The Case for an Indigenous Psychology

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M uch as academic people like to think of themselves as residents of an ivory tower, the truth is that academic development does not take place in a vacuum, or even in an ivory tower. Academic development is closely related to and even dependent on the prevailing social and political climate of a country. Kuhn (1962) in his insightful analysis of the history of science, has shown how the acceptance of particular theoretical positions is not entirely an objective process, but determined by social factors and even by the personality characteristics of advocates of competing theoretical perspectives.

Today, as Asian psychologists find new pride and enlightenment in their own cultural identities, they begin to suspect that there is no true academic freedom when the criteria for good psychology depends on the extent to which it resembles the imported materials of their colonizers. Such may lead to an occasionally indiscriminating rejection of anything Western and a wholesale enthusiasm for anything indigenous. But although many an indigenous psychology may come about because of a socio-political consciousness of one's identity as a culture, there are sufficient academic considerations to make a case for an indigenous psychology. Ultimately, it is these academic bases which should sustain our unimpassioned commitment to indigenous psychology long after the spark of political consciousness kindled our initial interest in it. This paper is an attempt to show why and how indigenous psychology makes good methodological sense.

In most scientific research, complete mastery over treatments and measurements is not possible. Various factors conspire to jeopardize the internal and external validity of any research undertaking. A most general example of a jeopardizing factor for internal validity is an extraneous variable, while that for external validity asks the question of interpretability of results or the "airtightness" of relationships between variables. External validity asks the question of representativeness, generalizability and true-to-life-ness. "While internal validity is the *sine qua non*, and while the question of external validity, like the question of inductive inference, is never completely answerable, the selection of designs strong in both types of validity is obviously our ideal" (Campbell and Stanley, 1966).

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

The relation of external validity to cross-cultural and to indigenous research is somewhat more apparent, and for this reason will be discussed first. In the last few decades, psychology has displayed its concern over generalizability and universality by

heavy replication. In spite of the alleged reliance on white rats and white Americans sophomore students, findings have been replicated outside the laboratory and even with various ethnic groups. The last few years have also witnessed a growing disenchantment with the wide-scale use of laboratory research, especially for social psychology. This has led to more field experimentation and the development of non-reactive methods to observe and measure behavior in real-life settings. While laboratories all over the world may be somewhat similar, real-life settings for behavior vary radically from one ethnic group to another. Cross-cultural psychologists have added considerably to the data base in psychology by replicating phenomena found in one culture for as many other cultural settings as possible.

Attempts to achieve a broader data base, however, do not ensure a universal psychology, as Enriquez (1977) has pointed out. Unless alternative perspectives from non-Western psychologies are put to use, cross-cultural psychology simply consists of replications from studies done in Western countries, and in no way lead in the direction of universal psychology. To cast this problem in the well-known terminology of Pike (1966), an *emic* (culture-specific) approach developed in a Western culture is assumed to operate as if it were an *etic* (universal) approach, and generalizations are therefore simply sought without altering the "emically-derived" theoretical perspective and method. This approach is what Triandis calls a *pseudoetic* approach. With this approach, instruments based on uni-nationally-derived theories and methods, and with items selecting uni-national conditions, are simply translated and used in other cultures as if they were universally derived (Triandis, 1972). Replications using such instruments may widen the data base of psychology, but they do not really enhance the external validity of the phenomena its studies.

According to Triandis, the original development of an instrument follows a procedure that requires five essential steps: (1) Specification of a content domain, (2) Sampling of appropriate items representing that domain, (3) Demonstration of item homogeneity for groups of items, (4) Reliability studies, and (5) Validity studies. A cursory survey of studies in which Western-derived instruments are borrowed or imported, however, is not likely to yield more than a few in which all these steps are taken.

In Hong Kong, the crudest form of importation would be to simply take an instrument as it is and look only for English-speaking Chinese. A slightly improved version would be to provide a Chinese translation that enables the researcher to test all literate Chinese. There are, of course, varying degrees of translation ranging from literal and artificial to a culturally equivalent translation. A further improvement would be to demonstrate the internal consistency, reliability and validity of the instrument for the Hong Kong culture (Steps 3–5). This is as far as most careful researchers go. A few may go back as far as Step 2, to explore the appropriate items that represent the relevant domain in the indigenous culture. For instance, instead of asking about Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet one may ask about the Dream of the Red Chamber. This is, however, only a parallel way of modifying an item; it does not question whether a knowledge of literary classics in this culture is of the same importance and function as it is in the Western culture, and whether it contributes in the same way to the ability being tested. It

fails to go back to Step 1 which is to specify a content domain according to its boundaries in the indigenous culture.

