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Varieties of Global Psychology: Cultural Diversity and Constructions of the Self

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Introduction

Psyche, self and person are the focus of the psychological sciences that seek to understand human behavior and experience through models of internal structure and interpersonal process. Throughout most of its history as an academic discipline, psychology has used Western subjects as the basis for research and theory building. Indeed, the great majority of studies have worked with university students who represent a limited range of social and cultural variation (Heinrich et al. 2010). The resultant models are shot through with assumptions about the nature of the person that are mostly presented in psychology textbooks as universal truths rather than contextualized in time

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and place. In contrast, there are rich literatures in philosophy and social sciences on the self, and ethnographic studies that examine wide cultural variations in constructions and construals of the self and personhood that influence everyday functioning and that underwrite various forms of healing and psychotherapy. These local ‘ethnopsychologies’ are rooted in particular cultural ontologies—assumptions about what the world is made up of, the sources and kinds of agency, and available modes of explanation and understanding of human action and experience. Respecting the diversity of these traditions begins with recognizing the cultural historical origins and assumptions of academic psychology.

Western academic psychology developed against the backdrop of colonialism, which subordinated or suppressed the perspectives of other peoples, cultures, and communities in favor of the implicit norms and values of Euro-American individualism. This history of marginalization is inscribed deeply in the language and logic of psychology. At the same time, the forces of colonization have also shaped the psychological dynamics of colonizer and colonized. Of course, in addition to European and American colonialism, other regional ethnic, cultural, and religious groups have been colonizing powers or subordinated other peoples in Africa, Asia, and the global south. Moreover, inequality and inequities did not end with the formal end of colonization. Global regimes of domination continue to shape the lives and subjectivities of peoples in health and illness, but the new vehicles of domination include mass media and electronic telecommunications driven by the human appetite for novelty and the engines of consumer capitalism. Unraveling the knots and contradictions of the pathologies of power and domination requires cultural historical reflection to clear a space where the voices of the subjugated can be heard and where the diversity of traditions can provide alternate psychologies with different views of interiority, identity, and functioning in health and illness.

In this chapter, we interrogate some assumptions of Western psychology to open up a broader conversation about the diversity of human experience in health and illness. Our approach draws from cultural constructivist and critical anthropological perspectives that view notions of self as situated and shaped by local interpretive practices inscribed

within and constrained by larger histories and political economic contexts (Kirmayer 2006). We view notions of self as cultural constructions that reflect collective understandings of experience and behavior. These practices involve embodied experience, modes of discourse, and social contexts or institutions that provide the cultural affordances through which we navigate the world (Kirmayer and Ramstead 2017). By laying bare these contexts, we can show some of the building blocks of psychological structure and function, the range of methodologies needed to advance this exploration, and the political constraints that continue to marginalize or silence diverse voices and perspectives.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the social and cultural roots of Western (Euro-American) ideas of the self, and of academic psychology as a Western institution. We then review some current approaches in psychology to constructions of self. Next, we consider the ways that ideas of the self and personhood in non-Western cultures are linked to prevailing worldviews, ontologies, and epistemologies. We illustrate these cultural concepts of self and personhood with examples from African, Asian, and Indigenous North American cultures. In particular, we note the shift from viewing ethnopsychologies as variants of a fundamentally Western theory of the self, toward efforts to elaborate indigenous psychologies based on the different cultural premises. We conclude with some implications of globalization and cultural hybridization for understanding constructions of self, and what this portends for work in global mental health.

What Is Psychology?

Psychologies are stories of the self in time, ways of narrating our experience and behavior that explain the basis of our actions. As such, they mirror local concepts of the person. The sense of self is the interior experience of personhood, which may be reified as mind or ‘the psyche’ in everyday explanations, academic psychology, or therapeutic discourse. When it is congruent with expectations of the individual and their milieu, many aspects of the self are tacit or implicit. Problems in functioning, whether due to internal dysfunction (illness or

psychopathology) or social conflict lead people to mobilize available cultural models to make sense of their experience or the behavior of others.

