

Comments on the future of Asian social psychology

David Matsumoto

Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California, USA

The efforts of Asian social psychology and the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) over the past decade and longer have clearly drawn attention to Asian cultures and their potential influence on psychological processes, and have highlighted the need to incorporate Asian social psychology into a global understanding of social psychology. Despite these advancements, however, all four authors, in their own way, suggest that these efforts are only the tip of the iceberg, and describe how Asian social psychology can shift their contributions to a higher gear. In this brief commentary, I discuss three points raised in the papers by Atsumi, Hofstede, Leung, and Ward: identity, the gold standard of comparison, and the contribution of Asian social psychology to a global social psychology, all in relation to visions of the future.

Key words: Asian social psychology, global social psychology, gold standard, identity.

Introduction

Atsumi (2007, this issue of the Journal, pp. 32–40), Hofstede (2007, this issue of the Journal, pp. 16–21), Leung (2007, this issue of the Journal, pp. 8–15) and Ward (2007, this issue of the Journal, pp. 22–31) each celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) in a unique and significant way. I was fortunate enough to have been exposed to their ideas twice, the first time listening to their keynote addresses at the Sixth Biennial Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, 2–5 April, 2005, Wellington, New Zealand, and the second time reading their ideas in the articles written for this Special Issue of the Journal. Collectively, they highlight the many accomplishments that Asian psychologists and Asian social psychology have achieved in the past decade and longer, but, even more importantly, they give us visions of the next decade and beyond. In doing so, they point out strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, for the future endeavour of Asian social psychology. Across their work, there is a consistent voice of concern, and cautious optimism, for that future.

In the present article, I offer comments on three issues raised either directly or indirectly by the authors: identity, the gold standard of comparison, and a global social psychology. I describe how I understand those concerns, and offer my own, perhaps different, views on these issues from my perspective – as a descendant of Japanese immigrants to the USA, academically trained and currently working in the USA on issues relevant to an Asian social psychology. My hope is to focus arguments and bring further clarity to

the visions already expressed by these founders of Asian social psychology, and to offer a different perspective on them, in order to encourage further contributions of Asian social psychology in the future.

Identity

One consistent question raised by the authors has concerned identity. Exactly who is an Asian social psychologist? What is Asian social psychology? What are the boundaries of Asia? What is the difference between Asian social psychology and a global social psychology?

As a continent, Asia is enormous, stretching from its western borders (in what is more commonly known as the Middle East than Western Asia), through Southern Asia (India, Pakistan), along South-east Asia, and from there up to East Asia and across even further towards the South Pacific and Oceania. The Asian continent comprises over 40 independent countries. As in any continent of the world, there is an amazing degree of variation among these countries, in terms of geography, climate, population and population density, affluence, religion, and economic power. These differences are associated with vast differences in history, tradition and, importantly, culture. Although this is true of all of the continents of the world, the diversity of the Asian continent is, in my opinion, second to none.

I was puzzled and intrigued to hear and read about Leung's and Ward's comments about identity. Leung differentiated between psychologists working in Asia and those not, whereas Ward wondered whether she was an Asian social psychologist. Yet, given the perspective of the Asian continent above, one definition of Asian social psychology could be social psychology originating in any of the countries of Asia that is relevant and meaningful in describing the social psychological processes of the

Correspondence: David Matsumoto, Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132, USA. Email: dm@sfsu.edu

Received 13 July 2006; accepted 1 September 2006.

citizens of those countries. An Asian social psychologist therefore could be anyone in the world doing such work, regardless of whether or not they were born or educated in an Asian country, currently work in an Asian country, or are ethnically Asian. A psychologist's passport or place of employment is of little concern in relation to the topic and culture being studied, and shouldn't the latter far outweigh the former? Of course it should, and thus it makes perfect sense to me that Ward is the president of AASP. What's important to the field is not where a person was born or works, but the bringing forth of data that originate from Asian countries that heretofore have been underrepresented in the literature, and that can inform us meaningfully about psychology.

What is the gold standard?

When Hideo Nomo, Ichiro Suzuki, and Hideki Matsui joined American Major League Baseball, on the one hand it was hailed as an accomplishment – that Japanese baseball had finally arrived. Yet, on the other hand, it created a worry that Japanese professional baseball would merely serve as a feeder system for the American big leagues. Underlying these ideas is the notion that American baseball is the best and should be the ultimate target of development.

This idea was an underlying current among several of the articles, evident in comparisons to American psychology journals, Asian psychologists educated in American universities, or the impact of Asian social psychology on American social psychology. Perhaps it appears silly for me, a psychologist working in the USA, to raise questions about this, but I did have strong questions about it. Why should graduating from or getting a job at an American university, or, more precisely, publishing in American journals, be the gold standard of comparison? Should Asian social psychology be a feeder system for big league American psychology?

