

# On the Foundation of the Indigenous Psychologies

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*Scientific indigenous psychologies have been developed mostly in non-western countries. Indigenous psychologies, seeing mainstream psychology as too western in its cultural foundation, are based on the culture of the society being investigated. In this article I critique the concept of culture used by representative researchers of indigenous psychologies in the English-language literature and contrast it to current concepts of culture in the social sciences. Furthermore, I argue that the concept of culture used in this literature has implications for the cultural contents that are identified as the culture of a specific society. I also suggest that the political dimensions of what contents of culture are associated with a specific society are not given sufficient attention in this literature. Finally, alternative approaches to culture for the indigenous psychologies are discussed.*

*Keywords:* Indigenous Psychologies; Culture Concept; Research Programme

## Introduction

The scientific discipline of psychology, in similarity to all human understanding, is developed, reproduced and changed in social and cultural contexts. The past decades have seen the development of the so-called indigenous psychologies, which can be seen as a reaction to mainstream psychology, mostly in non-western countries. These modern indigenous psychologies exist in different varieties, all in continuous development (Allwood 2002; Allwood & Berry 2006; Sinha 1993). They have at least two common denominators: they aim to develop a psychological science based on the cultural features characteristic of the researcher's society and they aim to be pragmatically relevant to their domestic society.

The indigenous psychologies discussed in this article should, as such, be distinguished from the traditional ideas about the human being in the long-term traditions

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of societies (including religions and philosophies). They are here also (for analytical purposes) distinguished from mainstream psychology, that by the indigenous psychology is seen as being too western in its cultural foundation, for example with respect to being too individualistic, too much based on liberal values and too secular; that is, too alienated in its' view of religion (for example, Kim 1995; Sinha and Sinha 1997).

That science is a culturally dependent enterprise is normally taken for granted, for example in the areas of science studies and sociology of knowledge (for example, Woolgar 1988; Yearly 2005), but the *indigenous psychologies* have, as described above, made this assertion a prime feature of their research programme. For this reason, it is of interest to attend to how the issue of culture is commonly handled in the indigenous psychologies.

Here a caveat is needed. Much of the research literature emanating from the indigenous psychologies is written in languages other than English. In some indigenous psychologies, some researchers have even argued that in order to protect the cultural relevant character of the psychology in question researchers should not write in English (for examples from the Philippines, see, for example, Church and Katigbak 2002). This article will only discuss the English-language literature from the indigenous psychologies. Thus, texts that are written in languages that are more domestic to the indigenous psychologies are not covered in this article. However, since English-language texts are an important means of communication between representatives of the indigenous psychologies in different countries, this literature is likely to play an important role in the development of the indigenous psychologies.

A fundamental assertion of the indigenous psychologies is as noted above that they should be "culturally relevant". Moreover, in order to argue that it is "culturally relevant", an indigenous psychology would have to describe the culture that it is rooted in. In order to do this the writer has to rely on a *definition of culture* and then apply this definition specifically to identify the *local* culture in question. As is discussed below, ideas about what culture is have been intensively debated in the social sciences, and especially in social anthropology, but to a lesser extent in the English-language research literature emanating from representatives of the indigenous psychologies.

In this article I argue that the English-writing researchers in the indigenous psychologies approach should pay more attention to the concept of culture used and that attempts to develop the indigenous psychologies may run into difficulties if a too limited concept of culture is used. I further argue that, if the indigenous psychologies are described as "rooted in the culture of the country", then the foundation of indigenous psychologies is inherently vague if it is not clearly and convincingly spelt out what is meant by "culture".

This article should not be interpreted as an argument against non-western contributions to psychology. Quite the opposite! More, and alternative (different) frameworks, are likely to enrich psychology, and obviously it is important to do research on socially relevant issues.

Neither does my critique coincide with that of the Canadian psychologist John Adair, who argued that the indigenous psychologies should not concentrate on studies of concepts from one's own culture, such as "amae" (Japan; for example, Yamaguchi

2004) or “face” (China; for example, Hwang 2006). Adair asserted that this had not proven to be an effective contribution to national development or to be fruitful in other ways (Adair 1992; 1998, 23), and that the indigenous psychologies should strive to be pragmatically useful and not deviate very far from the mainstream of psychology (Adair 1998).

