

***On the Advantages of an Empirically Oriented Culture Concept in the Indigenous Psychologies***

**Carl Martin Allwood, University of Gothenburg, Sweden**

**Abstract**

In this reply to Professor Hwang (2013b), I argue for the usefulness for the indigenous psychologies (IPs) of a culture concept that is empirically oriented in the sense that it pays attention to the heterogeneity and distribution of understanding in the IP researcher's society. The culture concept promoted by Professor Hwang sees cultures as the common understanding in a society and defines cultures as having a deep-structure of core understanding and as only slowly changing over time. I argue that this concept of culture is not useful for the IPs given that their goal is to produce knowledge that is applicable in their own society. A conceptual problem for Prof. Hwang's culture concept, and similar culture concepts, is that the idea of belonging to a tradition is unclear and vague, as is the idea of specific traditions and cultures, *as such*, existing over time. I speculate that Professor Hwang's insistence on researchers' difficulty of understanding research from other parts of the world may be an effect of his culture concept. Finally, I worry that reasoning conducted under the beacon of the *multiple philosophical paradigms* approach, advocated by Professor Hwang, may introduce the possibility of more degrees of freedom in the reasoning and makes it difficult for readers to follow the author's reasoning in a systematic way.

I thank Prof. Hwang for his answer to my rejoinder to his article in *Social Epistemology* earlier this year. Originally this debate started with an article I wrote in *Social Epistemology* (Allwood, 2011). In this article I criticized the indigenous psychologies (IPs) for tending to entertain a culture concept not suited to their goal, i.e. that their research should be based on the culture of their own society in order that the psychological research done in this approach should be possible to apply in the society where it was carried out. Since people's conceptions are important for their reactions and actions, a good understanding of the conceptions (understanding), etc. of the persons to whom the research results are to be applied is likely to increase the chances for successful application of the results. For this reason I argued that it is important for IPs to take an interest in what the actual cultural understanding of various segments of the population of their society is. Thus, I advocated a culture concept that recognizes the distribution and heterogeneity of the understanding held by people in the society in question. For example, it is often reasonable to expect that men and women, different age-groups, etc. may differ with respect to the understanding they hold.

## Culture issues

The culture concept advocated by Prof. Hwang as suitable for the IPs focuses on the *shared* understanding in a society, and assumes that cultures by definition have a *deep-structure* of core understanding and that cultures change slowly over time. Thus, culture in Prof. Hwang's approach tends to become somewhat reified. His approach also seems to include a belief that it is meaningful to attempt to characterize "the particular mentality of people within a given society" (8), an idea that has been much criticized in the last decades. Hwang's culture concept also assumes that cultures change slowly over time and that they go through periods, or phases, where they are more or less influenced by understanding from other societies and contexts. Prof. Hwang, via a quotation from John Berry (9), seems to argue that this type of culture concept is an emergent view in anthropology. This is not my impression of recent developments in social anthropology.

A conceptual problem for Prof. Hwang's culture concept and similar culture concepts, is that the idea of belonging to a tradition is unclear and vague, as is the idea of specific traditions and cultures existing over time (Hwang does not seem to distinguish between *culture* and *tradition*, for example he talks about "cultural traditions", e.g., 9). These ideas have been well formulated by Ruben (2013) who noted that "traditions do not typically have [...] easily identifiable originators or first members" (35) and that "the historical reality of transmission of beliefs and practices from group to group is one of perpetual fission" (39). He also argued that "There is no identifiable essence of a tradition that gets carried across all the groups of people that belong or claim to belong to the tradition and that can help to decide disputes about membership." (41). Thus, "Each tradition may not speak with a single voice about the limits of permissible variation. Finally, the criteria [for permissible variation] are themselves susceptible to change over time, since the criteria are themselves really only further beliefs of the groups." (44). This is in line with Eagleton's observation that "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).

