

## Interview

### Robust Cultural Pluralism

#### An Interview With Professor Richard A. Shweder

Richard A. Shweder<sup>\*a</sup>, Séamus A. Power<sup>a</sup>

[a] Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, Chicago, USA.

#### Abstract

In this wide ranging interview, Professor Richard A. Shweder from the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago, discusses whether it is or is not possible to be a robust cultural pluralist and a dedicated political liberal at the same time. In this discussion, Professor Shweder offers his insights - based on over 40 years of research - on issues related to the history and re-emergence of cultural psychology; moral anthropology and psychology; the experimental method in psychological investigation and its philosophical basis; contemporary and historical cultural collisions – most notably conflicting representations of female genital surgeries; cultural diversity and inequality; and the dissemination of ideas through open access publishing and Twitter. Professor Shweder ends by offering valuable advice to young researchers in the field of cultural psychology as well as a glimpse into the larger themes of his forthcoming book, which seeks to provide answers to the question of what forms of political liberalism are most compatible with robust cultural pluralism and which are not.

Europe's Journal of Psychology, 2013, Vol. 9(4), 671–686, doi:10.5964/ejop.v9i4.718

Published (VoR): 2013-11-29.

\*Corresponding author at: Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, 5730 S. Woodlawn Ave, Chicago, IL, 60637, USA.  
E-mail: rshd@uchicago.edu



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

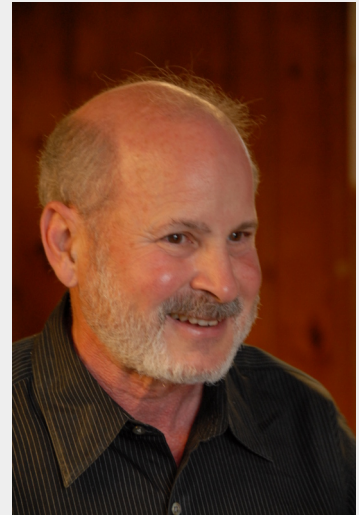
**Séamus Power:** Professor Shweder, thank you for making time to be interviewed by me for *Europe's Journal of Psychology*. Over the years you have contributed a lot to the field on cultural psychology, in terms of both empirical research and theoretical insights. What essays that you have written have had the most impact and why?

**Richard Shweder:** I am not really a fan of trumpeting one's accomplishments. As the expression goes one stands on the shoulders of giants. I say this not just because there is much to be said for the virtue of humility in academic circles or because it is inherently egocentric to comment on one's own importance for an entire field of study but also because I am not even sure I can answer the question with any accuracy. In recent decades there have been many voices around the world proselytizing on behalf of the field and I have been fortunate to have many brilliant students and colleagues who have contributed as much as I to the revival of interest in cultural psychology. If I don't name names here it is only because the list is long and I would not want to leave anyone out.

That said I will try my best to answer your question. Or at least I will try to make some comments about a few essays of mine that readily come to mind. One thing I do know is that my 7<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher was pretty astonished when twenty-five years later I met him at a reunion and told him he had given me the first real thought I had ever had (the concept of infinity). He had no idea of his impact on my intellectual life, although he was pleased to learn it was so, just as I will feel pleased if some of my work has made a difference or inspired creative work in others.

So what comes immediately to mind? First of all the interdisciplinary Social Science Research Council conference that Robert LeVine and I organized in the early 1980s, which resulted in the publication of a book titled *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*. Secondly two interdisciplinary conferences at the University of Chicago that James Stigler, Gilbert Herdt and I organized in the late 1980s, which resulted in the publication of a book titled *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*. During that era in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the field of cultural psychology was reborn. It happened through efforts on many fronts, for example at the University of Michigan where Hazel Markus, Richard Nisbett, Shinobu Kitayama and Phoebe Ellsworth took an interest in psychological pluralism and created a forum on the topic, inviting in speakers from anthropology and psychology. It happened as well at the University of California campuses at Los Angeles and San Diego in two famous person-centered psychological anthropology programs and in a very active cultural psychology program at UCSD led by Michael Cole. These were not necessarily unified visions of the field but taken together they signaled something important – that the study of human psychology should not be isolated from historical and cultural context.

Looking back, the essays ‘Cultural Psychology – What is it?’ and the three part earlier publication “Rethinking Culture and Personality Theory” provoked a conversation that in some measure may have contributed to that ongoing revival of the interdisciplinary study of differences in what people think, know, feel, want and value by virtue of membership in different historical traditions and cultural groups. That first essay in particular started a lively conversation about cultural psychology’s relationship to other fields like cross-cultural psychology, psychological anthropology and general psychology. Cross-cultural psychologists and some psychological anthropologists certainly reacted to the “Cultural Psychology: What is it?” formulation, and not always with pleasure. A subsequent essay, titled “Cultural Psychology: Who needs it?”, may have had some impact too, because it was published in the *Annual Review of Psychology*; and as you probably know that publication outlet tends to draw institutional attention and validates fields of research in American psychology.



Professor **Richard A. Shweder** is a cultural anthropologist and the Harold H. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of Human Development in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. He received his Ph.D. degree in social anthropology in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University in 1972, taught a year at the University of Nairobi in Kenya and has been at the University of Chicago ever since.

He is author of *Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology* and *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology* (both published by Harvard University Press); and editor or co-editor of many books in the areas of cultural psychology, psychological anthropology and comparative human development. His recent research examines the scope and limits of pluralism and the multicultural challenge in Western liberal democracies. He examines the norm conflicts that arise when people migrate from Africa, Asia and Latin America to countries in the “North”. He is currently writing a book provisionally titled *Customs Control: Un-American Activities and The Moral Challenge in Cultural Migration*.

