

## Why Indigenous Psychology? A Review Article

Divya Padalia<sup>1\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Indigenous Psychology is an emerging field in psychology (Kim et al., 2006, p.3). It has received great attention in the last 30 years with a number of articles and books been dedicated to the topic. Any discussion on this topic is often surrounded by a dialogue on cultural psychology and cross-cultural psychology. The primary aim of this paper is to understand the purpose behind the origin and development of indigenous psychologies that has been seen in various parts of the world and view it in light of cultural psychology.

**Keywords:** *Culture, Indigenous, Psychology, Cross-Cultural Research,*

Various authors have argued that mainstream psychology and psychological research is broadly based on western samples (mostly college students). Psychology has been understood to be an ethnocentric discipline – cultivated in certain parts of the world and then exported worldwide. This has been depicted rightly by the acronym WEIRD – westernised, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic – which is how a typical subject of experimental research in psychology could be described. Any discussion on psychology would implicitly be taken to mean a western ‘mainstream’ notion of psychology. Following somewhat of a top-down approach, a research conducted in America would be replicated in other parts of the world, but not the other way round. Since studies in social sciences are inherently contextual, basing a psychological phenomenon to be universal based on a very small subset of the population (mostly American) seems inherently flawed. For this reason, many new psychologies have emerged in the last few decades from areas that have been otherwise marginalised from mainstream psychology. Latin American psychology, Indian psychology, African psychology are some among them. These psychologies claim to be taking up issues that are relevant to their context and their people. Thus asserting their indigenous identities.

### *What is Indigenous Psychology?*

Indigenous Psychology arose as a reaction to the mainstream version of psychology and seeks to reflect the social, political, and cultural character of people around the world. Post-colonial reactions to mainstream psychology, and the belief that it was not an efficient aid to solving local social problems, were seen as important reasons for its development (Allwood

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, KNC, University of Delhi, India

*\*Responding Author*

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& Berry, 2006). Also, for a long time in mainstream western psychology, importance was only given to the 'self' or 'individual'. It was with the emergence of the concept of "culture" that contextual aspects were taken into account to understand differences in individuals.

Various researchers have endeavoured to define the term 'indigenous psychology'. One among these definitions is that of Kim and Berry (1993), who define indigenous psychology as "the scientific study of human behaviour or mind that is native, that is not transported from other regions, and that is designed for its people". Thus, indigenous psychology is said to be context – bound. A pioneer of the Chinese psychology movement, Yang (2000) reviewed the various definitions of indigenous psychology and concluded that "no matter how these psychologists define indigenous psychology, the definitions all express the same basic 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" (p. 245-246).

According to Ratner (2008), indigenous psychology can be represented in three distinct ways. One, as the culturally organized emotions, perceptions, cognitions, self - processes etc. of a particular group. Second, as people's self-understanding of emotions, self, and mental illnesses etc., and third, as a meta-theory that endorses studying indigenous self-understandings as accurate descriptions of the culturally organized psychology.

Allwood & Berry (2006) in a study invited prominent scholars with an interest in indigenous psychology, from all over the world, to give short statements of their views on the development and characteristics of the discipline. Insights from their study include two important factors behind the development of the indigenous psychology. First, post-colonial, often anti-Western reactions involved a critical attitude towards intellectual influences from the West, including the imported Western Psychology. Most of the contributors stated that it is important for indigenous psychology that the research methods used are appropriate to their cultural and social context. It advocates the use of various methodologies, and not just one. Also, more than half of the contributors discussed the possibilities of developing a more universal psychology via a comparative integration of the different indigenous psychologies.

### ***Cultural Psychology and Indigenous Psychology***

Shweder (2000) suggests that cultural psychology and indigenous psychology are kindred approaches. He believes that cultural psychology is a project designed to reassess the uniformitarian principle of psychic unity and aimed at a credible theory of psychological pluralism. Also, the unit of analysis of cultural psychology is 'mentalities' and not 'mind' (Shweder, 2000). The distinction Shweder makes between the unit of analysis (mind and mentalities) depicts the pluralism in cultural psychology apart from the fact that he considers the 'mind' as a non-cultural entity. Cole et al. (1995) are quoted as saying that, "on the intellectual level, cultural psychology has grown out of dissatisfaction with the universalism and decontextualized methodology of psychology in general and cross-cultural psychology in

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particular. This is the premise at which indigenous psychology also claims to have emerged from.

The above description of cultural psychology sounds very similar to that of indigenous psychology, especially when Yang describes one of the virtues of an indigenous psychology as "...priority to the study of culturally unique psychological and behavioural phenomena or characteristics of (Chinese) people." Is that not what cultural psychology also does? What is also important to note here is the fact that, most studies (cultural and cross-cultural) usually test different groups of people across cultures on certain variables/parameters. Does this go to show that cultures have similar frameworks but only differ in terms of degrees?

