What Type of Culture Concept Will Help the Indigenous Psychologies and Why? An Answer to Hwang
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Abstract

In this response I conclude that the Indigenous Psychologies (IPs) would be best served by a culture concept that supports attention to the full-fledged understanding of the members of the IP researcher’s society. In contrast, Prof. Hwang’s culture concept emphasizes the importance of the language used by the society’s members and also of the older traditional parts of the members’ understanding. I argue that this type of culture concept is not very well fitted to be useful for the IPs and, moreover, that it may not be very helpful for producing results that will help achieve the goal of a more universal, or at least a more comprehensive psychology. However, Prof. Hwang’s culture concept may have other uses and be helpful for other purposes.

I wish to thank Prof. Hwang for his latest contribution to our debate on what is a suitable culture concept for the indigenous psychologies. Initially, I would like to note that I find it very puzzling, after our long debate, that Prof. Hwang should have reached the conclusion that (56): “Prof. Allwood [ … ] is talking about a culture concept for cultural or cross-cultural research”. I have repeatedly stated that what I am discussing is a suitable culture concept for the indigenous psychologies and that the culture concept I suggest, in contrast to Prof. Hwang’s culture concept, is suited for the needs of the IPs since it will allow IP researchers to better catch the current active understanding of the people in the IP researcher’s society that the research is intended to be of help for. It beats me how this could have escaped Prof. Hwang’s attention!

The Reason for Prof. Hwang’s approach to the IPs

The full context of the just quoted sentence from Prof. Hwang was:

Prof. Allwood may or may not have sensed the root of divergence in our debate: while he is talking about a culture concept for cultural or cross-cultural research in general, I am arguing for another culture concept for pushing forward the third wave of psychology in the age of globalization (56).

From this, and other texts, it seems that Prof. Hwang is less interested in helping people in the IP researchers’ society than in helping the IP researchers, as such, to push “forward the third wave of psychology”.

Prof. Hwang did not directly comment on my conclusion (Allwood 2014, 41) that his “ambition to ground all IPs on one specific philosophical approach”, namely his own, contradicts “a central part of the IPs general research program, namely that they should be based on the cultural understanding of the society that the specific IPs relates to”. 
However, he probably intended to give an answer (indirectly) to this problem when he noted that specific IPs have been criticized by mainstream psychologists in various ways, for example that they may not be useful for people in other cultures since they only deal with their own cultures. And he next (58) writes

What is the meaning of an indigenous psychology developed in a specific culture to people in other cultures? In order to respond to these challenges, most indigenous psychologists have argued that the development of numerous indigenous psychologies is not their final goal. Rather, their final goal is to develop an Asian psychology (Ho 1988), a global psychology (Enriquez 1993), a universal psychology (Kim and Berry 1993), or a human psychology (Yang 1993). To achieve this goal, they have proposed several research methods or approaches, including the derived etic approach (Berry 1989), the metatheory method (Ho 1998), the cross-indigenous method (Enriquez 1977), as well as the cross-cultural indigenous psychology (Yang 1997). Unfortunately (insofar as I know), no indigenous psychologists developed any such psychology with these methods.

Thus, since Prof. Hwang is of the opinion that the IPs have not been able to pull off a more comprehensive psychology by use of their methodological approach, he proposed his own culture concept (and supposedly, the other features of his approach) in order to help IP researchers reach a psychology that is more inclusive than just covering specific local societies. This may, as I have repeatedly argued in this debate, have the unfortunate consequence that the people who were planned to be helped by the IP research, and to whose society the research was planned to be applied, may be lost out of sight.

**Problems with Defining Culture as Fundamentally Based in Specific Languages**

Along the way Prof. Hwang briefly notes that my culture concept will not help to do the job. The reason he has for this conclusion is unclear, but he seems to imply that a culture concept that does not see “language as the most important carrier of culture” (59, from a quote from an interview with Prof. Hwang published by Evenden and Sandstrom, 2011) will be insufficient.

Here it is of interest that Prof. Hwang, in the broader context, argues that

As a result of globalization, modernization and industrialization, cultural hybridization and interpenetration has become so common that traditional cultural differences are being eroded (Hermans and Kempen 1998), and some cultures and languages may even disappear. But, do not forget that language is the most important carrier of culture. Who can believe that the Chinese language will disappear someday (Evenden and Sandstrom 2011, 161)?

