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## Chapter 24

The Genesis of Macro Cultural Psychology's Political Orientation from Other  
Approaches to Cultural Psychology

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### The Psychology of Oppression

Macro cultural psychology's distinctive emphasis on the politics of culture (rooted in the political economy) introduces issues of power, oppression, class hierarchy, alienation, dispossession, destabilization, mystification, and false consciousness (that are elements of political economy) into cultural psychology. Material and political oppression generate, and depend upon, psychological oppression, which reciprocally generates them (Ratner, 2011, 2014c; Clark, 1965). Attacking psychological oppression is the way that psychologists can utilize their specialized competencies to improve social and psychological activity. We

assist oppressed people to comprehend their psychological oppression, as a window into economic and political oppression, and as calling for distinctive features of political-economic transformation/liberation. We explain how psychological phenomena reflect, embody, and reproduce oppressive macro cultural factors. We reveal internalized, subjective, oppression as a means of comprehending and transforming macro cultural oppression.

MCP highlights psychological oppression by employing concrete terms that connote its presence. We reject abstract terms that do not designate these. For instance, we reject the notion of cultural stress (stressors) because it is abstract. It includes stress that a medical team feels when urgently and rapidly performing surgery to save a patient's life. Stress also includes imprisonment, and precarious/threatening working conditions. General, abstract categories such as stress, shift attention to general, existential difficulties of life that are resolved by general, existential acts that "reduce stress." To avoid this, macro cultural psychologists use concrete terms such as oppression/exploitation instead of stress. Similarly, we replace neutral, abstract, descriptive terms such as "social hierarchy" – which includes parent-child relations and scientist-novice relations as well as boss-employer relations -- with political, explanatory terms such as discrimination, slavery, colonialism, and social class. These terms identify power, politics, economic principles, economic motives of special interest groups that generate and benefit from them.

Psychology of oppression includes people's ignorance, incapacities, mystifications, mistakes, apathy, silences, conformity, anti-social and self-destructive behavior. These are as telling about their psychology as what they do see and understand. They are as telling about society as its fulfilling aspects are. "Power works to develop and maintain the

quiescence of the powerless. Together, patterns of power and powerlessness can keep issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, and interests from being recognized” (Gaventa, 1980, p. vii; Lukes, 2005). These issues of oppressive psychology reflect oppressive society.

Psychology of oppression also includes what people find pleasurable, desirable, valuable, comfortable. It includes not simply what they dislike and avoid, but what they seek, imagine, acquire, retain, and (re)produce. Oppression is not entirely harsh, it is also pleasurable; not simply coercive but also alluring; not simply repressive but also expressive and impulsive; not simply passive but also active. This is the powerful insight of Marcuse and Foucault. They explain how consumer capitalism oppresses people by providing stunted, alienating, depersonalizing forms of need, pleasure, comfort, success, productivity, and expression.<sup>1</sup>

A major cultural factor that generates psychology of oppression is ideology. Ideology is the cultural mechanism for obscuring negative, oppressive features of a social system and its political economy. Social obfuscation obviously stunts consciousness, not only of society but also of psychology/behavior, because the latter is a function of social relations. Misperceiving, distorting, and denying cultural factors obviously limits one’s understanding of psychology/behavior. Ideology fosters “false consciousness.”

The psychology of oppression includes 1) the psychology of ordinary people, and 2) the psychological discipline of academics who study psychology and intervene to improve it. I designate this specialized, academic activity as Psychology, with a capital P, in distinction from spontaneous psychology of people. Macro cultural psychology analyzes psychology and Psychology to explicate 1) their oppressed, truncated, misinformed

elements, and 2) their oppressive/oppressing elements that promulgate oppression, stultification, and mystification (regarding the causes of and solutions to social-psychological problems).