The extent to which stable, somewhat isolated, cultures of the type argued for by Hwang exist in the real world and, if so, how common they are, are empirical questions. Thus, I would conclude (and it seems reasonable to assume that professor Hwang would also agree), that it is of relevance and importance for the IPs, in order to strengthen the applicability and usefulness of their research results, to carry out empirical studies of the culture of their own societies in order to find out how the understanding of people in their society is distributed over various categories of people living there. This issue would seem to be especially important in, what we both agree are, fast changing societies such as today's China and many other East-Asian countries.

Prof. Hwang seems to think that I consider China to be a slow-changing society (2013b, 3), but this is a misunderstanding on his part. My point was that Prof. Hwang's culture concept might be most useful with respect to countries that are only very little influenced by other countries and where the culture only changes very

slowly over time (i.e., *not* China). Thus, by implication, comparatively speaking, Prof. Hwang's culture-concept may not be very usable for IPs striving for that their research results should be useful in their own society in countries such as today's China. However, his culture concept may of course be used in research that is important for other reasons.

Prof. Hwang correctly interprets my description of modern cultures as commonly composed of many subcultures and traditions but from this he concludes that I suggest that such cultural conceptions must be studied "as a whole" (2) which he, in my opinion correctly, suggests is usually impractical. However, it does not follow from my culture concept that cultures must or should be studied "as a whole", all at once. It is obviously often a good, and even necessary, research strategy to select more specific cultural content and, for example, study the distribution of this content in a society. It is rather Hwang's selection principle for what cultural contents should be studied that is problematic, since he seems to argue that it is possible to identify "scientifically 'essential' aspect[s] of reality" (3) and their representation in culture. These "essential" aspects may then, according to Hwang, be part of the cultural deep-structure. However, it remains a philosophical controversial issue whether such essential aspects of reality exist, and if so, what they are. This is one reason why this take on the culture concept is problematic. Another reason is that people within a population are quite likely to represent one and the same aspect of reality differently.

In his rejoinder (2013b) Hwang agrees with a lot of what I wrote. For example, earlier I wrote that meaning (understanding of the world) is an important part of my culture concept and that

meaning may usefully be seen as the result of an interpretation of a representation, which gives rise to some effect; for example, a lived experience, an action or some understanding. In brief, *meaning* is seen as a naturalistic phenomenon, at least in the sense that it is dependent on local substrates (e.g. brains, print on paper, or zeroes and ones in computers). Since the local substrate on which meaning is dependent differs between actors, their held meaning content (even about the same phenomenon) can be expected to show (however small) variation (Allwood 2011b, 143).

It is gratifying that Professor Hwang now states "I agree with Allwood's argument that both the 'text' and the 'brain' are needed as 'subtracts for meaning.'" (9). However, a few lines later he equates *brain* with *universal mind*, whereas I meant *brain* as *biological organ*.

### **Scientific theories and microworlds**

In his rejoinder (2013b) Prof. Hwang says he agrees (4) with my argument (2013, 2) that "the everyday world overlaps to some, maybe substantial, extent with researchers' theories [...] this is especially likely to be the case in the social sciences" but he notes that "For Allwood, it might be unnecessary to separate scientific

microworld from lifeworld, but for other scholars, science as a culture is completely different from cultures of their lifeworlds" (5). Here we do not agree, as I discuss further below I would argue that the difference between everyday life conceptions/culture and scientific theories is a matter of degree, not an either/or phenomenon, irrespective of whether the scholar lives in the West or in the East. That was the point of my quotation of Laet's formulation (2012, 424) "Science is culture in culture"; scientific culture is nested and somewhat integrated into the larger societal cultural field.