There are signs that there is some awareness among the researchers in the indigenous psychologies about the important features of the culture concept. Kim and Berry edited an early anthology on the indigenous psychologies and, as their third point (out of six) in their attempt to characterise the indigenous psychologies, noted that “... within a particular society there can be a multitude of perspectives not shared by all groups [...] In addition, the existence of cultural diversity within a particular society could produce the need for different types of explanations and interpretations” (1993, 3). However, the importance of this point has often later been forgotten by many authors in the literature on the indigenous psychologies (including its authors).

### The Concept of “Culture”

In this section I will first describe some central features of the concept of culture that tends to be assumed in the English-written indigenous psychology literature. This type of culture concept will then be critiqued by being contrasted to, in my view, a more realistic culture concept more in line with current thinking in the social sciences and in cognitive science. There is of course variation in the concept of culture used in the indigenous psychologies, and below I have just attempted to identify some central and often occurring features of the concept of culture used.

In the indigenous psychologies (English-language) research literature, it is common that culture is defined as a rather abstract and delimited entity that has to do with understanding (including abilities) and sometimes activities, where these are more or less common to the members of a society.<sup>1</sup> Often one also emphasises that the culture is located at a collective level, an assumption that *per se* tends to reinforce the idea that the culture is common to the members of the society and tends to make culture into a quite abstract entity.

A problem with such a concept of culture is that it is somewhat old-fashioned, in the sense of being too much influenced by early social anthropological writings relating to the study of small isolated villages or groups of people. Thus, the culture concept used in the indigenous psychologies tends to see specific cultures as mapped to specific societies or groups of people and as being more or less common to the members of the society in question even though the societies discussed usually include many millions of people.

A further critique is that such a culture concept is too “essentialised” and reified, assuming that the culture in a society, at least partly, has an independent and somewhat stable existence, so to say “floating above” the other components in the physical and social system of the society and not connected to any supporting structures, or substrates. In addition and further discussed below, the culture concept used tends to depict culture too much as just a passive resource, not as something actively

constructed in online negotiations between people and groups striving to protect their interests. At least this negotiation tends not to be stressed.

Many versions of this type of culture concept occur in the indigenous psychologies literature. Three more specific examples will now be provided. The first two examples are chosen because they have had a great influence on the indigenous psychologies, and the third to illustrate some of the variation in the literature.

An important researcher in the indigenous psychologies is the South Korean Uichol Kim. With Park, he has recently presented a general programme for the indigenous psychologies, meant to provide a common framework for these psychologies (Kim and Park 2006). He has also presented two definitions of culture that are quite complex (Kim 2000), the first of which exemplifies the type of culture concept described above, and the second of which in general seems much too vague to be helpful in identifying the specific culture of a society. In the first definition, Kim argued that “Culture is defined as a rubric of patterned variables” (2000, 270) and suggested that “The creation and re-creation of a culture represents a continuous process ...” (2000, 269). An assumption of a common content core in a society’s culture is present in this definition:

Behind the external [cultural] products and psychological entities [“attitudes, values, beliefs and norms”] there are groups of people who maintain, share and create particular sets of values, beliefs, skills, and goals. They have special meaning and relevance to participants of the culture. (Kim 2000, 269)

In the same text, Kim (2000, 270) also presents a so-called *process definition* of culture: “Culture is the collective utilization of natural and human resources to achieve desired outcomes”. This process definition is elaborated in a later text (Kim and Park 2005, 85): “Culture is an emergent property of individuals interacting with, managing and changing their environment. Culture represents the collective utilization of natural and human resources to achieve desired outcomes”. A problem with this definition is that it is too complex and vague. It is similar to what Keesing (1981, 68) has called a *socio-cultural system*, “the pattern of residence, resource exploitation, and so on, characteristic of a people” and the relation between culture in this sense and specific meaning contents in a society is, in general, very vague. It seems reasonable to surmise that such a process definition will not be very efficient to use for an indigenous psychology that attempts to identify the culture of one’s research participants, or society. More or less the same definitions of culture also reappear in the chapter by Kim, Yang, and Hwang (2006).

