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Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: Understanding People in Context

A Book Review from the Transpersonal Psychology Perspective

C. Paul Yang · Francis G. Lu

Abstract There is growing recognition that psychological theories and principles developed in the West may not accurately reflect those found in other cultures. The newly published book entitled *Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: Understanding People in Context* has made an important contribution in expanding the scope of psychology. The contributing authors depicted their ultimate goal of developing a universal psychology. The purpose of this article is to review the book from a transpersonal psychology perspective with the hope of facilitating this process. Basing our thoughts on the theoretical framework of perennial psychology and positive psychology, we will suggest practical steps through which future psychologists may work collaboratively to bring about global moral transformation that is crucial to the survival of our planet.

Keywords Transpersonal · Universal · Indigenous · Cultural psychology

Introduction

Western psychology was founded and developed primarily in Europe and the United States (Kim et al. 2006). Western psychologists have successfully devised sophisticated maps of psychopathologies and techniques for alleviating them. It has dominated the field of psychology over the past century. Recently, there is growing recognition that psychological theories and principles developed in the West may not accurately reflect the psychologies found in other cultures. The publication of *Indigenous and Cultural Psychology: Understanding People in Context* is a timely and important contribution in expanding the scope of psychology. The contributing authors depicted their vision of developing a global psychology and ultimately a universal psychology through their efforts to advance our understanding of indigenous psychology (Hwang 2006; Kim et al. 2006). To accomplish this goal, Kim et al. (2006) suggested three levels of breakthroughs: philosophical reflection, theoretical construction, and empirical research. This would involve constructing

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formal theories on the mechanisms of universal mind, and then using these theories to analyze the specific mental processes of people in a given culture.

The purpose of this article is to review the book from a transpersonal psychology perspective. By providing a theoretical framework, we are hoping to assist scholars of indigenous psychology in their efforts to develop a universal psychology. In the first part of this article, we will introduce the fundamentals of the perennial psychology, a universal view as to the nature of human mind (Wilber 1975). We will describe how indigenous psychology parallels perennial psychology. The second part will elaborate on recent development of positive psychology that is thought to be universal across cultures. We will illustrate the potential collaboration between positive psychology and indigenous psychology. In the third section, we will discuss practical implications for the future of psychology. Finally, we will conclude by emphasizing how indigenous psychology and positive psychology can join hands to bring about collective moral transformation that is crucial to the survival of our planet.

From the perspective of perennial psychology

Grounding his theory in contemporary research in fields such as cosmology, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, religion, and ecology, Ken Wilber synthesized an integrated worldview of perennial psychology (Walsh and Vaughan 1994). Central to this worldview lies the model of "Spectrum of Consciousness." He sees human personality as a multi-leveled manifestation or expression of a single Consciousness, similar to a spectrum whose rich bands of colors are composed of a single invisible light. Each level of the Spectrum is marked by a different sense of individual identity, which ranges from the supreme identity of Universal Mind through several gradations of bands to the drastically narrowed sense of identity associated with egoistic consciousness (Fig. 1) (Wilber 1993). The diagonal slash line is representative of the self/not-self boundary.

Wilber proposes that psychological development and human evolution result in moving toward a higher level on the Spectrum. Different levels of psychological development involve identification with corresponding levels on the Spectrum. For example, an individual who identifies with persona needs to integrate with his/her shadow to develop a healthy ego. The next level of development would involve integration of the mature ego and the body to become a whole person. To move to the existential level, the person needs to expand his/her identity to include the environment. Thereafter, perhaps through contemplative practices, an individual reaches a more subtle mental state and eventually pure consciousness, a state of mind that corresponds with the infinite and eternal consciousness known as Mind, Universe, Allah, or Tao. The rigid self/other boundary becomes obscure at the Transpersonal Bands as illustrated in Fig. 1. Consciousness becomes increasingly refined and worldview becomes more expansive and free as this developmental movement proceeds.