Correspondence: Department of Comparative Human Development, University of Chicago, 5730 S. Woodlawn Ave, Chicago, IL, 60637, USA. E-mail: [rshd@uchicago.edu](mailto:rshd@uchicago.edu)

One might also point to the essay titled “Does the concept of the person vary cross culturally?”. It received the annual social psychology prize by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and was followed up in creative ways by Joan Miller’s very important developmental research in India and the USA which precipitated debates about whether the fundamental attribution error was universal. That essay on the concept of the person, based on research I conducted in Orissa, India and research conducted by Ed Bourne in the USA, was an early empirically grounded examination of multiple psychologies and was part of the return of interest among anthropologists and psychologists to the study of cultural variations in conceptualizations of the self, of the sort (egocentric v sociocentric; independent v interdependent) later made famous by Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama in their now classic essay “Culture and the Self.”

Some of the essays I wrote in the area now called “moral anthropology” have been important too, at least to my own intellectual development. Happily the investigation of moral judgments and the moral foundations of customary practices have recently re-emerged as a sub-field in anthropology, although moral anthropology has been a constant interest among students in my own department since I first arrived at the University of Chicago four decades ago. Alan Fiske, for example, who was one of my first students, has long been a grand theorist and first rate field worker in this area; and his work on the logic of four fundamental types of interpersonal relationships deserves to be seminal. In any case, the essay titled “Culture and Moral Development” which I wrote in the 1980s with my Oriya Indian friend and anthropological colleague Manamohan Mahapatra and with my then postdoctoral student Joan Miller ended up providing empirical evidence which provoked a set of generative debates. We questioned the supposed universality in folk psychology of the distinction between conventionality and morality as proposed by Elliott Turiel, Larry Nucci, and Judith Smetana. The debate is ongoing and productive of much research. That essay, plus the empirical research and theoretical formulations presented in the co-authored publication (with Manamohan Mahapatra, Nancy Much and Lawrence Park) titled ‘The Big Three of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the Big Three Explanations of Illness as well’ argued that the moral domain was broader than liberal values and should not be restricted to the study of the ethics of autonomy (or limited to a discourse focused exclusively on liberal moral concepts such as harm, rights, justice and equality).

“The Big Three” essay defined three clusters of moral goods and linked them to cultural variations in conceptions of the self, while suggesting that the illiberality of a cultural custom (for example, with regard to gender relations or parental authority) was not necessarily a measure of its immorality. That formulation ended up having an impact on the work of several younger scholars, some of whom were once pre-doctoral or post-doctoral students at the University of Chicago. I have in mind for example Lene Jensen’s important work on moral development, which was one of the early attempts to apply “The Big Three” approach to culture war issues in the United States. I would include Jon Haidt’s writings, which are influential and widely read expressions of the general approach. Haidt eventually partitioned the ‘Big Three’ into five (and now six) domains and focused his attention on the culture war and political faction issues in the USA. His work (for example his popular and very readable book “The Righteous Mind”) examines splits and divides between liberals and conservatives in the U.S. Usha Menon’s recently published book “Women, Well-Being and the Ethics of Domesticity in an Odia Hindu Temple Town” is another brilliant application of the general approach, in her case in the form an ethnographically based critique of some of the universalizing assumptions of global feminism. So from an impact point of view “The Big Three” essay did turn out to be fairly significant.

Off the top of my head I also think of ‘Who sleeps by whom revisited’, a co-authored essay based on comparative research I had done in India with parallel work done by Lene Jensen in the United States (and with collaboration

from Bill Goldstein). That particular piece became a kind of methodological model for studying the moral foundations of customary practices.

In recent years my work in cultural psychology has turned to the study of the cultural collisions that surface when people migrate from 'third world' sites into liberal democracies in Europe and North America. It examines the scope and limits of tolerance for robust cultural pluralism within nation states of various kinds, with special attention to customary practices (such as polygamy, animal sacrifice, and male and female genital modifications) that members of dominant ethnic groups in ethno-national states in Europe and even in liberal pluralistic states such as Canada or the United States don't like. One very recent example is the essay titled "The Goose and the Gander: The Genital Wars", which is available Open Access to a global audience at this website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2013.811923>

Here is the abstract:

"Should there be gender equity in genital cutting? In Germany (and much of Europe), the native inhabitants tend to argue there is moral equivalence between customary male circumcision and customary female circumcision and both should be proscribed. In Sierra Leone (and several other countries in Africa), the native inhabitants tend to argue there is moral equivalence between customary male circumcision and customary female circumcision and both should be permitted. In the United States, the native inhabitants tend to argue against moral equivalence, permitting customary circumcisions for boys while proscribing them for girls. Who has the better of the argument? And what are the implications of the argument for Jews and other circumcising ethnic groups living in Europe, Africa, and North America?"

**Séamus Power:** In terms of looking at cultural psychology now and before you wrote the books – *Thinking through Cultures* and *Why do Men Barbecue* – that contain some of the essays you have discussed, what changes have you seen in the field of cultural psychology because of your work and those books in particular?

**Richard Shweder:** It is important to remember that cultural psychology, by one name or another, whether it was labeled folk psychology or indigenous psychology or named otherwise, has been something that researchers, scholars and reflective intellectuals have thought about for hundreds if not thousands of years. So I view cultural psychology now as a renewal or return of interest in studying mental differences between members of different cultural groups.

