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Rigor in the Multicultural Psychology of the Whole Person: Embracing the Challenge

Editors' Introduction

Building a whole person psychology—a truly representative map of the human mind and a cross-culturally effective approach to wellbeing—requires the participation of many narratives and epistemologies, within a context of critical thought and evidence that will preserve its function as a psychology. An important goal of the transpersonal field relevant to this project is the effort to develop a *polyphasic* view (cf. Laughlin, 2013) of the human psyche: one that can be informed by a variety of states of consciousness, rather than understandings based in just one normative state (cf. Tart, 1972, 2008), as is conventional in Western societies. Toward this goal, transpersonal psychology has produced research and insight into non-normative states such as peak or transcendent experiences, but has made less progress in greater inclusion of cultural, ethnic, and gender perspectives (see Hartelius, 2014).

Such a project is more complex than early notions of combining Eastern wisdom with Western science (e.g., Grof, 1983), in part because the cultures of the East contain not one tradition, but scores—with larger categories such as Hinduism reflecting hundreds or even thousands of smaller, diverse communities that the Western gaze has aggregated into a single path (Flood, 1996; Gellner, 2005). Nor is the world composed of only East and West; there is also the middle world of Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism, and the global South with its panoply of indigenous cultures. There is no single Eastern wisdom tradition with which to

harmonize science, unless one accepts one of the numerous but problematic perennialist efforts to reduce all spiritual traditions to a single philosophy (see Ferrer, 2002; Hartelius, 2017). Nor is reconciling metaphysically based spiritual systems with the empirical methods of science a simple matter.

However, the presence of some consistency or underlying unity across spiritual traditions is not necessary for these to serve effectively. As Banerji (2018; this issue) has described in illuminating detail, teachings of the various yoga traditions are not speculative systems that attempt to provide absolute accounts of reality. This is not to deny that some yoga traditions use such language; rather, it is a critical perspective suggesting that even absolute reality claims serve a different role in the context of Indian culture than they do in Western culture. From a cross-cultural stance, this role can be characterized as hermeneutical rather than empirical. Within yoga systems these should then be understood as pragmatic epistemologies, meaning frames that provide context for the practice of yoga, and thereby support the achievement of personal and communally shared realizations. There is no need for testing the claims of yoga philosophies in research laboratories; instead, the value of practices is tested out as they are applied in life, and verified in the experiences of individuals and communities. The fact that various communities provide differing meaning frames in support of a variety of practices is not problematic, so long as these practices serve well for their respective communities. To say it another

way, because the goal is transformation within the world—and not abstract information about the world—it matters little whether the meaning frames that contextualize these systems of praxis can be verified scientifically. The metaphysical status of the philosophical frames, or *darshanas*, of yoga, is therefore not a shortcoming for the communities of practice who employ them.

These observations by Banerji (2018, this issue) apply not only to yoga traditions, but are likely somewhat relevant to many spiritual traditions worldwide. To the degree that a wider application of this analysis is valid, what can most fruitfully come into dialogue with Western psychology may not be novel accounts of ultimate reality from the East or the global South, since the ultimate reality project is likely more of a Western preoccupation. Instead, an understanding of transformative practices, the meanings they are given, and how praxis and hermeneutics serve the healing, wellbeing, and positive growth of individuals and communities, may be of greater value.

Each culture has developed ways to address challenges of mind, emotion, behavior, and relationship, often within the context of its spiritual teachings and practices. Western psychology has largely ignored this rich source of information because these approaches are usually associated with metaphysical meaning frames—accounts of reality that fit poorly with scientific worldviews and methods of building knowledge. When emphasis shifts from esoteric philosophies to the pragmatics of human wellbeing and development, these worldviews can be understood as meaning frames for practical approaches to human problems rather than reality claims in competition with those of Western empirical science. In this case, the project of a whole person psychology that includes contributions from cultures East and West and South becomes more feasible.

An empirical approach includes its own assumptions about reality. In one sense, a Western worldview is one narrative among many. Yet in another sense, science has brought something genuinely novel to the cross-traditional dialogue: a method that attempts to go beyond validation through lived personal and communal experience.

