On the Issue of an Appropriate Culture Concept for the Indigenous Psychologies and on the Limits of Philosophy
Carl Martin Allwood, Gothenburg University

Abstract

In this rejoinder to Prof. Hwang in our debate about a suitable culture concept for the Indigenous psychologies (IPs) I argue that a culture concept that attends to the distribution of different kinds of understanding among the members of a society is more likely to be useful for the IPs, which strive to produce knowledge that is easily applicable to the context of the people where the research results are to be applied. I also, for various reasons, question the desirability of Prof. Hwang's ambition to ground all IPs on one specific philosophical approach. One reason for this is that this would contradict 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. Furthermore, I, more in general, question the realism of attempting to construct one final, single philosophical ground for empirical research, given the complex and conceptually unbounded nature of reality.

Introduction

In this exchange with Prof. Hwang about what is a suitable culture concept for the indigenous psychologies (IPs), and earlier (Allwood 2011), I have, from the perspective of applicable knowledge, argued for a culture concept that is helpful with respect to making the results from research applicable to the society of the IP researcher. Cultural understanding is reasonably seen to be generated from the *local context* of the members of the cultural community. However, in today's globalized world the local context is no longer limited to the geographical proximity of the culture's members, but rather to all the environments that they take part of, whether these environments are physically and concretely nearby or realities conveyed through electronic or other means. Thus, in order that the IPs should be possible to use for the benefits of the society's members the culture concept that is assumed in research should be as close as possible to the locally specific understanding of the cultural group in question. This is in line with the principle promoted by Surowiecki (2004, 71) "the closer a person is to a problem the more likely he or she is to have a good solution to it."

For the practical applicability of the IPs, *prediction* is of immediate importance and it is well known that predictability benefits from consideration of the complex nature of reality. When more features of the local context are considered the better one's predictions are likely to be. Thus, for example, it is recognized in cognitive psychology that so called *strong methods* that utilize more of the various properties of the local environment (thus also including properties that are more or less unique to the

environment) will be more effective in that specific environment than so called *weak methods* that use only features that are common to many environments. The drawback is of course that strong methods generalize poorly to other environments (since they, at least partly, tend to rely on properties that are unique to the specific environment where they were useful).

Weak methods tend to be what people rely on when they have no strong methods available. Weak methods thus tend to be second priority choices. Accordingly, in similarity to strong methods, a culture concept that attends to the local understanding in its totality, for example by focusing on the specific understanding of various subgroups of people, is likely to be more useful for the IPs compared to a culture concept that focuses only on the understanding shared by large groups of people. Furthermore, it is presumably possible to find many similarities in people's understanding if the understanding is described on a more abstract level, but more specific and concrete descriptions of people's understanding are more likely to help predictions of the actions they take based on their understanding. In brief, at best, culture concepts that provide more abstract descriptions of people's understanding, of which Prof. Hwang's culture concept appears to be an example, may include pieces of understanding that are held by many people, but may not be very useful for the IPs if their goal is to be easily applicable in their own local contexts. This is one weakness of the culture concept Prof. Hwang promotes. Another is that it does not sufficiently recognize the often quick and interactive character of cultural change. Thus, Prof. Hwang's culture concept may not be able to well catch the cultural understanding heeded by the people supposed to benefit from the IP researcher's results.

The abstract tendency in Prof. Hwang's culture concept is evidenced in that his ambitions seem to be more directed towards explanation, as opposed to prediction. Thus, he writes "Once an academic movement finds its philosophical ground, it is mature for the movement has found a clear 'way' for its future development. Findings of many empirical researches can be explained in terms of the theories thus constructed, and the light of possible researches can be casted in the future" (52). Explanations are cheap in the sense that there are usually many (more or less) possible post-hoc explanations to an event, and thus more degrees of freedom when making up explanations. However, there is supposedly only one reality conforming, or not, to predictions. Thus, the challenge to make successful predictions is not only more useful for the IPs but harder, than making up explanations.

Is a Common Fundamental Philosophy for IP Research Desirable, or Even Realistic?

