



INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGY: TOWARD NEW HORIZONS OF POSSIBILITY FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

The world we live in today has changed in many ways that calls for a better understanding of each other, which calls for focusing on research on indigenous psychologies, for without knowing the psychology of people in their indigenous contexts, we cannot quite understand their worldview and why they do what they do. Indigenous models can be developed by starting from cultural insight. India has a rich scholarly tradition and psychology can take advantage of this cultural wealth. We need to enrich our psychological understanding of humankind by building indigenous models. Indigenous psychology has tremendous potential to contribute to global psychology. This paper presents a methodology for developing models from indigenous ideas, and describes that this methodology is useful for building models, which can also serve as self-help frameworks for practitioners, thus contributing to the world of practice.

Keywords: *Indian Psychology, Indigenous Psychology, Western Psychology,*

“Differences offer us choices, choices offer us freedoms, and freedoms offer us the possibility to move beyond limited views of who we are, and what we can become, to new horizons of thought and being”. (Antony J. Marsella)

The discipline of psychology has a unique distinction of sharing membership with natural science, life science, social science, and human science endeavours. In Indian universities it is placed in science, arts, and social science faculties. In true sense it has multiple identities, and engages with a wide range of methodologies and thematic concerns. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach in theories and methods, multivocality, and a certain kind of hybridity have become hallmarks of psychological enquiry [1].

For a long time, mainstream psychology maintained a physicalist orientation and its research was preoccupied with logico-positivist framework, which was emulated by behaviourists and it is still imprinted upon the minds of students when they enter in psychology classes. Its insufficiency is now felt and, accordingly, several alternative views have emerged. The emerging scenario is one in which disparate trends are going to co-exist. Thus, while globalization is leading to homogenization, we also register voices of separate cultural



identities [1]. Therefore, psychologists may have to develop theories and methods that equip people to meet challenges of life.

Psychology as a discipline has been dominated by western psychology, and the psychology of 1% of the population of the world is imposed on the rest of the world as universal knowledge [2]. This needs to change. The realities of our global era have resulted in an increased awareness of the diversities of people and cultures across the world. This has led to growing efforts to understand, appreciate, and respect the diverse psychologies that we are encountering. The challenge, therefore, is no longer to simply study these differences using theories and methodology of cross-cultural psychology, cultural psychology, minority psychology, but rather to approach a group's unique and distinct construction of reality. Psychology needs to move, as a science and profession, toward new horizons of possibility for understanding human behaviour [3].

India has a strong and variegated tradition of reflective scholarship with rich insights into human psyche and behaviour much before the advent of modern scientific psychology. One finds impressive experience-based accounts of mental states and activities. The goal of related deliberations was self-realization and alleviating suffering. The inner-directed discipline to regulate self processes and fostering harmony of mind, body, and spirit seems central to most of the Indian accounts. A holistic and integral vision has been central to it. It may be noted that the Indian thought systems (based on religions, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Islam) are quite diverse in their orientation. Thus, the thought systems and their various subsystems present a range of positions about human nature, behaviour, goals of life, nature of cognitive and affective processes, and mental health and well-being. The ideas presented in them draw upon rich textual traditions and cultural practices. Due to colonial exploitation this rich source remained neglected and an aversion was nurtured toward them [1; 3; 4].

In traditional Indian thought, psychology was never a subject independent of metaphysics. Indian psychology was based on introspection and observation. It was not empirical or experimental, but was based on metaphysics [5]. While psychology became established as an empirical science in the west, in both the USA and in Europe, by 1950, in India it remained a part of the discipline of philosophy. Following its independence in 1947 from the British rule, psychology in India moved away from its Indian roots to mimic western method and theory. In the 1950s, the Indian as well as the global zeitgeist was filled with the spirit of national development, and the western countries offered the gold standard for development. India had undergone hundreds of years of colonization and needed to become strong, and the western-educated Indian leaders did not know anything better than to emulate the west. Humanists like Gandhi did champion indigenization in both the economy and the lifestyle, but they became the outliers, the saints who were to be venerated and worshipped, but not to be followed by either the leaders or the masses in their daily living [3].