Both cultural psychology and indigenous psychology, also involve a crossing over to another culture, just like cross cultural psychology. From *cultural psychology*, Shweder and Bourne (1982) had utilized ethnographic data from India to question the universality of person as defined in European-derived cultures (in Greenfield, 2000). From *indigenous psychology*, Yang (1981) had contrasted the social orientation of Chinese culture with the individual orientation of modernism, while Ho (1993) integrated indigenous concepts across three Asian countries into a parallel psychological complex called relational orientation (in Greenfield, 2000). Thus we see that there has already been integration *at the theoretical level* of all three approaches to the psychology of culture. The essential point is that the differences between the three approaches melt away when one has a deep theoretical framework that can encompass findings from all of them, a framework that is generative across a wide range of behavior domains and developmental stages and that can encompass both universal and cultural differences – a universal theory of cultural differentiation (Greenfield, 2000).

### ***Why Indigenous?***

The motivation for almost all indigenous psychologies in non-western countries is reactive and defensive. Echoing the criticisms of cultural psychologists, indigenous psychologies evolved around the world as a reaction against unjustified claims of universality (Kim & Berry, 1993). If general psychology is universal, then indigenous psychology would not be necessary (Kim et al., 2006).

Scholars representing the contextual approach reject claims that current psychological theories are universal. They point out that many theories are ethnocentric, biased, and culture-bound (Berry, 1980; Shweder, 1991). Although existing psychological theories and concepts are assumed to be objective, value-free, and universal, in reality they are deeply enmeshed with Euro-American values that champion rational, liberal, individualistic ideals (Enriquez, 1993; Kim, 1995; Kim & Berry, 1993; Koch & Leary, 1985; Shweder, 1991). Thus, the emergence of indigenous psychology is mainly attributed to the above explanations.

However, most, if not all, indigenous psychologists believe that psychologies in all cultures, Western and non-Western, should be indigenous. This only boils down to the original concept of cultural psychology, thereby diminishing the importance of the concept of

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indigenous psychology. However, cultural psychology aims at and has been doing exactly what indigenous psychology purports to. Review of literature also depicts that cultural psychology and indigenous psychology were begun around the same time. The actual term *cultural psychology* seems to date from 1969, when two anthropologists, DeVos and Hippler, wrote an article entitled “Cultural psychology: Comparative studies of human behavior” for the second edition of Lindzey and Aronson’s *Handbook of Social Psychology* (in Greenfield, 2000). Indigenous psychology also began to debate on the issue of indigenization in psychological knowledge in the 1970s. The indigenization movement in Chinese psychology began in Taiwan in the 1970s. Kuo-Shu Yang pioneered the movement with a focus on important personality constructs in Chinese societies, including traditionalism, modernity and social orientation (Allwood & Berry, 2006).

Whereas cross-cultural psychology has supported universalism in a very traditional and positivistic sense (Lonner & Adamopolous, 1997; Poortinga, 1997), both cultural psychology and indigenous psychology have contributed to universal psychology by deconstructing it. Often in the past, a contrast has been drawn between universal theory and indigenous theories. With the aid of cultural and indigenous psychologies, however, we can now recognize so-called universal psychological theory as just another indigenous theory that must be put in a higher-order conceptual framework, on the same footing with other indigenous theories (in Greenfield, 2000). In such a case then, we don’t need to differentiate disciplines because at a meta-theoretical they all mean to be tackling the same subject matter. Moreover, Shweder (2000) alleges that the logic of filial piety or benevolence in Chinese Psychology or the logic of *abhimān* in Indian psychology, or for that matter, the concept of self-interest or personal control in Western indigenous psychology are all helpful in understanding aspects of each other’s culture. This implies the global relevance of all local knowledge and cultures. Thus the attempt should be remove the ‘ethno’ out of all psychologies and arrive at one single vision of what the psyche really is (Spiro, 1984). Spiro here might be hinting at the universality of mind. The question for psychologies to answer – what constitutes the mind? And, what is it’s relation to the society and its many cultures?

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

To conclude, one can say that mainstream psychology did not pay much attention to culture or cultural differences when dealing with group differences. In this sense, indigenous psychology does seem to have contributed to the discipline of psychology. A common thread that runs in all articles/papers is the strong resistance to the western– ‘mainstream’ – psychology and the explicit acceptance of the fact that indigenous psychology has emerged as a response to it. Even though, it is good to continue to move in the direction of challenging mainstream psychology to integrate cultural considerations into theory and research, one wonders whether a discipline that emerged as a mere reaction to what one believes to be mainstream, capable of sustainable progress?

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