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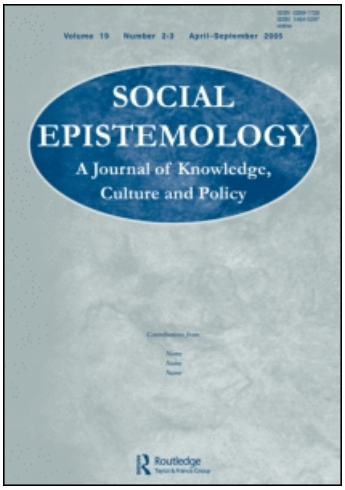

Social Epistemology
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713765921

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Online publication date: 20 April 2011

To cite this Article Hwang, Kwang-Kuo(2011) 'Reification of Culture in Indigenous Psychologies: Merit or Mistake?', Social Epistemology, 25: 2, 125 — 131
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2011.552125
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2011.552125

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Social Epistemology
Vol. 25, No. 2, April 2011, pp. 125–131

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Reification of Culture in Indigenous Psychologies: Merit or Mistake?

Kwang-Kuo Hwang

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Professor Allwood (2011, "On the foundation of the indigenous psychologies", Social Epistemology *25 (1): 3–14) challenges indigenous psychologists by describing their definition of culture as a rather abstract and delimited entity that is too "essentialized" and "reified", as well as "somewhat old-fashioned" and "too much influenced by early social anthropological writings" (p. 5). In this article, I make a distinction between the scientific microworld and the lifeworld and argue that it is necessary for social scientists to construct scientific microworlds of theories for the sake of pushing forward the progress of any field in the social sciences. Allwood and J. W. Berry (2006, "Origins and development of indigenous psychologies: An international analysis",* International Journal of Psychology *41 (4): 243–68) also recognized that western mainstream psychology is a kind of indigenous psychology. Therefore, theoretical construction in western psychology also implies a reification of culture. My central question is, then: why is the reification of the western culture of individualism a merit for the progress of psychology, and why the reification of non-western cultures by indigenous psychologists a mistake?*

Keywords: Scientific Microworld; Lifeworld; Indigenous Psychologies; Reification; Culture

A Challenge to Indigenous Psychologists

Because literatures of indigenous psychologies took a fundamental assertion that they should be "culturally relevant", and because many indigenous psychologists have attempted to describe the culture in which they are rooted, in his article entitled "On the Foundation of the Indigenous Psychologies" Prof. Allwood raised an important question on the definition of culture to challenge advocates of indigenous psychologies:

> In the indigenous psychologies (English language) research literature it is common that culture is defined as a rather abstract and delimited entity that has to do with under-

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ISSN 0269–1728 (print)/ISSN 1464–5297 (online) © 2011 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/02691728.2011.552125

> standing (including abilities) and sometimes activities, where these are more or less common to the members of a society. Often one also emphasizes that the culture is located at a collective level, an assumption that *per se* tends to reinforce the idea that the culture is common to the members of the society and tends to make culture into a quite abstract entity. (2011, 5)

Providing three specific examples, Prof. Allwood criticizes such a concept of culture as "somewhat old-fashioned", as "too much influenced by early social anthropological writings", and which tends to see specific cultures as "mapped to specific societies or groups of people". Also, the concept of culture is too "essentialized" and "reified" by assuming that the culture in a society has an independent and somewhat stable existence "floating above" the other components in the physical and social system of the society (2011, 5).

"New-fashioned" Concept of Culture

Prof. Allwood argued that culture is something that is created or constructed continuously as a way for people to promote their interests or values in interaction with other people. The understanding existing in a society is usually very heterogeneous, humans with different background understandings mixed in a society. Moreover, various traditions of background understandings are often mixed within one and the same individual, much of the content that is commonly identified with the culture of a society is not shared by those assumed to be "members" of the culture. Furthermore, a person may know about specific content but may not agree with it or practice it. Therefore, "some researchers even argue against the culture concept at all" (Allwood 2011, 13). In conclusion, Prof. Allwood (2011) advised the English-language writers in the indigenous psychologies to increase "the theoretical sophistication of how they chose to identify 'their own culture'" (2011, 13) and to engage more intensively in the general debate going on in social sciences concerning the nature of culture.

These are typical sermons from a culture-nihilist who plays the role of a commissary for mainstream psychology. Prof. Allwood seems to know neither the problems that indigenous psychologists intend to solve, nor the theoretical sophistication of how they attempt to solve those problems.