Empirical work also represents a sort of enacted conversation with the world; rather than relying only on explanations that seem congruent with experience or intuition, empirical work tries to test different ideas in ways that are less reliant on personal belief and experience. While an empirical approach cannot yield the chimera of truly objective knowledge, it does allow for the construction of knowledge that may have somewhat broader applicability—what Friedman (2015) has called *middle-range theories*. This success can result in the inflated assumption that scientific knowledge is universally valid, as Banerji (2018, this issue) has noted, yet justified critiques of such naïve universalizing are not reason to dismiss or minimize the utility of empirical approaches.

It should be noted that within the transpersonal field, Ferrer (2002) has repeated the apt critique that empiricism presumes a pre-given, object-based reality that is separate from the subject—a position that has lost considerable currency in the wake of postmodern deconstructions (e.g., Rorty, 1979; Sellars, 1956/1997). Ferrer (2002) has noted, quite correctly, that attempts to apply this sort of approach to inner experience—for example, as in Wilber's (1998) *inner empiricism*—do not resolve the tensions between science and spirituality, but simply perpetuate problems inherent in this artificial division between subject and object. Ferrer (2002) has noted that this critique of inner empiricism is not intended “to devalue the scientific and empirical study of transpersonal experiences,” which in his thought remain “important and necessary” (p. 3).

However, empirical inquiry does not require a naïve Cartesian worldview in which inner and outer are radically divided; devising ways to test one's assumptions so that others who may or may not agree can examine the evidence for themselves, can be conducted equally well in the context of a relational worldview. Here, experiments become intersubjective engagements in which the researcher is also a participant. Movement to what might be called a *participatory empiricism* (Hartelius, 2009) necessitates a change in the stance of the researcher, but need not detract from the rigor of research methods. Rather, a reflexive acknowledgement of the participatory and hermeneutical context of

empirical work would make such projects more rigorous (Packer & Addison, 1989).

Maslow (1971), a founder of transpersonal psychology, pointed toward a stance of this sort when he criticized the classical notion of objectivity as detached, uncaring observation. He noted that while this model works well enough on lifeless objects and simple organisms, its shortcomings become clear in the study of more developed animals such as dogs, cats, primates, and humans. He suggested that what he called a *loving perception* might be more accurate, one that is genuinely interested in or even fascinated by what it studies. He noted that his work with monkeys was likely “more ‘true,’ more ‘accurate,’ in a certain sense, more *objectively* true than it would have been if I had disliked monkeys” (p. 16, emphasis in original). Instead of attempting to manipulate or extract, this sort of attention allows the other that is studied to simply be itself, or even to flourish. While Maslow’s early conceptualization might be idealized, it points toward a different type of empirical science—one conducted within a relational frame rather than a world where subjects are quarantined in Cartesian fashion from the objects they study.

A necessary companion to this reframing of empirical work is a relational reconceptualization of hermeneutical systems. Within an objectivizing context, subjectivity has no substance; accordingly, a meaning frame is merely a subjective way of making objective facts more understandable to a subject. But in a participatory understanding, reality is composed of interconnected relationships among aspects of a living system, rather than meaningless interactions between disconnected objects. Meaning frames, as descriptions of relationships between individuals, communities, and worlds—and even as tools in the shaping of these relationships—are as substantive within the fabric of lived experience as scientific descriptions of objective phenomena. In the Western academy these are studied as philosophy rather than as psychology.

While the segregation between those two disciplines has permitted the cultivation of empiricism, it has also brought about a devaluation of meaning frames and philosophy within the scientific study of psychology. In Eastern contexts,

no similar divide appears to exist between philosophy and psychology. A common pitfall of conflating philosophy and psychology, at least in Western contexts, is the generalization of particular meaning frames into universal claims about the nature of reality. Through the practice of acknowledging philosophical assumptions underlying research endeavors, empirical work can flourish in the presence of multiple philosophies—Eastern, Western, or otherwise.

The fact that philosophy gives structure, explicitly or implicitly, to even the most rigorous empirical enterprise means that psychology must maintain standards of critical thought and empirical evidence so that philosophical frameworks can be assessed for how they produce particular kinds of knowledge. Even though critical thinking has its own cultural pedigree that it cannot entirely escape, it is this very critical frame that enables empirical questions to be asked and empirical methods to be developed from within multiple meaning frames.

