainstream cultural components. As with the seven tensions of resilience (Ungar et al., 2007) and universally occurring adaptive systems (Masten & Wright, 2010), these six forms of capital intersect and draw on each other as processes of cultural support.

Although there is protective value in intergenerational legacies of knowledge, beliefs, values, and practices that underscore cultural capital and provide guidelines for everyday living (Cole, 2008; Jenkins, 2013; Pagel, 2012), the adaptive value of culture depends on how youth embrace their cultural legacies (Chiu et al., 2010). Embracing culture implies action, or attentive ways-of-being and –doing. Rogoff (2011, pp. 17–18) suggested:

If we open-mindedly examine how people live, we can move beyond using ethnic labels that assign predetermined characteristics to people. We can think of culture as communities’ ways of living. Our focus thus becomes people’s participation in cultural practices. This helps us understand the commonalities and differences that exist both within and among cultural communities . . . and communities’ changes and continuities.

In her description of the consecrated life of Chona Pérez, a Mayan midwife, Rogoff (2011) illustrated how Chona’s adjustment to her life-world’s challenges was scaffolded by her mindful participation in cultural activities. Mindful participation included the reproduction of communal funds of knowledge and practices that were protective, a negotiation to change cultural heritage that was no longer optimally useful, and subsequent cautious transformation thereof, in collaboration with others. Accordingly, Chona’s case exemplifies active engagement with cultural legacy that was integral to her micro and macrosystemic context. In the course of this interaction, culture could be understood as a co-constructed process (Chiu et al., 2010).

When culture is understood and enacted as co-constructed, it offers ways-of-being-and-doing that “supply the solutions we use to survive and prosper in the society of our birth” (Pagel, 2012, p. 3). Such co-constructed solutions offer tools to navigate hardship (Jenkins, 2013). Thus, in seeking to explain how culture shapes social ecologies in ways that facilitate and/or obstruct resilience, it is necessary to consider not only what values and practices from social ecological and cultural systems are passed on to youth, but also how youth adopt, adapt, and discard these.

### Conclusion

A growing body of literature argues for cautious consideration of the protective role of cultural practices in youth resilience research and interventions (Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012; Theron & Theron, 2013; Ungar, 2011). Our intent with this chapter was to facilitate an awareness of the complexities of cultural considerations that can more critically inform the study of resilience. Specifically, we hoped to underscore the multifaceted and nuanced nature of an individual’s cultural positioning and the enactment of cultural practices, and in doing so, establish a framework which prevents the positioning of youth into simplistic understandings of cultural belonging. Thus, this chapter encourages a more detailed consideration of the subtle ways in which cultural influences impact youth, their social ecologies, and their related individual and collective processes of resilience; as well as the ways in which culture is a co-constructed, social process. Given the goal of resilience research as one of informing practice and supporting the lives of marginalised and vulnerable youth, through which a commitment to social justice is implied, a careful consideration of culture is essential.

Against this backdrop of complexity, and for the purposes of this book, we conclude by cautiously defining culture as **socially-constructed and socially-shared ways-of-being-and-doing**. These shared, or patterned, ways-of-being and-doing flow from intergenerational legacies of knowledge and values. These legacies offer capital that provides guidelines for everyday living and potentially bind together the people who share them (Cole, 2007, 2008; Pagel, 2012). They also flow from individuals’ active engagement with their cultural legacy, in ways that endorse and, as necessary, transform cultural heritage (Rogoff, 2011). As such, cultural practices both shape the behaviours and interactions of people, and provide a framework for understanding the world surrounding individuals and groups. Respect for this complexity, should support resilience researchers and practitioners to meaningfully identify and enhance culturally-shaped resilience processes.

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