Constructions of the self vary across cultures, in part reflecting differences in the ways individuals understand and experience personhood (Mauss 1985). Notions of the individual, self and person are key concepts in psychology and psychiatry and inform definitions of psychopathology and mental illness, norms for acceptable social behaviors, and approaches to managing conflict and healing (Kirmayer 2007). Concepts of self and personhood locate the individual in society, and underlie ascriptions of causality and agency in health and illness. In our usage, the *individual* refers to the person as a distinct entity; the *self* refers to individuals' awareness of their own identity, experience and consciousness; and the *person* refers to the social identity accorded to the individual in sociocultural context. An examination of the ways that notions of individual, self, and person are articulated and deployed in discourse about afflictions reveals cultural understandings of the etiology of mental disorders, their social consequences, and corresponding healing practices.

The Hegemony of Western Psychology: Colonial and Postcolonial Selves

European colonialism exerted profound effects on societies, devaluing, denigrating, and in many cases violently suppressing local culture and ways of life. In the process, colonizers installed hierarchies that created new kinds of identity and modes of being. A literature on the psychology of colonization has examined the deforming effect of these colonial regimes and critical postcolonial studies have explored their enduring traces and transformation with globalization (Lazarus 2011; Okazaki et al. 2008).

Appropriation of colonized lands, subjugation of Indigenous peoples, and institutions of colonialism, slavery and exploitation were justified by doctrines of the primitive, inferior, or subhuman status of others. Dominant group membership was associated with being a 'true' human,

while colonized groups were disparaged as being incomplete rather than 'full' persons, and were deprived of dignity, self-determination, social protection, and often robbed of life itself through systematic violence or genocide. The distinction between colonizer and colonized was marked by language (*barbarians* whose speech was coarse and unclear), culture (*uncivilized* people with crude or unrefined manners), and religion (*heathens*), but especially by physical appearance (skin color, hair, and facial features) through racialized identities treated as inherent or intrinsic to a group (Smedley and Smedley 2005). In the racial hierarchies set up by European colonization and imperialism, Whiteness was associated with a superior self, Blackness was the mark of otherness and inferiority, and gradations of skin color came to mark social status. The notion of moral, intellectual and cultural inferiority, framed in terms of biology in the scientific discourse of the time, justified the total domination and exploitation of the colonized and enslaved.

These societal forces have had profoundly damaging influences on the experience of colonized peoples, including deformations of the self. Selfhood for the colonized was experienced as in a state of internal division, resulting in self-doubt, self-deprecation, and inner turmoil. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903/2008) captured this phenomenon in the experience of the African American self, describing it as a state of double-consciousness, in which the person is constantly torn between two incongruent modes of awareness. Frantz Fanon (1967) described how this self-estrangement could arise from internalization of the misprisioning gaze of the other.

Though many of the institutions of colonialism have been dismantled—albeit only to be replaced by other local and global forms of exploitation and oppression—significant remnants of colonial hierarchies continue to shape subjectivities of self and personhood. The colonial mindset can be seen in everyday behaviors such as skin bleaching practices by women in Africa and the diaspora, as well as in less visible biases such as internalized stereotypes that influence everyday functioning (Steele 2010).

Postcolonial theorists and writers have stressed the importance of reclaiming and reconstructing the self beyond the constraints imposed by colonial perspectives (Césaire 1955). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'ō (1986)

highlighted the importance of establishing agency of the self by communicating in one's indigenous language rather than the language of the colonizer. By choosing to communicate in one language over the other, he argued, one controls the cultural, political, and historical lens through which one sees oneself and engages with one's world. Many writers have discussed the complexities of navigating, challenging, transforming or transcending racialized, ethnic, national, religious, or other kinds of identities whose boundaries were shaped and defined by colonial histories (Loomba 2015). This literature makes it clear that attention to history and politics is essential for rethinking global psychologies.

Self-Construction and Construal

The premise that constructions of the self vary across cultural contexts is linked to understandings of differences in patterns of social relationships. Different histories, ecologies, cultural practices, and institutions within societies result in different social rules, expectations, and values or 'prevalent cultural mandates' (Kitayama et al. 2010, p. 1) that define what it means to be a well-functioning member of a society. These cultural ideologies or orientations result in implicit and explicit social norms and practices that influence how individuals see themselves and others and that serve as templates to organize everyday thoughts, feelings, and actions.