Maybe, and maybe not. If the goal of Asian social psychology is to provide that feeder system, accepting explicitly that American psychology is 'better' for some reason or other, then sure, by all means, the markers of achievement should be in the number of articles produced by Asian social psychologists in mainstream American journals, or the number of Asian social psychologists educated and employed in the USA.

If, however, the goal of Asian social psychology is different, then the markers of achievement, and the gold standard of comparison, must be different. This begs the question of what are the goals of Asian social psychology and AASP? The AASP website states that its goals are to:

- Promote the development of social psychological research and its application in Asia-Pacific

- Provide opportunities for students to pursue education and careers in social psychology
- Serve as an academic forum for social psychologists in Asia-Pacific.

Achievement and progress in these goals does not appear to be directly dependent on American psychology. Perhaps I am naïve, but it seems to me that Asian social psychology could proceed without worrying as much about how it fares in relation to the USA. Perhaps incorporating the USA as a comparison could be part of a standard of achievement, but it seems to me that it should not be the whole or the most important. There are many developmental issues of concern for AASP as an organization, and for Asian social psychology in general, that do not depend on American-made markers.

Contributions to a global social psychology

One theme that resonated from all the papers was the potential for Asian social psychology to contribute to a global social psychology. Hofstede for instance, spoke about the contribution of Asia to his fifth cultural dimension – Long versus Short-term Orientation. Atsumi discussed the importance of applied research on relevant social issues that are unique to Asia. I, too, believe this is an important service Asian social psychology can play in the world, and cannot agree more wholeheartedly with the authors on this point.

But, while the field has made great strides at putting Asia on the map of psychology, there are still many limitations. As Leung pointed out, many studies and papers originating in Asia deal with culture. I agree with both him and Ward that these studies are limited because they typically compare psychological processes in an Asian country with the USA. Here again, the bias for comparison involves the USA, and it need not be so. Comparing data with the USA is a limited strategy that will bring about only limited results vis-à-vis the findings that could potentially be generated within a larger, global perspective.

There is also a limitation in the Asian countries studied. In my view, one of the important contributions of an Asian social psychology could be the elucidation of social psychological knowledge and principles that capture the rich and complex diversity of the Asian continent. But, currently, 'Asian' social psychology is in reality 'East Asian' social psychology, with some exceptions. Most of the research that is published about 'Asian' social psychological principles, both in American journals and in this journal, tend to be studies involving participants from Japan, China (including Hong Kong), Korea, and Taiwan.

Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with studies from these countries, and, at least from the American per-

spective, they are a welcome addition to the literature. But one of the unfortunate consequences of this reality is that 'Asia' becomes homogenized in the minds of many, and this is evident in the writing, both of Asian psychologists in Asia and elsewhere, as well as in American and other non-Asians writing about Asia. Certainly, there may be some underlying consistency in the psychology of the peoples of Asia. But, allowing research based on a few East Asian countries to represent 'Asian' social psychology does little justice to the diversity that exists in the Asian continent. I understand that much of this state of affairs is due to many factors, including differences among countries in economics, educational systems, ideologies about psychology, and the like. Yet, I cannot help but think that there must be some way to overcome these differences to promote the development, study, and reporting of social psychological issues across a broader range of the Asian continent. It starts with a vision, one that I believe the founders of AASP probably held, and many of the current leaders hold today. I offer these comments to remind us about it.

Certainly, no one would agree that Asian cultures and individuals are alike; there are vast similarities and differences across cultures and individuals. The world, however, or, more precisely, the world according to American psy-

chological publications, knows little about those differences, and thinks it knows much about the similarities. Who in Asia would agree that Korean culture is the same as Japanese or Hong Kong Chinese? The differences, in fact, are striking. The diversity is even larger across the Asian continent, from Iran to the Philippines. Yet the literature often does this great diversity a huge injustice by not recognizing it. I am often frustrated at how researchers take findings from one or a few samples from one or a few countries from the Asian continent, especially East Asia, and make generalized interpretations about 'Asia' and 'Asians' in general. This is certainly one area that Asian social psychology can well inform the rest of the world. Both between and within the vast cultural contexts that exist in Asia, there are probably many similarities and differences in social psychological processes. The elucidation of these could make a tremendous contribution to a global psychology. We need rich, complex, and accurate descriptions of the cultures of many countries in Asia, and how these relate to the psychological processes associated with the members of these cultures. Indigenous approaches to theory and research, as well as cross-cultural comparisons that do not involve Americans (gulp!), will be a welcome addition to the literature.