If you go back to the 1960's there was an inter-disciplinary conference that was published in a special edition of the *American Anthropologist* called the 'Transcultural Studies of Cultural Cognition' edited by A. Kimball Romney and Roy D'Andrade which brought together eminent psychologists, linguists and anthropologists. In my view that is an early example of a return of interest to cultural psychological kinds of issues and the recognition that local systems of meaning, cultural codes, are not so easily separated from intellectual processes and they make each other up; as the expression goes. I think the work that I have done is one of many streams that have resulted in a return of interest to psychological differences between human populations. Psychological anthropology has always been defined by the study of both similarities and differences in psychological functioning across cultural groups. What the psychological tends to mean for psychological anthropologists is what human beings know, think, feel, want and value as good or bad. There, in talking about what one means by the psychological domain or the domain of the mental, I used terms that come from Anna Wierzbicka's natural semantic meta-language. These are all concepts (to think, to know, to want, to feel, to judge as good or bad) that she argues are lexicalized in all human

languages and which I think provide a meta-language for defining the psychological. With the return of interest in cultural psychology the main focus turned to the study of the psychological differences. This is sometimes perceived as a denial of universals, which is definitely not the aim or message of cultural psychology as an intellectual enterprise. To study differences you have to predispose lots of likenesses; it's just that cultural psychology specializes in trying to understand the differences; their origin and their consequences.

**Séamus Power:** Where do you think the mis-perception comes from – that cultural psychologists are only concerned with differences?

**Richard Shweder:** It may come from – and here I am just speculating – the reaction of people in general psychology who believe that psychology studies basic or fundamental processes. When a critique of the privileging of universals or deep structures is put forward it may be mistakenly perceived to suggest that there are no universals. But that is not what cultural psychology is about as a field. And that mistake appears in surprising places. I mentioned Wierzbicka's claim that in all languages to think, to know, to feel, to want, to value as good and bad are universal concepts – those are universal features of human mentalities. I think one should also acknowledge that the boost for cultural psychology as a field of study probably came from a number of sources, some internal to the discipline of the sort mentioned earlier, but also from several external sources too. So, for example, there was the boost from activists in the United States who were interested in the diversity agenda and so-called multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a word which means many different things and can be quite misleading – indeed, years ago (before the head scarf controversy) when I gave a series of lectures in Paris I can recall being discouraged from using the word in the title of one of my presentations because according to my French host “multiculturalism” was then viewed as an American concept with little relevance to politics or society or academic culture in France. I will come back to some of the problems with the concept later. In any case there were a variety of people, for a variety of reasons, some of them political, who were interested in promoting diversity agendas and cultural psychology fit into that agenda in some ways. There were institutional boosts, for example, government funding agencies in the USA started to require all research proposals to sample minority groups and diverse populations and undertake more comparative research. U.S. immigration policy changed sometime in the mid 1960's. So the issue of immigrants coming into the United States and the issues and problems associated with cultural collisions became prominent. Similar immigration issues were emerging in Europe, especially in former colonial first world powers, which began absorbing large numbers of peoples who were coming from former colonies. Eventually in 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and that set off ethno-national movements of one sort or another. So, as the former Soviet Union and its empire collapsed or weakened, ethnic groups who in the past had their desire for self determination or autonomy suppressed by authoritarian rulers, were all of a sudden active again and they had modern aspirations to turn themselves into ethno-national states. Globalization also had the effect of weakening, or making more porous boundaries of various kinds which also lead to transnational migrations. So there was a variety of things happening where the ‘culture concept’ and the reality of cultural difference couldn't be avoided, which in a way was a boon for those of us who study cultural psychology. It wasn't all that long before cultural psychology was labeled as a subfield. Within the United States prominent departments of psychology (the University of Michigan, Stanford University, UCLA) were interested in developing it, and even started thinking about hiring people who were calling themselves cultural psychologists.

Another thing that was more internal to the academy had to do with the reductive move in mainstream North American and European psychology to go down to micro units or so-called lower levels of analysis. It's ironic that one effect of the move towards neurology – neuroscience in psychology – was to weaken the sub-field in mainstream

psychology that had been a prototype of “hard science”, namely cognitive psychology. All of a sudden cognitive psychology started looking soft and mystical because they didn’t have a non-symbolic thing to point to like a neuron. Because of technological innovations in looking at and mapping the brain, many psychologists started going micro and spent much of their time trying to keep up with the new technologies. Well, in response or even protest, other psychologists decided they needed a new unit of analysis too – and they went more macro and started looking at higher order levels of analysis “outside the skin.” So the move to the micro prompted, I think, or stimulated a return of interest to things like race, stereotyping, culture; these became more plausible as topics of investigation. If social psychology was not going to simply become a branch of neuroscience the field was going to need a new higher order unit of analysis. Social psychologists started doing comparative work and thinking about larger units – the study of group processes started to have some sex appeal and returned to the academic scene.

Within anthropology, which was an academic discipline that had been somewhat psycho-phobic and didn’t want to study the individual person, certain intellectual trends made it possible to look at anything if it was just treated as an example of “ideology” or “discourse”. Consequently it became acceptable to look at the self as ideology or at emotion as ideology. That turn towards ideology and discourse at least brought mental predicates into the conversation and those topics became more commonly talked about and researched. All of those separate trends, in their own ways, assisted in the revival of interest in cultural psychology.

**Séamus Power:** My background is at the Universities of Cork and Cambridge, where I studied social and cultural psychology, before coming to work here at the University of Chicago. I think the European flavour of cultural psychology does not place the same emphasis on the experimental method in psychological research, unlike in the United States. Here, it seems as though top universities want to see job applicants publishing experimental psychological work. In your commentary to the famous article by Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine and Ana Norenzayan, titled ‘The Weirdest People in the World?’, or the W.E.I.R.D. paper for short, you suggest that experimental tasks might not translate well across cultural boundaries. I wonder how you can reconcile those two positions – between top universities requiring researchers to publish experimental work but at the same time the experimental method being somewhat incapable of answering all cultural psychological questions.

