

Culture & Psychology (in press, accepted in October, 2018)

TOWARDS A CULTURAL REVISION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

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Abstract: Huang, Olwen and Yin (2018) present important considerations on the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, which has become a dominant reference in cross-cultural studies since the 80's. They observe that cross-cultural psychology has failed to define the concepts of collectivism and individualism in a precise manner, making it difficult to measure accurately intercultural differences. I argue that culture is a fundamental dimension of human experience. It guides us by means of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, actions, and personal aspirations. It also offers us symbolic resources for reflecting on these actions and aspirations, thus constituting points of view, relatively singular ways of being and of acting, either reflectively or not. The points of view that develop from different cultural traditions establish horizons that define the limits and propose the ways for people to inhabit the world with others. Furthermore, the conceptions that emerge from each culturally grounded point of view are not easily interchangeable, given that they belong to diversely built language systems. For this reason, psychological theorizations must take into account their own cultural background, as a condition for understanding the misconceptions and misunderstandings that take place when cultures exert their exotic views over one another.

Key-words: alterity, tradition, perspective, intercultural translation, equivocation.

The aim of this paper is to offer a comment on Huang, Olwen and Yin (2018). Despite sharing their view on indigenous psychology, I stress that, to understand a different cultural tradition, Western cultural psychology must delve deeply into it, which in turn will produce changes in psychological concepts and methodologies themselves. Cross-cultural psychology and even cultural psychology usually work with concepts and methodologies that come from and are more adequate for the reality of WEIRD¹ societies (cf. Groot, Hodgetts, Nikora, Leggat-Cook, 2011; Hwang, 2015; Teo, 2011). Much work is necessary if these psychologies intend to produce more extensive knowledge of human beings in different societies.

Huang et al (2018) present important considerations on the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, which has become a dominant reference in cross-cultural studies since the 80's. Cross-cultural psychology aims to measure differences in psychological characteristics of people from different societies around the globe. Research in this field aims to identify, in different cultures, certain relational patterns that determine expectations of people's behavior, problem-solving strategies, and construction of interpersonal relations. Huang et al (2018) observe, however, that cross-cultural psychology has failed to define in a precise manner the concepts of collectivism and individualism. The authors question the adequacy of these concepts for measuring intercultural differences, especially the notion of collectivism. This inadequacy may relate to the finding, supported by a selected critical literature on the subject, that these notions have a predominantly European cultural reference. Individualism, understood as the sum of the characteristics by which North-Americans define themselves, is one of the examples of this cultural "bias", as well as collectivism, which is a formalization of antithetic characteristics in relation to the first definition.

¹ Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic.

They add, still, that the collectivism-individualism dichotomy leads to three major issues in cross-cultural research: 1) the dichotomy fails to distinguish more subtle aspects of the interpersonal relations in each studied culture; 2) the notion of collectivism supposes a subordination of the individualized *self*'s agency to the collective, but is not always verifiable in the attitudes of people in favor of the collective; and 3) when collectivism and individualism are seen as characteristics of the individualized *self*, studies tend to overlook situations in which people may present qualitatively distinct attitudes in relation to one another, surpassing this dichotomy.

Considering the problems identified surrounding this dichotomy, Huang et al. (2018) propose alternatively a relational approach in cross-cultural studies, joining propositions from the sociological theory of structuring and a rational-relational model, developed in the context of Chinese psychology. This model is based on principles from the Confucian reflexive tradition. It offers a representation of the mechanisms of the *self* and of social interaction intended to suit any cultural context.

Culture, as a fundamental dimension of human experience, not only guides us, by means of verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources, actions, and aspirations, but also offers symbolic resources for reflecting on these actions and aspirations, thus constituting points of view, relatively singular ways of being and acting, either reflexively or not. The points of view that develop from different cultural traditions establish horizons that define the limits and propose the ways for people to inhabit the world with others. Furthermore, the conceptions that emerge from each culturally grounded point of view are not easily interchangeable, given that they belong to diversely built language systems.

Cultures cultivate the points of view of their members

I assume that the notion of cultivation is valuable for understanding the way human beings produce culture, since this process resembles other cultivating practices in several fields of human experience: cultivating the soil, cultivating faith, cultivating knowledge, cultivating bacteria, and so forth. Cultivating implies establishing a relation of care with what is being cultivated, although it also includes the possibility of exploitation. This is the case, for instance, in much of modern farming, in which land and animals are poisoned to improve farm productivity. (cf. Kawaguchi and Guimarães, 2018). This is also true with respect to the cultural industry, which produces poor quality popculture, reducing art to a commodity (Araújo & Utta, 2010; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985). In the context of the present paper, the notion of care refers to the way each culture establishes, through its members' actions, a regulated exchange of affects and reciprocal obligations that guide personal and collective trajectories. The individual members of any specific culture constantly reevaluate this process, actively changing, to a greater or lesser extent, the course of the cultural guidance.