Because of this failure to redefine a variable to be studied in the context of the indigenous culture, cross-cultural psychologists may deceive themselves into thinking that they have the makings of a universal psychology, when actually they are dealing with different content domains in different cultures. For example, the concept of morality or of happiness may differ quite radically from one culture to another. It is not fair to use one common instrument and conclude that one culture is more moral, or more happy, than another. On the other hand, happiness would be more universally understood if psychologists explore what happiness means in each indigenous culture, and how happy each culture is according to its own concept of happiness. While happiness may sound like an obviously culture-bound idea, even supposedly universal perceptual processes may be affected by cultural experiences, i.e., different groups have more or less developed abilities in the various sensory modes; e.g., an instrument such as maze-tracing would favor people from such places as Venice but not those who live in deserts. Also, West African children have trouble with three-dimensional pictures. To neglect such differences in tests of ability is like measuring groups on how well they can do *our* tricks rather than how well they can do *their* tricks (Weber, 1966). The task that confronts indigenous psychology, therefore, is to discover what these "tricks" are, or what the *emic* factor are. Only then can the quest for external validity rise above a mechanical broadening of psychology's data base.

INTERNAL VALIDITY

The second argument that can be raised in favor of indigenous psychology has to do with multiple operationism and its contribution to internal validity. Multiple operationism has often been associated with external validity because generelization is justified only for concepts which have been multiply measured or manipulated; i.e., external validity should include not only representativeness of subjects and environments, but also of techniques of measurement and manipulation in the variation of the theoretical concept (Crans and Brewer, 1973). However, to the extent that the use of a uni-national theoretical perspective limits multiple operationism and research findings could plausibly be attributed to the confounding variable of the method used rather than the variable studied, internal validity is seriously threatened. If a finding is obtained only while using a certain methods or measurement, the findings is clearly not a function of the variable studied but an artifact of the way it is operationalized. Such alternative explanations make it impossible to state a relationship between variables.

Operational definitions for any given concept vary from one study to another; for example, a reward may be defined in one study as two grams of rat food, in another it may be a piece of candy, and still in another it may be a smile or a nod from the experimenter. Across different cultures what is rewarding to some ethnic groups may be completely aversive to others. A theory in psychology that states the relationship between reward and performance would be considered supported if it holds true whether one defines reward as two grams of rat food or a piece of candy or whatever. On the other

hand, it would be far from supported if the theory held true only for an isolated study using only one particular operational definition of reward.

Because scientific psychology subscribes to the principle of multiple operationism, constructs and theories which are operationalized only within the context of one culture and specific to one language do not have as much value as those which are nonspecific with regard to culture or language. Multiple operationism is one important tenet of scientific psychology because of the imperfect fit between measurement and reality and this is especially serious for social sciences.

Suppose a researcher wanted to measure opinion about the Vietnam refugees issue, he should realize that each respondent's answer may be a function of his real opinion plus his degree of anxiety at being accosted by interviewers, plus what he thinks is the popular opinion, plus his familiarity with the language and concepts used, plus whether the baby was crying at the time the interviewer came, etc. Multiple operationism offers a solution for the imperfect fit between measurement and reality. A finding which has been obtained using different operations relevant to different cultural contexts point toward convergent validity. As Campbell and Fiske (1959) have suggested, if a finding is obtained using one method but not when using other methods, it may be inferred that the result is a function of the method only. If we get a result only by using a uni-national perspective, then this result may simply be a function of the methods and instruments that this perspective dictates. Cross-cultural researchers should therefore consider the use of a multi-language, multi-culture approach before accepting a finding as universal. This multi-language, multi-culture collection can not be realized by using a *pseudoetic* approach. Instead, it may be realized by the adoption of truly indigenous psychologies in different parts of the world. One approach is to start out with a construct that appears to be universal and to develop indigenous ways of understanding and measuring it. Another is to start completely at the *emic* or indigenous level and draw parallels for assimilation at the *etic* or universal level.

When different techniques produce common results, attributing the effect to the common conceptual variable can be substantiated. While this directly strengthens any statement we can make about the effect of a conceptual variable, i.e., enhance internal validity, it also adds justification for generalization external validity) due to the adequate representation of a conceptual variable in operational contexts that differ as much as possible.

HONG KONG PSYCHOLOGY

At this point the reader might want to know what indigenous psychology is all about. In this culture, indigenous psychology would be Hong Kong Psychology. But Hong Kong Psychology should be distinguished from Psychology in Hong Kong. Psychology in Hong Kong includes Hong Kong Psychology, but in Hong Kong Psychology could be sadly neglected even while Psychology continues to develop. Usually, Psychology in Hong Kong is what people outside of Hong Kong think about when they refer to the state of psychology in Hong Kong—like how popular or how developed it is, what kind of a program is available in the university, how many journals there are in

the libraries, how many professors, with what sort of qualifications, how much research activity goes on Psychology in Hong Kong may therefore be traced back to the beginning of academic psychology in Hong Kong (cf. Enriquez, 1978).

However, as Hong Kong people begin to study and to do psychology, they impart a characteristic flavor to it quite different from psychology anywhere else in the world, and this is the start of Hong Kong Psychology. First of all, they are dealing with a unique group of people in a unique cultural milieu. Hong Kong Psychology therefore includes the psychology of the Hong Kong people, their character, values, and attitudes; but more so Hong Kong Psychology includes a body of psychological theory, knowledge and methods formed through the Hong Kong culture as basis. It is the latter which is badly lacking in Hong Kong Psychology.

