

On the limited foundations of Western scepticism towards indigenous psychological thinking:

Pragmatics, politics, and philosophy of indigenous psychology

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James H. Liu

Victoria University of Wellington

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Address correspondence to:

Professor James Liu
Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research
School of Psychology
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600
Wellington, New Zealand
Email: James.Liu@vuw.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

The problem of defining culture has exercised anthropologists but not cross-cultural psychologists because psychological science is based on quantitative forms of empiricism where the validity of categorical boundaries is determined by their predictive utility. Furthermore, many indigenous psychologies have been allied to nation-building projects in the developing world that choose to gloss over within state ethnic differences for the purposes of national strength and unity. Finally, Allwood's target article is grounded in Western thinking about science that privileges analytical philosophy, particularly the importance of constructing definitional categories as the basis of its critique of indigenous psychologies. This is a limited basis for thinking about psychological science whose flaws have been exposed by highly visible critiques on analytical versus holistic thinking. From the point of view of Asian social psychologists, there is no analytical solution as to where to draw the boundaries of culture because culture is a social construction that will vary according to the situation, and motives at play in different situations. But this is not an intractable problem because all human psychology is intentionally realized with elements of social construction that are part and parcel of experienced reality.

Carl Martin Allwood's (in press) target article "On the foundation of the indigenous psychologies" is grounded in Western thinking about science that privileges analytical philosophy, particularly the importance of constructing definitional categories as the basis of its critique of indigenous psychologies. This is a limited basis for thinking about psychological science whose flaws have been exposed by highly visible critiques on analytical versus holistic thinking like that of Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001). Furthermore, although the author criticizes indigenous psychologies in general, so few non-Asian indigenous sources are referenced that it is fair to predicate one angle of response from the perspective of Asian indigenous psychologies rather than indigenous psychologies in general. At the same time, "the problem of defining culture" has exercised anthropologists for some time, but has inspired ennui among psychologists because psychological science is based on quantitative forms of empiricism where the validity of particular categorical boundaries is determined by their predictive utility rather than their definitional status. So my second angle of response (and the first in order of presentation) is based not on Asian, but American utilitarian forms of scientific epistemology that have thoroughly infused cross-cultural and indigenous psychology. Finally, many indigenous psychologies are rooted to societies where nationalism is perceived as an important bulwark against internal chaos, Western colonization, and outside threats, and this adds a political component to the desire for indigenous psychologies to align themselves with nationalistic projects rather than pursue more sharply delineated and internally divisive lines of thinking with respect to culture.

Allwood's article begins by arguing, somewhat ingenuously, that "if the indigenous psychologies are described as "rooted in the culture of a country", then the foundation of indigenous psychologies is inherently vague if it is not clearly and convincingly spelt out what is meant by "culture"". This argument is ingenuous because it is self-evident that one way to draw the boundaries of culture is by the pragmatic boundaries of the category system the author has invoked, the political boundaries of countries. My good friend Denis Hilton is fond of saying "What's the difference between a language and dialect?" The answer is "A language has an army and a navy."

There is nothing vague about armies, navies, governments, and the political boundaries they draw, whatever their flaws to political philosophers or social theorists. So Professor Hilton's dry wit captures an English admiration (or resignation) with American pragmatism that has contributed to making cross-cultural psychology among the fastest growing areas of psychology in recent decades. The basic idea is that the “nation-state” is an extraordinarily powerful planet-wide system with enormous powers of persuasion that not only describe cultural boundaries, but create and attempt to enforce them (see Anderson, 1983).

