

Hwang Kwang Kuo (2012). Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations. NY: Springer SBM

Foreword

Professor Hwang Kwang Kuo is a pioneer scholar in cultural psychology, that topical and methodological area of psychology concerned with investigating the cultural determinants of human behavior. Cultural psychology has been particularly interested in understanding and valuing the subjective experience of different ethnocultural groups, especially their cultural constructions of reality. Within cultural psychology, Professor Hwang has devoted much of his professional career to the study of indigenous psychologies. In the past few decades, indigenous psychologies have become the topic of increased interest among non-Western psychologists, many of who studied in the West and returned to their countries only to be confronted with serious issues about the validity and applicability of the Western psychologies they had so diligently been taught.

Fathali Moghaddam, a distinguished Iranian-American psychologist who is currently a professor at Georgetown University in the USA, raised serious questions about substantive differences in the psychologies of the first, second, and third worlds, and the unbridled exportation of first world psychologies (e.g., North American, Northern European) to the developing nations. He noted the dangers of using concepts and methods that evidenced little sensitivity to the realities of the developing nations, and the possibilities that these nations required the development of their own psychologies (Moghaddam, 1987). Others (e.g., Sloan, 1995, Marsella, 1998, 2010; Pickren, 2009) pointed out the risks and potential destructive consequences of assuming that Western psychology was universally applicable. Professor Girishwar Misra (1996), an Asian Indian, identified the problem and its consequences:

The current Western thinking of the science of psychology on its prototypical form, despite being local and indigenous, assumes a global relevance and is treated as universal of generating knowledge. Its dominant voice subscribes to a decontextualized vision with an extraordinary emphasis on individualism, mechanism, and objectivity. This peculiarly Western mode of thinking is fabricated, projected, and institutionalized through representation technologies and scientific rituals and transported on a large scale to the non-Western societies under political-economic domination. As a result, Western psychology tends to maintain an independent stance at the cost of ignoring other substantive possibilities from disparate cultural traditions. Mapping reality through Western constructs has a pseudo-understanding of the people of alien cultures and has debilitating effects in terms of misconstruing the special realities of other people and exoticizing or disregarding psychologies that are non-Western. Consequently, when people from other cultures are exposed to Western psychology, they find their identities placed in

question and their conceptual repertoires rendered obsolete (Misra, 1996, pp. 497-498).

Within this context of discontent and questioning, Professor Hwang, a Taiwanese-born psychologist, trained in graduate school at the University of Hawaii in social and cultural psychology, began to explore the thoughts and writings of the ancient venerated Chinese sage, Confucius (551 BCE – 479 BCE), with special attention to the role of Confucian ideas in shaping Chinese psychology across the ages. Professor Hwang's studies revealed the profound impact of Confucian thought for understanding Chinese psychology and behavior, even within the brief period of Communist and Maoist political domination. In a series of publications that now have important historical implications for psychology, Professor Hwang documented the relationship between Chinese psychology and behavior and Confucian thought, especially the critical role of relationism. Professor Hwang noted that Confucian thought places heavy emphasis on morality, context, and the nature of interpersonal relations. This recognition became the foundation for much of Professor Hwang's subsequent writings -- writings that now find their first collected presentation in the West through this compendium of his thought.

Using the Confucian foundations of Chinese psychology, Professor Hwang argued persuasively that Chinese behavior patterns can best be understood and appreciated *not* by using alien Western psychology assumptions and tenets, but rather by grasping the embedded nature of Chinese behavior patterns within the contexts of their own historical and cultural traditions. Indeed, as Professor Hwang points out clearly, the reliance on Western psychologies to understand the behavior of non-Western people constitutes an egregious error that frames the behavior of non-Western people within a template that is not only limited in its validity, but also potentially dangerous in terms of the conclusions that are reached, and the decisions too often made under the guise of Western scientific hegemony.

Based largely on his careful research and scholarship of Chinese philosophical and historical traditions, Professor Hwang was able to develop critical insights into Chinese psychology that were soon recognized and appreciated by psychologists throughout Asia as alternatives to Western psychologies. In 2006, Professor Hwang joined Professor Uichol Kim (Korea) and Professor Yang Kuo-Shu (Taiwan) in an edited volume entitled, ***Indigenous and Cultural Psychology*** (2006, Springer SBM Publications). The volume included a wide array of contributions from various cultures (e.g., Chinese, Japan, Korea, Philippines), and it immediately became an essential resource for psychologists around the world concerned with developing psychologies that were appropriate and sensitive to their own historical and cultural traditions.

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For years, Western psychology -- largely rooted within North American and Western European scientific and professional cultures -- was applied indiscriminately to non-Western people under the mistaken assumption that its principles and methods were universal. Western premises, assessment methods, and even diagnostic and therapeutic interventions were not only transported around the world, but were also accepted by many non-Western psychologists as valid and reliable foundations for understanding behavior and for developing policies and procedures that were consonant with the Western views.

Gradually, however, and it was here that Professor Hwang's most important contributions reside, it became clear that Western psychology's assumptions and methods were a function of Western history and culture, and as such, were ethnocentric and biased creations whose world-wide acceptance was based on the powerful influences of Western political, economic, and military dominance. In other words, what became apparent was that Western psychology, in spite of all its appeals to universal validity because of its alleged "scientific" foundations and conclusions, was itself a cultural creation, and that its claims and applications were problematic because it was neither universal nor scientific. Tod Sloan, a Western, critical theory psychologist, captured the socio-political dimensions of this problem. Sloan (1996) writes:

... the major problem lies less in the theoretical limits of Western psychology, although these are serious, than in the social functions of Western psychology. As scientific psychology entrenches itself further in industrial nations, its function as a sociopolitical stabilizing mechanism has gradually become more obvious...psychological theory and practice embody Western cultural assumptions to such an extent that they primarily perform an ideological function. That is, they serve to reproduce and sustain societal status quo characterized by economic inequality and other forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. The core operative assumptions that produce this ideological effect both in theory and practice are individualism and scientism. (Sloan, 1996, p. 39)

The essence of "science" -- an idea/concept/method much valued in the West -- is ultimately about accuracy in describing, understanding, predicting, and controlling the world about us. But the problem is that Western psychology is often *inaccurate* when applied the behavior of non-Western people -- indeed, it also has difficulty explaining behavior of Western people -- because it too often de-contextualizes behavior. The "decontextualization" of behavior, an approach often favored by Western psychologies that locate the determinants of human behavior within the human psyche and/or the immediate situation, fails to acknowledge that all human behavior carries with it the developmental and contextual influences of the culture of any individual or group.

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The awakening of non-Western psychology to the reality that every culture -- East or West -- evolves its own unique psychologies appropriate to and consistent with their historical and cultural roots is the new reality in psychology. Each psychology deserves recognition, development, and application as appropriate as a function of careful scholarship and validation. Today, owing to the work of Professor Hwang and non-Western scholars, the study of indigenous psychologies has become a global movement. Indeed, even within the United States and Northern Europe, cultural psychologists are critiquing Western psychology's dominance and hegemony as reflections *not* of "scientific" legitimacy, but rather as an ethnocentric construction, often oblivious to its own cultural roots and determinants.

This volume, thus, constitutes a major advance for psychology as a global science and profession precisely because it addresses the historical and cultural foundations of all psychologies, even as it demonstrates the determinants of Chinese psychology and its explanatory power for Chinese and other populations. May the trend flourish and become the reality for psychology across the world.

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Cultural & International Psychology Book Series

Springer SBM Publications, New York, NY