In this context it is relevant to note that he also wrote (59)
To me, a ‘cultural community’ should be defied [I assume he means “defined”] by the language shared by them, while the ‘geographical proximity of the culture’s members is of secondary importance in today’s world of high mobility’.

Thus, he, to a large extent, seems to equate culture with the language spoken by the people in the cultural community, and thus to a large extent, for example, to equate Chinese culture with the Chinese language. In my conception, language is an important tool to describe our (cultural) understandings, but language is not to be equated (or near-equated) with a culture as such. Although it is clear that the specific words and expressions in a language have been influenced by the historical circumstances in which they were introduced into the language, this does not totally determine their current meaning. In contrast, language is usually described as flexible and productive. This has the consequence that understandings prevalent in different cultures can be described in one and the same language, for example in English or Chinese, although some concepts may be more or less easy to express in a specific language (maybe due to the developmental history of the language). Moreover, the same word in a language may not always mean the same in different parts of the world. This is also one reason why some words and some expressions are more common among some groups than others or in some countries than others (compare English as used in India, the UK and the US for example).

A specific version of a language used in a specific context is called a sociolect. It seems that Prof. Hwang owes it to his readers to provide differentiating criteria as to when, according to his opinion, a specific sociolect of a language can be said to constitute a “culture” in his sense of the word! For example, using the example of the English language, it would indeed be bizarre to claim that the English speakers in the US, India and the Philippines (and many other places) have the same culture. Moreover, Prof. Hwang does not tell us whether he thinks that people who can speak many languages should be seen as members of all the cultures corresponding to all the languages they speak. (In addition, if they speak Chinese, to what extent should they be seen as Confucians?) Thus, I am not sure that Prof. Hwang’s culture concept would be very useful even for the task he envisions for it (thus, even if we leave the interests of the IP researchers’ society members aside). It would seem that to define cultures, more or less, as smaller and bigger languages is not the way forward.

**Tradition and Cultures are not the Same – Although They Overlap**

Apart from its language basis, Prof. Hwang’s culture concept does not seem to aim at capturing the understanding of the society’s members in question. Instead, it seems to be mostly focused on the part of people’s understanding made up by tradition (i.e., the part of the current understanding in the society made up of the understanding held by previous generations living in the geographical area of the society; or should it be, held by previous generations ascribing to the same ethnical identity as the members argued to

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1 Prof. Hwang’s latest version of his culture concept (in this debate) also includes other contra-intuitive parts, but I will not address them here.
make up the members of the culture?). Thus, the part of people’s current understanding that was not taken over from previous generations is left out of the culture concept Prof. Hwang advocates and this, again, makes it less usable for research aiming to be applied to the IP researchers’ own society.

A Culture Concept Suited for Research in the IPs

I argue for the usefulness for the IPs of a culture concept that, with respect to understanding, sees the generation of meaning as locally grounded. This is in contrast to culture concepts of the type advocated by Prof. Hwang, where the generation of understanding is seen as drawing on some distant pool of traditional understanding and where it is unclear, to say the least, where the substrate used for the generation of this understanding is located. A culture concept assuming that the generation of meaning and understanding must be locally grounded in some specific substrate seems more realistic and will allow the researcher to come closer to the actual understanding of the people investigated.

Part and parcel of such a culture concept, and a consequence of that the generation of meaning is seen as locally grounded, is that it primarily sees understanding in a society as distributed among the people in that society and does thus not, unrealistically and without evidence, take for granted that understanding is shared among the members of the society. Such a culture concept also, in line with what seems to be the facts, recognizes that understanding in a society includes both, to some extent, understanding transferred from previous generations, but also understanding that comes from people in other societies and that understanding is used, tweaked, and developed in strategic interactions between people attempting to reach their goals. As I have argued throughout this debate, such a culture concept, given its greater realism, is more likely to be useful both for helping, and improving our knowledge about, the people in the IP researchers’ own societies and for contributing to our understanding about the human being in large, compared with culture concepts that, without regards for facts on the ground, assume shared understanding, traditions, cultural heritage, core values and the existence of a cultural deep-structure, etc.

Professor Hwang’s Conception of my Philosophical Stance has Changed

In his latest reply, Prof. Hwang (2014, 63) asserts that I have changed my philosophical stance.