I shall illustrate these points in the case of “indigenous” psychological constructs. These are psychological tools in Vygotsky’s sense, which means they are indigenous cultural factors that contain psychological elements. Examples are losing face, filial piety, romantic love, privacy (personal space), and consumerism. These “emics” are presumed to be valid descriptions and explanations (and predictions) of native people’s psychology because they are the terms in which the natives understand themselves. For example, indigenous psychologist Hwang (2017) says “From the Confucian [constructs about] ethics and morality, we can understand the specific mentality of people living in Confucian society.” Emics are deemed superior to imposed foreign concepts (etics) such as schizophrenia that are ignorant of local culture and psychology. Emphasizing psychological constructs is part of the multicultural movement that respects diverse cultures and opposes the hegemonic, imperialist universalizing of a dominant culture and its constructs (Ratner, 2008).

However, indigenous cultures are class structures that are based on oppression and mystification. Their indigenous concepts are oppressive and mystified accordingly. They are not viable alternatives to oppressive capitalism. On the contrary, they must be revolutionized just as much as the dominant countries must be. Validating indigenous culture and psychology as locally-constructed expressions of agency, apart from a political economy and class structure and power relations, and ideology, leads indigenous

psychologists to ignore deleterious aspects of indigenous cultures and constructs. It also leads them to ignore the need to radically transform these cultures and constructs. I shall engage in a macro cultural psychological analysis of several Asian indigenous psychological constructs which elucidates these deleterious, political aspects.

I utilize the theory and methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis: “CDA tends to focus upon the ways in which the availability and localized uses of certain discursive constructions maintain and legitimate existing power relations within institutions and institutional practices” (Sims-Schouten, Riley, Willig, 2007, p. 108). This perspective helps us apprehend the ways that indigenous constructs obfuscate the actual, oppressive forces of society. This deprives their victims of a critical understanding of them that could transform them. This obfuscation of macro culture prevents understanding the origins, form and content, and function of psychological phenomena. Indigenous psychological constructs are thus bad scientifically and politically.

### Indigenous Chinese Cultural Constructs

Wang and Greenwood (2016) explain how unemployed Chinese workers draw upon traditional Chinese concepts as psychological tools to deal with their tragedy. Furthermore, the authors identify the psychological effects of utilizing these traditional concepts. “In China the xiagang [unemployment] problem became a national crisis. 25.5 million workers were laid off from State owned enterprises between 1997 and 2003. Only a few researchers have explored the psychological processes the laid-off workers experienced”

(p. 52). It is telling that this national crisis commanded little attention from Chinese psychologists and social scientists.

Wang & Greenwood identified four psychological themes that laid-off workers experienced: a) feeling of loss, b) feeling of physical pain, c) feeling of fatalism, and d) accepting unemployment and seeking to overcome it. These experiences are concretely (historically) organized by, and expressed (symbolized) in, indigenous Chinese concepts. Feeling of loss is dominated by loss of face (*diu mianzi*). Physical pain is a cultural somatization of mental pain. Fatalism is defined by Chinese ancient theocratic concept of *Tian Ming*. Acceptance of reality is attributed to finally making face (*zheng mianzi*) in Confucianism and Daoism.

Nearly all the interviewees said that their first response to being laid off involved losing face (*diu mianzi*). This cultural template, or framing, of their loss generated a series of psychological feelings. The interviewees said that losing face made them feel shameful and unable to confront their families, friends, and neighbors. They enclosed themselves in their own world of distress, without much communication with the outside world. For example: “I felt I had no face to meet my families, friends, neighbors after being laid off. I felt I was shameful and inferior to my friends. Therefore, I tried to avoid seeing them. I did not want to meet people and talk with them as I lost my face with losing my job. I trapped myself at home and the only thing that I did was smoking ... smoking ... smoking, and I tried to smoke all my anger and distress out of my heart ....What made me very shameful was that my daughter felt she lost face in front of her classmates due to my layoff (Li Ming, 48 years old, male, married, p. 56).