The Canadian psychologist John Berry is another researcher who has been very important for the development of the indigenous psychologies approach. Together with the cross-cultural psychologist Harry Triandis, he has written a chapter on the concept of culture in the book *Psychological concepts: An international historical perspective* (Berry and Triandis 2006). In this chapter the authors first review the development of the culture concept and then describe the current status of the culture concept according to their impressions, and here they also stress culture as shared understanding:

There are many definitions of culture (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952), but there are certain aspects that almost all researchers see as characteristics of culture. First, culture

emerges in adaptive interactions between humans and environments. Second, culture consists of shared elements. Third, culture is transmitted across time periods and generations. (Berry and Triandis 2006, 50)

A final illustration of how the concept of culture is handled in the indigenous psychologies comes from Misra, Jain, and Singh (2002). These authors saw the culture level as contrasted to the individual level, and asserted that cultures are meaning systems:

culture in the form of symbols, concrete activities and beliefs primarily function as meaning systems and define the range of our intelligibility and guide our participation in the social world [...] As a set of processes, culture supplies raw material to make the behavioural act possible as well as to monitor it so that the intended goals are achieved. [...] [Cultures] are considerably open-ended and are subject to continuous transformation. (Misra, Jain, and Singh 2002, 233)

Although not completely clear, culture here appears to be seen as a fairly free floating entity that is common to a society. Next, I critique this type of culture concept by contrasting it with various observations made about culture in the social sciences.

### What is Culture?

There are various reasons to question the just described type of culture concept. One type of critique is that the understanding existing in a society is usually very heterogeneous. The literary theorist and cultural critic 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, 15). Similarly, the Indian theory of scientist Meera Nanda noted that "All cultures contain a multiplicity of traditions, often at odds with each other" (2003, 17). Similarly, the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1993), and others, have pointed out that culture (understanding) in a society often is fragmented and differentially shared between different subgroups in the society. People with all types of background understanding now mingle in the world's large cities, and this does not only go for the cities that we might see as international metropolises.

Barth makes the same point and he exemplifies with Herat, a city in western Afghanistan and with Sohar, a city in Oman (Barth 1992). However, Barth goes further and also problematises the concept *society* in a similar way here done for the culture concept. He suggests that the concept of society that is traditionally used in the social sciences is an unrealistic idealisation that erroneously assumes that there in a society exist "internally shared cultural features" (Barth 1992, 21). Barth concluded that "The recognition of social positioning and multiple voices simply invalidates any account of society as a shared set of ideas enacted by a population" (1992, 32).

A further complication is that not only are humans with different background understandings mixed in a society; various traditions of background understanding are moreover often mixed within one and the same individual. The same researcher, Fredrik Barth (1993), has for example in a monograph described the situation on northern Bali in Indonesia. In northern Bali there are at least four different streams of

understanding currently in circulation: understanding from Hinduism, Islam, Bali Aga (an early religion with Balinese origin) and what Barth calls understanding related to “the modern sector”. Barth argues that even if an individual on northern Bali foremost may identify himself or herself with one or two of these traditions of understanding, he or she usually has access to variously large parts of the other traditions and can flexibly shift between the traditions; for example, depending on the situation.

The same general situation can be assumed to be characteristic for maybe most humans on earth. In current China it is likely to be common that one and the same individual knows about and can utilise greater or smaller parts of the Communist ideology, Buddhism, Confucianism and western-influenced ‘modern’ understanding. Moreover, in today’s world it is reasonable to believe that very many people around the globe know and maybe are influenced by, for example, films from the USA and India, television programmes from the USA and the United Kingdom, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Italian and French cooking, Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and religion, Japanese and other East Asian types of combat sports, the western style of education and also have some knowledge and understanding of scientific research methods and results. Much content of understanding can thus be assumed to be shared between the societies on earth, and cultural differences may often be as large within societies as between them. The ongoing economic globalisation and the development and spread of information technology suggest that this description is likely to be still more valid in the future.