Therefore, culture takes care of its members by establishing regulated exchanges of affects, thus allowing certain courses of personal development and restricting others. Affirming that culture cares implies understanding it as a supra-personal agency, a sphere of human experience that comprehends a given collectivity of people, artifacts, and other visible and invisible beings. Human beings are born into a tradition that precedes every new member. Each tradition is dynamically changing as it produces recognizable structures. The new members of a community must necessarily dialogue with this preexisting cultural universe in order to participate. In this dialogue, each person procedurally internalizes the culture in a unique manner. I am considering

culture as a field of action (cf. Boesch, 1991) that guides personal trajectories of development, bringing forth, in a dynamic and heterogeneous manner, the said relational patterns that determine expectations regarding people's behavior, problem-solving strategies, and construction of interpersonal relations.

Culture does not solely produce patterns. People are cultivated in their singular position in the cultural field. They are agents in this field and, as such, promote transformation in the regular patterns of the culture as they dialogue with it. The notion of point of view provides a key to understanding the dynamics between personal and collective culture (cf. Valsiner, 2012). This is because a point of view, or perspective, as discussed here, constitutes the reality of an experience, symbolically elaborated from a subjective perspective. The point of view thus articulates the sensitive and supra-sensitive dimensions of human experience (cf. Guimarães, 2010; 2011; 2016; Guimarães e Simão, 2017). It also regulates the manner people bring about transformation, determining the possibilities and limits to their creative action from their singular experiences in the cultural field, including the experience of self-reflection. Heterogeneity is a marked characteristic of the different cultures and is also noticeable inside each one of them: the same person assumes different positions in the cultural field throughout their life trajectory.

Boesch (1996/2007) discusses at least seven flaws of the cross-cultural approaches, six of them related to theoretical-methodological assumptions. The first six flaws can be thus summarized: assuming culture as an independent variable; granting legitimacy to cross-cultural sample comparisons; assuming there is equivalence of meaning in the measuring instruments of different cultures; excluding the researcher's personal idiosyncrasies as a part of the investigation; ignoring the fact that the specificities of the research problems attend to the demands of the researcher's culture;

and assuming that the information offered by the subjects is sufficiently consonant with the information required by the researcher. The last flaw discussed by Boesch (1996/2007) is of an ethical nature; he emphasizes that psychological studies should not be conducted as if people were solely a source of data for a supposedly well-intentioned investigation. The participants in a research are active in the dialogue where knowledge construction takes place and because of this their points of view should not be excluded.

Authoritative regimes have a negative impact on the creative diversity that characterizes human action because a dominant point of view is imposed. The same is true in the field of research: when researchers involved in the study of a culture import exogenous definitions of psychological processes without negotiating their meanings, they run the risk of, on one hand, not realizing the selected concepts' limited apprehension of the psychological aspects in view; on the other, of forcing the studied culture to conformity with a pre-established conceptual frame. In both situations, all sides lose: little progress is made in theory construction, the research is limited to a dogmatic reproduction of a preliminary thesis, and the other culture remains unheard.

From these considerations, I suppose it is evident that culture is not only or always good for the person. Human activity requires handling the tensions that emerge when people gather to co-create culture, whether they are in a specific cultural field or have distinct cultural backgrounds. Given this, I understand the pertinence of the reflexive study by Huang et al (2018), which points out the difficulties in operating with the individualism-collectivism dichotomy, considering it emerged in a research environment foreign to the Chinese cultural tradition. Reformulating this dichotomy may, however, lead to new understandings of human relations in this society, possibly more adequate and pertinent to the forms of cultivation of the person in the aimed cultural situations.

Each culture proposes forms of inhabiting the world

The notion of ethnic group has its origins in the Greek term *ethnos*, used to refer to the qualities of a people, a group who shared an *ethos*, i.e., customs and habits, principles, values, norms of action, and ideals. Figueiredo (1996/2013) discusses the notion of *ethos* as a way to “[...] constitute both men and their worlds – their dwellings; both subjects and objects; both the social experiences and the private and “subjective” experiences of each individual” (p. 48). The *ethos*, therefore, concerns the “human establishments” (p. 48), it comprises distinct forms of inhabiting the world. The *ethos* of each culture presupposes different customs and habits with which people can build safe and trustful dwellings for themselves. In this respect, the ways of coexisting and relating to the other’s culture are essential for each person to be able to work, think, play, experience and enjoy their worlds. . These matters are relevant to human health (Figueiredo, 1996/2013).

