

Some Reflections on Potential Abuses of Psychology's Knowledge and Practices

Anthony J. Marsella

Received: ----- Accepted: -----

This article identifies ten implicit and explicit assumptions of Western psychology that are rooted within its cultural history, traditions, and values. Unfortunately, these assumptions have informed and dominated the knowledge and practice of psychology across the world because of historic, cultural, political, and economic reasons. It is now clear, however, that the indiscriminate acceptance and application of Western psychological knowledge and practices constitutes a serious abuse for non-Western people and for ethnic/racial minorities in Western nations. This abuse is often transmitted and exacerbated via the training of international and ethnic minority students who learn to accept Western psychology as universal. In a global community in which all our lives have become interdependent, it is essential Western psychology be re-considered as a “cultural construction” with all the ethnocentric limitations this implies. As a counter, efforts must be made to acknowledge, develop, and transmit the diverse indigenous/national psychologies from across the world.

Keywords: Cultural construction, Ethnocentrism, Indigenous psychologies, Knowledge and practice, Western psychology

Psychology, as a science, profession, and art, has a problem. It is becoming subject to a growing number of abuses in its assumptions, training, research, and service functions as it is exported for uncritical use and application across ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. There is, in my opinion, an urgent need to develop a mechanism or procedure for a continuing review, monitoring, and evaluation of psychology's knowledge if we are to stem the tide of misapplication and unwarranted acceptance of psychology as universal. This is essential, I believe, not only to preserve psychology's integrity throughout the world, but also to insure that psychology not become a source of danger in its indiscriminate application -- an “abuse” that can easily occur given its current privileged position as an academic

discipline and profession at universities, hospitals, and clinics throughout the world.

In my opinion, the North American-Western European dominance of psychology's education, research, and service constitutes an “abuse” that must be addressed. Years of hesitancy to acknowledge psychology as a cultural construction has left us with a body of knowledge and a spectrum of practices that are scientifically inaccurate and professionally prejudicial when applied indiscriminately to ethnic and racial minorities in the West and to non-Western people across the world (e.g. Marsella, 1998; Marsella & Pedersen, 2004).

There is a growing international recognition that North American and Western European scientific and professional psychology is a “cultural construction.” This is evidenced by the widespread criticism and rejection of many assumptions, interventions, and findings among ethnocultural and racial minority groups in the United States and also among non-Western international psychologists. One result of this awareness is the emergence of numerous new journals, books, and organizations questioning Western psychology's

A. J. Marsella ✉
Professor Emeritus,
Department of Psychology,
University of Hawaii, Honolulu,
Hawaii 96822

e-mail: marsella@hawaii.edu

stance and offering alternative views and data that are more valid, accurate, and appropriate for our times (e.g. ethnic-minority psychology, cultural psychology, indigenous psychology, critical psychology, feminist psychology, and liberation psychology). The recognition is not new, but it is growing in proportion and consequence. In my opinion, this recognition needs to be nurtured and sustained given the changing political, economic, and cultural power-shifts occurring in the world. I say, let us learn, understand, and respect the many different psychologies of the world rather than accept as dogma the psychology of the West that has dominated education and practice for so many decades (e.g. Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006).

Emerging Abuses

In my opinion, the existing situation is resulting in the encouragement and support of the following: (1) ethnocentrically biased mental health assessments, services and interventions; (2) limited applicability of psychological knowledge to the daily-life circumstances and challenges of people in developing countries; (3) inappropriate training of international psychologists in the USA and Europe; (4) limited attention to issues of peace, conflict, and justice associated with Western hegemonic globalization efforts; (5) suppression of critical debate because of perceived and experienced power asymmetries; (6) hesitancy to address the social, political, and economic determinants of thought and practice because these are ignored or minimally addressed in Western universities and colleges; (7) acceptance of North American and Western European psychology as the “world standard” for research and practice in many national and international organizations (e.g. WHO, Red Cross) (see, for example, Higginbotham & Marsella, 1988).