Put together, these observations create problems for a concept of culture that has as a fundamental assumption the notion that the cultural understanding in a society, region or nation is to a large extent shared. Much of the content that is commonly identified with the culture of a society is not shared by those assumed to be “members” of the culture. As a further observation, a lot of cultural content (in a broad sense, conceptions, skills and attitudes) can reasonably be assumed to have a tendency to be gender specific; that is, better known by one gender. This may be typical in particular for many non-western countries where the life spheres of men and women tend to be more separated between the sexes than in the West. Social class and generation-specific contents of understanding exemplify the same phenomenon.

A further difficulty with the idea that cultural contents are shared is that a certain person may *know* about a specific content (e.g. a political doctrine) but may not *agree* with it or *practice* it. Is it still reasonable to say that the person “shares” the contents in question? A similar question concerns contents that can be derived from other contents. Should potentially derivable contents also be seen as belonging to the culture (in the definition of derivable, one might also include “associable” and not just “formally logically derivable”)?

If so, are all contents derivable from a culture part of it? For example, it can be noted that a religion such as Hinduism has been noted to include, as least as minority streams, very many different kinds of philosophies including materialism and atheism (see, for example, Smith 2003; Stutley 1985). Similarly, western culture can be argued to include a range of often completely contradictory ideas and traditions, such as materialism and idealism, determinism and the idea of free choice, praise of individualism and of

collectivism. The same is to some extent the case for mainstream psychology that includes very many approaches, frames of reference and methodologies with very different assumptions that are not as homogeneous as researchers in the indigenous psychologies sometimes appear to assume.

A problem that is illustrated above is that contents seen as belonging to a certain culture are often shared by persons that are usually not categorised as belonging to that culture. A woman in Nigeria who watches a television series from the USA would not normally be seen as belonging to the US culture because of this. Thus, a person is not usually seen as member of all the cultures that he or she knows contents from. But if it is assumed that the cultural contents are shared, one possible consequence is that a specific person will belong to a whole set of cultures, not just at different levels of aggregation but at the same aggregation level (i.e. scale level).

A culture concept that may surprise, but that takes the discussed problems into consideration, is to see the culture of a society simply as the *socially affected understanding, skills (and possibly) action/activities used in that group*. This culture concept does not assume that contents are shared within a society. The extent to which this is the case is seen as an empirical question.

This culture concept is in line with the reasonable assumption that culture is something that is created (or *constructed*) continuously as a way for people to promote their interests or values in interaction with other people. The just said obviously does not mean that one would expect just any type of understanding to be produced at a certain occasion. Although culture is in constant change, there is usually some natural inertia inherent to the system of factors that influences the understanding that will be produced at a specific occasion. Some examples of factors contributing to arresting the change of culture in a society are its current laws, rules, institutions and buildings (all of these are of course sometimes included in broader culture concepts). In addition, Atran, Medin, and Ross (2005) suggested that the human need to conform (i.e. not to distinguish oneself from other people too much) and the tendency to follow authorities, that is the level of social prestige of various actors function to increase stability and homogeneity in human culture.

Culture can be distinguished from *tradition* and it is reasonable to define tradition as such contents of understanding that has been passed on from previous generations to various groups in society. Given this, we can see that *culture* in addition to tradition also contains understanding that is newly created or has been passed on, or appropriated, from various concurrent contexts (“other societies”), for example from other countries and regions, than our own. If the speed of cultural change increases, partly as a function of increased and improved communications, it may be a reasonable prediction that traditions’ share of culture will decrease.

The idea that culture is something that is continuously constructed is not easily compatible with the idea that cultural contents are shared. The construction of culture occurs at a more or less local level. The local level is obvious for individuals who think and write and for dyads and groups of individuals who communicate. It is not as obvious for contents that are passed on by the mass-media. However, also in this case it is only the individuals that actually read the newspaper or book or watch the television

programme, and so forth, that take part of the contents. What happens locally will not at the same time happen in other parts of the broader culture of a larger context.