**Richard Shweder:** I think the experimental method should not be confused with conducting laboratory experiments. There is a basic logic to experimental reasoning which is terribly important for any disciplined researcher who is interested in developing a causal theory. So I am not against the logic of experimental method. I think J.S. Mill’s laws of agreement and difference are terribly important. They are not always easily applied in real world contexts or to complex multivariable processes and once you start applying them you have to follow the logic completely and worry about unmeasured background variables, co-varying confounds, how to go about sensibly doing causal analysis. Even famous anthropologists (Fred Eggan for example who developed the notion of controlled comparison in anthropological fieldwork) have adhered to the logic of experimental reasoning when comparing societies. Eggan was not doing lab experiments. He tried to look for naturally occurring groups or societies where many things (kinship structure, gender relations, political organization, subsistence activities) were the same, and then studied what happened when one of those things changed in one of those societies. That is an example of the application of the logic of the experimental reasoning.

The W.E.I.R.D. paper effectively and dramatically makes a point which has been made time and time again over the decades about rushing to generalizations about so-called fundamental or basic psychological processes and

not being aware of the boundaries conditions around the findings of your own particular study done with a very particular population (typically in mainstream psychology with college students in Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic societies) which does not adequately represent all of human kind. Cultural psychologists are well trained in this type of caution. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Margaret Mead made the point in a classic critique of Jean Piaget's claims about animistic thinking in Swiss children. Titchener's highly critical response (a response which should be studied and addressed as part of the basic training of any cultural psychologist) to the experimental findings on cultural variations in sensory acuity produced by the interdisciplinary University of Cambridge Torres Straits Expedition (which was conducted over 100 years ago) is all about this issue.

But the point I was making in my comment was not against doing comparative research, or even doing comparative experiments. My comment was a call to become aware of the incommensurability in meaning that arises when stimulus materials travel across cultural boundaries. It was a call to turn the study of the ways the "same" stimulus event or experimental situation is not really "the same" (or not really so readily translated into another language or cultural context) into a topic of cultural psychological investigation. So, it's not that there is some kind of inherent opposition between doing experimental work and studying differences in intellectual processes across cultural groups. The point is that once you recognize that from a subjective point of view the same objective stimulus is not really subjectively the same the many ways it is not the same, from the subject's point of view, becomes the grist for studying psychological differences. The noise for experimental psychologists who think their stimulus materials must be commensurate for all subjects is really the signal for a cultural psychologist. The psychological differences studied by cultural psychologists are tied up with all of the ways people understand the so-called objective stimulus materials in different ways, producing different judgments, goals, values, wants or so forth.

The example I gave in that commentary had to do with so-called experimental economic games like the dictator game in which you might find that in some parts of the world, like New Guinea, the majority of people who played the dictator game behaved in ways you never see among American college students. If they were given resources equivalent to 100 dollars they might offer most of it to a supposedly "anonymous other", who would refuse to take it, and then, given the basic rules of the dictator game (which one presumes the "natives" understood) no one - neither the giver nor the receiver - would walk away with anything. (The game is played this way with these rules: make an offer to the "anonymous other" who can either accept or reject the offer; if accepted both parties walk away with what they have left or received but if the offer is not accepted both parties receive nothing). This is a kind of behavior you don't see among American college students. American college students typically offer about half of their resource, which the other person typically accepts. One possible explanation for the way the New Guinea participants play the dictator game is that in their minds they are not playing with an 'anonymous other'. They import into the experimental stimulus event local ideas and ideals and have some concept of a person with whom you form long term alliances and have a potential political relationship. If you accept the offer of a gift it may incur obligations over the long term which you may not want. That local belief system may explain why the behavior of the New Guinea subject is different from the behavior produced by the belief system held by the American college student when they are in the "same situation," except from a cultural psychological point of view it is not really the same situation. And all the reasons that the situation is not de facto the same situation (not the same stimulus event) is what differences in cultural mentalities are all about. So my comment was about a method for studying cultural differences, namely by focusing on the incommensurability in your stimulus materials. I was not suggesting that you stop doing experimental research until everything can be made exactly equivalent in the minds of your subjects.

**Séamus Power:** That is an interesting answer to my question. I spoke with Professor David Nussbaum in the Booth School here at the University of Chicago and he wanted to ask how an experimental method can best be used to complement a cultural ethnographic approach?

**Richard Shweder:** I don't think there is a general formula for this. You have to understand the question you're trying to address. John Lucy, one of my first Ph.D. students and now colleague here at Comparative Human Development, when he did his PhD thesis on the Whorfian hypothesis, would not administer an experiment until he had learned the language well enough to understand how to formulate questions in the first place and until he understood how the whole question/answer interview process might work with his local informants. No experiments were designed until he had done a substantial amount of fieldwork and understood the local scene, 'thickly' as Clifford Geertz might put it, so that he could design an appropriate set of stimulus materials to test a particular notion he had about the way in which language influenced thought. I've certainly done experimental tasks in the field including the paper 'Who sleeps by whom, revisited' in which various cognitive experiments were undertaken. It's hard to see why someone would simply rule out on principle any method that might work or be appropriate.

There are deeper, philosophical issues about methods, of course, involving quantitative/qualitative arguments. It seems to me these are somewhat misguided if they are at the level of epistemology. The issues are deep and profound, however, if you turn them into questions about ontology or metaphysics – that is questions about whether you are investigating qualia or studying quanta. If you are studying quanta you are studying things you believe are part of the fabric of the real world that are independent of our involvement with them. If you are studying qualia you are studying real things that exist by virtue of someone's involvement with them and they are not typically the kinds of things you can point to or that you can best understand by bleaching them of meaning or subjective value and turning them into mathematical or structural formulations. And then the question arises: what are the appropriate methods for studying qualia and are they the same as the methods for studying quanta? And there you can plausibly argue that there is not a unity to science or if you are a strict empirical scientist who believes the methods of science were designed with the study of quanta in mind then you might argue that it is impossible to have a science of qualia because it doesn't fit the way you should go about studying quanta, which allows you to point to and measure things that exist regardless of perspective, interpretive community or who the observer is. Mathematical formulations don't become true by virtue of someone believing they are true, logic is not about how people think – logic is about logic. Certain things have that kind of objective status. They have a special status as ontological and metaphysical objects and may require distinctive methods if you are going to try and study them. That's why we have the famous humanities versus science so-called two cultures split and so forth.

