

On the Virtues of an Empirically Oriented Culture Concept and on the Limitations of Too General and Abstract Characterizations of Understanding
Carl Martin Allwood, University of Gothenburg

Abstract

In this ongoing debate on how culture should be best understood and on what would be a suitable culture concept for the Indigenous psychologies (IPs), Prof. Hwang argues that cultures should be described in terms of deep-structures and that such a culture concept would help the IPs to produce knowledge that is easily applicable to their own societies. In contrast, I argue that a more empirically oriented concept of culture would be more useful in general, and for the IPs in particular, since it is more likely to better mirror the reality it aims to predict. Hwang seems to equate deep-structures with generative mechanisms, but obviously there can be other types of generative mechanisms than deep-structures as this concept is used by Hwang, including mechanisms involving less deep structures or even shallow structures. The problem with Prof. Hwang's approach to culture and science is that it is very general and abstract. By this it risks being somewhat simplistic. In general, it attempts to explain too much and thereby may explain, or predict, very little. This is also evident in his classification of me as a naïve empiricist.

Introduction

In my [last contribution](#) to this debate with Prof. Hwang, I (somewhat more than) hinted that it would be my last. However, I could not resist answering Prof. Hwang's most recent contribution, if for no other reason than that he grossly misrepresents my epistemological stance. Moreover, I believe that Prof. Hwang's treatment of this issue is illustrative of the dangers with the type of approach to understanding that he takes.

To be the target of Prof. Hwang's classification activities is to live an uncertain life. Hwang earlier (2013a, 106) indicated that I should be classified in the "qualitative camp", but this time he (Hwang 2013c) first classified me as an empiricist and then I end up being classified as a naïve empiricist ("... thus his philosophical stance should be posited as naïve empiricism", 44). The reason for this is that I advocate a culture concept described in Allwood (2013a, 5), as follows

I argue (e.g., 2011b) that it is useful to take a naturalistic approach to culture and to see the culture of a society simply *as the socially affected understanding, skills (and possibly) action/activities used in that group, irrespective of whether this understanding, etc., is shared between the members*. In addition, but this part is not to be discussed here, it may be useful to have a broader culture concept that also includes the artifacts of

the society (old or new). An argument for including artifacts is that they give the society members “cues” for the activation and (re-)construction of their understanding.

This culture concept, thus, among other things, emphasizes that it, for example in the context of the Indigenous psychologies (IPs), is important to include *all* understanding held in a society, including the understanding that is only shared by specific sub groups such as males, females, city dwellers, farmers, young people, people in a specific part of the country, families, and held by specific individuals, etc. This is in contrast to Prof. Hwang who believes that the goal of the IPs should be “to understand the manifestations of people’s mentality within their cultures in terms of a larger common framework” (47) and who seems to believe in the utility and applicability of lumping together understanding into very large clusters (units) such as “cultures” or overarching philosophies of science, as a way to increase the usefulness and applicability of research in the IP researchers’ countries, and in general. We cannot include all the possible variables in our research but I would argue that it would be helpful to see the reality of cultures as somewhat more complicated than Prof. Hwang appears to do.

From my culture concept Hwang generalizes to an assertion about my overall epistemological orientation, namely that I am (some sort of) an empiricist. “Allwood seems to be an empiricist because he advocates for the advantage of an empirically oriented cultural concept in indigenous psychology research.” (43). However, he is wrong here. My stance on the epistemological dimension from (epistemological) empiricism to (epistemological) rationalism is somewhere in the middle of the dimension. I would argue that both theory and empirical data are needed for good progress in research. A catchy version of this is Kant’s statement (the translations of which differ somewhat) and argument that perception without conception is blind and conception without perception is empty. With respect to naïve empiricism, good arguments against sense data and protocol sentences have been provided in the chapters by Grandy (1992) and Savage (1992), see also Allwood (1996). Ontologically, I believe (but do not know) that most things point to the existence of an external world. Exactly where this would place me in Prof. Hwang’s rendering of Bhaskar’s three philosophies of science is not clear, but most likely in some combination of the three philosophies.

