

Culture, Language, Identity and the Properties of a Useful Culture Concept for the Indigenous Psychologies

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Abstract

Cultures are expressed in language and the mapping relation between language and culture is argued to be one-to-many. Accordingly, a language such as Spanish can be used to express many different cultures, including contents that are in explicit contradiction. By attending to the diversity in understanding in a society social interventions can be better tailored to specific groups of people in that society. Thus, a culture concept that emphasizes the diversity in the understanding of people in the indigenous psychology (IP) researcher's society is likely to be helpful for social interventions in different groups of that society. This, in contrast to a culture concept that focuses mostly on whatever understanding is shared and inherited from previous generations in the society. I also argue that it should be recognized that members of a culture have different conceptions of their culture's identity and that these conceptions are changing as they are constructed over time.

On the Relation Between Culture and Language

I'm happy that Prof. Hwang in his latest contribution to our debate writes "On the contrary, I don't believe that anyone with some common sense of social science would 'equate' Chinese culture with the Chinese language." (7). Thus, we are in agreement about this point. As shown below, however, my interpretation was not exactly as rendered by Prof. Hwang. The background was that Prof. Hwang on two occasions (in his interview with Evenden and Sandstrom 2011, 161 which was then quoted in his penultimate contribution to our debate, Hwang 2014a, 59) stated "do not forget that language is the most important carrier of culture". Moreover, he also wrote (Hwang 2014a, 59) "To me, a 'cultural community' should be 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.'" Given that he wrote that "To me, a 'cultural community' should be defined by the language shared by them" the conclusion that he, as I wrote, "to a large extent, seems to equate culture with the language spoken by the people in the cultural community" may not seem so far-fetched.

As mentioned above, Prof. Hwang to some degree misrepresents what I said in this context. For example, I (2014b, 46) wrote "he, to a large extent, seems to equate culture with the language spoken by the people in the cultural community", not "equates" and I wrote "Finally, Prof. Hwang seems to argue for the near identity of culture and language". Thus here I wrote "the *near identity*", not "equates" (49). Likewise, I also wrote about the "language basis" of his culture concept (46). Had I meant that he "equated" culture with language, it would not have been appropriate (too weak!) to use the expression "language basis". In addition, I also wrote as a heading "Problems with Defining Culture as Fundamentally Based in Specific Languages" (45), again

“fundamentally based” is not the same as “equates”. However, although, as I have tried to show above, my interpretation was not taken out of thin air, Prof. Hwang notes that my interpretation was wrong and I apologize for this.

In spite of this, there are still problems for Prof. Hwang to sort out in this connection. For example, he still argues that “Language is the most important carrier of cultural heritage” (2014b, 7). Here it should be noted that at least large languages such as English or Spanish which are spoken by very many people, reasonably can be argued to be able to “carry” *many* cultures, not just *one* culture. In general, the mapping relation between a language and culture would seem to be one-to-many not one-to-one as Prof. Hwang may think. If the relationship is one-to-many it would seem that even if a culture is *expressed* in a language, the relation between language and culture is not as tight as Prof. Hwang might think. In general, language is characterized by great flexibility and generativity. Moreover, completely contradictory assertions can be expressed in the same language. In this context it also remains unclear what other cultural “carriers” Prof. Hwang is comparing with when he says that language is the most important cultural carrier, is he comparing with buildings and other human material artifacts, human conceptions, or what?

Culture is More than Tradition

Prof. Hwang also writes: “All cultural traditions that can be transmitted from generation to generation must serve some function of helping people in a certain situation of lifeworld.” (2014b, 7). Here it is unclear if he means some of the contents that is transmitted from generation to generation or any content that is transmitted, and it is thus unclear what is asserted. Moreover, he does not provide any arguments for this assertion. Why *must* “all cultural traditions that can be transmitted from generation to generation”, “serve some function of helping people in a certain situation of lifeworld”? Surely much unhelpful cultural content has been “transmitted from generation to generation”!¹ Of course, a further problem here is what is meant by the vague expression “some function of helping people”. Here Prof. Hwang seems to take a somewhat naïve functionalistic view of the usefulness of traditional cultural content.

