

# On the rise and decline of 'indigenous psychology'

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## Abstract

The origins of 'indigenous psychology' go back mainly to Asia during the 1990s. Its declared objective is to arrive at psychologies which, unlike the American mainstream, are adapted to the needs of particular cultures/countries. The literature dealing with it, including both journals and books, is critically surveyed. Accounts are provided of the ways in which specific topics are treated, such as: definitions of 'Indigenous psychology'; its relation to cross-cultural psychology, and how the former's goals might be achieved. Most of the ideas discussed remain at a high level of abstraction, and a striking lack of consistency in the views of different authors is demonstrated. There are frequent suggestions that a universal psychology will eventually be created from indigenous psychologies across the globe, but no sensible ways in which that might happen are mentioned. It is the general lack of realism in the proposals, and the fact that it is questionable whether any indigenous psychologies actually exist, which help to explain the subsequent decline of the movement. Nonetheless, it did leave a legacy in so far as the term 'indigenous psychology' has become part of the vocabulary.

## Keywords

High abstraction level, inconsistent views, do indigenous psychologies exist?, critical literature survey, opposed to US mainstream, universal psychology, lack of realism, legacy, Asian origins

The movement intended to create 'indigenous psychologies' (IPs) or 'indigenized psychologies' (IZPs) had its beginnings more than half a century ago in the Philippines (Paredes-Canilao & Babaran-Diaz, 2013) and in Taiwan (Hwang, 2005). Its expansion into other countries/cultures was initially gradual, accelerating from the 1980s onwards into the first decade of the 21st century. Thereafter, the impetus sharply declined, and I shall argue in this paper that such a decline was inevitable owing to inherent weaknesses of the project.

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The distal cause of the rise of the movement<sup>1</sup> was undoubtedly the shift in power relations away from Europe and America and towards Asian countries. The consequent rise in national feeling and self-confidence led to the formulation of the project, as openly declared by several of those involved. So the prominent pioneer Enriquez (1993, p. 155) wrote that ‘... the movement is against a psychology that perpetuates the colonial status of the Filipino mind.’ Or again: ‘... the wholesale importation of western psychology into Asia represents a form of cultural imperialism that perpetuates the colonialization of the mind.’ (Ho, 1998, p. 89) While such an attitude is understandable, it is emotionally rather than rationally based. If western psychology was suitable for Asia, there would be no reason for jettisoning it just for the sake of having one’s own IP. Here it should be mentioned that the usual explicit or implicit counterpoint to IP in this literature is American mainstream psychology.

There is a further, more persuasive reason given why IPs are necessary, namely that western psychology is not appropriate for Asian and other cultures since it was developed in the particular socio-cultural environment of America, and does not correspond to their needs. That is generally simply taken as self-evident – no relevant evidence of failures is provided.<sup>2</sup> But the declared inability of western psychology to effectively deal with the problems of non-western cultures is a, if not *the*, major justification for creating IPs; and so it would surely have been important to attempt some empirical demonstrations of such inadequacies. However, since the absence of evidence is of course inconclusive, the question remains open and will not be further pursued here.

At the outset, a selection of the literature dealing with IP will be broadly surveyed. Then a series of questions will be raised on important issues, and the various ways in which they have been answered will demonstrate a striking lack of consensus. The final part will examine the notion of a universal psychology and ask whether an IP can be said to exist.

## Some key writings on IP

There is now a considerable literature on IP, though the same authors’ names tend to recur. The sketch in this section is certainly not comprehensive but will be supplemented later from a wider range of sources. First, special issues of journals will be considered, followed by an account of two important books.

