Note on “History of Psychology in India: Problems and Prospects”

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Recently, Indian political psychologist Ashis Nandy (2013) stated that “the mythos on which modern India built its self-definition is under severe stress” (p. ix). This stress is evident in some of the recent works (e.g., Cornelissen, Misra, & Varma, 2011), in which Indian psychologists critically ventured into the colonial notions of understanding Indian psychology and advocated for the development of indigenous psychology. The indigenization movement of psychology in India attempts to develop a context sensitive discipline that can understand the concept of mind and human behavior from the cultural perspective (see Sinha, 1986, 1994; Misra & Kumar, 2009; Pandey & Singh, 2005). It emphasizes the culturally bound aspects of human nature and uses methods to explore the ways in which culture emerges from history.

Given the directions of scientific research, it is not absurd to engage with Western theories. Nevertheless, some Indian psychologists have resisted what they consider the intrusion of modern psychology. They have forwarded premises about human nature in the philosophical roots of traditional Indian thought which look tautological and feed back to our oppressive social structures, for example, the patriarchy and caste systems. The scope of social change is limited under the garb of indigenization, unless the movement of indigenization calls for social change. The politics of social change is based on the argument for social justice rather than the revival of the oppressive past. If modernity is problematic in the eye of indigenous protagonists, its merits are also observed in the eye of oppressed. Representations of such oppressed voices were evident in the social movement led by Jyotirao Phule, Ambedkar, and so forth. There were leaders (e.g., M. K. Gandhi) who followed the middle path taking both from the traditional and the modern for the betterment of the nation after colonial rule. As nationalist reformists, their philosophies lingered somewhere between modern and traditional perspectives. This trend was observed in some of the research in social psychology, which claimed to construct better theoretical explanations about the Indian social contexts such as caste and social class hierarchy, religion, and gender.

In some instances of psychological research in India, two approaches have become prominent: first, the rejection of the Western method of understanding psychology, instead contextualizing on the basis of philosophical roots which shaped Indian psychology and socialization; and second, theorizing by adopting Westernized methods to confirm the established cultural foundations. The movement of indigenization is a reaction to colonial intervention, and its results show how positivist Western methods reinforce traditional Indian conservatism. These contexts for doing psychology in the universities of India are
something which can be either labeled as “modernization of the tradition” or the “traditionalization of the modern” (see Rudolph & Rudolph, 1967). However, by the way of these research trends, the Indian psychological literature has neglected to address the above mentioned social contexts.

Philosophical inquiries have resulted in the uncritical essentialization of the Indian schools of thought and have contributed to the maintenance of hierarchical factions (Chattopadhyaya, 1993). Thus, the critical approach toward indigenization seems to be accepted to the extent that the Brahmanc concept of soul and mind based on purity and Varna system is not questioned. It seems that indigenous psychology believed in the essentializing of the social system and that, in using modern psychological methods and theory to critique colonialism, the indigenization movement has in effect reinforced precolonial concepts of inherent hierarchy.

The cultural value system in India reflects the dominant caste and social class system, which in turn nurtures the research system of psychology. Thus, the effort to indigenize psychology in India was both a critical response to the colonial modernization and a revival of foundational premises of Indian psychology. The problems with these foundational premises were barely highlighted in the new Indian psychology, and as such it effectively contributed to the reinstitutionalization of hierarchy and oppression through normalized social systems. For example, the mechanism through which caste and social class as a dominant context moderate the psychological facets of life has been hardly visible in the research so far (see Sinha, 2016). The viewpoints of dominant caste and class group membership have shaped the movement toward the indigenization of psychology in India and fueled the social divisions and invisible inequality.

Indian psychological approaches should become cognizant of the following points to better understand the relevant contexts for social responsibility:

1. As a discipline, modern psychology in India has been transplanted from the west, and hasn’t looked critically into the effects of cultural patterns. However, its current values questioned some of the oppressive cultural worldviews such as karma theory and occupation based social status (see Cotterill, Sidanius, Bhardwaj, & Kumar, 2014; see also Jogdand, Khan, & Mishra, 2016). The modern method has been utilized to show the legitimacy of the social structure. It can be interpreted as paradoxical to use Western methods to understand the embedded psychology of people in India. However, this quandary may be resolved by a profound and intense inquiry into the context and by considering alternative viewpoints of Indian cultural contexts. The colonial impact and the creation of a culture of loyalty and commitment to the individualistic metatheory of explaining scientific knowledge have precluded necessary paradigm shifts in the psychological research in India.

2. The impact of the spread of belief in the principle of universality and generalization without an accompanying examination of psychological phenomena from their philosophical roots, which can be rectified through the consideration of the clash between mainstream and alternative histories.

3. The current lack of self-reflexivity in research. Researchers should bring in their subjectivity for better understanding. The notion of being objective in psychological science may limit scientific rigor (see Hibberd, 2014).

4. The replacement of psychological theory and constructs within relevant sociohistorical context is necessary. Researchers should understand the politics of
neutrality as a scientific value, and consider how limiting their research to this boundary may also limit its capacity to support beneficial social change.

5. The limited dialogue between knowledge generators and its consumers doesn’t provide a robust enough connection between research and its impact. The scope of shared psychological knowledge as it is currently limited to the educated and privileged is insufficient and thus there needs to be broader dissemination.

The following are recommendations for a new wave of psychological research in India:

1. Increased critical assessment of scientific methods of inquiry.
2. Restraint from assessment of cultural pluralism, diversities, status quo and political identities based on the traditional way of doing psychology in India.
3. Inclusion of constructionist worldviews that emphasize diversity and dialogue.
4. Development of critical emancipatory perspectives that question the utility of the status quo, its position and value neutrality.
5. Increased concern for accountability and social responsibility on the part of social scientists.

References