Scientific Microworld versus Lifeworld

Prof. Allwood claims that his article discussed only the English-language literature from indigenous psychologies, texts written in domestic languages were not covered in his article. But in my article "Constructive realism and Confucian relationalism: An epistemological strategy for the development of indigenous psychology" (Hwang 2006), published in a book cited by Prof. Allwood (Kim, Yang, and Hwang 2006, cited in Allwood 2011), I emphasized that it is essential for indigenous psychologists to construct scientific microworlds from lifeworlds for the progress of indigenous psychology. I proposed a conceptual framework to differentiate two types of knowl-

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Table 1 Two Types of Knowledge in Lifeworld and Scientific Microworld

	Lifeworld	Microworld
Constructor	Cultural group	Single scientist
Ways of thinking	Originative thinking	Technique thinking
Types of rationality	Substantive rationality	Formal rationality
Patterns of construction	Participative constructive	Dominative construction
Functions of worldview	Meaning of life	Recognition of world

Source: K. K. Hwang. 2006. "Constructive realism and Confucian relationalism: An epistemological strategy for the development of indigenous psychology". In *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in context*, edited by U. Kim, K. S. Yang, and K. K. Hwang, pp. 73–108 (Table 1 from p. 84). New York: Springer. © 2006 Springer Science+Business Media, Inc. with kind permission from Springer Science+Business Media B.V.

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edge we use in the lifeworld and the scientific microworld (see Table 1). I think a clear distinction between these two worlds may help us to see the blind spot of Prof. Allwood's arguments.

For the individual, the lifeworld in which humans live is a primordial world in which everything presents itself in a self-evident way. Before human beings began to develop scientific knowledge, they tried to understand their daily experiences by delineating, explaining and responding to the structures of their lifeworlds. These explanations and responses belong to a domain of pre-logical, pre-technical and pre-instrumental thinking, and the richness of their roots lies in individual life experiences, which are flexible, penetrable, and yet unbreakable. Human beings can neither exhaust the contents of their lifeworlds, nor go beyond their boundaries (Husserl 1970).

Lifeworlds exist inevitably at a particular point in history. The lifeworld's contents differ by historical age and culture. Economic crisis, war, and civil or political conflict may lead to drastic changes in the lifeworld. However, while people living in the same culture experience changes to their lifeworlds, their lifeworlds are constantly sustained by a transcendental formal structure called cultural heritage.

A second world construction is that of the microworld. Any scientific construction can be regarded as a microworld. A microworld can be a theoretical model built on the basis of realism, or a theoretical interpretation of a social phenomenon provided from a particular perspective by a social scientist. Within any given microworld, the reality of the given world is replaced by a second-order constructed reality that can be verified by empirical methods.

Two Ways of Thinking

The microworld of scientific knowledge is constructed by a solitary scientist, while groups of people construct their lifeworlds using language and knowledge from the same cultural background in their course of historical development. In the formative years of a particular culture, people concentrated on observing the external world and contemplated the nature of every object in their lifeworld. They attempted to get rid of

their own will and intention, and tried their best to make everything manifest itself in the language they created to represent it. This way of thinking was called *originative thinking* or *essential thinking* by Heideger (1966). On the contrary, the language used by a scientist to construct the microworld of scientific knowledge is created intentionally to reach a specific goal; it has a compulsory and aggressive character that demands the most gain with the least cost. Therefore, the microworld is a product of *technical thinking* or *metaphysical thinking* in Heideger's perspective.

Two Kinds of Rationality

From the perspectives of insiders living in a given society, their collective consciousness and social representations are all rational (Durkheim 1912/1965), but there is a fundamental difference between the rationality used for constructing the microworld and that used in lifeworld. In their lifeworlds, people emphasize the importance of *substantive rationality*, which is completely different from the *formal rationality* for constructing scientific microworlds used by western scientists after the European Renaissance. The former emphasizes the importance of goals or results and provides no clear-cut means or procedures for reaching them. Only a few persons who are familiar with the special means or procedures can use them to pursue goals deemed worthy. The latter, on the contrary, pays attention to the calculability of means or procedures that can be used by everyone to pursue personal goals, and emphasizes only the value-natural facts (Brubaker 1984).

In order to attain the goal of controlling and utilizing nature, scientists construct microworlds about various aspects of their external world that are concerned by human beings with Cartesian dualism by the way of *dominative construction* (Shen 1994). These microworlds are neither permanent nor absolutely certain; each of them has its own specific goal. When the goal loses importance, or when people are faced with new problems, scientists must construct other new microworlds to address these problems. On the contrary, in pre-modern civilizations, people construct knowledge in their lifeworlds by *participative construction*. Anthropologist Lucien Levy-Brühl (1910/1966) indicated that the cultural systems of primitive people are constituted on the law of mystical participation, which conceptualizes human beings and nature as parts of an inseparable entity that can be viewed as a consciousness of cosmic holism (Taylor 1871/1929).