In a series of influential papers, Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2010) contrasted two markedly different templates through which individuals understand and experience personhood: the *interdependent self*, which they saw as typical of many cultures of East Asia, and the *independent self*, characteristic of Western (Europe and North America) settings. The interdependent construction of the self sees the person as strongly connected to others in the immediate social network, and these others are experienced as an important, even intrinsic, part of the self. As a consequence, while individual qualities, aspirations, and autonomy are important for the interdependent self, their expression is continually influenced by the actual and perceived presence, goals, and reactions of

others. Belonging to the group is a central component of interdependent identity, and fitting in (rather than sticking out), and avoiding (or minimizing) social friction or conflict are important drivers of behavior in such cultural settings. In contrast, while social others are important for self-evaluation in Western cultural settings, they are less central to the experience of self and performance of personhood. In Western contexts, the individual's uniqueness and reflexivity (individual-focused attention, self-knowledge, self-expression, self-direction, self-validation, and self-promotion) are key drivers of internal experience as well as expressed behavior. These differences result in variations in basic psychological processes including the fundamental attributional bias that emphasizes individual rather than contextual explanations for behavior and self-enhancement biases that are held to maintain self-esteem (Heine 2001, 2015).

While a large body of research on cultural differences involving the self has been based on this contrast of interdependence/interdependence, this approach has important limitations. A single dichotomous contrast seems woefully inadequate to capture the wide cultural variations in notions of self and personhood. Indeed, the simple dichotomy of East and West seems particularly misleading, since it tends to exaggerate differences in terms of poles on a continuum defined by an academic social and personality psychology heavily underwritten by Euro-American individualism. Of course, there is great variation within any culture or society and, across studies, East Asian samples do not consistently score as more interdependent than Western samples. Culture also intersects with other basic dimensions of social identity and position including socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnic minority status, all of which may also influence interdependence. Moreover, culture does not simply determine the self. Selves (and therefore associated internal psychological processes) and cultures (through institutions, cultural products, and ideologies) are mutually constitutive and continually interacting with each other (Markus and Kitayama 2010). Individuals may challenge, resist, and reframe cultural mandates to create new modes of being. At the same time, social, environmental, and technological changes reshape

cultures over time. Thus, Oishi (2010) found that in many contexts, residential mobility, rather than cultural group of origin, predicted the prominence of collective versus individual-focused modes of self because mobility shapes the perceived permanence of social relationships.

In a recent study, with a sample of 55 cultural groups drawn from 33 countries in different regions of the world, Vignoles and colleagues (2016) found that independence and interdependence were not unidimensional but could involve variations across seven different contexts or domains of functioning: self-definition (the degree to which an individual experiences and defines the self as different versus similar to others); self-experience (the degree to which an individual experiences and defines the self as self-contained versus connected to others); decision-making (the degree to which an individual's decision-making processes are influenced by others); looking after oneself (the degree to which an individual meets their needs through self-reliance versus dependence on others); the degree of consistency/variability when moving between contexts; the degree of focus on self-expression versus harmony when communicating with others; and when dealing with conflicting interests. This approach allows for a more nuanced exploration of cultural modes of self-construal and highlights the need for a multidimensional and contextual view.

Concepts of Self and Personhood in Non-Western Cultures

Discussions of self and personhood in non-Western cultures contrast Western psychology with local ethnopsychologies in terms of the qualities that define a good, well-functioning person. A common starting point is making explicit comparison to Western European *individualism* with its emphasis on the centrality of the individual and the values of independence, autonomy, and self-direction, and individual accomplishments. In contrast, people in many cultures construe the person in terms of an ethos of *collectivism* or *communitarianism*, which emphasizes

group orientation and sociability, through values of social relatedness, and connectedness to family, lineage, clan, or community (Triandis, et al. 1988). While the autonomous self of individualism is highly prized in the modern Western countries of Europe and North America, notions of a *sociocentric* self, defined in relational terms, are more central in many Eastern and African cultures as well as among Indigenous peoples in the Americas and elsewhere (Appiah 2004; Bharati 1985; Kitayama and Park 2007).