In any case as far as designing an experiment to see if you have an adequate understanding of something based on your field experience or your observations – I think it is a perfectly legitimate and important thing to do. When I went ahead and designed an experiment for asking residents of a temple town in India to sort members of a hypothetical 7 person family into sleeping arrangements under different kinds of constraints – how do you sort this particular 7 person family into two, three, four sleeping spaces - I had already had some idea of the kinds of variations that might exist and even some ideas through interviewing about the kinds of principles (for example, a lack of concern about exclusive husband-wife co-sleeping or what we called "the sacred couple") that might be revealed in the choices people made. The experiment was meant to systematically see what would come up under a very controlled type of task.



**Séamus Power:** You have already talked about some of the issues in cultural psychology in terms of migration. What are the significant contemporary questions that cultural psychology can answer?

**Richard Shweder:** I certainly think that one kind of question that ought to be asked if you are concerned with issues of cultural diversity and if you are concerned with issues of equality and inequality has to do with what some of us refer to as the equality-difference paradox. By which I mean there is a trade off between the amount of diversity and the amount of equality you can have within a society. This is evident in some initial pilot research that a number of us have done. I was involved in a research planning group in which we looked at over a hundred countries and the relationship between income equality and cultural diversity. There is something called the Gini Index which is used to assess how equal or unequal income distributions are within a country and one can also look at measures of cultural and linguistic diversity in those countries. The basic finding is that the most egalitarian societies in the world are also among the most culturally homogenous. So, it would appear that if you really want redistribution of wealth and relative equality within your society one way to do it is to press for cultural homogeneity, either by means of partition, deportation or as a result of conflicts resulting in so-called ethnic cleansing or alternatively through the forced or voluntary assimilation of minority groups to a relatively uniform set of mainstream customs. That's a pretty startling discovery and an astonishing kind of conclusion, but, nevertheless it does appear to have some kind of plausibility. On the other hand if you value diversity – and if you want to preserve that diversity in a complex society – then it would appear that making space for some amount of inequality is going to be the consequence of it.

Slovenia is a relatively egalitarian place, right now, Rwanda is too. Places that have had histories of partition, ethnic cleansing or top down pressures toward assimilation tend to get together groups of like-minded people, so people feel they are of the same family and there is a sense of primordial identification and fellow feeling they have with each other. One speculates such identifications and feelings provide the basis for government policies that promote redistributing wealth and maintaining relatively high degrees of income equality.

I'd say that is a pretty significant problem for the field of cultural psychology to think about. If you are a robust cultural pluralist you do not think that "difference" is something one ought to eliminate in the world. If you are a robust cultural pluralist you find it strange when the United Nations appoints a committee to define what a normal family will look like and universalizes that notion or declares to the world "here's the best way to bring up children." If you find something problematic in that then I think one needs to think hard about the consequences of cultural diversity. One of those consequences may well be that there are different kinds of things that are valued, different kinds of skills and occupations that are valued, different kinds of 'cultural capital' that different groups have, and the outcome of those cultural differences is not necessarily going to be equality in wealth. If you want to preserve cultural diversity in your society, it is likely that there may well be a division of labour between different groups and highly unlikely that every kind of labour is going to be rewarded equally in financial terms, even if it plays a necessary role in the overall functioning of society.

So, that is one kind of problem: the dynamics associated with the equality-difference paradox. There are many others. We live in a world that is globalizing, boundaries are coming down and we are faced with cultural collisions of one type or another as people move into common territorial spaces. Cultural psychologists have a very important role to play in promoting human understanding of cultural differences which, at least in principle, might support a more tolerant live and let live attitude, especially if you can get over your initial reactions of indignation or disgust at what other people are doing when we encounter unfamiliar practices. That responsibility arises in part because

of the technologies associated with media. These days you can stick a camera in someone else's valley and show a very provocative or even incendiary image which gets people to want to react very quickly, even before they necessarily understand what they are seeing. I can see how cultural psychology might have a part to play in the world of journalism, for example. So, those are two examples. Wherever cultural difference questions arise, either in terms that imply that "difference" is a social problem and thus should be eliminated or in terms that imply that "diversity" should be valued there is a role for cultural psychology.

In passing I mentioned multiculturalism earlier. It is curious that the concept gets used to talk about opposite things. The 'sovereignty' agenda of Native Americans in the United States (there are now hundreds of such sovereign territories) is basically an attempt to have self-determination and to restore or revive a distinctive way of life. It is sometimes referred to with labels such as multiculturalism but so too is the 'inclusion agenda' for mainstreaming African Americans, which looks entirely like an assimilation program. So the label "multiculturalism" gets used whether you are assimilating to the mainstream or withdrawing from the mainstream. There are people who use multiculturalism to imply that all difference is a result of vicious discrimination. That type of multicultural analysis of difference basically attributes all cultural differences to vicious discrimination, the implication being that if there was no discrimination in the world the cultural differences amongst ancestral groups would become attenuated or disappear. And at the same time there are theorists who think multiculturalism is all about promoting cultural difference.

**Séamus Power:** Where do you stand on the issue of multiculturalism?

**Richard Shweder:** I think where I stand is that multiculturalism has become a useless concept because of its multiple meanings and people often talk past each other. It has become a banner without much specific substance. It is a good idea to go beyond the label and specify what it is you actually mean.