Many psychologists of non-Western origins have raised similar concerns. For example, a few decades ago, Fathali Moghaddam, a Persian trained in the UK and now a distinguished faculty member at Georgetown University in the United States, wrote that the United States is considered the “First World” of psychology, with other industrialized societies constituting the “Second World,” and developing nations making up the “Third World” (Moghaddam, 1987). He concluded that a major problem with this situation is that psychology continues to be exported from the “first” and “second” worlds to the “third” world, with little or no attention to the appropriateness of what is being exported or even how it is taught (Moghaddam & Taylor, 1986). Although his concerns are now more than two decades

old, they continue to be valid. Consider, for a moment, this simple fact: developing countries face enormous problems in poverty, population growth, political instability/war, environmental destruction, urbanization, and so forth. Yet, how many educational and training programs in psychology are providing training in these areas for students from developing countries either in the West or in their native countries? And what are the textbooks and journals used to inform students?

Girishwar Misra (1996), an Asian Indian, represents yet another scholar of non-Western origin who has raised critical concerns about the proliferation of Western psychology. A decade ago, he wrote:

The current Western thinking of the science of psychology on its prototypical form, despite being local and indigenous, assumes a global relevance and is treated as universal of generating knowledge. Its dominant voice subscribes to a decontextualized vision with an extraordinary emphasis on individualism, mechanism, and objectivity. This peculiarly Western mode of thinking is fabricated, projected, and institutionalized through representation technologies and scientific rituals and transported on a large scale to the non-Western societies under political-economic domination. As a result, Western psychology tends to maintain an independent stance at the cost of ignoring other substantive possibilities from disparate cultural traditions. Mapping reality through Western constructs has a pseudo-understanding of the people of alien cultures and has debilitating effects in terms of misconstruing the special realities of other people and exoticizing or disregarding psychologies that are non-Western. Consequently, when people from other cultures are exposed to Western psychology, they find their identities placed in question and their conceptual repertoires rendered obsolete (Misra, 1996, pp. 497–498).

Thus, for many ethnocultural and minority groups, international students, and international psychologists there is an unreality to the dominance of their North-American and Western-European centered education and knowledge foundations. They are asked to accept what is taught and supervised -- often at the peril of dismissal -- even as they recognize it may have little relevance, or applicability for them. And it should not be forgotten that there are also negative consequences for Western psychologists of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds because of their ethnocentricity. Their ethnocentric training and education limits their horizons of thought and application, keeping

them captive to an obsolete and prejudicial world-view in our global era. Witness what occurred in recent national and international disasters when well-intentioned Western professionals found their methods of assessment, intervention, and prevention of questionable utility: “I need a new boat, not pills and talk.” “I don’t like to talk to strangers about how I feel, and it does not help,” “I prefer to go to the temple and pray” (e.g. Marsella, Johnson, Watson, & Gryczynski, 2008).

Political and Moral Consequences

Equally important, however, are the implicit political assumptions and consequences of North American–Western European psychology. Decades ago, Sampson (1983) argued that Western psychology reflects a “capitalist mentality,” and that, in many instances, science serves the existing political and economic ideologies of the West. Later, Sampson (1991) noted a distinction between “conventional” (i.e. science as a mirror of nature) and the “socio-historical” (i.e. science as a story or proposal about reality) approaches or views.

For critical psychology advocates (e.g. Sloan, 1997, 2001), “psychology’s theories, methods and practices contribute to the maintenance of an existing social order characterized by oppression, domination, inequality, and injustice.” Critical psychology supporters want a psychology that will be dedicated to building a just society. Sloan (1996) writes:

...the major problem lies less in the theoretical limits of Western psychology, although these are serious, than in the social functions of Western psychology. As scientific psychology entrenches itself further in industrial nations, its function as a sociopolitical stabilizing mechanism has gradually become more obvious...psychological theory and practice embody Western cultural assumptions to such an extent that they primarily perform an ideological function. That is, they serve to reproduce and sustain societal status quo characterized by economic inequality and other forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. The core operative assumptions that produce this ideological effect both in theory and practice are individualism and scientism. (Sloan, 1996, p. 39)

Consider also the views of a leading critical psychologist, Isaac Prilleltensky (1997; see also Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997 and Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2004), who raises concerns about the moral and social justice implications of our training programs for maintaining the status quo. Prilleltensky (1997) writes:

...we believe that psychology’s traditional practices and norms hinder social justice, to the detriment of individuals and communities in general and of oppressed groups in particular...as you will discover throughout this book, mainstream psychology is also inherently value-laden. It seeks to maintain things essentially as they are, supporting societal institutions that reinforce unjust and unsatisfying conditions. Psychology is not, and cannot be, a neutral endeavour conducted by scientists and practitioners detached from social and political circumstances. It is a human and social endeavour. Psychologists live in specific social contexts. They are influenced by differing interests and complex power dynamics. Mainstream psychologists too often shy away from the resulting moral, social, and political implications. (Prilleltensky, 1997, p. 1; quoted in Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997)

For critical psychology advocates (e.g. Sloan, 2001), “psychology’s theories, methods, practices contribute to the maintenance of a social order characterized by oppression, domination, inequality, and injustice.” They argue for a psychology that will be dedicated to building a just society.

Ten Implicit and Explicit Assumptions in North American & Western European Centered Psychology

I contend that North American and Western European psychology, with its roots and attachments to logical positivism and Western “Enlightenment” thinking, is a cultural construction. As such, it reflects the assumptions, values, and priorities of the dominant Western cultural and historical contexts. Because of this, basic assumptions about human nature (i.e. ontology), knowing the world about us (i.e. epistemology), and ways of acting or doing things (i.e. praxiology) constitute an abuse because of their dominance and their attachments to North American and European political, economic, social, and military dominance.

In my opinion, the ethos that continues to dominate in this psychology is driven by a commitment to the following:

- (1) *Individuality* – The individual is the focus of behavior. Determinants of behavior reside in the individual’s brain/mind, and interventions must be at this level rather than the broader societal context.
- (2) *Reductionism* – Small, tangible units of study that yield well to controlled experimentation are favored.
- (3) *Experiment-based Empiricism* – An emphasis on experiments with controls and experiment group

comparisons and uses of ANOVA analyses that often account for 5-10% of variance. Lab studies are often favored over field studies.

- (4) *Scientism* – The belief that methods of the physical sciences can be applied similarly to social and behavioral phenomena, which results in spurious methods and conclusions that are inappropriate to the subject under study or that avoid studying certain subjects.
- (5) *Quantification/Measurement* – “If something exists, it can be measured, said Edward Thorndike. Unless something under study can be quantified, it is not acceptable for study. This, of course, leads to operationalism as the standard for assessing concepts.
- (6) *Materialism* - Favors variables for study that have a tangible existence rather than higher order constructs -- I can see it and touch it under a microscope.
- (7) *Male Dominance* – Years of male dominance favors particular topics, methods, and populations for study – remember “involuntal melancholia” the psychiatric disease of middle-aged women.
- (8) “*Objectivity*” – Assumption that we can identify and understand immutable aspects of reality in a detached way, unbiased by human senses and knowledge.
- (9) *Nomothetic Laws* – Search for generalized principles and “laws” that apply to widespread and diverse situations and populations because of an identification and admiration for the physical sciences.
- (10) *Rationality* – Presumes a linear, cause-effect, logical, material understanding of phenomena and prizes this approach in offering and accepting arguments and data generation.

Both separately and as a group, the ethos in psychology generated by these assumptions is often in direct conflict with many of the assumptions of psychologies from non-Western cultural and historical traditions because their ontologies, epistemologies, and praxiologies differ dramatically. It is essential in a global era that we resist any hegemonic imposition of something as important as psychology. Clearly, every culture in the world has its own psychology that emerges from its unique historical and situational circumstances. Efforts must be made to understand and to respect these differences rather than to deny or abuse them (e.g. Kim, Yang, & Hwang, 2006).

Roots of the Assumptions

The characteristics noted above can be traced to a

number of diverse historical, cultural, and intellectual forces in North America and Europe that shaped values, thought, and behavior (e.g. Newtonian physics, Enlightenment-era thought, anti-religious sentiment, Marxism, logical positivism, electro-chemical developments in late 19th Century, and the politics of British and German intellectual dominance because of their economic and military dominance). It was simply assumed, because of ethnocentricity, that these assumptions were correct. They emerged from history as the uncontested reality of Western Europe and North America. A reality to be imposed on the rest of the world.