Let us review some of the indigenization attempts that have been made in the past. As has been mentioned, the study of Hong Kong people as a unique people with their peculiar traits, values and attitudes is part of Hong Kong Psychology. This kind of study, however, has frequently been undertaken by visiting researchers, using western theories and western-derived instruments, so that the result may at best be considered an understanding of Hong Kong people from a visitor's point of view. No amount of translations can replace an understanding based on familiarity with the language and culture itself. Without such understanding, indigenous concepts could easily be taken out of context.

Enriquez (1977) provides us with an example from the Filipino experience. *Pakikisama* has long been a supposed Filipino value which was identified by Western-oriented social scientists during the period of token use of the Filipino language. These social scientists failed to perceive that *pakikisama* is just one among many modes of interaction which range from plain civility to oneness with, and all of which have the prefix *paki(ki)*. While *pakikisama* approximately means conformity, it does not imply a slavish conformity. This becomes apparent only when one considers that all the modes of interaction starting with *paki(ki)*-point to an other-orientedness that is important for the culture, but conformity *per se* is not. The term *pakikisama* has therefore been taken out of context and the part *sama* (going along with) rather than the prefix *paki(ki)*- has been given undue attention. The term *pakikipag-kapwa* (an orientation/commitment toward one's fellowman) can summarize the whole range of interaction much better than *pakikisama*. But to what extent the labeling of *pakikisama* as a national value has fostered docility and even a colonial mentality in Filipinos for years, it is hard to say.

Other indigenization attempts of Hong Kong Psychology include validation of translated and back-translated instruments on Hong Kong people, as well as replication of findings in Western Psychology. All of these attempts shared a common problem: these instruments, these hypotheses to be tested and replicated did not grow out of the experience of the Hong Kong people; they were arbitrarily imposed. Past attempts in the indigenization of psychology also tended to overlook the fact that a lot of good psychological material which is truly indigenous may not be found in academic psychology but in street corners, in public markets, in local literary materials, and in colloquial expressions, proverbs and sayings. The value of indigenous concepts, which are not

easily translatable into other languages, was not realized. Actually, when one takes a concept which is common in Hong Kong culture and which is not easily found in other languages, he has the start of a rich indigenous psychological theory. He may start by relating it to a variety of other concepts in language, and in this way map out the lexical domain of this concept. He may also identify the antecedent and consequent variables of this concept: for example, if it is a behavior, what factors are likely to lead to this behavior and what is the effect of this behavior on the actor and on observers?

How can such data be obtained? While each culture may eventually develop its own best indigenous method, it appears that the general problem can profit from a phenomenological approach, at least in its early stages. Such an approach is compatible with trying to get into the space of a concept in the experience of the culture. The researcher could ask native speakers to talk about the relevant concept until he gets significant agreement on what the concept means in the experience of the culture. Native speakers can elucidate on when and where and how they use the concept and what it means to them. The researcher may get different answers at first but sooner or later he will arrive at a set of essential characteristics that are most commonly used to describe the concept. Some respondents may emphasize some characteristics more than others, but with sufficient respondents a common set of characteristics will eventually surface. (See for example an analysis of Filipino concept, the *sumpong* by Mataragnon, 1977).

The indigenous researcher can observe how people use the concept; he can get hold of any literary or indigenous folklore, proverb, etc., in which the term may be used. In each case, it is important to determine what antecedents and consequents surround the concept. What is its evaluative connotation; is it positive or negative, to what degree? What is its function; does it serve any purpose in the culture? If so what distinguishes it from other concepts which serve a similar purpose? Hypotheses can be formulated and then tested. However, at this stage of development, attention needs to be directed toward more observation and data-gathering that leads to hypothesis-generating, not hypothesis-testing. Hypotheses are basically convenient data-summarizing generalizations which are used to guide decisions about the content and interpretation of future observations. Without the preliminary data-gathering from which theories are normally generated, theories would be artificial irrelevant, and lacking psychological reality.

The problem that confronts Asian psychologists today is that they have been "blessed" or "cursed" with an abundance of ready-made psychological theories, and have hardly had a chance to think for themselves or to formulate theories based on their own experiences. What they do instead is to look for examples to fit a theory: this and that case supports so and so's theory of cognitive development, but what about the 99 other cases which do not? Which theory can best explain these other cases? Most of the techniques of research which academic psychologists learn have to do with hypothesis-testing, to find data in support of theories. Somehow they seem to have more reverence for multivariate analyses than for naturalistic and unobtrusive observation. But this presupposes that they already have an adequate set of relevant theories waiting to be tested. Can these theories explain the behavior in their indigenous culture? Maybe at this

stage Asian psychologists should ask more questions, formulate more hypotheses, rather than get arbitrary answers.

Triandis (1972) once made an analogy about apples and oranges which is worth repeating here. "If we are to compare apples and oranges, we can do it only on those dimensions they have in common, such as size, thickness of skin, and acidity, and not on unique dimensions such as 'apple flavor.' We can formulate 'laws' that describe the relation between size and price or thickness and price, that are applicable to all 'fruit', but we also need laws that are unique to apples or oranges." Whether we happen to be an apple or an orange, let us discover our own true flavor.

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