

Psychology in a global world

Locally relevant... but globally ignored?

WE would all like our work to be relevant and useful to society, and psychology is fulfilling at least some of its promise in this respect. But the way psychology is going about realising its true potential is changing. Most mainstream psychology has been of Western origin, following a universalist mode that aims to formulate powerful empirical regularities valid for most, or all, of humankind. Indigenous psychologies (mostly non-Western approaches) tend to be conducted in a more local mode. But are these two extremes of the research continuum quite as far apart as they seem, and which is best for the future of the discipline?

Universalist approaches

An obvious advantage of universalist approaches is that economic resources can be saved if research results are valid for people in most societies. Economically deprived countries could simply make use of the findings from richer countries. For example, the simpler neuropsychological and cognitive memory tests developed in mainstream psychology may also be of use in non-Western countries.

But in modern times, many see it as naive to believe that psychology can formulate such 'laws'. Many of the regularities identified, especially in the applied parts of psychology, are only valid for limited groups of people – specific cultures, ethnic groups, social classes or gender, for example. In contrast, local approaches to psychology, with more limited ambitions for generalisation, are more likely to provide results that better fit other local instances in the same society.

Another problem with the universalist approach is what has been called the 'crises of representation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Reality can be described in many ways, each description focusing on specific aspects and representing them in specific ways. Given this, the descriptions that are actually produced are a function of the researcher's prior, culturally contingent,



CARL MARTIN ALLWOOD discusses some of the practical problems with taking an indigenous approach.

understanding (Gadamer, 1960/1985). So given that any research is based on specific and limited pre-understanding, is even the universalist approach really a local one too?

There is also a political dimension to the crisis of representation. Being able to produce descriptions and communicate them effectively to other people is associated with access to resources, and here psychology is failing large parts of the world. In the 1980s and 1990s only 4.7 per cent of the entries in PsycLIT (a US-based international electronic database for published psychological research) came from South and East Asia, Latin America and Africa (Adair *et al.*, 2002). Although PsycLIT mostly contains publications in English, this result still shows that psychology has a long way to go before it is truly international with respect to the origins of its research.

Indigenous psychologies

The indigenous psychologies, mostly developed after the Second World War and more noticeably in the 1970s in countries such as India, China, the Philippines and Mexico, were political and pragmatic reactions to the mainstream modern Western-originated psychology. In the postcolonial context there were many reactions to the dominance of Western approaches in the human and social sciences. Dhruv Raina's description of the situation in India is probably valid for many other non-Western countries as well: 'What was found problematic was the insertion within an internationalist context of a canonized European definition of rationality and universality' (Raina, 1997, p.18).

The indigenous psychologies occur in different varieties, but they all aim to be culturally and pragmatically relevant to the researcher's own society (Allwood, 2002). It is argued that Western mainstream psychology has been too affected by liberal, individualistic and secular values, and that it has not given heed to traditional non-Western thinking.

Moreover, critics argue that Western

mainstream psychology has not sufficiently attended to the social problems that are prevalent in non-Western countries: the effects of poverty, drug abuse, problems of living in too confined quarters and of not being able to read and write. Other examples are effects of having your siblings as your caregivers (as, for example, in a large part of Africa), or of growing up in a one-child family (the 'little emperors' of China, who some psychologists believe are more likely to be spoiled and unable to cope with difficulties).

When psychology has focused on locally relevant concerns, it has thrown up studies that should also be of interest further afield. An example is Kao and co-workers' research on the practice of Chinese calligraphy and the beneficial effects of performing it on various human disorders such as mild retardation, children with attentional deficit disorders, as well as mental and stroke patients (e.g. Kao *et al.*, 1997). Another example of successful research in the indigenous psychologies is Kwang-Kuo Hwang's and others' research on Chinese/Confucian moral attitudes as a function of whether the agent of the judged

action belongs within or outside of the family, and how this distinction relates to the feeling of loss of face (e.g. Su & Hwang 2003). Such research can contribute to better treatment methods and to more realistic communication between people.

However, there are also several practical and theoretical problems with the indigenous approach, which I turn to now.