Cross-Cultural Psychology's Empiricist Approach. Rather than try to engage in academic efforts to define culture analytically using armchair philosophy (which always end up with the target article's conclusion that “it's complicated” and thus “consider my approach to dealing with the complications”), cross-cultural psychology has decided that it is better to chart its impacts empirically using “naïve” category systems like countries or East versus West. There have been thousands of articles published by cross-cultural psychologists, using surveys, experiments, and even occasionally qualitative and ethnographic methods demonstrating, among other things, that East Asians differ by being more collectivist than individualistic North Americans (Hostede, 1980/2001), and this is enormously important for self-construal and its emotional, cognitive, and motivational consequences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama's (1991) seminal paper made virtually all social psychological phenomena contingent on culturally-based forms of self-construal, bounded not by analytical definitions of culture (what could be more vague than East Asian versus Westerner?) but based on a combination the weight of published empirical evidence and a compelling theoretical frame. As a principal contribution of cross-cultural psychology to global psychology (see Berry, Poortinga, & Pandey, 2008), dimensions of cultural variation like the individualism-collectivism are far vaguer in terms of boundary definitions than the indigenous psychologies that Allwood criticizes-- these at least tend to have a shared linguistic and/or political basis, whereas the dimensions of cultural variation tend to be based on regions like East Asia versus North America. Variation within regions is handled pragmatically, like for instance excluding East

Asians from a North American sample comparing self-construal with Japanese, or by developing a priming theory of how bi-cultural individuals can either function as individualists or collectivists depending on the context (Hong, Morris, Chiu, Benet-Martinez, 2000).

These empiricist and pragmatic utilitarian strategies cross-cultural psychologists have adopted in lieu of the target article's analytical definitional approach to deal with the complexities of culture's impact on psychological functioning date back to the philosophy of William James (1907, 1909). It is the demands of quantitative verification of theory that provide the basis for determining culture's contribution to psychology, not analytical reasoning about category definitions. Put simply, if there were no measurable differences in psychological functioning between members of different cultures (empirically defined), then there would be no literature in cross-cultural psychology. If there is too much random or overlapping variability among empirically defined categories that are hypothesized to yield differences, then there will be no significant differences between them and the result will not be publishable. Empirical results, not analytical definitions decide when category boundaries have to be reset, or at least tempered by individual or group differences.

One may question this (and certainly, many within the field have, beginning most famously with Ken Gergen in 1973), but at least as indexed by such measures as impact factor, this strategy has been successful. The flagship *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology's* impact is comparable to top journals in anthropology today, whereas thirty years ago anthropology was far more relatively influential. Over that same period of time, psychology's influence in the social sciences has grown enormously relative to its former tripartite partners sociology and anthropology, both of whom have wrestled with difficult epistemological issues like the nature of culture and society more. There may be important lessons to be learned from this about the power of empiricism or perhaps the nature of relationship between power and empiricism in the development of global science (see Liu, Paez, Techio, Slawuta, Zlobina, Cabecinhas, 2010).

Indigenous Psychology's Anti-Colonial and Nationalistic Approach. It is from an

understanding of cross-cultural psychology that one must begin to understand indigenous psychologies. All the founders of indigenous psychologies emerged from training first in cross-cultural psychology, and then declared independence. It is important to note that this independence is not simply a matter of academic importance but has political undertones as well. Enriquez (1992) is the most explicit among the Asian founding fathers about the national basis of his *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* in his book *From colonial to liberation psychology: The Philippine experience*. He writes, “The philosophical position of *sikolohiyang Pilipino* turns the problem of regionalism and language diversity in the Philippines into an advantage. Ethnic diversity and ethnic consciousness enrich national culture and help define the Filipino psyche.” (p. 37). The Philippines is an archipelago with more 7000 islands and 86 dialects, some of which would certainly qualify as languages in a different political context. Enriquez situates his project entirely within an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist flow that makes the political and social justice component of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* very salient and clear. Specific and separatist claims from the various cultural groups within the Filipino state are hardly even mentioned within the solidarity of his anti-colonial narrative. It would be naïve and inaccurate for anyone to presume that Professor Enriquez was in any way unaware of the cultural differences within this incredibly varied collection of peoples or of the difficulties that this posed for his project. Rather, Enriquez glossed over cultural differences within the Filipino national project in an entirely purposeful and self-conscious way exactly as greater nation-builders like Gandhi.

