



Symposium/Other Proposal

2016 APA Annual Convention

Proposal ID: sym16337

1. Type of program: Symposium

2. Title of program: Consciousness & Awe: Alternative Cultural Paradigms in Research & Practice

First index term 64.5 training and education

Second index term 85.3 practice

3. Brief Content Description: The interplay of awe and culture is examined through the lens of indigenous psychology and cultural alternatives to prevailing Western perspectives. Expanding the application of culture, implications for training, practice, and research are discussed

4. Division to submit this proposal: 32 - Humanistic

Other division(s) appropriate for submission

- 01 - General
- 24 - Theoretical and Philosophical
- 26 - History of Psychology
- 29 - Society for the Advancement of Psychotherapy
- 39 - Psychoanalysis

5. Length of time requested on program: 1 hr. 50 min.

6. Chair(s) of the session:

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Title of presentation: Indigenous Psychologies
Electronic Archiving: Yes
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Membership status: Non-Member
Title of presentation: Promoting Research in the History and Philosophy of Psychology:
Particularities of Brazilian Context
Electronic Archiving: Yes
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Title of presentation: From Stimulus-Response to Consciousness: Toward an Alternative Model of
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Title of presentation: Training Multicultural Consciousness: Can We Teach Awe?
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8. Discussant(s):

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9. Accommodation request: none

10. Submit for CE: False

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Consciousness & Awe: Alternative Cultural Paradigms in Research & Practice

When confronted with the new or the other, how can the cultivation and implementation of awe bridge intersectional discoveries that are informed by cultural or multicultural contexts? In this symposium, the interplay of awe and culture is examined through critical discourse of indigenous psychology and cultural alternatives to prevailing Western perspectives. Sequentially, the initial speakers situate indigenous psychologies and provide an international example of how the cultural and institutional values of specific countries can influence local research traditions. The remaining speakers explore the phenomenology of awe as a guiding principle in preparing psychologists for multicultural societies. Finally, the discussant will consider the prospect of awe-based consciousness or the awe-based quest as a commonality among diverse views that privileges humility, wonder, and the sense of adventure toward living. Implications for training, research, and practice are discussed.

(1) Indigenous Psychologies

The term ‘indigenous psychology’ is employed in a variety of ways in contemporary literature. It is sometimes employed to reference the distinctive local forms of human psychology and behavior that is often evident in different cultures and historical periods, the subject-matter of the recently developed American sub-discipline of cultural psychology, which is now an international enterprise. It is an open and empirical question whether such cultural psychological variance is in fact to be recognized, and whether participants in any particular culture are best situated to make such a determination.

Indigenous psychology is also employed to reference the theories of human psychology and behavior that are part of the folk heritage of cultural groups, sometimes called the “folk psychology”, on a logical par with folk theories of physics, chemistry, biology, sociology and economics. Although it is likely that participants in a particular culture may have privileged access to the contents of their folk psychology (although there may also be local forms of implicit bias that the folk may not realize), this does not vouchsafe the descriptive and causal explanatory claims of their folk psychology, which may be no more accurate than their folk physics and folk biology.

Finally, there is indigenous psychology in the form of psychology that embraces theories and methods that form part of the intellectual and practical heritage of a culture, which are different from those deployed by the dominant American form of psychology, and which may be better suited to the psychological reality of that particular culture. This is an open and empirical question, as is the question whether participants of any candidate culture are best situated to make that judgment.