The indigenous cultural construct “losing face” exacerbates the tragedy of unemployment. It generates corollary social and emotional experiences to unemployment. This exemplifies Leontiev’s and Vygotsky’s statements that cultural factors contain psychological meanings, motives, aspirations, and constraints that are individualized in personal subjectivities.

Diu mianzi is political in that it blames the worker for the job loss that was instigated by a bureaucratic decision. This blaming the victim through shame, deflects criticism of the State that was responsible for the crisis. It did not lead Li Ming to resent, criticize, or rebel at the system. Utilizing this cultural construct to explain Li’s unemployment additionally led Li’s daughter to blame her father rather than the State. Emotional shame is a conservative emotion that maintains the status quo by blaming and punishing individuals for negative behavior (Lin, 2012).

Atilola and Ayinde (2015) identify this same character of shame in Yruba culture (where it is called esin). Loss of face/shame is a major cause of suicide there. “Therefore, when life is on the verge of indignity, dishonour, and shame, suicide was an acceptable and even the honourable way out in the ancient Yorùbá historical social cognition” (p.462). Esin and suicide are thus macro cultural concepts that frame peoples’ self-understanding and self-concept, and direct their behavior. Essin and suicide are not personal inventions. Culturally informed Esin is also a stronger cause of suicide than psychological depression is, among the Yruba.

Yruba suicide reflects the fact that social failure/deviance/loss of face is attributed to individual incompetence and (ir)responsibility. If failure were attributed to cultural factors (structures, policies) – i.e., if people adopted the macro cultural psychological point

of view -- victims and the community would protest the culture and console the victims. Individual attribution of social failure exacerbates the malaise of failure by making victims kill themselves (Gaventa, 1980).

This analysis applies to the other Confucian notions that framed the three other psychological reactions to unemployment. The workers' physical pain reflects the traditional Chinese taboo on expressing, or experiencing, psychological distress – which is construed as weakness. Physical distress is construed as not construed as so personal, and is thus socially acceptable: it's not one's fault if one's body hurts. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman has explained this thoroughly in his work.

The unemployed workers felt a sense of fatalism and loss of hope about the future. Nearly half of the interviewees felt that their future was hopeless because they were born at the wrong time and bad luck had followed them since the time when they were born. (This echoes the individualistic, self-blame of losing face.) This theme was closely connected with the Chinese concept of Tian Ming ('The Mandate of Heaven'). "Heaven was regarded as the power to rule the lower world; it was responsible for the rise and fall of the rulers and the contentment and discontentment of the people. Thus, fatalism is one of the characteristic traits of Chinese people" (Wang and Greenwood, 2016, p. 60) that traps them in unfortunate situations.

Over time, some individuals found alternative jobs. However, Tian Ming and diu mianzi make the process difficult by generating pessimism.

MCP reveals that indigenous cultural concepts can oppress people by exacerbating their objective difficulties, causing psychological stress and stultification, and mystifying their true sources and solutions. This exemplifies Vygotsky's point that macro cultural



psychological tools are the operating mechanisms of psychological phenomena; they do psychological work. Consequently, “the basic problem is the study of those means and devices that the subject used to organize his behavior in concrete form... Bringing up auxiliary means of behavior allows us to trace the whole genesis of the most complex forms of higher mental processes...This methodology makes them accessible for objective study; it objectivizes them” Vygotsky (1999, p. 59). This is what analysis of indigenous psychological constructs can accomplish.

### Mystifying, Oppressive, Features of Psychological Interventions

The politics of mystification are not confined to indigenous, traditional psychological constructs held by the people. They extend to psychological diagnoses and interventions by professionals (i.e., Psychology) that socially adjust the ways that people generate and express psychological phenomena.

An excellent description of this is Yang’s (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017) analysis of the manner in which anger is treated by professionals in Chinese social science and public health. Yang describes the political objectives of minimizing and channeling anger to mute social unrest. Chinese social scientists, therapists, and policy makers partition anger from macro cultural-political factors, by reframing it as a) a psychological overreaction that can be medicated, and/or b) a reaction that is rooted in masculinity.