Economic concerns

Unfortunately, social and cultural circumstances in the country where the indigenous psychology is being developed are likely to hinder its progress. In most developing countries there is a great lack of resources for research, which makes it difficult to find the time for doing research and to get access to research journals and other necessary resources (see Adair, 1995, for a general description of conditions for doing research in developing countries).

One way to try to solve these problems is to initiate collaborations with researchers in economically better-off (mostly Western) countries. However, this often puts the researcher from the economically poorer country in a subordinate position when it

comes to choice and development of the research problem. It is easy to imagine that such subordination is even more sensitive (or even impossible) in the context of developing an indigenous psychology.

Moreover, many developing countries, where an indigenous psychology might be of interest seem to lack a well-functioning research 'community' – namely, a research culture where peer reviews of research papers, or applications for research money or jobs, are carried out in a reasonably impartial way and on scientifically relevant grounds (Adair, 1995).

Even when the research has been carried out, the problem of resources rears its head again. Shams (2002) pointed out that the non-Western indigenous psychologies are at present dependent on the Western context for their reproduction.

What to study?

The desire to develop psychologies that are both culturally relevant and pragmatically useful could involve a conflict. In the context of Indian indigenous psychology, Adair (1998) argued that in delving deeply into traditional concepts there is a risk of getting lost in the esoteric at the expense of practical usability. Instead, Adair suggested that the indigenous psychologies should not deviate very much from Western mainstream psychology. However, such advice is likely to be seen by some indigenous researchers as a hindrance to the development of culture-specific indigenous psychologies.

Given that the indigenised psychologies aspire to develop from their own cultural basis, they might choose not to adhere to a conventional definition of science. However, adhering to very liberal or controversial definitions of science may lead to isolation and also decreased pragmatic utility. For example, Virgilio Enriquez opened the door to radical changes in the Philippine indigenous psychology when he argued: 'As research on indigenous psychology matured, it became clear that the West did not enjoy the monopoly on scientific standards. In fact, the recognition that science evolved from Eastern intellectual traditions provided additional impetus to the task of investigating the Filipino intellectual tradition' (Enriquez, 1997, p.43). Likewise, a softening of the boundary between science and religion might make it harder to evaluate empirical evidence in a more neutral way.



Special issue

The risk of isolation is also present in the way psychologists choose to communicate. An example is the Filipino indigenous psychology where, as reported by Church and Katigbak (2002), there is a call for and a tendency of some researchers to write and read texts only in the local language. The authors also note that such tendencies incur the risk of 'reinventing the wheel'; out of about 200 'new' indigenous research methods, many in fact already existed in mainstream psychology.

Whose culture is it anyway?

A further issue is that what is construed as a specific 'culture' provides no clear basis for an indigenous psychology. Sometimes the cultural heterogeneity may be larger within a society than between societies, and the boundaries between cultures may be unclear. Thus, the interpretation of the properties of the culture that is to be the base of the indigenous psychology may well be controversial. Furthermore, different groups within a society (e.g. genders, social classes or ethnic groups) may each ask for the development of its own indigenous psychology. In the end it may be access to economic resources that will decide which indigenous psychologies are developed, limiting the chances of a truly universal psychology on the basis of more local indigenous psychologies.

There is also the danger of specific indigenous psychologies, national or other, forgetting that they, on the one hand, may

only represent the pre-understanding typical of a specific segment (e.g. social class or ethnic group) of the researcher's society, and on the other hand, may have commonalities with much broader segments of humanity.

The hope for a universal psychology

This commonality with humanity at large is, paradoxically, vitally important to the future of indigenous psychologies. Despite its focus on locally relevant concerns and methods, the indigenous approach has much to learn from mainstream psychology (and vice versa).

A universal psychology informed by various indigenous psychologies around the world would clarify the degree to which conclusions generalise to many societies (and to which societies). Given that one aims only for a 'light' version of a universal psychology there may be some promise in such an approach. But any such attempt will still be limited to the aspects and forms of reality considered relevant by the researchers producing the proclaimed universal psychology (cf. the crisis of representation, above). The key for the future will be communication: the threat of isolation is, to my mind, the greatest danger to the future success of the indigenous psychologies.

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