### *Journals*

A special issue of *Applied Psychology* (1999, pp. 397–509) was entitled ‘Indigenous psychologies: The meaning of the concept and its assessment’. This title is rather odd and the reference of ‘its’ doubtful. What it does tell us is that in 1999 the meaning of ‘indigenous psychology’ was still in need of clarification, and it cannot be said that the content of the issue contributed much to that end. The first paper by Adair and Diaz-Loving (1999, pp. 403–418) is quite abstract, and in the second

one Poortinga (1999, pp. 419–420) diplomatically evinces some scepticism. The two subsequent papers, respectively from Mexico and Korea, refer to ‘the indigenous psychology approach’ (my emphasis) which presumably is not the same as a full-blown IP. Finally, three empirical articles had only a rather tenuous connection with IP.<sup>3</sup>

A special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* devoted mainly to cultural themes does contain two relevant articles: ‘Indigenous, cultural, and cross-cultural psychology: A theoretical, conceptual, and epistemological analysis’ (Kim, 2000, pp. 265–287) and ‘Monocultural and cross-cultural indigenous approaches: The royal road to the development of a balanced global psychology’ (Yang, 2000, pp. 241–263). As may be inferred from these titles, both consist largely of speculative high-level abstractions.

Another issue devoted to IP appeared in the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* (2005, p. 8). It was called ‘Special issue on responses to the epistemological challenges to indigenous psychologies’. As is clear from this title, the content of the papers was again quite general and abstract, and there is no need to go into details. One interesting comment made by Poortinga (2005, p. 71) may be noted: he pointed out that ‘As recently as 1997 the legitimacy of indigenous psychologies was a major issue in a review of the field by Sinha (Sinha, 1997). That appears to be no longer the case.’ In other words, by 2005 the legitimacy of IP had come to be simply taken for granted.

This also applies to the stance taken by Allwood<sup>4</sup> and Berry (2006), whose title refers to the ‘origins’ of IPs. They circulated a questionnaire which, among other things, asked: ‘Describe briefly some important characteristics of the indigenized psychologies in your own country today.’ (p. 246). This formulation goes even further, presupposing the existence of IZPs everywhere. Yet of the 15 responses only a single one, namely that from the Philippines, could be regarded as coming from a country that possibly has a fully-fledged IP.

### *The two books*

The first of these, jointly edited by Kim and Berry (1993) was entitled *Indigenous psychologies: Research and experience in cultural context*. It was an important work in so far as it served to put that topic on the map, and it was widely cited. At this point, only some general features will be noted, with more details provided later under several rubrics. The introductory chapter explicates the authors’ notions of IPs, followed by 15 chapters few of which have much relevance to the principles expounded in the introduction; furthermore, most of these consist of – often stimulating – general discussions rather than reports of empirical studies. The final chapter suggests ways of moving from IPs to a universal psychology.

The second book edited by Kim, Yang and Hwang (2006) is in sharp contrast to its predecessor, in spite of a significant overlap in editorship; the difference is already manifest in the title, which is *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in context*. In the introductory chapter, which serves the

same purpose as in the earlier book, the key difference is pinpointed. After an attempted refutation of critics, the editors write:

Contrary to these misconceptions, indigenous psychology is part of a scientific tradition that advocates multiple *perspectives*, but not multiple *psychologies*. The current volume uses the singular form of indigenous psychology rather than the plural form. Indigenous psychology is a part of scientific tradition in search of psychological knowledge rooted in cultural context. (Kim et al., 2006, p. 9, emphases in original)

The distinction between multiple ‘perspectives’ and multiple ‘psychologies’ is not explained, and so the choice of the singular initially seems rather arbitrary. However, when one reads the contributions, the reason becomes clear: apart from some theoretical ones, the bulk of them consists of reports of empirical studies. These are generally excellent and include rich accounts of the cultural background. Yet none of them can be described as IPs in the sense of coherent systems of knowledge. Hence in the period intervening between the two books, a radical shift of meaning has occurred, though one not shared by all those writing on the topic.

The next section, which takes the form of a series of questions, draws on the contents of both journal articles and the two books.

## Survey of conflicting views and claims

### *What is an IP?*

First of all an ambiguity in the use of key terms has to be noted, which is not resolved by the definitions to be considered shortly. For a majority of writers, IP refers to a psychology that has been partly borrowed from the West and then transformed into a psychology adapted to the needs of a particular culture/country. Others (e.g. Allwood, 2002) call that an IZP and for them IP is a psychology that is already traditional in a culture rather like anthropologists’ ‘ethnopsychology’. Sometimes IP and IZP are treated as though they were synonyms (cf. Sinha, 1997, p. 133), and there is a certain amount of confusion. In order to avoid that the normal usage here will be IP, unless the context requires resort to IZP.