If the question is "where do you stand with regard to cultural difference?" I am a robust cultural pluralist. I believe that given the nature of human beings as situated creatures with our kind of cognitive capacities, cognitive limits and affective attachments, cultural differences between members of different groups is an inevitable feature of being human. I think that where there is vicious discrimination we should oppose it. On the other hand, I don't think cultural differences are primarily a result of vicious discrimination. I think they are a result of some combination of the existential nature of human life and the fact that any person or any social order has to address and try to answer certain questions which don't have a single rational answer; like who is up and who is down, like how should burdens and benefits be distributed, like what's male and what's female, what's mine and what's not mine, what's me and what's not me. Those are universal questions that have to be faced for the sake of personal identity and social existence - they are unavoidable. But it's not as though science or logic is going to provide a definitive answer binding on all; and different historical traditions have developed different kinds of answers and built different types of institutions around those answers. There is not a single way to trace group inclusion or kinship affiliation. There is not a single universally binding conception for gender relations, one that all rational and morally sensitive human beings must abide by. Morally sensible and reasonable people can disagree without being involved in error, ignorance, or confusion. Or if there is error or ignorance that may be a concomitant of the ultimate limits of human reason. There are some questions that can't be decided solely using rational procedures and some truths that are just unknowable.

**Séamus Power:** In terms of your recent publications on cultural clashes, you focus on "the practice that can't be named". Why is this topic of such great interest to you?

**Richard Shweder:** The ‘practice that can’t be named’ refers to a practice some people call female circumcision, some call female genital cutting, some call female genital modification, some call female genital mutilation and some call female genital beautification or vaginal rejuvenation. I sometimes call it “the practice that can’t be named” – because any way you name it presupposes a moral attitude and runs the risk of foreclosing critical reasoning, dispassionate empirical research, argument or discussion. If you refer to something as ‘genital mutilation’ it’s roughly the same as starting the conversation about abortion by asking “are you in favour of the murder of innocent life?”

I don’t, however, just focus on “the practice that can’t be named” when it comes to investigating cultural collisions. There are many different types of cultural collisions in the world, and I have written about several of them. I have written about whether the Amish should have to send their kids to school – where there was a culture clash where Amish parents were prosecuted for not sending their kids to school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I’ve written about polygamy and about animal sacrifice, court decisions evaluating whether Santeria people in Florida can sacrifice animals as part of their religious worship. I’ve written about several aspects having to do with gender relations. I’ve written about male circumcision, and different images of the body. So, the attention I have given to the topic of female genital surgeries is in the context of a much broader consideration of the scope and limits of robust cultural pluralism.

However, it is true that I think “the practice that can’t be named” is an important topic for all thoughtful people to examine, even if it is the kind of topic most people are not inclined to think about. Why do I think about such a sensitive, provocative and even taboo topic at all?

Originally, I learned about the practice when I was in graduate school at Harvard University, when I was preparing to go to teach at the University of Nairobi in Kenya for a year. Anyone in anthropology in the late 1960’s or early 1970’s who learned about any part of East or West Africa was going to learn about the history of colonial interventions including efforts in the 1920’s and 1930’s to eradicate female, but not male, genital surgeries. When I taught at the University of Nairobi in 1972/73 it was before the period associated with the emergence of contemporary global feminism. When the international women’s movement became really active it picked female genital operations in Africa as one of the things to eradicate – that was the term used “eradication”, as though the customary East and West African practice was a disease. And, in the early 1970’s when I was in Africa probably about 50% of the ethnic groups in Kenya had as a customary practice both male and female genital modifications. I had students who came from some of these groups and there was a kind of ‘live and let live’ attitude in Kenya at the time. It was well known that Jomo Kenyatta the first president of Kenya and a nationalist who was one of the leaders of the uprising against British rule, had written a Ph.D. thesis in anthropology at the London School of Economics in the 1930’s in which he described Kikuyu male and female genital surgeries and articulated a rationale for them while noting that educated opinion in Kenya viewed that custom as legitimate. Kenyatta analogized the custom to Jewish circumcision, although he politely avoided the question “why aren’t Jewish women circumcised?” (which by the way is the title of an eye-opening book by the Harvard scholar of Jewish literature Shaye Cohen). With the rise of global feminism, starting roughly in the early 1980’s, this custom was put on a list of abominations along with lynching’s and the holocaust and rape. That was startling, at least for some anthropologists of African societies, who knew about the history and who were familiar with the practice through fieldwork or through reading about it. It felt like a return to a certain kind of “dark continent” colonial perception.

But there are other reasons I became interested in the topic. If you are a Jew and familiar with Jewish history the accusation that parents are mutilators of their own children is not new in history and anyone familiar with Jewish history will be aware that Jews have been called mutilators of infant boys because of the practice of male circumcision. Indeed, the holiday of Hanukkah is a celebration of the Maccabees' victory over an attempt to use the power of State to eradicate Torah based practices and male circumcision was one of those practices. So Jews with an historical consciousness ought to be wary when those who are powerful start describing minority groups as mutilators of their children. I was surprised that highly educated secular Jews I knew, and who I generally thought of as eager to engage in debates about almost any topic, seemed to turn off their critical reasoning when it came to this practice and readily accepted the mutilation discourse. When I finally examined the empirical claims that were often made about sexuality and health consequences of female genital surgeries they seemed hyperbolic and almost fanciful in relation to the actual evidence.

So, one stream of interest in the “practice that can’t be named” flowed from my learning about colonial history. One stream came from my own experience of living in Africa. One stream came from being astonished by the level of affect and passion unleashed by the mutilation discourse or when people read about African parents “torturing” their children and the disinterest in engaging in further inquiry. Although critical reason has its limits – I’ve already said it can’t take you all the way to a single answer about many existential issues - nevertheless, it seems to me, this was an example of people being motivated by their gut feelings. One of the reasons Jon Haidt (whose book on “The Righteous Mind” I mentioned earlier) is interested in gut feelings is because they are so powerful and motivating and this seems to be a clear example of it. Those were some of the things that motivated me to be interested in the topic.