Wilber sees that the human race is on a purposeful developmental progression toward "the good." This developmental view is consistent with the "Person-making Perspective" in the Chinese context as described in Chapter 15 (Yang 2006). It is the process by which one returns to the true human nature that is good and moral. The path of self-cultivation was clearly delineated by Confucius and his successors. The route includes cultivating oneself, raising a good family, running the country, and ultimately achieving world peace. The self is not seen as a static object but as an evolving and expanding entity. Through this process, the person gradually relinquishes the private and individuated self (the small self), to embrace a larger collectivity to which one belongs (the large self). The person starts off by

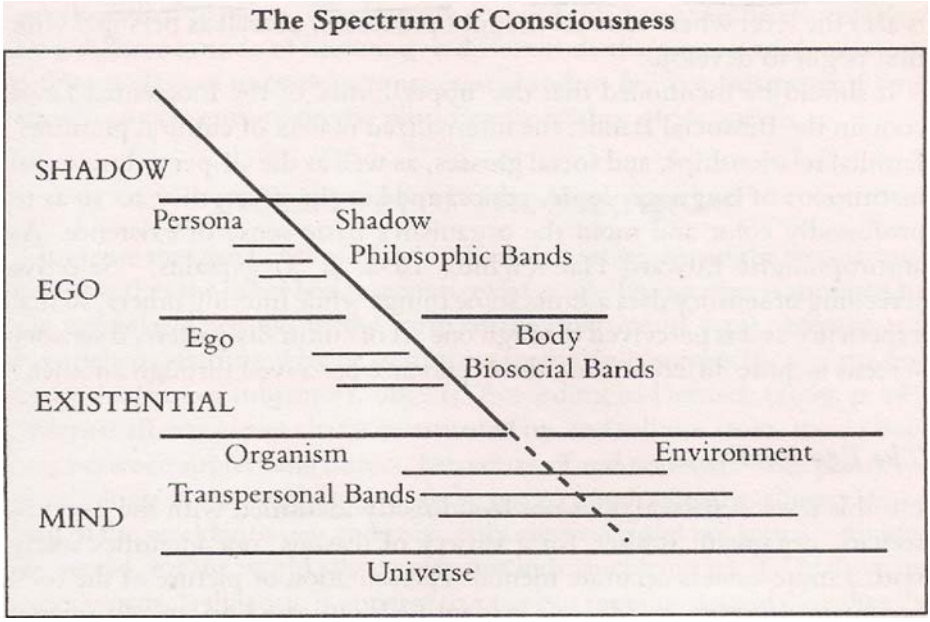

Fig. 1 The spectrum of consciousness (from *Paths Beyond Ego* by Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan, copyright © 1993 by Roger Walsh, Ph.D. and Frances Vaughan, Ph.D. Used by permission of Jeremy P. Tarcher, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.)

including family members into the large self, then gradually friends and associates, then the community, and finally the world. The final state of the developing self is sagehood in which one is united with heaven and earth.

Wilber suggests that different stages of human evolution are marked by different predominant states of consciousness and identity that are reflected in culture and religion. In a general fashion, each culture is concerned with a particular level of the Spectrum depending upon the disposition of the average person in that society. For instance, the individualism-oriented cultures correspond more closely with the Biosocial Bands where the average persons' values lie in following their own motives. By comparison, the collectivism-oriented cultures that emphasize compassion, altruism, and societal harmony coincide more closely to the Transpersonal Bands. Each culture has both its own strengths and limitations as well as its own developmental tasks to accomplish. As Boski (2006) points out, individualism is associated with freedom, self-direction, and active agency. However, its selfish nature may hinder social connections and deplete social responsibility. While humanism could inhibit business economy, its communal sentiment facilitates democracy, patriotism, and appreciation of other cultures. Both individualistic and collectivistic perspectives have advantages for people. The best solution is to learn to embrace aspects of each, to use them appropriately according to time, place, or purpose (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 465). A truly integrated and encompassing culture can and should make use of complementary insights offered by other cultures.

Cultures have been undergoing transformation toward "the good" since the beginning of civilization (Kim and Park 2006). Benevolence and humanity are generally playing a more important role in the foundation of legal and ethical system in modern societies. The development of democracy and the rule of law protect the right of the individuals. For

example, in the United States, slavery was abolished after the Civil War. In developed countries, social programs are in place to help those who are in need. In modern East Asian societies, egalitarian values are replacing traditional values. For example, women were excluded from obtaining an education and participating in society, but this is no longer the case. In Korea, the inheritance laws, divorce laws, and family registry have changed so that women have equal rights with man. More recently, the growing environmental concerns have prompted countries worldwide to institute policies limiting emission of hazardous pollutants. It appears that the evolution of cultures is parallel to the evolution of consciousness, moving from the Shadow level, through the Ego level, toward the Existential level on the Spectrum.