Since culture is best seen as continuously created, it follows naturally that there is also a political dimension to culture. In this context a remark by the US literary theorist Terry Eagleton is relevant. He asserts, in a well-expressed formulation, 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). Eagleton here focuses on that the definition of culture, and more concretely of specific cultures, is a question of negotiation between “parties” located on a social arena and who are stakeholders in the sense that they have interests to protect. Similarly, the Norwegian anthropologist Unni Wikan (1999) attending to the political uses of descriptions of immigrants in terms of their “culture”, calls culture “A new concept of race”. Thus, how culture is defined and how cultures are identified are used as a political resource when people strive to get advantages in different contexts. If a group manages to make their understanding of their society’s (or group’s) culture recognised as the accepted understanding, this is likely to affect how members of that society (or group) see themselves (and are seen by others) and how they act in various situations.

I have not seen the difficulties discussed here dealt with in the research literature emanating from the indigenous psychologies. But the issues brought up create problems since it remains unclear what is to be meant with the “cultural roots” that the indigenous psychologies are to be rooted in. Since this “rootedness” is an essential characteristic, maybe *the* essential characteristic of the indigenous psychologies, the problem is somewhat acute. Furthermore, it is somewhat strange that the recognition and debate on the political dimension of how one’s own culture is identified and described appears to be absent from the indigenous psychologies literature. This result follows since the idea of the indigenous psychologies, as such, can be said to have come about at least partly due to political reasons; that is, as a post-colonial reaction to the historical dominance of the West and sometimes more specifically the USA (see, for example, Allwood 2002; Allwood and Berry 2006). Very clear examples are India (see, for example, Raina 1997; Sinha 1997) and the Philippines (Enriquez 1997) and, with respect to the USA, the case of Canada (Adair 1999).

In spite of my criticism above, some researchers writing on or in the indigenous psychologies have discussed or noted problems of the same type as discussed here. Poortinga discussed the question of the suitable grain size (scale level) for the indigenous psychologies and suggested that if the scale level was too small that may have unfortunate consequences since “the development of multiple psychologies soon defies principles of parsimony” (1999, 429). However, it seems that Poortinga’s reasoning in itself presumes a culture concept along the fairly traditional lines described above.

More to the point, the Polish researcher Pawel Boski noted the increasing globalisation process and the development of what he called “personalized cultures”. From these observations, Boski (in Allwood and Berry 2006, 262) drew the conclusion that “It may become less and less productive to postulate indigenous psychologies based on fixed ethnic entities”. Yet another example is Okazaki, David, and Abelmann, who criticised the indigenous psychologies for being “ahistorical”: “From this perspective,

indigenous psychology appears to address the ‘colonization of the mind’ of the formerly colonized on some level yet falls prey to the dangers of ahistoricity in practice” (2008, 100). This can be interpreted as suggesting that the culture concept used in the indigenous psychologies is much too static.

Thus, the question of what definition of culture is used in the indigenous psychologies has immediate repercussions for their own research. This is so since the definition of culture will affect which parts of the understanding in a society are identified to make up the foundations for the indigenous psychology of that society. Two parallel questions thus are *whose culture* the indigenous psychology should be anchored in and *whose psychology* is being developed. Further relevant questions are whether the various indigenous psychologies *de facto* use the same criteria for identifying the target culture, and if so, if this is *desirable* and, moreover, which criteria should be used.

If they do not use the same inclusion criteria, the results from the various indigenous psychologies will be more difficult to relate to one another. This may endanger, or at least make it harder to reach, the often-stated goal for the aggregated results from all indigenous psychologies to be used to enlarge and thereby increase our general understanding of the human being as such (for example, Berry and Kim 1993).

Furthermore, if the indigenous psychologies are to be based on, and are to identify, their own specific cultures by use of their own specific culture definitions, then it will be difficult to claim convincingly that the indigenous psychologies taken as a group has a certain common epistemological foundation. Still, Kim and Park (2005, 75; 2006) attempt “to outline the epistemological foundation of indigenous psychologies”. They also, more specifically, claim that “Indigenous psychologies represent the transactional scientific paradigm in which individuals are viewed as agents of their actions and collective agents through their cultures” (Kim and Park 2005, 82)

## Conclusion

The indigenous psychologies can in large be said to constitute a quiet rebellion against the western dominance in psychology. A fundamental premise of these psychologies is that they are to be anchored in what is identified as the local culture. This starting point may create an expectation that a multitude of indigenous psychologies will be developed around the globe (Poortinga 1999). However, so far this idea has to the greatest extent remained a research programme rather than something that has been accomplished, in spite of the fact that some indigenous psychologies are starting to be represented in a number of, mostly non-western countries where one has produced some important results.

