



The (Im)possibility of the ‘Royal Road to Global Psychology’

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Abstract Professor Durganand Sinha in his oeuvre of work has provided a disciplinary vision to Indian psychologists to formulate a psychology indigenous to Indian ethos as well as use it to contribute to the building of a universal psychology. This commentary tries to interrogate the challenges that accompany realization of this two-pronged vision. It raises some critical questions about the challenges and possibilities of developing global psychology based on indigenous psychologies.

Keyword Indigenous psychology (IP) · Global psychology (GP) · Culture · Cross-indigenization · Neoliberalism

Professor Durganand Sinha (1965) offers two programmatic aims to the psychological enterprise in India and globally. Firstly, he urges the Indian psychologist, “Instead of the policy of denial and negation which the modern Indian psychologist has been following, a more conducive and fruitful outlook would be to see how much he can learn from older psychologies and integrate into his scientific framework. Rather than keep looking to the West all the time, we can sometimes draw inspiration from our own philosophical traditions and socio-historical settings, and the result is likely to be creative and would put Indian psychology on the map of the world” (1965, p. 11). Secondly, his call is to show how, “the two lines [Indian psychology and Western Psychology] can converge and integrate profitably. This would

result in bridging many of the gaps that are too obvious in modern psychological theory of action, and at the same time interpret our [Indigenous Indian] psychological thought in scientific light. It is only through such efforts that what we have sometimes called Indian Psychology (and have regarded in a derogatory light) can raise itself to the level of well-established science, and show in what way the East can contribute to the building of a universal psychology of human personality and development” (1965, p. 16). Thus, his first proposal is to urge the Indian psychologist to delve into the rich philosophical heritage of the ancient Indian wisdom traditions for formulating a psychology indigenous to Indian ethos. His second proposal is for mutual illumination of Western and Indigenous Psychology in India through each other. His vision is that hypotheses drawn from Psychology in Indian thought are verified by the scientific methodology and at the same time they contribute to the building of a “universal psychology” by proving their relevance beyond the Indian ethos.

In this reflective commentary on Prof. Sinha’s 1965 essay titled ‘Integration of Modern Psychology with Indian Thought’, an attempt is made to interrogate the challenges that accompany the disciplinary project of developing “the logic of Indian psyche” (the indigenous thrust) and the “the Indian logic of psyche” (the universalizing thrust) in the contemporary world outlined by Sinha in his essay. The indigenous impulse is defined by the goal of “developing scientific knowledge system that effectively reflects, describes, explains, or understands the psychological and behavioural activities in their native contexts in terms of culturally relevant frame of reference and culturally derived categories and theories (Yang, 2000, p. 245–246). Thus, the indigenous psychology (IP) movement represents a significant advancement towards building culturally focussed psychology. The call for IPs cannot be justified solely on intellectual grounds.

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It has an ethical imperative also. Indigenous knowledge systems embody practices, representations and values which sustain natives and lends meaning to their everyday lives. In addition, they also hold the solutions for many of the world problems that we are facing today. For example, traditional ecological knowledge is effective in providing lessons in sustainable living and environmental conservation.

The impulse to develop Global Psychology (GP) is an integral part of the IP movement. Early contributors to this discourse are: Virgio Enriquez (Philippines), Ardila (Latin America), Berry and Kim (Canada and South Korea), Nsamenang (Cameron), and Durganand Sinha (India). It strives to actualize the goal of a GP that is not based on colonial or particular visions but one which is genuinely equitable and socially just offering a fuller understanding of human functioning. Such a GP is envisaged to be based on creative integration of indigenous psychologies. It holds the promise of broadening the conceptual, methodological, and practical knowledge and skills of psychologists across the world as they face the multidetermined, multilayered, and contextually embedded psychological phenomena of the twenty-first century. The ethical imperative in this enterprise is for the mainstream psychology rooted in Euro-American ethos to understand the limits of its science, practice, and professional development as well as for the discipline of psychology to become more inclusive and responsive to meet the international challenges of the twenty-first century.

The programmatic directions sketched out by Sinha for psychologists to follow have immense potential. The question that needs to be addressed then is: How can we bring about a coherent, global psychology based on IPs? This commentary raises some critical questions about the challenges and possibilities of developing a GP based on IPs.