The work of Huang et al (2018) is an effort to review psychological concepts from the point of view of the *ethos* of the Chinese culture. Nevertheless, psychology developed as a modern science through a series of historical-cultural tensions that guided the formation of certain ways of cultivating subjectivity. The emerging modern man, whether in Europe or in regions under its influence, shared an *ethos* grounded in this continent’s cultural traditions.

Acknowledging the Greek-Roman and Judeo-Christian origins of most psychological assumptions are obvious, their cultural belonging have frequently been neglected in the intentions to generalize psychological knowledge; but Psychology has

other largely overlooked cultural origins. It also emerged from the fissures left behind after the European peoples' encounter with the diversity of things and peoples around the world. Despite not always having maintained an effective or reflexive approach to cultural diversity, psychology should not fail to recognize the pertinence of anthropological concerns and the references to distinct cultures in the discourses that legitimate its theories and practices, regardless of the theoretical approach. Each cultural tradition, in turn, has a history of its own, conceives the world and its problems guided by a particular set of principles and values.

With respect to the notions of ethics and *ethos*, Figueiredo (1996/2013) understands that from one culture to another and from one period to the next implicit patterns and codes of behavior may vary, together with the forms of demanding obedience and punishing transgressions. In this way, "we can understand ethics as a set of devices that "teach" subjectivity formation: they effectively *subject* individuals, i.e., teach, guide, model, and demand the transformation of men into historically determined moral subjects" (p. 67). It is worth, however, to consider the processes of subjectivity formation that happen beyond the fissured *ethos* of the modern psychology. I consider this as *one of the tasks of the indigenous psychologies*, which are gaining space and influence in the academic environment, contributing with distinct foundations to new conceptual frameworks.

This task demands a genealogical work capable of taking into account other cultural traditions as intrinsic to the field of Psychology. These cultures have acted as interlocutors and have contributed, from the standpoint of alterity, to the intense transformations in the practices and intellectual culture that characterize modernity and contemporaneity. If the different traditions throughout the world are not late versions of the pre-modern closed societies, whose tendency is to integrate the modern project in its

current form, then it is possible for other trajectories of subjectivity formation to coexist with the fissured *ethos* of the modern human beings. Such new reflections would, as Huang et al. (2018) suggest, provide conditions for questioning crystallized psychological conceptions from psychology's original cultural background. This would enable understanding specific cultural situations through their own semiotic references. It would also be possible to understand the generality of the cultural process as a creative process that multiplies the differences, even if the differences generated in a cultural field are not arbitrary.

Each culture has concepts which are not interchangeable

William James (1890) claimed that among the sources of error in psychology are: 1) the absence of proper terms for investigating and understanding the thoughts and feelings that constitute the psychic life; 2) the confusion that may happen between thought and the object of thought; and 3) the possible confusion between the psychologist's point of view and the psychic fact. Given that psychology has not yet fully developed its own terms for investigation, the psychologist borrows terms from the general culture, including other sciences.

Scientific terms and practices abound in cultural references. The manner each person, culture or psychological approach understands their surroundings, together with the concepts they use for this, must not be mistaken for an impersonal reality, independent of people or culture. James (1890) calls attention to the fact that psychological phenomena are only partially accessible to the participants in a dialogue. The psychologist must therefore take into account the nebulous space of

indetermination between the interlocutors to understand the intended object: thoughts and feelings, behavior, etc.

These considerations lead to the problem of translation of the human and cultural phenomena into psychological terms, which are always impregnated with cultural references. The lack of correspondence between the concepts developed by the psychologists and the conceptions that emerge from the cultural fields that comprise thought systems distinct from where psychology has emerged produces tension.

The issue of the misunderstandings as signs of the differences of perspective emerges from the differences between the one who observes and builds meanings about something from the interior or the exterior of a cultural field. Differing perspectives are sources of challenges in dialogue, misunderstandings and equivocations. According to Viveiros de Castro (2004), equivocations are inherent to the process of becoming a culture intelligible to another culture:

The equivocation is not that which impedes the relation, but that which founds and impels it: a difference in perspective. To translate is to presume that an equivocation always exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocity—the essential similarity—between what the Other and We are saying. (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p. 10).