### *Definitions of IP*

The one most widely cited is that by Kim and Berry (1993, p. 2), which will therefore receive more detailed comments. It runs as follows: ‘... *indigenous psychologies* can be defined as the scientific study of human behaviour (or the mind) that is native, that is not transported from other regions, and that is designed for its people.’ This definition is open to a number of objections: in the IP literature there are divergent notions of what is meant by ‘scientific’, and not all writers believe that IPs need to be scientific; a majority concede that an IP more often

than not will to some extent contain imported elements; ‘designed for a people’ raises the question ‘what is a people?’ ‘a culture?’ ‘a nation?’ This issue of the nature and boundaries of units was raised by Francis Galton more than a century ago.<sup>5</sup>

Another couple of subsequent definitions will be cited which all have some problems. One is by Ho (1998, p. 94):

An IP is the study of human behaviour and mental processes within a cultural context that relies on values, concepts, belief systems, methodologies, and other resources indigenous to the specific ethnic or cultural group under investigation; these indigenous resources may be applied at different points in the entire process by which psychological knowledge is generated.

Ho adds that IPs are not necessarily scientific in a strict sense (i.e. by Popper’s criterion of falsifiability). One might ask about the likelihood of finding indigenous scientific methodologies, and it is not clear what point is being made by the second sentence.

Lastly, Yang (2000, pp. 245–246) lists several definitions and says that all

... express the same basic goal of developing a scientific knowledge system that effectively reflects, describes, explains, or understands the psychological and behavioral activities in their native contexts in terms of culturally relevant frames of reference and culturally derived categories and theories...

Yang states that both natural science and human science models are acceptable for this purpose. In this connection, it should be noted that in the literature generally the expression ‘human science’ tends to be employed in an elastic manner, which serves to justify the claim that IP is scientific. The phrase ‘culturally derived... theories’ implies that each culture will have its own theories, a matter to which I shall return.

Last but not least, there is the question as to what is and what is not denoted by the term ‘psychology’ in the expression IP. That is hardly ever mentioned, probably since it is presumed to be self-evident – but it is not. Ho (1998, pp. 89–90) does mention it and notes that ‘there is nothing indigenous about psychological facts, such as perceptual constancy, that are manifest in all societies.’ The formulation is curious, since it implies that IP does not deal with psychological ‘facts’; yet, Ho does make an important point by stating that IP does not cover the whole of the wide range of meanings of the term ‘psychology’. The question then arises as to what segments of psychology IP is confined, and what if any limits there are.

From internal evidence, it appears that IP is primarily concerned with social and personality, and to a lesser extent developmental psychology. These are all areas in which cultural influences tend to be powerful.

Some writers have constructed typologies of (hypothetical) IPs: Yang (2012) distinguishes Westernized, indigenized, and indigenous psychologies, while Hartnack (2015) puts forward a trichotomy of ‘textual’, ‘subaltern’ and ‘synergetic’

IPs. There would be no point in explaining these categorizations, which bear no relation to each other.

### *What are the goals of IP?*

These are sometimes stated, usually in a rather general and vague form like the following: '... IP aims to develop a psychology based on and responsive to the indigenous culture and realities.' Enriquez (1993, p. 158). Other statements have more content but are apt to diverge greatly as other examples will indicate: 'The main goal of developing IP is to construct various systems of knowledge based on folk wisdom, in order to help people in solving their daily problems more efficiently.' (Hwang, 2010, p. 96); 'The primary purpose [of IP] is to interpret, understand, predict and change people's minds and behaviour such that personal adjustment can be improved and social problems prevented or solved.' (Yang, 2012, p. 15); '... the goal of indigenous psychologies is to describe and understand phenomena in their local, community, ecological and cultural context and to develop a scientific model that can be verified and applied.' (Kim & Park, 2005, p. 77).