Definition of Culture

As a culture focussed and culturally inclusive project, the most significant concept for IPs is ‘Culture’. However, the concept of culture is underwritten by several problematic assumptions which greatly limit its usefulness and emancipatory relevance (see Bansal, 2021, 2022). The usual practice in IPs is of seeing culture as mapped to specific society or group of people defined by national boundaries such as Indian culture, Filipino culture, and Japanese culture. However, terms like nation, nationality, and nationalism are notoriously difficult to define, let alone analyse as argued by Anderson (1991). Bhatia (2007) points out that static, essentialist, homogeneous and monolithic assumptions are attached to the notion of nation-state. The overlap between culture and nation becomes irrelevant in the face of flows of immigration and diaspora. Histories of colonialism have also resulted in intermixtures of cultural practices and

knowledges. Edward Said has expressed this idea very well: “... all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic” (cited in Eagleton, 2000, p. 15). The postcolonial birth context of indigenous psychologies makes them especially susceptible to the nationalist agenda where psychology is used to build national consciousness (Bansal, 2022).

Culture is usually understood as ‘shared’, ‘unified’ set of patterns and symbols in IPs. Dudgeon (2017) posits that “culture may be thought of as a body of collectively shared values, principles, practices, customs, and traditions” (p. 320). On the contrary, culture is an area of social life where people struggle over understandings.

IPs, therefore, need to creatively dialogue with critical notions of culture to move away from the homogenous, static, and essentialized assumptions attached to the concept of culture.

Language of Indigenous Research

A dilemma for IPs arises for the language in which research must be conducted, in which the science is taught, and in which the science must be written. The language of science is English; the language of culture may be Hindi, Mandarin, Spanish, or German. Worldviews and ways of perception are embedded in language. Imposition of colonial languages, especially English, as medium of education, business and media coerces people to make sense of their lives in the categories offered in these languages. It serves to obliterate and silence the meanings of the native languages. If the language of GP is English, translation of native experiences into foreign language would destroy the native meanings. Thus, linguistic imperialism of English doesn’t only raise issues of social justice, e.g., equality of opportunity for publication, but also—and more profoundly—involve issues of validity or fidelity to the empirical phenomena under investigation. However, there is another side of this dilemma too. Strong native language preferences coupled with a reluctance to read or publish in the English language of science can impede cross communication across researchers of different cultures and thus, limit their participation and feedback. International scientific communication occurs primarily through scientific publications and presentations at international congresses which provide opportunities for cross-indigenous comparisons with other cultures. Resisting English, therefore, can lead to insularity of indigenous research.

The misinterpretation of the Japanese concept of *amae*, first described by Doi (1973), as an example of dependence exemplifies how native concepts are distorted when translated in foreign language. Yamaguchi and Ariizumi (2006)

pointed out that both Japanese and U.S. scholars made this assertion without a clear definition of *amae* or empirical evidence to support the underlying assumption. They conducted a series of experiments to analyze different facets of *amae*. They defined *amae* as the “presumed acceptance of one’s inappropriate behavior or request” (pp. 164–165). They developed scenarios containing instances of *amae* and carried out studies with a sample of Japanese, U.S., and Taiwanese students. They found that respondents engage in *amae* in order to obtain a desired goal through the help of a powerful other (i.e., proxy control) as well as to affirm the close relationship. *Amae* occurs in close relationships, and the special request, which is often demanding and unreasonable, is granted because of the close relationship. This example is a case in point of how indigenous concepts must be clearly defined and empirically supported using appropriate methodologies to be able to effectively contribute to the development of global psychology which is simultaneously culturally sensitive and globally relevant.

Psychological Relevance of IPs

How can an indigenous concept stemming from a culture illuminate the understanding of psychological functioning of people of other culture(s) and vice versa? In other words, how can concepts like ‘kapwa’, ‘*amae*’, ‘*atman*’ be made understandable and useful to people outside the cultures from where they have emerged? Enriquez proposed cross-indigenization as a strategy towards this goal. He postulated: “In this model, the different cultures of the world are tapped as sources of cultural knowledge. The resulting pool may then be called cross-indigenous knowledge...” (Enriquez, 1992, p. 86). In this model, firstly indigenous concepts are developed in different cultures and then they are compared across to discover similarities and differences via a mediation of existing (Western) theories. This will give rise to tentative theories which is followed by a theory testing phase across cultures. And the last step is to give it a place in the discipline (of psychology) (Pe-Pua, 2015).