This occurred in the way anger was construed and treated in the case of displaced workers (from state enterprises) in Changping in the mid-1990s. Yang says that class

became salient in workers' everyday discourse and in their confrontations with factory management and local governments when articulating their discontent and anger about anti-working-class policies. However, workers also adopted less oppositional discourses which conformed to authoritative discourses of the state. For example, unrest among working-class men was framed by local authorities as a crisis of masculinity rather than class struggle. This crisis is one basis of disbursing government assistance (programs on reemployment, poverty relief, etc.). To qualify, male workers in Changping often instrumentally adopted this official discourse to claim they are suffering from weakened masculinity that prevents them from providing for their family. Thus, government authorities imposed financial and social constraints on the ways that emotions are framed and expressed.

Therapy recapitulates this obfuscation. “Class as an analytical and political concept has been replaced by gender (and race). Also the rise in the post-Mao era of a biologized, naturalized understanding of gender facilitates the [distorted] expression of class differences through gendered meanings” (Yang, 2016, pp. 104-105, my emphasis). This politics of Psychology complements the politics of psychological phenomena. Both politics obfuscate the social, political-economic, and ideological causes of malaise by blaming false causes such as individual deficiencies. Confucian anger management is what Foucault calls governmentality: it protects the status quo from outrage. Political critique and protest are replaced by positive talk therapy (see Ratner, 2017b for similar analysis of guanxi).

Yang explains two Chinese political-philosophical traditions that are central to the current cultural framing of anger —Confucianism and Daoism. Confucianism explains anger management display. Daoism explains appraisal processes that generate anger.

Confucians encourage 'higher' rather than 'lower' expressions of the anger – e.g., moral indignation rather than physical violence (Yang, 2016, p. 105). For them, social order is restored by li (ritual of propriety). Li dictates rules for both individual behavior and the social order. To adhere to li, one must restrain one's emotions and do what is right to conform to social norms for greater unity rather than giving into passion or anger that would disrupt norms.

Daoists undertake a different strategy. They seek to eliminate the reason for anger via cognitive reappraisal (xiangkai) or a combination of purposeful neglect and non-judgment (hutu). Daoist adherents thus propose that "A person does not allow likes and dislikes to get in and do harm". They cultivate a kind of emotionality rooted in stillness (ibid., pp. 105-106).

Community psychosocial counselors, whose responsibility is to help laid-off workers 'recover' from the trauma of being cast off from the state sector, and to help them 'help themselves' adapting to the market economy, often stigmatize public, critical, anger/cursing ("majie") as an irrational, feminine and bodily symptom. This pejorative labeling renders as illegitimate, workers' requests for justice (ibid., p. 109).

Psychotherapeutic intervention (in conflicts between management and workers intensified by unemployment and its crippling consequences) has attempted to domesticate widespread anger and discontent among workers. In Changping, workers'

displays of anger and discontent have been directly engaged by local authorities through medicalized discourse, feminization, reemployment, shaming, comradery... and Confucianist and Daoist approaches to anger management. My analysis examines both the domestication of anger and the personalization of politics, for example, by counselors; both are state organized interventions designed to shift blame from policies that aggravate injustice towards problems of the individual (ibid., p. 120).

Yang (2017) says, Chinese “self-help uses heart-based Confucian ethics not only to help individuals cope with socioeconomic changes, but also, I argue, to constrain direct opposition to the causes of those changes by translating structural inequalities into ethical and moral issues. I suggest that this virtuous power serves government interests. The emphasis on Confucian ethics humanizes market competition and biologizes individual and family responsibility for care, legitimizing both class stratification and the family as a provider of social welfare.”

Ma (2012) reports that Chinese psychiatry has turned toward Western, individualistic, biomedical causes and cures for mental illness that compound the individualism of indigenous psychological constructs. “Contemporary psychiatrists construe schizophrenia as a disorder of the self.” “The social-psychological issues that concerned patients and families were seldom given any attention by the staff” (ibid., p. 210).