Many traditional East and Southeast Asian cultures emphasize relatedness with others in the definition of the person, and hold commitment to relationships as the ultimate expression of self and personhood. They affirm notions of self and personhood that emphasize values or traits, such as attentiveness, humility, respectfulness, dependence, empathy, self-control, moderation, nurturance, dutifulness, self-sacrifice, conformity, traditionalism, and cooperativeness (Church 2000). These values may be experienced and expressed in terms of culture-specific emotions that reference salient social situations and appropriate, normative, or ideal responses. In traditional Chinese culture, the word '*ren*' refers to character or personhood, and denotes a social being who expresses self through mature commitment to family or some larger social group (Tu 1985). Similarly, the Korean concept of *cheong* (a kind of lingering feeling of attachment to persons, objects, and places that the person has experienced) has been described as one of the most commonly felt dimensions of daily life (Choi and Choi 2001). As a cultural orientation, '*cheong* embodies the socioemotional links among individuals connected to each other by feelings of we-ness and exhibiting the humanistic side of their selves' (Choi and Choi 2001, p. 80). What is common to many of these value systems is an emphasis on the self in terms of its social embeddedness and connection to others. As a result, in sociocentric cultures, mental disorders are related to ruptures in social relationships with family, community, ancestors, or nonhuman agencies (e.g., spirits), and healing interventions are targeted at repairing relationships, affirming the person's connectedness to family and community, and restoring the social order.

Sociocentric notions of self and personhood are also found among African peoples and cultures (Mbiti 1969). Among the Yoruba, for example, the terms of '*omoluabi*' and '*iwapele*' describe a person of good character and inform the basis of moral conduct. An *omoluabi* is a person of integrity, who has respect for the rights of others, goodwill toward them, and gives to the community (Abimbola 1975). The Bantu term '*ubuntu*' ('humanity towards others') has been elaborated as a grounding concept for a kind of humanistic philosophy in southern Africa (Eze 2008). *Ubuntu* affirms that one becomes a human being by recognizing the humanity of others, and on that basis, establishes humane relationships with them. From the perspective of Ubuntu, it is participation in society that gives human beings their humanity.

Although the contrast between individualism and collectivism has been supported by a large body of research, there are many other concepts of personhood that inform local ethnopsychologies and shape experiences of suffering and healing. In addition to the many other versions of *ensembled* individualism (Sampson 2000), these include the *ecocentric* self that emphasizes connections to the land and the environment, and the *cosmocentric* self that emphasizes connection to the world of departed ancestors and spirits (Kirmayer 2007).

An ecocentric sense of self and personhood has been described among many indigenous peoples who view the individual as part of a much larger web of life (Kirmayer et al. 2008). In this framework, people understand themselves to be in constant transaction with the environment that includes nonhuman persons (e.g., animals and the elements), which have their own agency and perspectives (Kirmayer et al. 2008). As hunting or agrarian societies, indigenous peoples recognized their interdependence with the land and viewed the relationship as filial, essentially one of mutual caretaking rather than simply resource extraction. In consequence, illness and adversity could result from disruptions in the harmonious balance existing between humans and the land or other nonhuman agencies. In traditional shamanistic healing practices, associated with hunting cultures, the healer derived his powers from animal helpers, who allowed the healer to restore the necessary balance and reciprocity between the afflicted person or the

community and the natural world (Vitebsky 2001). The natural world also provides models and metaphors for recovery, which may then be viewed not so much as a personal achievement but rather as a gift from these other-than-human beings. Thus, compared with the individualist or collectivist accounts of recovery, agency includes a nonhuman order, with which humans must maintain good relations, in part, through ceremonial practices.

Cosmocentric notions of self and personhood are found in cultures that view the person as embedded in a larger cosmic order, which may include ancestors, spirits, or gods, as well as the forces of nature. Many ethnic groups in West Africa have cosmologies that locate humans as links between the natural world (inhabited by the physical elements, plants, and animals) and the supernatural world (inhabited by spirits, ancestors, and gods). These cosmic agents act as guardians of tradition, ethics, and the social order, and thus have a major influence on a person's life. They also protect against malevolent agents and inflict punishment for transgressions, which can account for many forms of affliction (Kpanake 2015). In Yoruba belief, for example, a person is comprised of three dimensions: the *ara* (body), *emi* (spirit/soul), and *ori* (essence), each of which is considered as agentic (Adeofe 2004). The individual's distinctive qualities and destiny come from the *ori*, also considered a deity, though distinct from the spirits of ancestors and religious deities. Ongoing relationships with these deities give rise to individual personality, as well as to afflictions and the process of healing. Similar notions of cosmic agencies contributing to personhood abound among many other African peoples. A major aspect of African traditional healing, then, is the understanding that illness is caused by external and supernatural agents and associated with ruptures in relationships (with family and extended kin, but also with ancestors or spirits). Hence, an important focus of healing is repair of these relationships, reordering the individual's social networks and ancestral relations (Bojuwoye 2015). Healing practices associated with cosmocentric concepts of the person may employ methods of divination to determine what has gone wrong in the relationship with gods or ancestors, and to identify appropriate actions to restore harmony with the cosmic order (Adeponle et al. 2012; Kpanake, in press).