Indigenous psychology is one of the scientific disciplines that seek to understand psychological phenomena in a cultural context. The contributing authors of this book presented a wealth of knowledge derived from their studies of indigenous cultures from various perspectives including familial, social political, religious, and ecological. These perspectives represent cultural phenomena that happened in the past. Yet there is a dynamic process by which people are working individually and collectively to modulate culture to fulfill their future aspirations (Kim and Park 2006). The Spectrum of Consciousness model provides a useful tool for integration of diverse perspectives throughout history and time. The multiple perspectives derived from indigenous psychology can be seen as addressing different levels of the Spectrum at the local culture at the time under study. The essence-driven developmental and evolutional worldview that underlies perennial psychology offers an integrated view across cultures and time and provides a theoretical framework for universal psychology.

From the perspective of positive psychology

Recognizing that contemporary psychology has largely neglected the positive side of human experiences, there has been an explosion of interest in the field of positive psychology in recent years (Snyder and Lopez 2007). Positive psychology adopts an Aristotelian view that human nature is innately good. According to the Aristotelian model, humans should exercise their many virtues and live their lives at their best. It is only through an ongoing education and cultivation that an individual acquires virtues and realizes his or her full potential (Jorgensen and Nafstad 2004). The good or essence-driven view of positive psychology is in accordance with the Aristotelian's model and echoes Wilber's developmental theory.

There has been a debate over whether positive psychology is free of or embedded in culture (Jorgensen and Nafstad 2004). Peterson and Seligman (2004) conducted an extensive and comprehensive survey of the world's most widely influential traditions including Confucianism and Taoism in China, Buddhism and Hinduism in South Asia, ancient Greece, Judeo-Christianity, and Islam in the West. Twenty-four personal characteristics emerged consistently from all these cultures. These characteristics can be broadly classified into five major categories: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. There was, however, considerable variability across cultures in terms of what the culture values. Whereas each tradition nominated some number of virtues as proper or necessary for the well-lived life, no two lists were identical. It is possible that the observed cultural variations are attributable to the differences in languages as well as the description, manifestation, interpretation, priority, and purposes ascribed to these characteristics (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 89). Scholars generally agree that a core group of positive

traits and processes exist across cultures and that these dispositions can be modified by cultural environment across time (Jorgensen and Nafstad 2004).

For instance, unselfish love, a key aspect of the virtue of humanity, has been seen in different forms, described in different terms, given different priorities and ascribed different purposes in different cultures. Love reigned supreme among the Seven Heavenly Virtues in Judeo-Christian tradition. It was considered the mother and root of all virtues (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Templeton suggested that *agape* love embraces all of humanity, lies at the heart of all spiritual, religious, and philosophical traditions, and has been associated with a divine presence that underlies the cosmos (Post 2003, p. 17). Humanity takes the form of "boundless compassion" in Buddhist traditions. In Hindu traditions, it has been called for in good actions toward others, a path that will exempt the followers from returning to Earth after death (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 47). In Chinese culture, love manifested through virtues of *ren* (human-heartedness) that is first experienced in the family in the parent–child relationship defined by filial piety. In Korea, the concept of *jung*, (deep affection and attachment for a person, place, or thing) can be considered a functional equivalent of human-heartedness. In Korean families, the filial piety of taking care of elderly parents is not only a moral imperative but also a legal obligation. In Japan, *amae* (defined as the act of asking and receiving special favors in close relationships) could also be seen as a psychological equivalent. Although *jung* and *amae* have very different denotations, psychological analysis suggests that they both capture the essence of human-heartedness (Kim and Park 2006).

The five-dimensional model of love proposed by Sorokin (Post 2003, p. 31) provides a conceptual model allowing for higher levels of development in every form of the virtues. Using love as an example, the first dimension is intensity, ranging from a minor action of love such as giving a few pennies to the destitute to high intensity such that the most valuable resources are freely given. The second dimension is extensity, starting from loving oneself to the love of all mankind and living creatures. The third dimension is duration, which may range from minutes to as long as the whole life of an individual. The fourth is purity without egoistic motivation. The fifth dimension is the adequacy of love with which a person utilizes wisdom effectively such as not to spoil a child with love. Based on his observation that in-group altruism tends to generate out-group antagonism, Sorokin cautioned that if unselfish love does not extend over the whole of humankind, collective group loyalty could result in clashes between cultural groups and damage to humanity (Post 2003, p. 37). It is imperative that strengths and virtues develop to their highest potential in all dimensions. The task of creating strength-inducing social structures to foster care for the broad community of humanity beyond one's local culture requires collaborative efforts between indigenous psychology and positive psychology.