It is beyond my understanding how Prof. Hwang can conclude from my culture concept as described above and elsewhere that I am a naïve empiricist! The context discussed was a suitable culture concept for the IPs. Here my specific point was that, in order for IPs to be successful in their endeavor to produce knowledge that is applicable to their own societies it would help to identify the specific cultural understanding of the category of people and individuals addressed. In general, asserting (as I do) that a phenomenon, such as culture, is complex (e.g., cultures are always heterogeneous), is not the same thing as being an empiricist. In for example Allwood (1998, 2014), I discuss a general perspective, labeled *anthropology of knowledge*, on how understanding is generated in human societies. This approach is in its general characteristics to a large extent similar to

that of others, including the pioneering Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1987, 1993, 2002) and Attran, Medin and Ross (e.g., 2005).

In brief, Prof. Hwang is mistaken in believing that a culture concept that is geared towards the specific understanding upheld by various categories of people, groups or individuals in a society precludes taking an interest in how these people's behavior is "generated" from their understanding, that is, what he calls "generative mechanism". Hwang seems to equate deep-structures with generative mechanisms, but obviously there can be other types of generative mechanisms than deep-structures, for example less deep structures or shallow structures. The problem is, I think, that Hwang's general and abstract approach is too simplifying and thus attempts to explain too much and thereby risks explaining very little.

As an aside: Prof Hwang disagrees with my impression that recent developments in social anthropology supports my type of culture concept and does not support the type of culture concept that he and researchers in, for example, cross-cultural psychology tend to hold (culture as shared fairly stable understandings, etc.). He notes "Prof. Allwood's impression is really different from mine. But, it is not difficult to change if he is willing to step outside of empiricism and listen to other social anthropologists." (46). As an example of an anthropologist he mentions Greenfield (2000). Here he errs on different levels. First, his reference to Greenfield (2000) in his list of references is to a book by Susan Greenfield, philosopher and populariser of science ("...she is best known as a populariser of science" [according to Wikipedia](#)). However, second, and more importantly, he probably meant to refer to Patricia Greenfield, but she is not an anthropologist either. She is a developmental psychologist who has earlier made cross-cultural research in Africa and Latin America and would thus be an example of the category of cross-cultural (or for that matter, sometimes cultural) psychologists I referred to above.¹

Science and culture

I next turn to the issue of how science relate to everyday culture. My point with respect to the relation between theories, conceptions, etc., in science and in everyday life was meant to be *general*, namely that the difference between everyday life conceptions and conceptions in science is *a matter of degrees*, that is, they overlap (compare e.g., Cook & Campbell, 1979). It is not a question of total difference as Prof. Hwang holds, or at least as he has held in his previous contributions to this debate. Now he seems to present a more reasonable view on the issue when he says that it is a matter of degrees for "laymen or outsiders" (38). Thus, compared to his earlier assertions his view seems to have shifted somewhat when he now says that

¹ Third, on a more nitty-gritty level, Hwang's quote from Greenfield is not exactly from the paper by Patricia Greenfield in the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 2000, either, but maybe from her conference presentation that he describes.

For laymen or outsiders, “the difference between everyday life conceptions/culture and scientific theories is a matter of degree, not an either/or phenomenon” (Allwood 2013, 63). But for experts who are struggling for survival in a particular field of the scientific community, they have to learn not only the knowledge related to scientific microworlds constructed by other scientists, but also how to construct their own scientific microworlds in order to compete with others. This is why I argue that the distinction between scientific microworlds and lifeworlds (Allwood calls it “everyday conceptions”) is essentially necessary for IPs in non-Western cultures to make (38-39).

Thus, it appears that Prof. Hwang’s perspective is now pragmatic on the issue, as his argument now is about how scientists (for example IPs in non-Western cultures) should behave in order to survive as scientists, whereas his previous take on the issue was more general. In 2006 (85) he wrote “The language and the way of thinking scientists use to construct theoretical microworlds are completely distinct from those used by people in their lifeworlds” and “all phenomena irrelevant to [the theme of the specific microworld in question] will be excluded”.