Postcolonial, Indigenous, and Postmodern Psychologies

Recognizing the cultural diversity of concepts of the person is one step toward decolonizing psychology. Taking these ways of being seriously allows us to introduce new concepts into our theories of human nature and functioning. However, in many instances, the accounts generated by psychologists within diverse societies have been shaped by a dominant set of values derived from Western (Euro-American) societies. The consequence is that alternate ways of being human are discounted, ignored, or reduced to caricatures.

Recent years have seen efforts by academic psychologists and practitioners to articulate a variety of indigenous psychologies. The term *indigenous*, in this context, does not refer to Indigenous peoples, but to the effort to rethink human nature from alternate frameworks anchored in cultural values distinct from those that are central to Western psychology. Some of this work is implicit in the comparative study of varieties of personhood described above. However, in renaming this effort ‘indigenous psychologies’, the point is not simply to characterize alternate approaches by contrasting them with Western models, but to identify distinctive structures, dimensions, and processes that arise from indigenous worldviews and explore their implications for psychology (Moghaddam 1987). This alternate worldview may be articulated in terms of specific forms of life (characterized in terms of social institutions, values, and practices) and corresponding ontologies (notions of what the world is made up of, including, for example, particular elements and energies). The hope is that these approaches will yield psychologies that better fit the values and aspirations of each cultural community as well as contributing to a much richer and more diverse picture of the human condition.

Many of these approaches to indigenous psychology also make epistemological claims about the sources of knowledge and the ways in which we can come to know ourselves (e.g., Liu 2017). This poses challenges to the production of evidence in mental health (Kirmayer 2012). Ultimately, indigenous psychologies cannot be viewed as hothouse

flowers, nurtured in isolation, but as alternative modes of being that coexist in a complex global or planetary ecosystem, in which cultural diversity, hybridity, and mutual transformations are driven by powerful political and economic forces as well as new information and communication technologies that are changing the social landscape.

Conclusion

Constructions of the self are shaped by ontological assumptions about the kinds of entities there are in the world and epistemological claims about the ways we can know them. In this way culture, as a system of meanings and set of tools for self-fashioning, comes to shape individuals' experience, and provides vehicles for navigating, articulating, explaining, adapting to and challenging their reality or worldview. Attention to worldviews and to their ontologies and epistemologies is therefore essential to understanding how self-narratives—and corresponding psychologies—vary across cultures.

Social constructivist perspectives emphasize that the self is constituted and configured by social contexts and discursive practices, as well as cultural, historical, economic, and political dynamics (Bauman and Raud 2015). The crucial implication for global mental health is that the histories of colonialism and the political economy of globalization, with all of the inequities and possibilities they engender, as well as everyday engagements with hierarchies of power and privilege, all shape experiences of self and personhood, including the sense of agency, internal psychological dynamics, intersubjectivity, and social being. The resultant cultural variations in self and personhood can contribute both to the processes of psychological dysfunction and to modes of coping, adaptation, and healing (Kirmayer 2004).

Postcolonial critiques of a hegemonic Western psychology have contributed to the recognition of diverse ways of being human, each with its own virtues and limitations. Rebuilding psychological theory from indigenous perspectives can provide us with approaches that better capture the realities of people around the globe and allow mental health

practitioners and others to respond more effectively to their needs and concerns. At the same time, every cultural variation provides insights into human potentiality—both to current realities ignored by dominant ideologies and to future possibilities. We need to respect this diversity to work toward greater equity and to respond to the profound challenges we will all face on this planet in the years to come.

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