Prof. Hwang argues that the total distinction between scientific microworlds and their everyday conceptions ("lifeworlds") is especially necessary for IPs in non-Western cultures to make, that is, the "other scholars" (5) in the quote above, since "science as a culture is completely different from cultures of their lifeworlds" (5). A few lines later he writes "For non-Westerners, science is something imported from the West, which is alien to their own cultural tradition." (5). One reason for why I disagree with this is that non-Western academics would tend to come from social contexts that already has had a lot of influence from Western countries (and this influence is likely to have increased through their education, both before and at the university). Furthermore, it is also not obvious that "science as a culture" and everyday life is *completely* separated in non-Western countries as assumed by Hwang. Again, this is an issue that deserves empirical research rather than categorical assertions. As I have tried to show above when discussing Hwang's culture concept, the recommendation that IPs should use microworlds as a research strategy, for example when conceptualizing cultures, may not be what the IPs need if they are interested in producing research results that are applicable in their own societies.

According to Prof. Hwang, Western science is "*mechanical*" and Chinese science "*organic*" (5). These descriptions appear somewhat oversimplified and it would have been useful if Hwang had explained what he means by *mechanical* and *organic* and had made clear if he would argue that this description is correct for all scientific disciplines, including, for example, physics. Moreover, it seems that systematic empirical research is called for to substantiate Hwang's descriptions of Western and Chinese science.

### **Possible dangers of a *multiple philosophical paradigms* strategy in research**

Professor Hwang describes his approach as

I do not stick to *phenomenology* or any single philosophy. In my long-term struggle to overcome the difficulties encountered by most non-Western IPist in promoting the IP movement, I found it necessary to use various philosophies of science to deal with different issues. Therefore, I initiated and advocate my own strategy of *multiple philosophical paradigms* (Hwang 2013, 6).

For example, in this context it can be noted that he does not seem to see the difference between lifeworlds and everyday life conceptions as a difference of any importance.

Given that he does "not stick to phenomenology or any other single philosophy", it is understandable why he seems to downplay the difference between lifeworlds and everyday conceptions. Thus, the phenomenological associations stemming from the lifeworld concept appears not to be important to him.

The problem with a *multiple philosophical paradigms* approach is of course that it introduces the possibility of more degrees of freedom in the reasoning and that the reader may not always know which philosophical paradigm or combination of philosophical paradigms is used at a particular occasion in Prof. Hwang's writing. This makes it difficult to trace the meaning of his concepts in a systematic way. In addition, as his approach is composed by his own personal mix of various philosophies it is congruent that he repeatedly stresses that his research approach is "unique". (Parenthetically, I did not find the term *multiple philosophical paradigms* in Hwang (2013a) as suggested by Hwang but he may have meant to refer to his forthcoming paper in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*.)

Professor Hwang's tendency to see cultures as fairly well-integrated, isolated bodies of understanding with essential deep-structure components might be behind his tendency to emphasize the difficulty of persons from various parts of the world to understand one-another. For example, Hwang argues that the Easterners might have great difficulties understanding Western science (5, 6), e.g., "the fundamental barrier for Chinese social scientists to make a genuine breakthrough in their research works is a shortage of comprehensive understanding on the progress of Western philosophy of science which is the essential ethos of Western civilization." (6) and he also hints that Westerners (such as the present writer) might have great difficulties understanding Eastern thought and he writes "The uniqueness of my approach might be difficult for Allwood to understand" (6). A notable exception to this inability of people to understand other perspectives is Prof. Hwang himself who seems to be privileged with respect to his ability to jump between Eastern and Western paradigms and understanding. As noted, he seems less willing to grant this ability to other persons but given, as we agree (2) with my assertion quoted by Hwang in this context that "much of the current cultural understanding in societies around the world comes from abroad", this ability may also pertain to others, to a greater extent than assumed by Hwang.

In the paragraphs above I have attempted to clarify my reactions to Prof. Hwang's critique of the usefulness of my culture concept to the IPs. In addition, I have commented on the usefulness of Prof. Hwang's own culture concept for the IPs, on his concept of microworlds and his *multiple philosophical paradigms* approach. It will be of great interest to take part of his response to my comments. Since Professor Hwang opened up this last spurt of debate between us (2013a) he will by editorial convention also get the last word.

**Contact details: [cma@psy.gu.se](mailto:cma@psy.gu.se)**

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