Prof. Hwang also assumes that all IPs should be grounded in one common philosophical understanding, namely the philosophical framework he assumes is the best, that is, a combination of the third of Bhaskar's philosophies of science (transcendental realism) and his own specific philosophical approach. Thus, he claims "indigenous psychology

should be grounded on transcendental realism advocated by Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1975, 1978) and my multiple philosophical paradigms (Hwang 2013c)" (47). Here it seems that Hwang argues that his specific combination of philosophical approaches is the only philosophical approach that should be tried in the IPs. In this he excludes the possibilities for the specific IPs to be grounded in its own culture-specific philosophical base. In this he also compromises the integrity of the general IP research program that says that the IPs should be grounded in the cultural understanding of the IP researcher's own society.

Similarly, in the Abstract of his last contribution to this debate he notes that "It seems to me that an academic movement is mature once it finds its philosophical ground. I do believe that my approach of multiple philosophical paradigms in combination with the philosophy of Critical Realism (Bhaskar 1975; 1978) may provide a solid philosophical ground for the IP" (Hwang 2013c, 44). The quotations from Prof. Hwang above also illustrates that he seems to believe that it is realistic to construct a logically, totally consistent conceptual system that links empirical research to a philosophy. This is in line with aspirations in Western philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century. Examples are such different philosophers as Edmund Husserl who as part of his program to reach apodictic knowledge saw the role of his phenomenological philosophy as a "prolegomena" to all other thinking activity, and Rudolf Carnap. Both of these thinkers later appeared to have given up attempts to provide logical systematic platforms for empirical research.

Although order and a systematic approach surely are good things in research, the complexity and open-endedness of reality may make the ambition to ground all empirical research in a logical, totally consistent conceptual system, based on a specific combination of one or more of the currently formulated philosophical platforms, too ambitious. Many authors have noted the importance of heeding the extent of our ignorance in research, especially when the results of this research are planned to be used in everyday life (see e.g., Faber, Manstetten and Proops 1992; Gross 2007; Ravetz 1987, 1993; Rescher 2009; Rosen 2010; Smithson 1993; Taleb 2007). An approach that strives to provide a final philosophical ground for empirical research appears to neglect the openness and complexity of reality. It also seems to neglect that it may be somewhat unrealistic to see our everyday world (that the IPs often try to capture in their own societies) as even a quasi-isolated system (Rosen 2010). Such an approach also ignores the *descriptive openness* of reality, for example with respect to what attributes of reality are considered and how they are described. Instead, uncertainty about the framework for our reality and how it should best be described, both on the micro-level, distant meso-level and on the macro cosmological level, would seem to call for a more humble approach that would inspire to try out multiple (but sophisticated and well-considered) philosophical approaches. As an aside, it may be noted that although Prof. Hwang's concept of *scientific microworlds* seems to be (or, may be) inspired by observations of the above kind, at the same time it includes the, as I have argued earlier in this debate,

faulty assumption that researchers' theories are completely isolated from the conceptions prevent in everyday life.

A further feature of Prof. Hwang's approach to philosophy is that he seems to think that philosophical positions clearly limit the ability of the persons that hold such positions to understand other philosophical positions and approaches to research. To illustrate, he writes "It is very difficult for a psychologist in the second camp of transcendental idealism to answer those questions because they tend to speculate such variables as moderators or mediators to account for the phenomena under investigation" (49). This is a strange statement considering that Prof. Hwang appears to agree with the statement by Popper that I quoted in my last contribution to this debate and that he re-quotes "'if we try we can break out of our framework at any time' (Popper 1970, 56)" (Hwang 2013c, 48). I take this quotation to mean that people are not locked in by their philosophical stances but are able to *understand* also other philosophical positions, although they may not agree with them (i.e., they can understand what they don't agree with).

A further indication of the same stance on Prof. Hwang's behalf is that he, after discussing the issue of deep-structures in a way that is quite general and abstract, states that he thinks it is impossible to discuss the issue of deep-structures with me unless I am equipped with the "disciplinary horizon" that he himself holds: "If and only if Prof. Allwood is equipped with such a disciplinary horizon, we will be able to discuss the ultimate concern of his rejoinder to my article on 'Science as a culture in culture with deep-structures' (Hwang 2013)" (50). 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.