Professor Hwang also asserts and apparently has the opinion that “most people act daily according to the cultural heritage” (2014b, 12), but he does not specify what he means by acting “according to the cultural heritage”. It is also unclear if he means most of the actions in a day or just at least once per day. More generally, and as I have observed earlier in this debate, Professor Hwang does not seem to be interested in recognizing the difference between “tradition” (cultural heritage) and other types of cultural content, namely such contents that have not been conveyed from previous generations in the society but have been added to the current culture within the current generation, coming either from outside of the society or being created by the current generation in the society. Given this distinction, how does he know that “most people act daily according

¹ Furthermore, in order to recognize some of the complexities in figuring out what it means “to inherit” a tradition I recommend reading the contribution by Williams (2014) in another debate in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*.

to the cultural heritage” and not also typically according to other types of cultural contents?

An Erroneous Interpretation

From my statement “From this, and other texts, it seems that Prof. Hwang is less interested in helping people in the IP researchers’ society than in helping IP researchers, as such, to push ‘forward the third wave of psychology’ ” (Allwood 2014b, 44), Prof. Hwang erroneously seems to infer that I was referring to his personal helping ambitions. However this is not a correct interpretation, I was, in line with the main theme of our debate, referring to the usefulness and helpfulness of his culture concept, not to Prof. Hwang as a person.

What Type of Culture Concept is Likely to Lead to More Successful Social Interventions?

A feature of Prof. Hwang’s culture concept that makes it a poor candidate to be useful for the people in the Indigenous researchers’ societies is that it emphasizes the understanding in a society that is *shared* (expressed in statistical terms: it emphasizes the central tendencies of the understanding in a society, not the variation), and thus does not pay attention to the variation of the understanding prevalent in a society. A culture concept likely to be more useful in practical social work would emphasize the importance of variation in understanding, thus the importance of identifying the typical understanding of various categories (social classes, professions, age-groups, genders, etc.) and intersections between categories (e.g., younger blue collar work men, older men, etc.) of people in a society. This, in order to get as close as possible to the understanding of the specific individuals that are the target for the social help-intervention. In brief, a culture concept, such as the one I argue for, that emphasizes that understanding is distributed in a society, rather than that it is shared would seem to be a more useful culture concept for the indigenous psychologies.

Parenthetically, Professor Hwang asked “why would Prof. Allwood worry that Chinese IP would be out of recognition?” (2014b, 12) and I next explain what I meant in this context. When I wrote that Prof. Hwang’s advice to the IPs to use his culture concept and research philosophy (imported from a culture outside of the IP societies) would risk changing the IPs out of recognition, I meant that this would go against a central tenant in the IPs research program, namely that they should be founded on their own cultural premises, and, in this sense, risked changing them out of recognition. However, what I wanted to say does not appear to have been picked up by Prof. Hwang. Hopefully it is now clear what I meant.

The Social Construction of Cultural Identities

In his penultimate contribution to our debate Prof. Hwang wrote “I am arguing for another culture concept for pushing forward the third wave of psychology in the age of globalization” (Hwang 2014a, 56). In his latest contribution (2014b) he instead emphasizes another motivation for his approach: “My approach represents efforts to

preserve cultural identity and subjectivity for any non-Western culture” (11) and, “My approach enables them to preserve their cultural identity and subjectivity” (11). Thus, he now emphasizes his motivation to preserve the cultural identity of the IP researchers’ societies.

In line with his tendency to reify and “centralize” cultural contents (i.e., to focus on shared contents), he now also reifies and centralizes cultural identity (i.e., *one* cultural identity). Thus, it seems that he believes that the cultural identity is more or less the same for all people in a society and that it is relatively stable and unchanging (and moreover, that it is a virtue that this remains the case). However, to think that each person in a society conceives of the identity of their culture in the same way and that this way is not changing very much over time seems clearly unreasonable, so hopefully I have misunderstood this.

Alternatively, he may believe that there is a cultural super-identity for each culture that exists irrespectively of the different conceptions of the identity of their culture held by the persons in a culture group. If so, then it would also seem that he does not take into account the social processes that continuously and dynamically compete to “negotiate” conceptions of the cultural identity of societies. In contrast Prof. Hwang’s reified and “centralized” conception of one fairly unchanging cultural identity it seems more realistic to recognize that there are many competing images of the identity of a specific culture. Similarly, literary theorist, professor Terry Eagleton (2000) pointed to the on-going construction in social contexts of claims of what the culture in a society is when he wrote “The word ‘culture’, which is supposed to designate a kind of society, is in fact a normative way of imagining that society” (Eagleton 2000, 25).

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