Advancement in both the fields of indigenous psychology and positive psychology will undoubtedly make important contributions to the 21st-century field of psychology. It will require vigilance to ensure that they do not create further cultural or societal segregation and divisions. Enhanced knowledge in understanding people in their cultural context may facilitate development of societal-wide compassion toward other cultures. Together, humankind may work collaboratively to build a harmonious and prosperous global village. Viewed from space, our blue planet appears as one undivided home where all beings live inextricably connected within one delicate ecosystem. Indigenous psychology could be seen as the seed of humanity. With careful cultivation, the flowers of positive psychology can bloom in every region of the Earth so we may see one enchanted global garden.

Practical implications

In the section below, we will suggest practical steps through which future psychologists may work collaboratively to build the visionary global garden. The initial step involves assisting individuals in diverse cultures to create better lives, improve subjective well-being, and realize their full potential. To do this, we need to develop a moral vision regarding what constitutes a good life and what are the higher reaches of human nature (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 90). Based on their profound insight into the nature of mind, Eastern meditative traditions and Western transpersonal psychology have provided us such a vision (Walsh and Shapiro 2006). In meditative traditions, self-cultivation culminates in liberating oneself from the self, reaching the *Atman* (Universal self) in Hinduism and *Nirvana* in Buddhism (Eckensberger 2006). In his extensive review of literature on meditative traditions and Western psychology, Walsh et al. (Walsh and Shapiro 2006) described some of the psychological potentials of what Maslow called "the farther reaches of human nature." These enhanced capacities include unbroken attention, equanimity, clarified awareness, lucid dreaming, emotional intelligence, all-encompassing love, altruistic motives, moral maturity, and freedom from drive conflict.

Higher reaches of the human mind can be attained through a variety of avenues. Contemplative practices, moral development, and cultivation of virtues are among the commonly documented paths. Mindfulness is described as attending non-judgmentally to all stimuli in the internal and external environment. In moments of mindfulness, depths of the psyche reveal many of the positive psychological processes such as loving-kindness and empathy (Snyder and Lopez 2007; Walsh and Shapiro 2006). With growing evidence documenting the significant psychological and physiological benefits, meditation practices are rapidly gaining popularity with hundreds of millions of practitioners worldwide (Walsh and Shapiro 2006). Gilligan (1982) concluded that people could develop along a moral trajectory—maturing from selfishness to care giving and ultimately universal care giving—similar to the path of maturation that meditation aims for. The transpersonal level of morality has been descried by several authors in different terms including "*sainted altruism*," the "*seventh stage*," the "*ethics of divinity*," and the "*Kita-mode*" (Eckensberger 2006; Eckensberger et al. 2001; Kohlberg 1973; H. K. Ma, 1998, *The Chinese stage structure of moral development. A cross-cultural perspective*, unpublished manuscript; R. A. Shweder, 1991, *The future of psychology: Truth, intuition and the pluralist way*, unpublished manuscript). Cultivation of virtues can also proceed through religious pursuit or modeling after people who exemplify them. All worthy manifestations of religion focus on virtues such as love, forgiveness, and generosity. Exemplars of virtues and strengths can easily be found in stories, parables, creeds, or mottoes of a given culture, as well as in contemporary saintly individuals and ordinary good neighbors. (Peterson and Seligman 2004, p. 24).

Archetypal images of various virtues can pass down through generations within a culture to help people find meaning in suffering and transcend grief from losses. For example, Sima Qian was a prominent official historian in Han Dynasty in China. At the height of his career, he was sentenced to castration and imprisonment by the emperor who was furious about his attempt to defend a defeated military commander, General Lee. He plunged into a deep depression, feeling humiliated, deficient, and suicidal. He eventually found courage from the examples of sages who arose from unbearable sorrow and accomplished spectacular tasks. He was inspired to live through his despair to complete the "Book of

History," a literary landmark in Chinese history. His writing touched the heart of many and his example served as an inspiration for victims recovering from relentless trauma.

Clinically, assessing and mobilizing inner strength may facilitate recovering from a mental illness as illustrated in the following patient cared by the first author. Mr. B was a 34 year-old Chinese man who emigrated from Hong Kong at age 18. He was able to hold a job at a local post office and attend college before he was diagnosed with Schizophrenia when was 27 years old. He was psychiatrically hospitalized because he followed the commanding voices to cut his wrist that resulted in a deep laceration that required surgical repair. While in the hospital, he was isolated in his bed most of the day, appearing depressed and preoccupied. Knowing that he had been enthusiastic about pursuing a military career, I inquired about his underlying motivation. His affect brightened up while eagerly elaborating on how he went on the rigorous boot camp training in order to serve the country but how he regretted having to drop out due to a mental disorder. In response to my inquiry as to his role model, he vividly described a military general standing strong wearing a uniform with multiple medals. I encouraged him to ask advice from the general and behave like a soldier on the unit. He was out of his bed for the next few days marching in the hallway. He told me he had been practicing letting go of the voices so that he could focus solely on his recovery. His condition quickly improved and was discharged to home 4 days later. The warrior archetype (Vaughan 1995, p.181) indeed served as an inner source of empowerment and recovery for Mr. B.