Mishra [6] provided a succinct analysis of the development of indigenous psychology in India and posited that psychology like all other sciences was imported to India from the west, and psychological concepts that did not fit western assumed etics or universals were simply considered to be anomalies. Thus, in the second



half of the twentieth century, Indian psychologists seldom attempted to derive psychological principles from their philosophical or folk traditions. As a result, it has become largely irrelevant to the Indian populace.

The western world dominates research and knowledge creation that often leads to starting with theoretical positions that are grounded in the western cultural contexts. Thus, starting with such a theoretical position, leads to the pseudoetic approach in which theories are western emics. To avoid this, it is necessary to start with insights offered by indigenous cultures with novel and useful research methodology. This approach proposes that we start with insights from folk wisdom and classical texts in indigenous nonwestern cultures. We should enrich these insights with anecdotal evidence, qualitative analyses, and observational data from the target indigenous culture [3].

Psychology needs to be grounded in the cultural worldview of the society and people being investigated, and without making such effort we cannot begin to understand human psychology. The intention is not to call to question the existing western psychological knowledge, but to inspire a dialogue among various indigenous psychologies, including the western psychology. We need to put a moratorium on pseudoetic research that leads to the mindless copying of western ideas, and start paying attention to indigenous ideas in psychology [3]. Psychological research in India can be used to exemplify the general ideas presented in this paper.

The evolution of cross-cultural psychology has helped change this “look to the west” thinking, and researchers are seeking local conceptualizations, insights, and understanding [3; 7; 8; 9, 10, 11, 12, 13,]. In recent years efforts have been made to recover the sources of Indigenous wisdom [1; 14; 15; 16; 17].

The scientific worldview is being adopted in the western countries, but there is still a lot of resistance in other cultures to a total acceptance of the scientific worldview. We find innumerable examples of how people are comfortable using the scientific methods in chemistry, engineering, and such other domains, but when it comes to areas where science is not able to give a definitive answer, they resort to other systems of explanations, which are often derived from their own cultures. And these are the domains of research for social science in general, and psychology in particular. We often find people using processes of decision-making that could not be called rational. We can label such behaviors as superstition and argue that such behaviors or their “unscientific” explanations would go away in time. Or, we can examine them more systematically, and learn about people’s worldviews, what they do in different contexts, and why. Our worldview gives us faith in how the world around us works, and faith cannot be discarded [18].

Indigenous models can be developed by starting from cultural insight. India has a rich scholarly tradition, and psychology can take advantage of this cultural wealth. The classical texts (the Bhagavad-Gita, the Upanishads, the Buddhist texts, the Jain texts, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Bible and the Quran) can be a source of much psychological insight to study cognition, emotion, and behavior, and there are many other texts from which researchers can borrow ideas (e.g., the Sufi). The rich folk wisdom should also be tapped, which could provide a good starting point. We need to enrich our psychological understanding of humankind by building



indigenous models, especially since we now live in a forever shrinking global village. Indigenous psychology has tremendous potential to contribute to global psychology [3; 19].

We need to appreciate research just as life is – messy. Thus research is going to be messy and may not always fit into the experimental paradigm. Clearly, Indian Psychology is holistic and much innovation will be needed to meet the research need of people in India [3]. The humanistic approach to research fits naturally with Indian Psychology in contrast to the scientific approach. It should be noted that the meaning of episteme in ancient Greek was “knowledge,” whereas in Modern Greek it means “science” [20]. The epistemology of Indian Psychology and philosophy merge with the general Indian worldview of knowledge, truth, and belief about making sense of the self and the world [1; 3].

It is apparent that the Western psychology has focused on individual’s goals, goal achievement, and the need for achievement. Indigenous Indian psychology, on the other hand, as a consequence of the Indian worldview, has focused on self and its interactions with the world through desires, controlling desires, and attaining personal peace. In indigenous Indian psychology, therefore, tremendous emphasis is placed on how to deal with, even eliminate, desires, whereas we find that in western cultures following one’s desires (e.g., doing one’s own thing and doing what, one likes to do) is greatly emphasized. Thus, the Indian worldview leads to building psychological models that are quite different from what we have in the west [3; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 14; 17; 21; 22; 23; 24].