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2 The same focus on culture as traditions and cultural heritage is found in for example Hwang (2014c). Although Hwang here says that cultural groups can be more or less anything, including “playgroups which have been formed by teenagers via the internet” (2014c, 12), his culture concept still has a focus on tradition and “cultural heritage”. For example: “However, while people living in the same culture experience change their lifeworlds, their lifeworlds are constantly sustained by a transcendental formal structure called cultural heritage.” (2014c, 18). In the same text (2014c, 12) he also denotes “Hinduism in South Asia” as a significant cultural group, together with other world religions. Here it is of interest to note the discussions on whether Hinduism should be seen as one or many religions (see e.g. the chapters in Llewellyn, 2005).
He may change his philosophical stance from time to time because he insists on the cultural understanding ‘in a fairly open, broad and complicated systems of events in a complex and conceptually unbounded reality.’

However, here he is in error since I have not changed my philosophical stance during our debate. Instead it is Prof. Hwang that has repeatedly changed his classification of my position, maybe because he has tried to squeeze my position into his own Bhaskar-influenced philosophical framework.

**Is it Uncontroversial to Ground the IPs on a Version of Western Philosophy?**

Prof Hwang suggests that IP researchers need to understand Western philosophies of science in order to make genuine progress in their research (2014b, and elsewhere). For example, “I soon realized that the fundamental barrier for Chinese social scientists to make a genuine breakthrough in research is a lack of comprehensive understanding on the progress of Western philosophy of science, which is the essential ethos of Western civilization.” (2014b, 8). And he later in the same text writes “It is one of my eternal beliefs that in order to overcome the difficulties encountered in the work of theoretical construction, non-Western IPists have to understand not only their own cultural tradition, but also the Western philosophy of science.” (2014b, 8-9). From this he leaps to the conclusion that IP researchers should *use* the philosophical frameworks of Bhaskar and Wallner in order to be able to compete with Western mainstream researchers. However, he did not argue why to understand something implies a need to use it.

Although Prof. Hwang is to be commended for his openness in wanting to ground the IPs in a Western originated philosophy of science (Bhaskar, Wallner), this enterprise seems somewhat paradoxical in the context of the IPs’ research program that proclaims that the IPs should be grounded in their own cultural framework. Although Prof. Hwang argues that IP researchers should use his culture concept and his preferred research philosophy in order to be able to compete with the researchers in mainstream psychology, there is a danger that this advice would change the IPs he intends to save, out of recognition.³

³ In addition, Prof. Hwang misunderstood what I wrote when he stated: “But, according to Allwood, ‘anything goes’ for studying *morphogenesis* of socio-cultural interaction in local people’s lifeworlds, so it is unnecessary for him to stick to any philosophical stance:” What I wrote (and he quoted as the basis for his remark) was

> It is not clear to me why I would not, for example, be able to understand Bhaskar’s concept of generative mechanism even if I should not agree with the philosophical stance in Bhaskar’s third philosophy of science. In fact, as a quick Internet search will support, the concept of generative mechanism is a fairly common and central concept in current psychological research (Allwood 2014, 44).

From this it does not follow, nor is it my opinion, that “anything goes’ for studying *morphogenesis* of socio-cultural interaction in local people’s lifeworlds”. (Moreover, just as it is possible to understand something without having to use this understanding for your own purposes, it is surely possible to understand something even if you should not agree with it.) Here Prof. Hwang has made it a little bit too easy for himself it seems.
Some Final Conclusions

In brief, it seems that although Prof. Hwang asserts that his culture concept is important for the pragmatic reason that it will help IP researchers solve the task of producing results that would be respected by mainstream researchers in psychology, he also offers more substantial reasons for his culture concept, claiming that his culture concept in fact would help produce results for greater parts of humanity than specific local societies. For this reason his culture concept is not purely pragmatic. His more substantial reasons are compatible with his pragmatic mission but they should not necessarily be seen as solely made up ad-hoc to accomplish this mission. In his own research his culture concept may help to achieve understanding about the conceptual implications of Confucian beliefs and attitudes when activated in everyday life in the way Prof. Hwang assumes. However, this may be more useful for understanding the versions of Confucianism that Hwang writes about than for understanding the full-fledged lives and perspectives of different categories of Chinese speaking people in different parts of the world.

Finally, Prof. Hwang seems to argue for the near identity of culture and language, but his arguments for this conception of the relation between culture and language are unclear. For example, it seems that Prof. Hwang would need to clarify if he thinks that learning to speak Chinese will also make you a follower of Confucianism, and learning to speak English will make you some type of Christian (or a Hindu?). In contrast to Prof. Hwang’s conception it would seem that languages and cultures are best seen as separate.

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References