What Western born and bred academics sometimes forget is that Asian societies like the Philippines are developing countries, with far more at stake in their development than epistemological issues in the refinement of their academic fields. The Philippines has only been self-governing since 1946, having had colonial rule violently imposed by first the Americans and then the Japanese for the first part of the twentieth century following almost 400 years of Spanish Imperial rule. Mindanao (the Muslim Southern portion of the archipelago) has had a tradition of active and violent separatist movements. In these types of contexts, founding indigenous

psychologists were (and to a certain extent their heirs still are) social constructionists in the sense of constructing their fields as contributors to societal harmony and well-being, rather than just academics who published good papers and books. Enriquez and K.S. Yang would be prominent exemplars of being intellectual entrepreneurs in this regard even though Yang has been much more focused on narrower scientific issues in his recent work.

In my reading of Enriquez, his silence on the cultural variability within the Philippines is entirely based on his project for what was required to develop a Filipino society already rife with class differences and a debilitating colonial history. He was trying to create a positive psychology for the Philippines based on his understanding of the Filipino psyche. For Enriquez, there was no place for multiple indigenous psychologies vying against one another for smaller and smaller pieces of the pie when national peace and prosperity was at stake. Issues like the definition of culture and sharply defining boundaries between cultures could have had politically devastating consequences (including terrorism and potentially civil war) in a multi-cultural mutually intersecting society like the Philippines, and so Enriquez did not pursue this line of thinking. Similar choices have been made by other founding fathers of indigenous psychologies, and this tendency has persisted among their heirs to this day.

Holistic Epistemology in East Asian Indigenous Psychologies. Last but not least, there are even more fundamental philosophical reasons to doubt the validity of the target article's assertions. Critiques such as that endorsed by the lead article are not new. Kashima (2005) challenged Clifford Geertz's (2000) assertion that "bringing so large and misshapen a camel as anthropology into psychology's tent is going to do more to toss things around than to arrange them in order" (p. 19). He located contemporary epistemological struggles between hermeneutic and empiricist schools of thought within a Western dualist ontology that separates mind from matter, human nature from material nature. The analytical approach to knowledge espoused by the lead article would be symptomatic of such an approach, where psychology (and indigenous psychologies') empiricism is seen as a "problem". Kashima (2005) by contrast, views Asian tendencies towards holistic thinking

fused with empiricist methods as an opportunity. He claims that “If we take a view that intentionality is materially realized, meaning is part of a causal chain, and social scientific investigation is also part of complex causal processes, we can adopt a monist ontology, in which human nature is not distinct from, but continuous with, material nature.” (p.35)

In this point of view, *there is no analytical solution as to where to draw the bounds of culture because culture is a social construction, but this is not a problem because all human psychology is intentionally realized with elements of social construction that are part and parcel of the real world.* Different category boundaries and different definitions of culture will be mobilized depending on the agenda at hand.

Liu and colleagues (in press; Liu, Ng, Gastardo-Conaco, & Wong, 2008) have noted that one of the consequences of this epistemic leaning is that Asian social psychologists have typically adopted a highly pragmatic orientation towards methods that is implicitly rooted to indigenous philosophical traditions. In Asian indigenous psychology papers published in their native language, culture is most often *not* the explicit topic of inquiry, but rather is embedded within the processes and objects of inquiry. Culture in most indigenous psychology papers (which are published in their native language) forms the background, not the foreground of inquiry, so definitional issues are moot.

Usage of analogy, metaphor, introspection, and mixed quantitative and qualitative methods are all acceptable from epistemological orientations rooted in major Asian philosophical traditions (Liu, in press). From the perspective of Asian intellectual traditions such as those from China (e.g., Mou, 1970), far larger issues of social constructionism versus realism and qualitative and quantitative methodologies can be resolved holistically. This is because, in general terms, Asian philosophical traditions allow for human beings to have the ability to grasp ontological reality, though they are understood to reach radically different conclusions about what this might be (see Hwang, 2006 and Wallner and Jandl, 2006 for discussion of the research implications of such a philosophy). Rather than seeing methodology or category definition as the solution to intellectual

issues in social science research, Asian implicit theories (or folk beliefs) are based on holism and perpetual change where “a tolerance of contradiction, an acceptance of the unity of opposites, and an understanding of the coexistence of opposites as permanent, not conditional or transitory, are part of everyday lay perception and thought” (p. 265, Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2007; or Nisbett et al, 2001 for an overview).