It should be noted that, although counterintuitive, fluency in English language is a major disadvantage that Indian and other researchers face. Since most Indian researchers are fluent in English, they think in English, and much of the western literature, therefore, makes sense to them. This gets further compounded by the desire to succeed by publishing in international journals, which require building on the western ideas. Thus, they never pause to think if the concepts would make sense to the masses. It will help if psychology students were required to study the classic texts and folk literature to develop sensitivity to indigenous ideas. Research, in indigenous psychology, calls for adopting a diversity of methodologies, beyond the experimental method favored by western psychology and social sciences [3; 25]. Thus, research in indigenous psychology is likely to provide new paradigms and models that cannot be developed following the western research tradition.

Marsella [19] entreated researchers to replace the western cultural traditions by more encompassing multicultural traditions and reiterated the need to emphasize the cultural determinants of human behavior, which has been discussed in the literature [6; 25; 27; 28]. He recommended the systems orientation and noted that many indigenous psychologies are well equipped to deal with ascending dimensions of behavioral contexts, from individual to family to society to nature to spirituality. He further proposed that qualitative research including such methods as narrative accounts, discourse analysis, and ethnographic analysis should be encouraged [3].

Paranjpe [16] showed that many processes in Indian Psychology require observation and analysis of the subjective and within-person information. On the other hand, in western psychology, the focus is primarily on



the study of the other, and thus the empirical paradigm that lends itself to the observation of the other is more appropriate. Sociology of knowledge creation in India is different from that in the west. In the west, research culture is tighter and allows little or no freedom to researchers to deviate from what is considered standard practices [3]. On the other hand, the research culture is much looser in India as people are more open to accommodating variation in conceptualization and method. Clearly, science is tight, whereas human experience is loose, and this gets further reflected in Indians having a holistic approach to research, whereas in the west, people value research broken into small pieces leading to testing one hypothesis at a time. So it appears that there are major differences between western and Indian research enterprises, much like their cultures [8; 10; 12]. Second, there was clear shift toward non-experimental research as seen in the first 15 years of Sinha's career [29].

The issue is simply not about method, experimental or otherwise, but about research questions. The questions asked by Indian psychologists, if they keep close to the reality of Indian society, are likely to be different from those in the west. Methodology should follow the demand of the research questions, rather than researchers manufacture questions that fit the experimental methodology. Thus, the message for the Indian Psychology is quite clear: Address research questions that are grounded in the Indian milieu, using methods that make sense to address the research problem, rather than fit into the 2×2 designs to fit in the western journals [3].

Engagement with broader theoretical frameworks and using innovative methodology are helping to realize the unexplored potential of psychology. In this effort the discipline is becoming “glocal” by responding to the aspects of local reality and global concerns [1; 30].

CONCLUSION

India and Indian people have lived for thousands of years without western psychology and can do so today and in the future. This is not a call for rejection of western psychology. It is a call to get strong in one's indigenous worldview to be able to deal with ideas from other cultures with strength, rather than by constantly apologizing for what may be the strength of one's culture as its weakness as viewed from the western perspective. Once such an Indian Psychology is developed in its own right, cross-cultural psychology and comparative work can begin. Standing on its own foundation, and thus existing in its own right, is necessary for cultural or indigenous psychologies to develop.

The indigenous models have been tested over thousands of years by practitioners and thus it has much empirical validity, which can be further tested by individuals in their own experience. If a model makes sense when one reflects on his or her own personal experience, and if it helps the person change a behavior that is of concern to him or her, then that is the best practical use of a theoretical model. Perhaps that is why Kurt Lewin said, “There is nothing as practical as a good theory.”



In order to make sense of the social and psychological reality we need to be culturally sensitive, enhance our conceptual repertoire and be willing to go for a more open-ended methodological strategy toward new horizons of understanding human behaviour.

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