### *What is the relation between IP and cross-cultural psychology (CCP)?*

Kim and Berry (1993, p. 23) state that IP and cross-cultural psychology (CCP) are complementary. They contrast the IP approach as *indigenization from within* with CCP as *indigenization from without*. This is far from clear, since CCP is not usually seen as entailing any kind of indigenization. Ho (1998, p. 101) suggests that IPs 'are best regarded as a sub-domain of cross-cultural psychology', while Yang (2000, p. 247) sees both CCP and cultural psychology as part of IP. On the other hand, Georgas and Mylonas (2006, p. 198) regard IP as 'a legitimate branch of CCP'. That almost exhausts all possible permutations.

These are all brief and abstract formulations. When one looks at the empirical studies reported in Kim, Yang, and Hwang (2006), intended to exemplify IPs, both the topics investigated and the methods employed overlap extensively with those of CCP. Here, for instance, are some of the topics: *Amae* in Japan; moral socialization in Taiwan; Chinese personality and the Mexican self. Methods include attitude scaling, participant observations, observations of family interactions, interviews and psychometric measures.

So when it comes to actual practice, the approaches of (postulated) IP and CCP are not readily distinguishable.

### *How could an IP be produced?*

There are two main ways in which the building up of an IP is conceived, and these are sometimes combined. One is to see the problem as one of creating an IP and usually, but not necessarily, starting by importing western theories and methods

which are gradually indigenized. A few writers view an IP as capable of being constructed from scratch. In either case, a new IP adapted to the local culture will result. The second way consists of drawing on existing traditional sources within one's culture in order to arrive at an IP.

One would have thought that this was a matter of crucial importance, but more often than not little if anything is said about it. The introduction to Kim and Berry (1993) discusses at length the relation between IP and other 'cultural sciences', but there seems to be no account of the process of building up an IP unless a paragraph on the 'scientific approach' is intended as such. Its first sentence reads: 'The cultural science tradition affirms the need to develop a descriptive understanding of a phenomenon in order to discover psychological and cultural invariants.' (p. 17) Since the discovery of invariants bears scant relation to IPs, the relevance of this paragraph is unclear.

A later contribution by Adair (2006) has the promising title 'Creating Indigenous psychologies'. Disappointingly, it does not tell us a great deal about the actual nitty-gritty of the processes of indigenization. Adair postulates four stages of indigenization: (1) Importation of [western] psychology; (2) Implantation of the new discipline; (3) Indigenization and (4) Autochtonization, described as 'the emergence of a self-perpetuating discipline independent of its imported source'. (p. 472). Surprisingly, the only case of stage 4 he cites is that of Canada!

One of the more detailed suggestions is due to an author who introduced the concept of 'indigenous compatibility' (Yang, 2000) that should inform the work towards an IP. It was more fully spelled out in Yang (2012), where he says that the researcher as a local person should use self-observation and introspection to gain what seem rather remarkable insights:

... imagine what the potential participants as typical local people would think and feel, and how they would behave under specific conditions or situation; ... These imagined or anticipated thoughts and actions can serve as an important basis upon which sufficiently indigenized theory, concepts, methods, and tools can be created ... (Yang, 2012, p. 19)

Again, one is not told *how* a theory, etc. could be derived on that basis. The only exception to this general neglect is the work of Enriquez (1979, 1981, 1990, 1993), who describes the search for key Filipino concepts as the way to construct a Filipino IP.

Let me turn now to the second kind of proposal for arriving at IPs. A considerable number of authors, drawn mainly from Asian cultures with ancient civilizations, suggest that their IPs should in the main be based on their own traditions. Mention is made of Buddhist, Confucian and Hindu religions and philosophies, all of which contain significant psychological elements. Here is a typical passage by an Indian contributor (Paranjpe, 2002, p. 30):

[India] has an enormously rich intellectual tradition. Its libraries are full of philosophical treatises of psychological significance; indeed, they are a veritable goldmine of

psychological insights. For instance, traditional systems of thought such as Yoga, and the writings of various sects of Buddhism, contain psychological concepts, theories, methods of investigation, and techniques for self-control... Much of this psychological heritage can be shown to be of contemporary relevance...