For cross indigenization process to be effective in building of GP, it is important that IPs dialogue with each other. It is important to constantly ask and test out these questions: Will my IP extend to other contexts? Do others’ IP apply to my context? Can I relate with others’ IP? As Jahoda (2016) has noted each IP dialogues more with the Western mainstream than its near neighbours. The pantayo approach of Filipino IP, implying that culture-bearers explore their IPs among themselves, should prevail. This exploration should be done in a respectful environment of learning and improving through discussions. The pantayo approach serves as test of how other indigenous psychologists understand and relate to other indigenous theories. This will increase the

chances of showing possible modification, enhancement, or even conflicting ideas to the indigenous theories. The pantayo approach has to be accompanied by the pangkami perspective (cultural bearers explaining their psychology to others) because eventually, IPs have to be useful and more widely understandable. A good suggestion offered by Pe-Pua (2015) for executing the pantayo and pangkami approaches together is that rather than looking at collaboration between western and non-western investigators or amongst indigenous psychologists each invested heavily in their own culturally-inclusive phenomena, a horizontal collaboration between an indigenous and co-indigenous investigator, i.e. an indigenous researcher researching to understand another culture is a better strategy for cross-indigenization endeavours.

The potential of indigenous concepts to be applicable to other cultures can be demonstrated taking the example of Yamaguchi and Ariizumi’s work (2006) on *amae*. They found that the U.S. and Taiwanese respondents were more likely than Japanese respondents to engage in *amae*. They concluded that although *amae* is an indigenous Japanese concept, the psychological features of *amae* can be found in other cultures. Thus, a series of empirical studies have helped to clarify the confusion that was initially created by Japanese and U.S. scholars. These studies outline key features of *amae*, which could potentially challenge some of the precepts of attachment theory (Yamaguchi & Ariizumi, 2006).

Neoliberalism and the Fate of IPs

Neoliberalism is, in its broadest sense, a “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey, 2007, p. 2). Neoliberalism is carried far and wide by the forces of globalization and global capitalism. It operates more insidiously rather than political force as was the case with the old colonialism. Neoliberal subjects use their agency to pursue the benefits promised by the global capitalist political economy and in the process shed their traditional forms of life. The question that emerges then is: what is the place for native, indigenous sensibilities in the increasingly neoliberal world? The veiled and pervasive nature of neoliberalism subtly undermines the indigenous sensibilities of the non-western world and tempts them with material gain through increasing participation in the global, consumerist world. It has also been observed that neoliberal capitalism make use of native culture, indigenous knowledge to further its own agendas.

It is important to unpack the power dynamics inherent in the neoliberal discipline of psychology which has been exported across the world to envisage the possibility of GP. The learners and teachers of psychology are recruited from a psychological culture who read and subscribe to mainstream theories of individual differences, intrapsychic basis of mental disorders and self-determination. Psychology promotes neo-liberal subjectivity—subjectivity which is goal-oriented, self-directed, committed to acquiring skills and competences required for self-advancement, prepared to take responsibility for one's own well-being and for managing risks and vulnerability. Psychology is infused by the features of neoliberalism and is a tool for shaping us as neoliberal subjects who in turn further the neoliberal agenda through their consumption, parenting, femininity and masculinity, desires and communication (Ratner, 2019). The applied and professional image of psychology with its focus on activities like assessment, therapy, coaching, training, intervention, supervision, consultancy and research furthers the neoliberal agenda. To understand the importance of neoliberalism, psychologists have to appreciate its fundamentally political nature. Failing to do so will result in unreflective dissemination of Western psychology and subversion of indigenous and local theory, research and practice that represent alternatives to neoliberal oppression.

The Western model of psychology has exported itself across the world for over a century and half now. Its knowledge base is quantified in academia in terms of citation rates and impact factors. Thus, it leads in the competition of ideas. In this competitive, adversarial model, is there a space for alternative, minority psychologies to flourish? If mainstream psychologists from Asia, Africa, South America have to compete with the Euro-American psychologists, they have to fit with the criteria of scholarship set by the latter. What is the incentive in this export model of psychology for the inclusion and integration of indigenous psychologies outside the West? Epistemic modesty is a value that can give rise to this incentive and foster inter-cultural communication. A deep seated acknowledgment that our own knowledge horizons are always limited and, therefore, we need to be humble and modest about making universal psychological claims is required for the project of global psychology to flourish. Also, a realization that there are many sections of people within the western world who are not catered to by the WEIRD psychology.