Different implicit or explicit definitions of culture will arise in response to different situations that are managed in a pragmatic way to serve researcher agendas. Hwang (2009) argues that in time with the right epistemological orientation (neo-positivism, see Hwang, in press), the workings of these agenda will give rise to Asian social sciences that are both cognizant of what they owe to Western philosophy, but are also capable of developing unique insights into Asian societies rooted to their own philosophical systems.

Conclusion. At present, one of these agenda is an attempt to develop an Asian social psychology that is indigenously compatible (Yang, 2000), in the context of globally dominant Western psychology. Many Asian authors, notably Ho and colleagues (see Ho, Peng, Lai, & Chan, 2001) have criticized Western scholars’ methodological individualism in psychology. After reading the target article, we can add philosophical individualism as well. Nothing could illustrate the ideologically-based individualism than Allwood’s usage of Barth (1992), who is quoted as saying that “The recognition of social positioning and multiple voices simply invalidates any account of society as a shared set of ideas enacted by a population.” (p. 32). Cross-cultural research in psychology with its thousands of empirical studies would retort that Barth’s assertion is simply untrue. But more disturbing, the position taken by Barth and Allwood reminds me of Fukuyama’s (1992) argument in *The End of History and the Last Man*, where liberalism and individualism were argued as being “just better” than any other possible system. Such a philosophy does not appear to allow for the possibility of effective social change, which requires the operation of shared ideas spread out and activated by the leadership of a substantial sub-population. This is a philosophy of closure that assumes that the individualistic and pluralistic society produced by the West at the end

of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century is the best for all time. At the end, the model that is privileged Barth's statement is the status quo, because the only agency allowed is individual agency. Everything else is a "problem". Even so marvellous a syncretism as Hindu religion is disqualified as a shared cultural artefact because "Hinduism has been noted to include, at least as minority streams, very many different kinds of philosophies including materialism and atheism."

The "solution" to this "quandary" offered by the target article is "to see the culture of a society as the *socially affected understanding, skills (and possibly) action/activities used in that group*". This is a totalizing definition that is not helpful to psychologists because of its lack of specificity. There is no way to distinguish individual-level effects from group-level effects from culture-level effects using such a definition. Thus it cannot be used to generate empirical research. Is the usage of the word "group" in this sentence intended as a marker to stand for some form of replacement for the word culture? How and why can this be justified? In psychology, group-level research is a body of theory, concepts, and empirical outcomes that is distinct from culture-level research. Even a cursory reading of the two literatures will reveal that a reduction of the psychological research on culture to a collection of groups yields no benefits and great confusion. The target article's argument that "researchers in an indigenous psychology should be able to present empirical data showing how the contents of the understanding of the culture is distributed among the members of the culture" is reasonable, and has been done too many times to count, and by psychologists of every brand, not just indigenous psychologists (see for example, Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999). It is worth repeating as a cautionary note and a promise of due diligence.

Overall, however, the target article's call for adhering to a more rigorous definition of culture in indigenous (and by extension, cross-cultural psychology) is not likely to be influential because of (1) the empiricism of psychology, where categories demonstrate their worth by predictive utility, (2) nation-building projects where the de facto definition of culture is

purposefully the administrative unit of the country, and (3) the holistic thinking rooted in indigenous philosophies of Asia where analytical definitions are not privileged above other, less categorical forms of thinking. Those who argue against “using the culture concept at all” do so at their own peril because the confines of their ivory towers in Western institutions may be far more fragile than they would care to admit. Change is coming, and culture is going to be part of the change to global society, not just academic society (Liu, Li, & Yue, 2010). As Napoleon once said, “China is a sleeping dragon. It is better to let sleeping dragons lie.”

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