The identifiability of scientific traditions and theories (“microworlds”)

With respect to the possibility to identify the absolute origins of scientific traditions and theories (“microworlds”) Prof. Hwang’s current view is the following: “For culture and tradition in general, Ruben’s (2013) [argument](#) [that ‘traditions do not typically have [...] easily identifiable originators or first members’ (Ruben 2013, 35)] might be correct; but for science as a culture, his argument is debatable. Every scientific microworld has easily identifiable originators and a follower group of different size” (40).

Prof. Hwang here appears to have abandoned his previous view that microworlds are specific to individual researchers, in the sense that they are constructed by “single scientists” (Hwang, 2006, 2011, 2013a). However, given his current standpoint it may, for example, appear credible (for Prof. Hwang) to claim that psychology as a science started 1879 with the establishment of Wundt’s laboratory at the University of Leipzig. This may be regarded as “the official birth of psychology as an independent field of study” as [phrased by Wikipedia](#), but no serious researcher in the history of ideas would see this as the start of psychology as a science. It is clear that the task to find a definite time and place for the start of psychology as a science is wrought with very large difficulties (to say the least!), and this is exactly Ruben’s point. The eerie feeling of oversimplification (apart from possible errors) that is elicited in the reader by Prof. Hwang’s attempt to render the three schools of philosophy of science presented by Bhaskar (41-42) also testifies to the correctness of Ruben’s argument.

On understanding the issue of whether there are deep-structures in science

Prof. Hwang (46) argues that “[Allwood] doesn’t understand that science also has a deep-structure because he is bound by naïve empiricism”. This statement is unfortunate both with respect to its formulation² and with respect to its content. It is unfortunate with respect to its content since, as stated above, I don’t subscribe to “naïve empiricism” and, in addition, even if this had been the case, even I can think outside of specific “paradigms”, just as Popper argued against Kuhn that people in general are not prisoners of specific paradigms “if we try we can break out of our framework at any time” (Popper 1970, 56). It is relevant to note that Popper’s point also serves as an argument for a culture concept where cultures are seen as dynamic and constantly changing (people can think outside of the “box” [framework]) rather than fairly constant and slow-changing.

Deep-structures in science?

Prof. Hwang argues that “there is an essential ‘deep-structure’ behind scientific knowledge” (41). It is not clear if he means that there is only *one* deep-structure, or many, in science, and if many: how many? Be that as it may, it seems that a structure would need to be around for quite some time in order for it to become an “essential ‘deep-structure’”. However, he does not specify any criteria for judging when a structure (theory, theoretical framework, philosophical background assumptions?) should be seen as a “deep-structure” nor how long time a “structure” has to be around for it to count as a “deep-structure”, or an “essential deep-structure”. This makes the issue of the existence of “essential ‘deep-structure/s’” behind scientific knowledge hard to discuss and even harder to draw conclusions about. It seems that Prof. Hwang would have to clarify these aspects of what he means by “essential ‘deep-structure’” before this issue can be meaningfully discussed.

Empirical research or deep-structures as an aid for solving everyday problems in Non-western societies?

In the context of his assertion that “Knowledge generated by Western psychology cannot be used to solve their [the societies of IP researchers] daily problems”, Prof. Hwang, to a large extent correctly, notes that this “is the main reason some psychologists decided to develop indigenous psychologies in reaction to the dominance of mainstream psychology” (39). Accordingly, as I argued in my last contribution to this debate:

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

² With respect to its formulation: it is not a question of “*understanding*” that science has a deep-structure. Such a formulation takes for granted that the asserter and his assertion are correct, thus begging the question.

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 (Allwood 2013b, 61).

To this Prof. Hwang answered:

Allwood's conclusion seems plausible. But, the crucial questions to be asked here are: how to study the "understanding" (conceptions) of people in their society? What instrument should be used to measure their understanding (conceptions)? On what theoretical ground has the instrument of measurement been constructed? How are the findings of empirical research interpreted in the context of a particular scientific microworld? What kind of concepts are used to represent the transcendental reality (see Figure 1 above) (45)?

This response is somewhat mystifying since it gives the impression that Hwang does not think that it is possible to study and learn about the understanding of people in Non-western societies (or in any society?). I don't see why it would be impossible to, for example, interview people about how they see the world and life and, if needed, do content analyses of this data or to use participant observation to find out about how people understand the world. Is Prof. Hwang's standpoint here a reflection of constraints that he sees for the indigenous psychologies; or maybe for research in general? If so, it would be of interest if he would care to elaborate on what these constraints inherent in the IPs, or in research in general, are.