On Drawing Conclusions About and From Specific Philosophical Positions

Although my own specific philosophical stance may not be of central interest to this debate, I note that Prof. Hwang's fervent classification urge again has produced a different result with respect to my philosophical location; from previously having indicated my stance as in the "qualitative camp" (2013a, 106), and then in Hwang (2013b), as an "empiricist" and a "naïve empiricist" (44), he, in his last contribution (2013c), based on a very loose argumentation, classified my philosophy as "Kant's transcendental idealism" (46), the second of Bhaskar's three philosophies of science. He also states that my philosophy of science has an "identity crisis". However, I don't agree. If anything, it is Prof. Hwang's classification activities that by now should be experiencing an identity crisis.

One reason why I don't consider my background philosophy to be central to this debate is that I, as illustrated above, am more skeptical than Prof. Hwang with respect to the possibility to build logically consistent and certain relations between one's

epistemological and ontological assumptions and one's research methodology. My more sceptic stance on this issue is paralleled in the writings of many authors who have noted that it is difficult to show that specific research methods *necessarily* have to be linked to specific research philosophies. This observation has for example been made by many authors in the context of the debate on the nature of the so called qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., Guba and Lincoln 1998; Hammersley 1992; Pope and Mays 1999; Wardekker 2000). For example, Guba and Lincoln (1998) asserted that both qualitative and quantitative methods, in principle can be used with any research philosophy (their label for "research philosophy" in this context is "inquiry paradigm", for example positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivism). Another example from the same literature is Brannen (1992, 15) who stated "There is no necessary or one-to-one correspondence between epistemology and methods".

I have no main objections to (Prof. Hwang's version of) Bhaskar's third philosophy (*transcendental realism*) since it, for example, is in line with my intuition (as I noted in my last contribution to this debate) that there is an independent external reality. However, I humbly recognize that this is just an assumption based on my epistemological gut-feelings that, as such, are fallible. In contrast, Prof. Hwang appears to take this assumption for granted. Prof. Hwang may thus note that my description of my philosophical stance is well compatible with Bhaskar's third philosophy, but I want to be clear about that I had not related my philosophical stance to Bhaskar's three philosophies before Prof. Hwang brought up the issue. It is also worth to note that my impression is that the assumptions made in Bhaskar's third philosophy (transcendental realism), as rendered by Prof. Hwang, are not as unique in the literature as he seems to think.

Prof. Hwang announces that psychologists mostly are some version of positivists. He writes "Because most psychologists take the position of positivism or naïve positivism when conducting empirical research, they generally assume that human beings are 'passive recipients of given facts' and 'recorders of their constant conjunctions' (Bhaskar 2008, 16)" (53). Here he is out of tune with the reality in current psychology, just as his impressions about the prevalent culture concept in current anthropology – as I noted in may last contribution to this debate (Allwood 2013b, 56) – seems to be out of tune with the current realities in anthropology.

Conclusion

To conclude, I argue that people's understanding that together makes up the cultural understanding in a society, including the societies relevant to the IPs, is located in a fairly open, broad and complicated system of events in a complex and conceptually unbounded reality. This argues for a view where culture is seen as distributed, very open to influence and, partly for this reason, fairly quickly changeable, and against a culture concept where culture is seen as fairly monolithic, difficult to influence and thus fairly stable over time. Some features of reality pointing in this direction are that it may not be realistic to see the natural social systems where understanding is generated, and located, as even quasi-

isolated. As a consequence, it is difficult to clearly limit the range of factors that may have an influence on human understanding. The difficulty to predict the development of human understanding is aggravated by Popper's observation (1970, 56) that "if we try we can break out of our framework at any time". However, at the same time it is also important to recognize that there are factors working to create stability in human understanding. Among such factors are, on the individual level, habits and cognitive automatization tendencies (see e.g., Anderson, 1982), and on the social level, institutions of different kinds (Allwood 2013a). The openness of human understanding also suggest that it may not be very realistic to think that it will be a successful and useful approach to try to develop final one-to-one mappings between fundamental philosophical systems and research methodology.

Contact details: cma@psy.gu.se

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