Chakkarath (2005, p. 48) presents an outline of 'Hindu psychology' and claims that many of its hypotheses could be tested 'and thereby contribute to progress in empirical psychological research.' However, no such hypothesis is actually mentioned cf. also Chakkarath (2012). Generally, as Sinha (1997) noted, while apparent similarities between Western and Asian formulations are often pointed out, no attempt has been made in this literature to integrate the two approaches.<sup>6</sup>

While Indian writers usually to focus on similarities, Chinese, Japanese and Korean ones tend to stress differences. Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist cultures are said to be basically what they call 'relational', in contrast to western individualism. They seem to think that that is specifically Asian, yet it applies to many majority (of the world population) cultures. Thus, Nsamenang (2006, p. 295) dealing with developmental issues in Africa, writes: 'The social ontogenetic paradigm is premised not on an independent or autonomous frame; its foundational principle is an interdependent or relational script.' All that reveals a tendency of Asian writers to compare themselves to the West rather than to other non-western cultures. Again, while some Indian writers envisage an IP that covers the whole range of psychological knowledge, other Asian ones tend to confine their aims to an IP focusing on the social and personality spheres. However, it has to be said once again that the kinds of empirical studies undertaken towards that end hold out little promise of eventually arriving at an IP.

### *How many, if any IPs are there?*

This question was raised by Poortinga (1999). From the titles of many of the publications in the field, one might imagine that IPs are plentiful, but in reality that is not the case. The answer to the question how many IPs actually exist depends largely on what one means by the term. The prime candidate, frequently cited as a model, is Sikolohiyang Pilipino (Philippino psychology). Now if innovative indigenous concepts and methods are regarded as sufficient to characterise an IP, then Sikolohiyang Pilipino is one; if on the other hand one requires the presence of a theoretical system, then it fails (cf. Church & Katigbak, 2002). A very loose definition, such as those used in many writings, permits the claim that there are numerous IPs. My own view is there are approximations to IPs in several Asian countries, but no convincingly complete one. This view largely coincides with that Allwood, who had previously been a keen supporter: 'so far this idea [of IPs] has to the greatest extent remained a research programme rather than something that has been accomplished...' (Allwood, 2011, p. 11).



## The objective of a universal/global psychology

Numerous writings on IP allude to this issue, probably because it is treated at some length in the seminal book by Kim and Berry (1993). In it, both Berry and Kim and Enriquez actually propose (different) ways of arriving at a universal psychology by combining (presumably world-wide) IPs. Most of the subsequent literature does not go so far, with authors confining themselves to brief remarks about the hope or expectation of a future universal/global psychology. This of course presupposes a world-wide spread of IPs, which is possible in principle but highly unlikely, and the procedures envisaged for combining IPs are unworkable.<sup>7</sup>

Another question concerns the meaning of a universal/global psychology in this context. Berry and Kim seem to suggest that it would cover all fields of the subject, while others say nothing about that. But as noted above, most writers on IP explicitly or implicitly deal predominantly with social psychology. For instance Hwang (2005, p. 229) has a section entitled 'Emergence of indigenous Chinese psychology from "Americanized" social psychology'. Yet, social psychology constitutes only a small fraction of psychology as a whole; moreover, it is an area greatly influenced by cultural factors so that one might expect considerable variation compared with other aspects of the subject.

## Retrospect

At its inception, the members of the IP movement were drawn mainly from Asia but also had important western supporters. When one reads the early writings, the enthusiasm for the fresh vista that seemed to open up shines through. The prospect of constructing an at least partially new psychology better suited to the needs of one's society seemed an appealing one. The *bête noire* from which one had to free oneself was an – often greatly simplified – version of American psychology, treated as though it were homogeneous, though that is far from being the case. The problem for the advocates of IPs is that practically all of them, including those from majority non-western cultures, had been trained in western academic institutions in a tradition they now wanted to largely reject. It is not surprising that this led to ambivalence if not actual conflict. This comes out most clearly in the treatment of 'science'. The dilemma was that of wanting IPs to share the prestige of science, while at the same time displaying a reluctance to be shackled by the demands of rigour; it tended to result in more flexible re-definitions of 'science'.