Aims and objectives of IPs

The aims and goals of IPs are often to solve local problems and/or to build national consciousness. But since these concerns are embedded in particular cultural contexts, they are likely to be different for different cultures. Then how can

GP be built? For IPs to contribute to GP, they need to have a joint agenda focused on threats to humanity's common destiny on the planet like ecological degradation, poverty and social injustice and intergroup violence. This will enable IPs to shed their isolationist tendencies and join hands to address global concerns. To build GP, IPs require to go beyond patriotism and engage in humanitarian agenda of global relevance. Ting and Thong (2020) state that IP should "adopt an identity rich in its own unique tradition while still connected to global development" (p. 229). While solving common problems facing humanity, the question of from where has the content emerged will become less important. While decolonization and indigenization are important goals of IPs, they cannot only have a culturally descriptive face. They need to also address matters of global concern.

In sum, the road leading from IPs to GP is neither royal nor smooth. The vision of building GP through inductive assimilation of theoretical systems originating from different parts of the world seems an implausible proposition. On the other hand, if only the generalizable cultural realities are granted scientific status then the non-generalizable social, political and historical realities risk being obliterated from knowledge production. Instead, the epistemological foundation of GP can be based on Shweder's formulation of "one mind many mentalities" (Shweder et al., 1998, p. 865). This offers a useful cognitive map for the transition from IP to GP. Most importantly, it moves away from the replacement logic of colonization and decolonization which seeks to replace and eliminate the indigenous and colonial elements of culture respectively. Shweder's formulation affirms the worth of different mentalities as manifestations of the universal mind. Much like a jigsaw, every piece of indigenous knowledge illuminates the understanding of another piece. In practice, it means constant public debate and discussion with other mentalities. The call for a genuine, socially just GP has to be augmented by an analysis of power and internal values entrenched in the discipline. Not only epistemic modesty but also a sharp recognition that the philosophy of mainstream psychology is ill suited to the practice of discipline as benefitting the humanity is desired. The future of GP based on IPs depends on radical rethinking and reformation of mainstream psychology along the ethics of international justice, humanitarianism, democracy and global solidarity.

Sinha's Programmatic Vision and Psychology in India

Psychology in India has diverse currents running through it. There is a strong trend which uses Western methods and theories as they are or modify/adapt them to study native reality by using Indian samples. Here, the Indian culture is the 'target' of study and not the 'source' of knowledge;

rather it is the recipient of ‘Western knowledge’. Another current broadly referred to as ‘Indian Psychology’ comes closer to the vision of Durganand Sinha. Indian psychology understands human nature as essentially human and draws attention to research on Yoga, spirituality, meditation and positive psychological concepts. It also subjects native concepts and theories to empirical verification in order to ascertain their global relevance. While there is immense potential in IP as a panhuman, universal psychology premised on the core value of liberation of human spirit and transcendence of human suffering, the positioning of the field as an anti-thesis of Western Psychology does more harm than good to it. As Nandy (1983) writes, “The pressure to be the obverse of the West distorts the traditional priorities in the Indian’s total view of man and universe and destroys his culture’s unique gestalt. It in fact binds him even more irrevocably to the West” (p. 73). The Indian worldviews are heterogeneous and give support to both aspects of human life: material and spiritual. In fact, they both make each other relevant. Psychology in India needs to tap into the complex, multidimensional space of the Indian mindset which is at the same time traditional and modern, colonized, globalized and native. In addition, a reliance of Indian psychology on classical texts and scriptures has created a wide gulf between people’s lived experience rooted in caste, gender and class based realities and knowledge embodied in the texts. The diverse currents of psychology in India mirrors Western psychology in its neglect of study of material conditions of living and scant attention to pressing questions of our times like immigration, racism, rise of nationalism, communalism, corruption, modernization. Misra and Pirta (2019) note in the sixth ICSSR survey of psychological research that assumptions and practices of psychology curtail “engagement with structural inequalities and disadvantages based on caste, class, gender, religious affiliation, and so on, and how these hierarchies shape social interactions, thereby contributing, even if indirectly, to a reaffirmation of the status quo”.

Psychology in India should not only be culturally descriptive but future forming (Gergen, 2015). Using its philosophical traditions, folk knowledge, and understanding of everyday mundane realities, it has the potential of expanding possibilities for people across the globe to live comfortably with fuzzy self-definitions, in communion with diverse others; in short to come closer to the ideal of ‘vasudhaiva kutumbakam’.

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