And So . . . Doubt

Thus, I say to all psychologists -- Western, Eastern and In-Between -- recognize the historical and cultural contexts of your knowledge and practices. See them as “cultural constructions” relative to time, place, and person. Though you may yearn for the comforts of certainty, this is not possible for our field of knowledge. But this is not a cause for grief nor sorrow. Rather, it is a recognition that has made for the very advances in knowledge we respect. Consider here the wisdom of the ancient writings of the *Rgveda* from more than 3500 years ago:

Not non-existent was it, nor existent was it at that time; there was not atmosphere nor the heavens which are beyond. What existed? Where? In whose care? Water was it? An abyss unfathomable? . . . Who after all knows? Who here will declare from whence it arose, whence this world? Subsequent are the gods to the creation of this world. Who then, knows when it came into being? This world - whence it came into being, whether it was made or whether not - He who is its overseer in the highest heavens surely knows - or perhaps he knows not. (Creation Hymn - X. 129, *Selections from the Rgveda*, Maurer, W. 1986, p. 285)

Here the unknown author was willing to point out with comfort that the very overseer in the highest heavens may not know. Yes, it is the very process of “asserting” yet “refuting” that is expressed in the Creation Hymn that advances our knowledge. In a publication on the search for meaning, I wrote:

It is an adaptive dialectic (doubt and certainty) that enriches and extends our human possibilities and potential. Even as we reach a hard-won conclusion, doubt emerges to move us toward yet other possibilities. Unlike other beings whose behavior

is fixed by reliance upon instinct and reflex, human beings have the capacity for reflective thought. We can reach a conclusion in one moment and modify it a moment later. The human impulse to know and to doubt provides an insight into the origins and nature of our . . . belief systems. These too, spring from our impulse to know and to doubt (Marsella, 1999, p. 41).

A Closing Thought

In this brief commentary, I have attempted to raise some serious concerns that have too long been ignored by psychologists across the developed and developing world – the risks and consequences of the ethnocentric biases of Western psychology’s knowledge and practices – the potential for abuse (from) these. Now, in this inaugural issue of the National Academy of Psychology’s *Psychological Studies*, I can think of no better time nor place to raise some critical concerns for the future of Indian psychology as well as the development of psychology throughout the world. I greet your new journal with respect and admiration. May it fulfill its mission. *Namaste Ji!*

References

- Fox, D., & Prilleltensky, I. (Eds.) (1997). *Critical psychology: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Higginbotham, H. & Marsella, A.J. (1988). International mental health consultation and the homogenization of third-world psychiatry. *Social Science and Medicine*, 27, 553–561.
- Kim, U., Yang, K., & Hwang, K.K. (Eds.) (2006). *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in context*. NY: Springer SBM Publications.
- Marsella, A.J. (1998). Toward a global psychology: Meeting the needs of a changing world. *American Psychologist*, 53, 1282–1291.
- Marsella, A.J. (1999). In search of meaning: Some thoughts on belief, doubt, and well being. *The International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 18, 41–52.
- Marsella, A.J., & Pedersen, P. (2004). Internationalizing the curriculum in counseling psychology. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 17, 413–424.
- Marsella, A.J., Johnson, J. Watson, P., & Gryczynski, J. (Eds.) (2008). *Ethnocultural perspectives on disasters and trauma*. NY: Springer SBM Publications.
- Misra, G. (1996). Section in Gergen, K., Gulerce, A., Lock, A., & Misra, G. (1996). *Psychological sciences in cultural context*. *American Psychologist*, 51, 496–503.
- Moghaddam, F.M. (1987). *Psychology in the three worlds*. *American Psychologist*, 47, 912–920.
- Moghaddam, F.M., & Taylor, D.M. (1986). What constitutes an “appropriate psychology” for the developing world? *International Journal of Psychology*, 21, 253–267.
- Maurer, W. (1986). *Pinnacles from India’s past: Selections from the Rgveda*. Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Prilleltensky, I. (1997). Values, assumptions, and practices: Assessing the moral implications of psychological discourse and action. *American Psychologist*, 52, 517–535.
- Prilleltensky, I. & Nelson, G. (2004). *Doing psychology critically*. London, UK: Macmillan.
- Sampson, E.E. (1983). *Justice and critique of pure psychology*. NY: Plenum Press.
- Sloan, T. (2001). *Critical psychology: Voices for change*. NY: MacMillan.
- Sloan, T. (1996). Psychological research methods in developing countries. In S. Carr & J. Schumaker (Eds.) *Psychology and the developing world*. NY: Praeger.