

Reflections

All psychologies are indigenous psychologies: Reflections on psychology in a global era

Understanding psychology as indigenous to the contexts in which it is developed and in which it operates may help forge a new conception of the role of culture.

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All Psychologies are Indigenous

While the term "indigenous" is often used to refer to "native" people and cultures, post-modern ideological and socio-political uses of the term have resulted in a growing opinion among psychologists that all psychologies are "indigenous" to the cultures in which they arise and are sustained. This position challenges the current dominance and privileged stance of Western (i.e., Eurocentric/North American) psychology as a universal set of assumptions, methods and applications. This challenge is gathering increased support within the Western world and across the globe as the fundamental issue of "accuracy," rather than "scientism," becomes the arbiter of psychology as a discipline for inquiry.

I must note here that those who disagree with the term "indigenous," as broadly applied to "national" rather than "native" contextual meanings unique to place and time may be protecting political interests by choosing to deny histories of abuses of "native" cultures. This is occurring in Australia, Canada, Taiwan, U.K. and the USA. Thus, the way we define the term shapes our opinions.

Sources of Increased Interest in "Indigenous Psychology"

The knowledge, wisdom and realities supporting the position of "indigenous psychologies" have three basic sources:

(1) The growth and appreciation of post-modern thought that considers all knowledge to be socio-political in its nature. This position acknowledges the reality that knowledge emerges and is sustained by socio-political forces, including the privileged positions of certain individuals considered leaders, and the distribution of economic and political power. Within this framework, psychology is a construction, subject to the forces, events and people in its context.

(2) The rise of nationalism and national identities resisting an imposition of Western values, ways-of-life and colonization of mind and behavior. This has been aptly demonstrated in the work of Ignacio Martin-Baro and his

contributions regarding “liberation” psychology (see Martin-Baro, 1994; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). The roots of this arise justifiably among non-Western nations seeking to escape the legacy of European and North American domination, and also among ethno-cultural minority groups within Western nations who found their way of life devalued, stigmatized and oppressed by the dominant powers. This is now apparent from the wide number of ethnic minority “psychologies” being advanced in Europe and North America, and the recognition that ancient cultural traditions and civilizations (e.g., from India, China, Arabic lands) have long had complex theories of human behavior that include rich traditions of life, healing and social progress.

(3) The increased understanding and appreciation of the role of “culture” as a determinant of human behavior. Once “culture” achieved popularity and legitimacy as a behavioral determinant, it was only a matter of time before Western psychology, especially as represented by European and North American psychology associations, was challenged for its primacy. As “culture” entered the behavior equation, it was clear that any claim of universality was only an assumption, rooted in ethnocentricity and fueled by technological, economic and military power.

“Culture” Specialization Disciplines

Within Western psychology itself, a number of specialty areas have emerged in response to the important role of culture as a determinant of human behavior, including: (1) cross-cultural psychology, (2) cultural psychology, (3) multicultural psychology, (4) minority psychology, (5) racial/class psychologies (e.g., Black Latino, Native American, Asian), (6) psychological anthropology and, most recently, (7) “indigenous psychology.”

Although each of these specialties has its own supporters, their shared or common concern has been the importance of understanding the “cultural” context of human behavior, and relevant theories, methods and applications. Contestations within and among these specialties has encouraged distinct knowledge bases, methods and practices resulting in a vast array of handbooks, encyclopedias, journals and other forms of communication.

Decontextualization

Concern for ethnocentric biases in Western psychology and their pernicious consequences is not new. Fathali Moghaddam (1987), an Iranian-American psychologist, Girishmar Misra (1996), an Asian-Indian psychologist, and others have written of the risks of accepting Western psychology as universal.

Misra, within the context of India's vast historical store of diverse philosophies and religions, recognized that Western psychological dominance was largely a socio-political phenomenon, rather than a valid accounting of the varied views of human behavior that existed across the world. In a now "classic" paper, Misra, with great eloquence, force and credibility, stated:

The current Western thinking of the science of psychology in its prototypical form, despite being local and indigenous, assumes a global relevance and is treated as a universal mode 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 cost of ignoring other substantive possibilities from disparate cultural traditions. Mapping reality through Western constructs has offered a pseudo-understanding of the people of alien cultures and has had 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, 497-498).

For me, the key phrase in Misra's comments is the term "decontextualized" vision. In advancing this term, Misra and others emphasized the importance of context in the construction of reality, specifically the "cultural" construction of Western psychology. And here I must add the brilliant insights of Tod Sloan (1996, p. 39), an American critical psychologist, who noted that Western psychologies — as is the case for all psychologies — carry an implicit worldview — an ideology stance — which reflects and embodies their cultural context and their values and priorities. Culture is context.

Culture — Concept and Nuances

There are many definitions of culture. Because culture is central to this commentary, I offer the following definition because it captures the depth and implications of culture as a force in all of our lives. Culture, for me, can be defined as:

Shared learned meanings and behaviors transmitted across generations within social activity contexts for purposes of promoting individual/societal adaptation, adjustment, growth and development. Culture has both

external (i.e., artifacts, roles, activity contexts, institutions) and **internal** (i.e., values, beliefs, attitudes, activity contexts, patterns of consciousness, personality styles, epistemology) representations. The shared meanings and behaviors are subject to continuous change and modification in response to changing internal and external circumstances. Cultures can arise and function in brief and immediate temporal settings (e.g., culture of faculty meetings) and also long-term settings (e.g., ethno-cultural ways of life).