With the use of any form of empiricism comes another concern: Whether applying standards of Western critical thought—the *-ology* portion of psychology—perpetuates a colonizing stance toward non-Western traditions. Perhaps instead, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Asian traditions should simply be recognized as psychologies in their own right, rather than having their metaphysical claims bracketed as assumptions that cannot be empirically tested. While appearing to bestow respect, calling such traditions psychologies may be problematic. These culturally located systems of meaning include highly sophisticated approaches to human development, healing, and wellbeing, yet calling them psychologies imputes to them the standards of Western rational thought—a culture-specific logic absent from many non-Western traditions. Rather than elevating non-Western traditions by calling them psychologies, such a claim may instead subtly elevate a Western disciplinary standard as normative for cross-cultural approaches to wellbeing, rather than as a Western contribution to cross-cultural dialogue.

Despite such complexities, a whole person approach must necessarily take up the challenge of appreciative engagement between Western

psychology and the teachings and practices of non-Western traditions. A critical, participatory, and hermeneutical lens for such underscores the ongoing dialectic of experience and understanding between scholars, researchers, and practitioners working within delineated worldviews, honing in on the multiplicities of perception and meaning which construct human understanding in both knowledge traditions and the research process. Without this effort, a broader representation of humans in their diversity may not be possible.

Aurobindo's integral yoga may be seen as one contributor to a dialogue that can inform a whole person psychology. Integral yoga on its own should not be considered a psychology any more than cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) should be called a yoga. If one were describing CBT colloquially to an Indian audience unfamiliar with this approach to psychotherapy, one might call it a "talking yoga," but this would be true more in a literary sense than a literal one. While Aurobindo's teachings and practices could be said to include wellbeing among their goals, his work is situated on a quite different set of assumptions than a psychology. His radical nondual philosophy postulates a spiritual singularity as the source and goal of all of reality, a position that cannot be accepted as valid by Western science because it is by definition beyond any form of empirical verification. In addition, while Aurobindo did not hold to a traditional *astika* interpretation of the Vedas as revealed knowledge, it is common for many of those who adhere to his teachings to accept them as revelation—a stance incompatible with a psychological approach (D. Banerji, private communication, May 23, 2018). Yet there are many aspects of integral yoga—practices, concepts, and hermeneutical frames—whose value might be demonstrable by empirical means. Such elements can be simultaneously described within the Eastern cultural context of their origins, and considered within the Western cultural setting of scientific psychology. These could constitute what Chaudhuri (1975) termed an integral view, or what has more recently been termed *integral yoga psychology* (IYP; e.g., Miovic, 2004).

The current issue of IJTS offers a collection of papers on IYP that attempts to situate aspects of Aurobindo's work within a critical frame indigenous

to Western psychology, while also reflecting the hermeneutical and cultural contexts of Indian thought. The effort to select and edit these papers has been led by Special Topic Section Editor, Debashish Banerji, in dialogue with the journal's editors. In this process it was necessary for metaphysical assumptions concerning the nature of reality in IYP to be bracketed as culturally located knowledge—in keeping with postmodern and feminist notions (cf. Harraway, 1988; Nagel, 1986). At the same time, the need for this bracketing is grounded in the culturally located standards of Western rational thought. In this way, IYP embodies an attempt at fruitful dialogue between East and West—one that authentically reflects the insights and practices of Aurobindo's integral yoga, yet also attends to Western standards that pertain to the discipline of psychology.

In This Issue

In the general section of this issue, we present two papers from Indian scholars. Kumar and Menon analyze the transformation of embodiment in the lived experience of four individuals with spinal cord injuries (SCIs). The authors use Thematic Analysis and a phenomenological narrative interpretive framework to elucidate how a severe physical trauma and the resulting disruption and disability can reveal creative possibilities for the social self and the lived body. For the authors' participants, personal agency and willingness to adapt to a new way of being in the world cleared a space for new social identities and life purposes to emerge. Kumar and Menon's study provides a needed perspective that views disability not so much as a tragedy, but as a reflexive transformation of lived experience.

Menon, Rajaraman, and Kuchibotla discuss an Indian psychology of well-being and transformative consciousness, drawing from sources in Indian literature, philosophy, art, medicine, and praxis to demonstrate the pragmatics of such an approach to understanding lived experience. The authors argue for common threads of the transpersonal and transformational across the diverse epistemologies and metaphysical positions within Indian thought, shaped by existential and ethical concerns, and ultimately concluding in a holistic and embodied spiritual life in which a healthy self-identity is exemplified.

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