The literature consists to a considerable extent of attempts to draw up blueprints for IPs, which were mostly uncoordinated and often rather muddled. In hindsight, it is evident that the difficulty of such a task had been greatly under-estimated, and much of the literature does not go beyond efforts to clarify the ground rules and definitions. Over a period of some two decades, the literature flourished, but has now been reduced to mere trickle. All that is not to suggest that the work was wasted. The search for IPs inspired a considerable number of interesting and

valuable empirical studies, although the central objective was never anywhere near fully achieved.

I am reminded of what a critic wrote about William McDougall's *An introduction to social psychology*, which dominated the field from 1908 to the 1940s. The sentence, cited by McDougall ([1919] 1943, p. xvi) himself, runs as follows: 'He seems to do a great deal of packing in preparation for a journey which never starts.' Suitably adapted, this might well serve as an epitaph for the IP movement.

## Conclusion: The legacy

What the IP movement has successfully done is put the phrase 'IP' on the linguistic map, and it is now quite widely used. There appears to be at least two rather different usages. One is a slogan going back from Triandis (1997) to Marsella (2013) which says 'All psychologies are IPs'. At first sight that looks like a mere truism, since all psychologies inevitably have their origin within a particular cultural setting; there is, however, more to it. When employed by western psychologists, as in the two cases above, it probably constitutes a disclaimer of any western superiority. It also seems to imply that any psychology is as good as any other, which is a rather curious stance at odds with the frequently trumpeted view (shared, as shown above, by many proponents of IP) of psychology as a science.

Two recent publications illustrate a radical shift in meaning of 'IP'. Sundararajan (2015) seeks to assess the adequacy of cultural models by the extent to which they fit indigenous categories, and criticises the conventional cross-cultural approach. Liu (2015) proposes that an East Asian style of 'relationalism' could serve to 'globalize' IP. Both have little in common with the previous drift in IP writings.

Another novelty is the application of the concepts 'indigenous' and 'indigenization' in historiography, whereby indigenization is perceived as having occurred *within* the West. Danziger (2006), after briefly outlining the concept of IZP, states that apart from the label it is nothing new in the history of psychology. In particular, the export of psychological knowledge from Europe to the United States constituted 'Indigenization on a massive scale' (p. 216). Teo (2013), another historian, employs the concept to refer to the critical German backlash *against* American psychology. So it appears that both 'IP' and 'indigenization' have come to serve as intellectual tools in a much broader context than that originally envisaged.

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## Notes

1. The movement to be discussed differs from other approaches such as the Marxist-inspired 'critical psychology'. For instance, a recent issue of the *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* (vol. 3, No. 1, 2015) contains a thematic section on 'Decolonizing Psychological Science', which has little in common with the IP movement.
2. For example, Korean contributors merely stated that 'the application of psychological knowledge resulted in dismal failures' (Allwood & Berry, 2006, p. 249).
3. They include a content analysis of Turkish and Soviet psychological journals and surveys of psychological research in Venezuela and Puerto Rica.
4. However, as will be seen later, Allwood (2011) subsequently changed his position.
5. This problem is admitted in additional comments where the authors write that '... within a particular society there can be multiple perspectives not shared by all groups (Kim & Berry, 1993, p. 3).
6. Similarly, Kim and Park (2006, p. 40) warn against resort to philosophical and religious texts for the purpose of explaining behaviour.
7. Enriques (1993, pp. 154–155) refers to a 'cross-indigenous perspective', whereby cultural knowledge is pooled without specifying how that might be done. Berry and Kim (1993, p. 279) suggest a kind of ANOVA approach, with psychological sub-fields on the Y-axis and IPs on the X-axis and a two-way integration resulting in a global psychology located at the bottom right. Yet, what the entries in the cells should be remains obscure.

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