The essential part of this definition for me is that cultures construct our realities. Our psychologies are shaped and formed in cultural contexts. Cultures represent “templates” through which we order the world about us. This occurs, in my opinion, because there is a human “effort after making meaning,” that is fundamental to human nature: This point of view can be stated in the following propositions:

- There is an inherent human impulse to describe, understand and predict the world through the ordering of stimuli.
- The undamaged human brain not only responds to stimuli, but also organizes, connects and symbolizes stimuli, and in the process, generates patterns of explicit and implicit meanings that help promote survival, adaptation and adjustment.
- The process and product of this activity are, to a large extent, culturally contextualized, generated and shaped through linguistic, behavioral and interpersonal practices that are part of the cultural socialization process.
- The storage of stimuli as accumulated life experience, in both representational and symbolic forms in the brain, and in external forms (e.g., books), generates a shared cognitive and affective process that helps create cultural continuity across time (i.e., past, present and future) for both the person and the group. To a large extent, individual and collective identities are forged through this process.
- Through socialization, individual and group preferences and priorities are rewarded or punished, thus promoting and/or modifying the cultural constructions of reality (i.e., ontogenies, epistemologies, praxologies, cosmologies, ethos, values and behavior patterns).

Therefore, “reality” is culturally constructed. Different cultural contexts create different realities.

Thus, culture is an essential determinant of human behavior. A danger or risk of avoiding this view is “ethnocentricity,” especially when combined with hegemonic power and privileging. Perhaps it is time to accept the view that all psychologies are “indigenous” to the cultural contexts in which they evolve and develop. Eurocentric/North American scientific and professional psychology is a function of events, forces and people that shaped it, and made it what is to today, including its implicit assumption as being a universal psychology. It is not. It is a cultural construction.

Ten Assumptions of Western (Eurocentric/North American) Psychology

In a previous paper (Marsella, 2009) I identified 10 basic assumptions of Western psychology, questioning its universal applicability in a world of cultural diversity. They are:

- **Individuality** — The individual is the focus of behavior. Determinants of behavior reside in the individual’s brain/mind, and interventions must be at this level rather than the broader societal context.
- **Reductionism** — Small, tangible units of study that yield well to controlled experimentation are favored.
- **Experiment-based empiricism** — An emphasis on experiments with controls and experiment group comparisons and uses of ANOVA analyses that often account for 5 to 10 percent of variance. Lab studies are often favored over field studies.
- **Scientism** — The belief that methods of the physical sciences can be applied similarly to social and behavioral phenomena, which results in spurious methods and conclusions that are inappropriate to the subject under study or that avoid studying certain subjects.
- **Quantification/measurement** — “Whatever exists at all ... can be measured,” said Edward Thorndike (Thorndike, 1918). Unless something under study can be quantified, it is not acceptable for study. This, of course, leads to operationalism as the standard for assessing concepts.
- **Materialism** — Favors variables for study that have a tangible existence rather than higher order constructs — I can see it and touch it under a microscope.
- **Male dominance** — Years of male dominance favors particular topics, methods and populations for study — remember “involutional melancholia,” the psychiatric disease assigned to middle-aged women.

- **“Objectivity”** — Assumption that we can identify and understand immutable aspects of reality in a detached way, unbiased by human senses and knowledge.
- **Nomothetic laws** — Search for generalized principles and “laws” that apply to widespread and diverse situations and populations because of an identification and admiration for the physical sciences.
- **Rationality** — Presumes a linear, cause-effect, logical, material understanding of phenomena and prizes this approach in offering and accepting arguments and data generation.

Each of these characteristics are associated with two very obvious forces: (1) The broad historical contexts of Western culture (e.g., Period of Enlightenment), replete with their unique historical figures, events and forces; and (2) the culture context of Western psychology that emerged from within its unique historical events, forces and figures (e.g., logical positivism, behaviorism, generalization from animal experimentation and limited samples of white college students).

Closing Thoughts

The term “indigenous” has many meanings, and this is acceptable. But we should specify what meaning or definition we are using. Thus, using the term “indigenous” can be controversial in locations such as Australia or Taiwan because they may be associated with native populations that were suppressed. The “Indigenous Psychology Listserv,” created and administered by Louise Sundararajan is a nurturing information site for those seeking to explore and develop the historical and contextual foundations of different psychologies. Asymmetrical balances of economic, political, military, technical and organizational powers must not determine the accuracy of our conclusions. Good science is about accuracy, not about opinion rooted within hegemony privileges.

Recently representatives of psychology from different nations met in Stockholm, Sweden, to discuss the “science” and “profession” of psychology and to develop first steps toward consensus of what professional psychology is. They met under the best of intentions — shared concerns and issues. But I am concerned that the representatives present were psychologists who are highly-socialized to Western and North American psychology because of training within the West and privileged positions of influence in their own nations — I hope that any attempt to reach consensus will take care to assure diversity in perspectives.

It is possible to speak of unity within diversity in psychology, and not sacrifice the legitimacy of a psychology’s roots. I spoke of this a decade ago under the

title of global-community psychology or psychology for a global community (Marsella, 1998).

It all comes down to the value of diversity. Life is diversity. Life is context. Psychology is a contextual creation. We must be careful the pursuit of "order" does not destroy the wonderful chaos of life. We do not need uniformity or homogenization in psychology. As Octavio Paz, the Mexican Noble Laureate, stated simply and profoundly: "Life is diversity, death is uniformity."

Viva la diferencia siempre!

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