There is one other reason I should mention. There is an essay of mine on this topic, which I probably should have mentioned when you asked about my writings, titled ‘What about Female Genital Mutilation? And Why Understanding Culture Matters in the First Place’. The title of that paper comes from an experience I often had when lecturing about moral and cultural pluralism. It was not uncommon for someone to raise their hand and say “What about Female Genital Mutilation?” The question was often asked as though it was some sort of argument-ending Trump card where the mere asking of the question was the end of the conversation. For me it was the beginning of the conversation.

**Séamus Power:** In terms of the global discourse around F.G.M. – how does it feel to be in a minority of people who think it is a legitimate cultural practice?

**Richard Shweder:** Of course it is not a minority view in at least seven African countries where 80-90 percent of women would feel excluded if only men were permitted to engage in the practice (and one should note and consider the significance of the fact that virtually in any society where it is customary to engage in female genital surgeries it is also customary to engage in male genital surgeries). Gender equity in genital cutting is the norm in those societies. But I suppose you might well of asked, How did it feel to be a Jew who circumcised males in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe where the dominant population thought (and still does think) that male circumcision is a mutilation and a form of child abuse? How did it feel to be a homosexual in the United States during the long period of time when the vast majority of the country felt homosexuality was a crime or a disease and certainly didn’t feel it was legitimate to permit gay marriage? But what really is the point of this question? One is interested in “the practice that can’t be named” for all the reasons I mentioned earlier. Being a researcher or an academic is not a process whereby you look around and see what the majority thinks and says ‘oh that’s what I’m going to believe’.

One “follows the argument where it leads.” Being willing to upset apple carts and question dogma is one of the responsibilities we have as scholars and intellectuals in the academy. It’s one of the reasons I occasionally give a seminar called ‘If someone asserts it, deny it, if someone denies it, assert it’. The Socratic tradition is partly about what it is like to be in a minority – that’s what questioning received wisdom implies – it comes with the territory. So when people who are genuinely admiring of Socratic skepticism lose sight of their skeptical capacities it is worrisome and becomes something to be examined. Perhaps the feelings I have are those stimulated by seeing so many typically self-reflective critical intellectuals, surrender their critical reason when it comes to this highly emotive and provocative topic, which I believe is potentially consequential for all circumcising minority groups, including Jews.

**Séamus Power:** I wanted to speak about the dissemination of ideas. The last paper you published ‘The Goose and the Gander: The Genital Wars’ was published in an open access journal, and this interview is in *Europe’s Journal of Psychology*, which is also peer-reviewed and freely available. I am on the editorial board of *Psychology & Society*, which is another popular open access journal from the University of Cambridge. What are your thoughts on open access publishing and the increased potential of the dissemination of ideas to a broad audience?

**Richard Shweder:** Well, the article you mentioned which was published in *Global Discourse*, and as you said is called ‘The Goose and the Gander: the Genital Wars’ is the first one I have published that way. I elected to do it when the option was presented because I wanted there to be as broad a conversation about the issues as possible and largely because I am aware that in many places in the world, including Africa, which of course is one of the most relevant regions of the world for this discussion, universities are not necessarily going to be subscribers to journals. Under those circumstances students are not necessarily going to have access, non-subscribers won’t have access. So it was a way to make the essay available for free to anyone who was interested in getting involved in the conversation and I thought that was a plus.

**Séamus Power:** I think that’s wonderful.

**Richard Shweder:** With Open Access publication I do think it remains important that each piece is vetted by a set of reviewers or by some editors, but in general I think open access is a real plus, and broadens the conversation – and the broader the conversation around a published article the better. So, that’s the reason I did it.

**Séamus Power:** Do you think it’s something you are going to do again?

**Richard Shweder:** Yes, I suspect open access is going to be the way of the future one way or another. The question is who pays for it because whoever is doing it still has to stay in business. The way open access publishing operates, the authors are, in one way or another, subsidizing or paying for the publishing which makes it possible for the publisher not to be too reliant on subscribers. The business model is going to have to be worked out. But, if you just take the journal *Global Discourse* it appears the articles that are getting read most widely are those that are open access. This is not terribly surprising – it makes sense.

**Séamus Power:** When I looked at your article in comparison to others in the journal I noticed it was downloaded over 2,600 times, which was a lot more than the other articles in that edition. I noticed too that Professor Steven Pinker tweeted it to his substantial following and I speculated that’s where a lot of the views came from. I wanted to ask your views on social media, in particular Twitter, in the dissemination of academic ideas. It seems to me it goes hand in hand with open access publishing.

**Richard Shweder:** Well, a couple of comments. It was nice of Steve Pinker to tweet it and he does have a large following. He also tweeted and made public the fact that he and I have a five year old bet about the future of male circumcision in the United States among non-Orthodox Jews which he also announced in a tweet which perhaps raised some interest in the essay – I think those two tweets probably came out the same day if I remember correctly. And I was fortunate as well that John Tierney, who was a former NY Times columnist and is a free thinking journalist in the Socratic tradition, also tweeted it and he has a substantial following as well. It's a little hard to pin down exactly why that particular article has gotten the attention it has gotten, there are other potential sources too, but I'm sure those two had an important impact. I, of course, sent the essay to a network of scholars and researchers who work on "the practice that can't be named" and they themselves may or may not have sent it to other people. There are also some discussion sites that are Africa based that might have picked it up and so that's possible as well. But I think you are right we are now in a transition away from journals that are hard copy to other modes of communication.