Two Worldviews

The worldviews in the lifeworld and the microworld are essentially different. As people of a given culture contemplate the nature of the universe and the situation of mankind, they gradually formulate their worldviews with original thinking over the course of their history. Walsh and Middleton (1984) indicated that the worldview formulated in their lifeworld usually answers four broad categories of questions: who am I? What is my situation of life? Why do I suffer? How do I find salvation? Speaking more directly, a worldview describes not only human nature but also the relationship between an

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individual and his/her external environment, as well as one's historical situation in the world. In addition, it provides a diagnosis for problems and prescribes a recipe for their solution.

The worldview in a scientific microworld does not serve such a function. In his lexical theory, Kuhn (1969/1990) indicated that the scientific lexicon is composed of a set of terms with structure and content. Scientists use terms in the lexicon to make propositions in a theory for describing the nature of the world. Theory and lexicon are inseparable. The microworld of a theory can be understood with its specific lexicon. Different theories can be understood with its different lexicon. When a theory is changed, its lexicon will change with it.

Any lexicon contains a method to recognize the world. Members of the same scientific community must master the same lexicon, understand meanings of each term, and share the same worldview in order to communicate with one another. In order to think about the same problem and engage in related research in the same scientific community, they must share the same worldview. However, the worldview of scientific microworld provides no answers to problems related to the meaning of life. It is essentially different from the worldview of a lifeworld.

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Academic Mission of Indigenous Psychologists

Understanding the sharp contrast between the lifeworld and the scientific microworld, it is not difficult to find the weakness of Prof. Allwood's arguments. In view of the social reality in the lifeworld, the literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said is correct in saying: "… all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinary differentiated and unmonolithic" (cited in Eagleton 2000, 15). The social anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1993, 21) is also correct in arguing that the traditional concept of society in the social sciences is unrealistic for it erroneously assumes that there exist "internally shared cultural features".

However, we are neither literary theorists, nor cultural critics, nor cultural anthropologists who are deemed to pay close attention to what is going on in the lifeworld. We define ourselves as indigenous psychologists with our own mission and academic goals to accomplish. Viewing from the philosophy of evolutionary epistemology (Popper 1972), when a psychologist of a non-western country found that a given theory of western psychology is inadequate or inappropriate in explaining domestic phenomena, it is necessary for him or her to construct a new theory, even to develop a scientific microworld with an appropriate research paradigm to compete with the old ones.

Theorization and Reification

It is a commonplace for social scientists that there are many definitions of culture (Kroeber and Kluckhorn 1952). It is also well-known that theorizing culture implies its reification, which was an issue for debate between the camp of evolutionary

epistemology and followers of Frankfurt school after the 1961 sociological conference at Tübingen University (Habermas 1967/1988). The 10-year debate enabled Habermas (1968/1971) to propose his famous system of trichotomization for social sciences; namely, analytic–empirical science, historical–hermeneutic science, and critical science.

Acknowledging that most western theories of psychology are constructed on the presumption of individualism, but that most cultures of the world are not individualist, many indigenous psychologists have attempted to construct theories to describe various aspects of their own cultures. The academic goal of constructing theory of culture in social sciences certainly means its reification. This is the reason why Prof. Allwood can find so many targets for critique in his article. However, if he takes patience to review the literature of mainstream psychology, he can find that his criticism also applies to any effort of constructing social psychology theory in western society. Of course, assuming that western theories of psychology are acultural and universal may save him from the act of attacking mainstream psychology. Nevertheless, does such an assumption lend sound support for criticizing indigenous psychologies, especially without examining mainstream psychology?

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Merit or Mistake?

It seems to me that those theories of psychology constructed on the presumption of individualism are not universal at all. In the first chapter of my book *Confucian relationalism: Philosophical reflection, theoretical construction and empirical research* (Hwang 2009), I argue that the epistemological goal of indigenous psychologies is constructing theories that may represent the universal mind of human beings on the one hand, and can be used to interpret mentalities in a particular culture on the other hand. In Chapter Four of that book, I explained how I constructed the Face and Favor model (Hwang 1987), which was supported to be a universal framework for understanding social instruction in various societies. In Chapter Five, I used that model to analyze the inner structure of Confucianism (Hwang 1987).

I fully understand that my strategic approach of solving this problem may reify Confucianism. I certainly understand that nobody in his/her lifeworld will behave exactly in the Confucian way even though Confucian sayings are frequently cited by Chinese people in their daily life. But, if I am able to use my theoretical analysis to conduct empirical scientific research, to interpret social psychological phenomena in Confucian societies (Hwang 2009), or to criticize unjust social conditions to seek emancipation from ideological domination of any type (Hwang 2010), I believe that the successful reification of culture should be a merit to be admired, rather than a mistake to be blamed in the development of indigenous psychologies.

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