The 21st century psychology should not only focus on healing of mental illness but also emphasize disorder prevention and health promotion (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 488, p. 494). In the past few decades, general psychology has made important progresses in treating major mental illnesses and reducing debilitation. In recent years, prevention programs that aim at curtailing psychological problems before they occur are being developed to target indigent populations, ethnic minorities, children, and the elderly (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 350). Future psychology will focus on promoting positive well-being (e.g. happiness, life satisfaction) and foster positive virtues (e.g. courage, compassion). Further enhancement efforts will maximize current positive well-being to achieve peak and plateau experiences (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 347). There is growing evidence to suggest that fostering positive virtue such as mindfulness, empathy, gratitude, and forgiveness may buffer stress and enhance well-being (Emmons and McCullough 2003; Grossman et al. 2004; Linehan et al. 2006; McCraty et al. 1998; McCullough et al. 2002). Assisting people to achieve transpersonal levels of development will be an integral part of this future enhancement movement.

Beyond enhancing well-being of individuals, the next challenging step lies in building a social ecology that fosters thriving families, communal neighborhoods, effective schools, socially responsible media and civil dialogue (Snyder and Lopez 2007, p. 490). To bring about these social changes, psychologists must partner with colleagues in other disciplines such as politicians, legislators, educators, and sociologists. To extend the social renewal movement from local cultures to the global community will require establishing multi-cultural applicability of positive constructs and processes. Indigenous psychology can help to understand how culture counts in the development and manifestation of strengths and virtues. Indigenous psychology should further study people's use of strengths in their local culture as seen in their daily lives, such as, overcoming life adversity, maintaining harmony, transcending trauma, transforming difficult emotions, and enhancing life satisfaction. Insights gained from such studies are likely to lead to successful implementation of cultural competent preventive and enhancement programs for the global community.

Conclusion

One important goal of the field of indigenous psychology is to construct a psychology that applies to all humans but retains cultural uniqueness. The cultural values and worldviews of the researcher and practitioner influence indigenous psychology. It is imperative that social scientists move to the *Kita*-mode, a transpersonal level of moral thinking that concerns human virtues and principles, which are true to all humankind (Eckensberger 2006). By way of undergoing their own transpersonal development, social scientists can expand their worldview that would allow them to see both commonality and uniqueness of the cultures they study. As their developmental processes unfold, social scientists might be inspired to face the next challenging task: to assist people in diverse cultures to improve their lives and ultimately bring about a social renewal movement that extends from local cultures to the global community.

Lewis Mumford (1956) points out that the great human and social transformations throughout history involve three steps: a broad-ranging synthesis of knowledge, recognition of a hierarchy of existence (Spectrum of Consciousness), and a purposive view of humankind as evolving toward "the good." He further suggests that humankind's primary task is to align with this hierarchy and evolution. This developmental and evolutional worldview comprises our theoretical framework for universal psychology that is in concert with the core principles underlying perennial psychology and positive psychology.

Cultural transformations over the past century have improved people's quality of life that is unparalleled in human history. However, social problems such as delinquency, violence, and poverty continue to plague cultures around the globe. Advances in technology have created maximum stress on natural resources and the global environment. Ecological pollution and deforestation have accelerated the speed of global warming and the rapid extinction of species, while cultural clashes have resulted in rampaging terrorism and international warfare. With the advance of biological and nuclear weapons, our planet is facing an unprecedented threat of massive destruction. We have catapulted ourselves into a new phase in earth's history in which the human activities in the next few decades and generations will determine our collective fate (Musser 2005).

The advancement of positive psychology provides tangible ways for humankind to realize higher reaches of moral development. Progress in the field of indigenous psychology hold promises for mutual enrichment and potential integration among diverse cultures. Fostering widespread moral maturation and social evolution in each and every culture may be the only way we are able to navigate our way through our current global crisis. It has been shown that scientifically valid theory can be applied to affect personal change, community change, and a large-scale societal change (Bandura 1997). The ultimate goal of indigenous psychology should lie not only in discovering universal principles of psychological phenomena but also in bringing about a collective moral transformation of humankind.

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