I don't yet really know how I feel about tweeting. I'm open on that score. I recognize that it is a way of becoming your own journal, or having your own circle of people you are writing to, or publicizing your work, which can be a benefit. I do worry that it becomes a form of self promotion. Based on my rather limited experience reading tweets, 95% of them seem pretty mindless, so you can spend a lot of time generating and reading words like "awesome" and "fantastic" which, from my point of view, are not fostering careful thinking. I suspect people actually read books and full essays less and less these days – I have not looked at the data on this and I hope I am wrong. Nevertheless it is my guess that more and more readers just look at bullet points or the abstract of an article, or a one line tweet, which become substitutes for actually sitting down and doing the hard work of thinking through an argument and collecting evidence and reading a careful critical discussion of something. And in that sense I worry that it's a kind of erosion, or has a corrosive influence on critical reason. But it certainly does seem to work well as a global stage for a popularity contest. The signal to noise ratio in social media is not all that great and as far as I can tell all sorts of misinformation (and even slander) very easily goes out into these forums. I've imagined a one act play with two characters – God and the Devil – having an extended conversation about who is happier with the internet and all of these social media sites. My guess is that overall the devil is happier than god. There are of course wonderful things we all do with the new technologies, like being able to send articles out and receive things from other people quickly, but it's not obvious to me that the light side is winning out over the dark side when it comes to these new modes of communication. We seem to have managed to empower the gossip and it is now very easy to put people in the cyber-stocks as a social control mechanism - that sort of stuff happens very quickly and powerfully. How is one to feel when journalists stop doing investigative field work and spend most of their time looking at tweets and blogs? How should one feel about dinner party conversations where everyone around the table is looking at their iPhone much of the time? One day I may put up a sign for dinner guests at my home that says leave your guns and your iPhone at the door. So I don't yet know how I feel about tweeting and I am in the process of deciding.

**Séamus Power:** Great, that's interesting. One question that interviewers in this journal ask of senior academics is what advice do you have for up and coming researchers in the area of cultural psychology?

**Richard Shweder:** First of all, I think it is very hard to be interdisciplinary. Being interdisciplinary isn't a matter of learning one discipline and then tinkering in the others. You really need to try and train yourself so you are pretty sophisticated in all of the disciplines you are doing. If not that, then you have to develop long term relationships

with people in these other disciplines and develop the capacity to really understand each others discourses and methodologies and focus on questions that can really be advanced with collaborative research.

Kuo-Shu Yang, the Chinese cultural psychologist who actually is the father of what is called indigenous psychology in East Asia, has a list of advice for budding indigenous or cultural psychologists. One recommendation is to start your research by really immersing yourself in the phenomenon of interest. He has in mind something like engaging in what anthropologists call participant observation. For the budding cultural psychologist I would recommend finding a way after your first year of graduate school, especially if you are in disciplines where field work or language learning is not part of the training, to get into the field, whether it is in the United States or somewhere else. Try to understand the local social norms of the people you study. Get to know these people in the contexts where they live their lives. Later you can try to isolate a phenomenon of interest and see if you can manipulate it in a lab. But let it be something that has enough reality that it is not just a process created by the context and demands of lab research. One of the reasons Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority were as important as they were – I view that research as the ultimate example of significant social psychological lab research whatever you feel about the ethics that were involved – is that he was building on Hannah Arendt's analysis of the Nazi experience and the banality of evil concept. So, we had WWII and the Nazi experience, we had in hand a rich historical analysis by a political philosopher before Milgram moved into his lab. Something like that is a useful process for developing significant cultural psychological research. I would advise people to get to know some group well. The very attempt at language learning, even if you don't fully succeed or ever get fluent, is a deeply instructive exercise. Translation as a process is something that is a huge challenge and I sometimes think that many of the apparent disagreements that exist between different peoples turn on the failure to recognize everything that gets lost in translation. When you actually go through the process of really understanding what someone else means and really understanding their view of the world, and the constraints in which they live, eventually you get to the point when you say, well actually I would do the same thing if that were my world. That's some of my advice.

And of course follow your curiosity. I think that what you don't want to do is lose your critical capacity or feel that you have to do some research just so you can have a minimal publishable unit show up on your vita as fast as possible. One of the hazards in academia, especially for graduate students, is the rush to publish. Also, look for a generative project. When you are young you want to define a project that you could easily imagine working on for the next ten years, a project that has the capacity to lead to other interesting questions.

**Séamus Power:** Is there anything else you would like to talk about – your future work or new book?

**Richard Shweder:** Well, the question that is on my mind and maybe you can put this on the list of what I view as significant questions for cultural psychology is 'is it possible to be a robust cultural pluralist and dedicated political liberal at the same time, or not?' In other words, what forms of political liberalism are most compatible with robust cultural pluralism and which ones aren't? There are varieties of liberalism which are hostile to robust cultural pluralism and aim to liberate people from their cultural traditions. They define the idea of "agency" as resistance to culture. They hope to cleanse the world of those cultural customs they view as illiberal. The question – under what kinds of political orders will cultural pluralism thrive – is also on my mind. It is a question that has led some scholars to be interested once again in the structure of the Ottoman Empire. Twenty-two different peoples speaking different languages – at least for some period of time – managed to have a lot of local control and autonomy and to co-exist in the Ottoman Empire. So those questions – how do you organize cultural diversity and what types of political systems are most compatible with it, and what kinds of intellectual frameworks and

philosophies are compatible with it - are important agenda items for cultural psychology. My project right now is to try to conceptualize a big tent view of the United States, its ethical and legal traditions and to ask how much space can there reasonably be within those ethical and legal traditions for robust cultural pluralism. What are the limits on tolerance? What is and ought to be on your un-American Cultural Activities list, if anything? And how should you construct such a list?

**Séamus Power:** And when should we expect to read this book?

**Richard Shweder:** As for the book I'm working on it. It may take some time. But most of the things I write these days are in one way or another addressing those questions, including the *Global Discourse* piece. This publication on the genital wars and the recent court ruling in Cologne, Germany, where the appellate judge ruled that male circumcision, as practiced by Jews and Muslims, was unconstitutional in Germany is a specific example of this larger project.

**Séamus Power:** Fantastic. Well, thanks very much for your time, we appreciate it.

**Richard Shweder:** My pleasure.