In contrast to my view, Prof. Hwang appears to argue for the practical usefulness of research on cultural deep-structures. However, although of interest in other ways, it is very unclear why he thinks that abstract assertions on a very general level about assumed deep-structures in the cultural understanding assumed to be common for large geographical areas, such as China, can be of much help in solving people's daily problems in Non-western societies. For this, a more nuanced understanding of the understanding and life-values of the specific categories of people that the research is aimed to help would seem to be needed. Moreover, as pointed out by Fredric Barth (1993) with respect to Northern Bali in Indonesia, people often switch between cultural understandings depending on the situation and in order to communicate well with people it is necessary to be aware also of this complicating factor.

Contact details: cma@psy.gu.se

References

- Allwood, Carl Martin. 1996. "Essay review: A cognitive perspective on science studies. Review of: Ronald N Giere (Ed.): *Cognitive Models of Science*." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 27 (4): 599-605.
- Allwood, Carl Martin. 1998. "The creation and nature(s) of indigenized psychologies from the perspective of the anthropology of knowledge." In *Knowledge and society, Vol 11*, edited by Shirley Gorenstein. Greenwich, Conn: Jai Press Inc. 153-172.
- Allwood, Carl Martin. 2011b. "On the use of the culture concept in the indigenous psychologies: Reply to Hwang and Liu." *Social Epistemology* 25 (2): 155-66.
- Allwood, Carl Martin. 2013a. "The role of culture and understanding in research." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (5): 1-11.
- Allwood, Carl Martin. 2013b. "On the advantages of an empirically oriented culture concept in the indigenous psychologies." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (8): 60-5.
- Allwood, Carl Martin 2014. "Anthropology of knowledge." In *The encyclopedia of cross-cultural psychology*, edited by Kenneth Keith. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. DOI: 10.1002/9781118339893.wbecp025. 69-72.
- Atran, Scott, Douglas L. Medin and Norbert O. Ross. 2005. "The cultural mind: Environmental decision making and cultural modeling within and across populations." *Psychological Review* 112 (4): 744-76.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1987. *Cosmologies in the making*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Barth, Fredrik. 1993. *Balinese worlds*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Barth, Fredrik. 2002. "An anthropology of knowledge." *Current Anthropology*, 43 (1): 1-18.
- Cook, Thomas D. and Campbell, Donald T. 1979. *Quasi-experimental design and analysis issues for field settings*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Grandy, Richard E. 1992. "Information, observation and measurement from the viewpoint of a cognitive philosophy of science" In *Cognitive models of science*, edited by Ronald N. Giere. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 187-206.
- Greenfield, Patricia. M. 2000. "Three approaches to the psychology of culture: Where do they come from? Where can they go?" *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 3 (3): 223-40.
- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. 2006. "Constructive realism and Confucian relationalism: An epistemological strategy for the development of indigenous psychology." In *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in Context*, edited by Uichol Kim, Kuo-Shu Yang, and Kwang-Kuo Hwang. New York: Springer. 73-107.
- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. 2011. "Reification of culture in indigenous psychologies: Merit or mistake?" *Social Epistemology* 25 (2): 125-31.

- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. 2013a. "Linking science to culture: Challenge to psychologists." *Social Epistemology* 27 (1): 105-22.
- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. 2013b. "The construction of culture-inclusive theories by multiple philosophical paradigms." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (7) 46-58.
- Hwang, Kwang-Kuo. 2013c. "Science as a culture in culture with deep-structure across empirical studies in psychology." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (10): 38-51.
- Popper, Karl Raimund. 1970. "Normal science and its dangers." In *Criticism and the growth of knowledge* edited by Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 51-58.
- Ruben, David-Hillel. 2013. "Traditions and True Successors." *Social Epistemology* 27 (1): 32-46.
- Savage, C. Wade. 1992. "*Foundationalism naturalized.*" In *Cognitive models of science*, ed. Ronald N. Giere. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 207-236.