There is no need to overcome alterity, since it is inherent to the I-other-world relations and since there is no dialogue without difference (Simão, 2003). Some degree of intersubjective sharing must, however, be established to prevent the production of excessive equivocation. The alterity relation challenges preconceptions and pre-established schemes of understanding (cf. Coelho Junior, 2008; Simão, 2010). Despite the importance of choosing an adequate conceptual framework to approach the other, the exceeding element, alterity, must also be taken into account. Alterity resists the efforts of understanding, however adequate and supposedly adjusted to the other's singularity a conceptual framework may seem.

The political aim expressed here, in the field of the dialogue between cultures, does not advocate the construction of increasing intersubjective sharing, adjustment of points of view or literal translation of meanings between interlocutors. To Faleiros (2014), the impossibility of translating certain poems from one language to another demands a process where the experience of the poem, lived in the body, defines the construction of a new text that does not have the same literal content, but that communicates the meanings of the sensitive experience established in relation to the poem. To Viveiros de Castro (2004), transduction is a process in which the difference between terms is a condition for meaningful communication. It is by means of the difference that the self and the other connect, building discourses that do not express the same. The interethnic relation continuously produces differences in meanings, even if a common language is used in the dialogue.

I have been working in this field of research since 2011, alone and in collaboration with other academic researchers and Amerindian peoples, reviewing psychological concepts in the field of cultural psychology². I will not return to these conceptual revisions here, because my intention is to stress why novel revisions are needed, considering other cultural perspectives such as the Chinese, the Amerindian, and others.

Notes for possible future research

² For further information, see the discussion on the notion of dialogue and perspective (cf. Guimarães, 2011; Achatz and Guimarães, 2018), humanity (Guimarães, 2012; Kawaguchi and Guimarães, 2018), body and affectivity (Guimarães, 2018; Guimarães and Simão, 2017); person and Self (cf. Guimarães, 2013; Moraes and Guimarães, 2015; Guimarães and Benedito, 2018), knowledge construction and education (Guimarães, 2017; Macena and Guimarães, 2016); temporality (Guimarães, 2015) etc.

Considering Huang et al's (2018) observations on the inadequacies the individualism-collectivism dichotomy presents, as it was classically defined in cross-cultural psychology, for measuring relational processes in the Chinese culture, I understand cultural psychology has an important role in comprehending meaning construction in distinct cultural fields. In both cultural and personal history, self-knowledge tends to amplify when people are available and have conditions for establishing bonds with different people and cultures. The ability to reflect about oneself depends on the encounter with others, since all knowledge is a form of comparison between differences (cf. Valsiner, 2001). I do not consider there is benefit in trying to merge different cultures, or in keeping them strictly separated.

As alterities, different peoples around the world presented, directly or indirectly, deep questions to the European cultures, about the nature of the human being, the universality of Eurocentric values, theories, and ways of life. In other words, by dislodging the West from its usual place, an unprecedented broadening of horizons was made possible, which can be verified in the numerous advances in science and especially in psychology. The encounter with diversity brought psychosocial demands to the western man, since it generated specific forms of disquiet, confusion, dispersion, and fear, affections the psychologists must face on a daily basis; but it also lead to openness, associations, novelty, and possibilities of choice in life course.

I argued here that each culture can make original contributions to the development of psychology. The role of cultural psychologists should not be limited to increasing knowledge in the field of Western psychology. Nor should it be confined to reproducing exotic concepts and applying them to research performed *in loco*. Psychological practice and thought can depart from other non-colonized bases for knowledge construction. It is important to clarify the relations between the constructed

psychological knowledge and the cultivated life so that new knowledge may emerge in relation to the specificities of a given tradition. In other words, it seems to me relevant to search for the cultural roots of the relational patterns that determine the expectations concerning people's behavior, problem-solving strategies and forms of constructing interpersonal relations. In the case of the study by Huang et al (2018), I hope the relations between the *Dual-factor relational orientation framework* and Chinese philosophy may be further developed and clarified, offering the world a more sophisticated understanding of aspects of the human cultural life that are still unknown in its due extent by the majority of psychologists.

It means that psychology should not only export or import conceptions and methodologies from WEIRD contexts, but dialogue with conceptions and methodologies from other traditions. Being available for the other has been an important guideline in our work with Amerindian peoples and has enabled us to develop general knowledge on the issue of the dialogue with the other. How do we make sense of the other's utterances (verbal and embodied communication) when the other developed in a radically distinct *ethos*? The general knowledge passes, unavoidably, by the understanding of the limits of each cultural system to approach the other cultural system, the semiotic elaboration of affective experiences through multiple trajectories of meaning construction.

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