The indigenous psychologies appear to exist in a zone of tension between a desire to be conventional sciences and the fact that they are parties on a political arena, at least when it comes to the question of what contents of understanding is to be identified as belonging to “the culture” of their own society (for an example of the political dimension, see Moghaddam in Allwood and Berry 2006).

There is, as argued above, a tendency among the English-language writers in the indigenous psychologies to see culture as a relatively stable phenomenon. Although

one usually acknowledges that some change occurs, the culturally central content is assumed to change more slowly than other contents circulating in a society. Furthermore, culture is seen as shared to a large degree (i.e. homogeneously and not heterogeneously distributed in the society). Both of these tendencies can be noted in the tendency to discuss indigenous psychologies for whole nations that include a multitude of ethnic groups and other types of collectives (e.g. China, India and Mexico), and sometimes even greater geographical parts of the world such as Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia or Latin-America. In general, it clearly appears too abstract and over-generalising to identify an indigenous psychology for a whole nation. The understanding in a nation is usually much too diversified to provide a secure foundation for a psychology claimed to be anchored in the local culture and that also claims to secure robust possibilities to apply the results from one's research to the local society.

If an indigenous psychology is claimed to be based on the local culture, it is reasonable to expect that the specific meaning contents identified as the culture of the society should be representative of the total distribution of understanding in the society. Thus, researchers in an indigenous psychology should be able to present empirical data showing how the contents of the understanding of the culture is distributed among the members of the culture for which the indigenous psychology in question has been developed. Moreover, it is relevant to know what stances the various important categories of the population considered take with respect to the contents in question (e.g. have heard about, knows about, believes in/rejects/is not interested in, etc.). More specifically, one should assure that contents that are age or gender specific, or typical for various social classes and the largest activity groups (e.g. the most common professions) are included. However, it appears to be very rare that researchers document that the culture one has identified as representative of the society of the indigenous psychology is in fact representative for it, or that this issue is even discussed.

In brief, the concept of culture that tends to be used in the English-written literature in indigenous psychologies is problematic. The culture concept used tends to be old-fashioned in the sense that it tends to be inspired by 19th-century or first-half-20th-century culture concepts from social anthropology that built on field-experience from small confined villages (or at least so they were depicted by the anthropologists). There is also a tendency in the indigenous psychologies to assume that the local area of the shared culture can be large, such as whole nations or continents. Included in this concept is also often a view that is based on a reification of understanding; that is, which tends to assume that contents of understanding continues to exist in spite of actual non-use of the content.

Would it be better to locate the indigenous psychologies in more clearly delimited traditions? Probably not, since there then is the risk that there may not be any, or just fairly few, individuals with an understanding that is sufficiently close to the assumed "culture" to allow for reasonably secure application-possibilities of the research findings.

The "indigenous approach to knowledge" was described by Durganand Sinha as an approach that "places particular emphasis on culture-specific factors in human functioning—the researcher wants to know what is native, or rooted in specific societies and cultures" (1997, 131). Moreover, he argued that the indigenous psychologies take

such an approach to knowledge. In general it is reasonable that indigenous knowledge approaches should take an interest in how various types of understanding are typically distributed in different types of societies and especially in one's own society. Furthermore, a greater interest in the processes for the reproduction and change of understanding (i.e. cultural change) in various societies, and, especially in one's own, would be relevant. For example, what are the typical "mechanisms" used to handle new understanding from other societies and are these dependent on the status of the providing society in the receiving group?

Thus, the English-language writers in the indigenous psychologies would often do well in increasing the theoretical sophistication of how they chose to identify "their own culture". A starter would be to engage more intensively than now in the general debate going on in social sciences concerning the nature of culture (see, for example, Atran, Medin, and Ross 2005). As hinted above, some researchers even argue against using the culture concept at all. This stance is a fundamental challenge to the indigenous psychologies that base their self-definition on the concept of culture.

## Note

- [1] Sometimes more components are included or hinted at in the culture concept used, but these are not central to the current discussion and are not discussed here.

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