(2) Promoting Research in the History and Philosophy of Psychology: Particularities of Brazilian Context

Research can flourish only in a milieu that favors it. For this reason, it is important to understand how cultural and institutional aspects of specific countries can contribute to the shaping and direction of local research traditions. In this sense, Brazilian context may offer an interesting example of how institutional reforms can lead to new developments in research strategies within specific areas. In this paper, I have two main goals. First, to show how the expansion of Brazilian universities since 2009 has promoted a general growth and incentive in relation to scientific activities throughout the country, not only in the so-called hard sciences, but also in the human sciences. Second, within a more specific context, to explain how it was possible to create two new institutional spaces dedicated to the history and philosophy of psychology at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF) in Brazil: the Wilhelm Wundt Center for the History and Philosophy of Psychology (NUHFIP) and the Graduate Program in History and Philosophy of Psychology. As for the general context, I will describe how Brazilian Federal Government implemented, in the first decade of this century, some measures to improve the level of higher education in Brazil. These two measures had an immediate impact on the development of the federal universities in general, and on the expansion of the graduate programs within these universities in particular. Concerning the specific context, I will explore the impacts of these measures on the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, especially with regards to the development of research in the history and philosophy of psychology. Finally, I will discuss some challenges that remain for the future, given Brazil's current political and economic crisis.

(3) From Stimulus-Response to Consciousness: Toward an Alternative Model of Awe

The late E. Mark Stern recounted his experience of seeing the ruins of the World Trade Towers:

The sight . . . is so very fresh. It is fresh as a makeshift graveyard suddenly called into service. . . . Allow me to relate a tale from Elie Wiesel's memoirs: "In my dream I am looking for my father. . . . He sees me and begins to cry, weakly, like the child he is becoming. . . . A stranger goes before us and blows out the candles. Now it is dark. I no longer know where I am. 'Father,' I whisper, 'where are you?' He takes a deep breath and bends down . . . I no longer see his face. Yet while I still know who he is, I no longer know who I am." When I no longer know who I am, when the disappearance is so out of proportion When the darkness glares so absolutely . . . that absence of knowing is where the sacred begins. (cited in Sundararajan, 2002, pp. 185-186)

As a response to terrorism that is tinged with so much pain and cultural tension, yet so refreshingly free from anger and vengeance, Stern's experience of awe transcended the mindset of the zero-sum-games that have loomed large since 9/11.

Unfortunately, Stern's experience does not fit the scientific framework of awe proposed by Keltner and Haidt (2003), a model that capitalizes on the non-reflective, biologically based responses, characteristic of mainstream psychology of emotion. I argue that a more fitting model is Rudolf Otto's (1970/1923) phenomenology of awe, which foregrounds the self-reflexive consciousness that makes it possible for us to embrace the dissolution of our habitual models of the world, a process which is indispensable to both creativity and scientific discovery, and embrace culture/multicultural knowledge.

(4) Training Multicultural Consciousness: Can We Teach Awe?

The Bhagavad Gita is a dialogue embedded within an epic battle known as the Mahabharat. The Gita conversation happens between two key players: Arjun, and Krishna, one mortal and one not yet known immortal. In the following passage, Krishna reveals himself in his true form to Arjun:

“In that cosmic form, Arjun saw unlimited faces and eyes, decorated with many celestial ornaments and wielding many kinds of divine weapons....If a thousand suns were to blaze forth together in the sky, they would not match the splendor of that great form. There Arjun could see the totality of the entire universe established in one place, in that body of the God of gods. Then, Arjun, full of wonder and with hair standing on end, bowed his head and folded his hands before the Lord (Chapter 11, Verse 14).”

The words, “full of wonder”, in Sanskrit reads as *vismaya avishta*, and equates to the modern English use of awe, defined as “reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder.” When Arjun beholds Krishna’s divine form, he is so awe-struck that his hair stands on end. He is fearful and afraid, and ultimately transformed.

When confronted with the new or the other, how can cultivate awe when training graduate students? I argue that by using the allegories presented in the Gita we can help students arrive at a truly multicultural level of consciousness by using a culturally different and new text to promote and encourage the experience of awe. Ultimately, as modeled by Sundararajan’s concept of awe (2005), a person’s ability to accommodate a new and vast experience is what leads to awe and ultimately, change. Arjun’s experience of Krishna’s divine form was infinite and beheld not only the world, but Brahma and all the universes. He was forever changed and able to see his dear friend in this new way, and also inspired to continue on his battle, which was his ultimate duty.