Chapter 21

Creating Indigenous Psychologies

Insights from Empirical Social Studies of the Science of Psychology

John G. Adair

About 20 years ago I was introduced to the concept of indigenous psychology by a young graduate student in Canada, Uichol Kim. Intrigued by the concept he was presenting, I posed the question, “How do you know when the goal is achieved — when a non-indigenous psychology within a country has become an indigenous psychology?” Uichol responded with examples of indigenous concepts, that only made me puzzle more about the dynamics of the process called indigenization. My question had been posed from my social studies of science perspective rather than from my perspective as a cross-cultural psychologist. I was interested in operationalizing and studying how the indigenization process worked.

My work over subsequent years has applied social science research methods, e.g., bibliometric and content analyses, interviews, surveys, and database analyses, to the study of the science of psychology — in this case how it develops and is made culturally appropriate in countries around the world. Social studies of science are not common within psychology, and particularly uncommon in the study of indigenous psychologies. Aside from occasional empirical data collections on the state of development of a subfield or of the discipline within a country, Gabrenya’s (2004) research on the indigenous psychology movement within Taiwan represents the only other systematic program of research on the topic from this perspective. His research has focused on understanding the individual, interpersonal and organizational dynamics, and contextual factors influencing the community of psychologists engaged in indigenising psychology within a single country, Taiwan. In contrast, my research has focused on the indigenization
process across several countries. My approach is to empirically describe the
course of change in research over time with the goal of determining the fac-
tors that facilitate and impede the ways in which an imported discipline is
made more culturally sensitive and appropriate and of identifying the vari-
ables that impact on this process. My approach is primarily descriptive and
analytical of what has occurred rather than prescriptive or normative of
what should occur. In this paper I review some of the insights that have
emerged as a result of these studies.

HOW THIS APPROACH DIFFERS

A social studies of science approach differs in many ways from those that
pursue the identification and promotion of indigenous research accom-
plishments. For example, rather than culturally unique findings as the
goal for this research, indigenous psychologies and the way they develop
are the objects of study. This different perspective hopefully will challenge
and inform thinking about indigenous psychologies.

Indigenous contributions vs. Indigenous Psychologies

The first difference may be the distinction between indigenous contribu-
tions and indigenous psychologies. Research is conducted in discrete proj-
ects. Research projects that attempt to explain thoughts and behaviors that
are unique to a culture with concepts and measures developed within the
culture may make identifiable indigenous contributions. Such contribu-
tions are important to the society and to the development of its indigenous
psychology. They may better represent the culture, identify differences
from so-called Western mainstream psychology, and serve as stimulants
and models for indigenous research by others. But we should resist the
temptation to equate indigenous contributions with an indigenous psy-
chology. Indigenous contributions are like anecdotes — they serve a useful
purpose, but are an inadequate means of assessing discipline progress. For
example, it is safe to say that many of the research projects that proceeded
in the fashion described at the opening of this paragraph would not make
significant contributions, yet such research by any definition would be
regarded as that found in an indigenous psychology.

Moreover, it should not be assumed that merely increasing the number
of such indigenous contributions will, like building blocks, ultimately lead
to an emerging indigenous psychology. Such a perspective confuses indig-
enization as a goal with its function as a process to develop an “appropri-
ate” psychology for the culture. Much more is involved. The creation of an
appropriate psychology for any country is not solely dependent upon its