## The Paradoxical Character of Indigenous Psychological Constructs for Scientific Cultural Psychology

Indigenous cultural concepts have a dual, contradictory cultural character. On the one hand, they are cultural insofar as they represent (crystalize) particular cultures and organize psychological phenomena and behavior in accordance with particular cultural systems.

At the same time, indigenous concepts do not invoke concrete cultural reasons to explain psychology. Rather, indigenous concepts generally invoke metaphysical, supernatural, natural, or personal processes to explain psychology. This obscures macro cultural forces that organize psychology/behavior.

The Chinese constructs we have examined are obscurantist in this way. So are most explanatory constructs of psychology such as fate, god's will, genes, neurotransmitters, hormones, and libido. These are all indigenous constructs that explain psychology in non-cultural terms.

Indigenous constructs generally validate indigenous people's psychology as creative agency; they do not recognize debilities in indigenous psychology – i.e., that people are ignorant about their society, and the origins, organization, and function of their psychology. Nor do indigenous psychological constructs recognize that they are partially responsible for ignorance, irrationality, prejudice.

Indigenous concepts thus do not apprehend the full nature of peoples' psychology. Nor do they apprehend the full nature of themselves and their effects. They do not

comprehend that they obscure the cultural organization of psychology, and they obscure the oppressive aspects of cultural factors.

The Hindu notion of brahman further illustrates these points. Chakkarath (2012, p. 84), an indigenous psychology advocate, explains that brahman is a Hindu concept of an eternal, universal soul, an all-encompassing life force that embodies all aspects of existence, including the individual self (atman). Ignorance of this (true, real) relation results in suffering.

Human beings are equipped with a cognitive system that is the main source of human suffering...The individual develops the conviction that he is a unique and separate entity, unrelated to the rest of the world...The individual constructs an opposition between himself and world instead of recognizing...brahman. This ignorance is the source of egoism and results in selfish behavior, driven by uninhibited emotions, greed, the need for a diversified and adventurous life, and so forth...which constitute the root of failure, disappointment, frustration, aggression, shame, and many other negative states (ibid).

Chakkarath's account never refers to macro cultural factors as causing social-psychological problems or needing reorganization in order to eliminate problems. Individual cognitive systems simply go awry – for no particular reason -- in failing to apprehend the true interrelationships and balances that universally exist. Brahman 1) blames individual

cognitive systems for ignoring brahman, 2) blames the plethora of social-psychological problems -- ranging from failure to disappointment to aggression -- on this individual, cognitive failure, 3) assumes that recognizing brahman will eliminate/prevent the plethora of problems. For Hinduism, harmony does not need to be constructed through cultural reorganization and political action; for it naturally exists. Humans simply fail to apprehend harmony. The solution lies in psychological remedies to correct individual cognitive failures so they may appreciate bliss that already exists.

These preposterous claims distort reality. Reality is that macro cultural factors such as exploitation, class structure, capital accumulation, consumerism, private property, and commodification cause real alienation and anomie, which lead to social-psychological problems. This is the reality that people misperceive and succumb to. And one of the main causes of people's ignorance is indigenous constructs such as brahman that mystifies the causes and solutions to the problems. Brahman and face possess oppressed/oppressive/oppressing features.

The Buddhist notion of self-concept manifests the same neglect of culture. Chakkarath (2014, p. 187) explains that this notion constitutes the self from: 1) earth, water, fire, and wind; 2) sensations of body and objects, 3) physical perceptions of sound and taste, 4) mental formations, 5) consciousness of sensory organs. Specific, organized, cultural factors are not included in the influences on self. Yet Chakkarath (2012, p. 82) claims that "indigenous psychology shares the cultural psychologist's conviction that we need to investigate psychological phenomena in their specific ecological, historical, and socio-cultural contexts".

Indigenous constructs do not even regard themselves as cultural factors. They do not regard themselves as 1) having arisen for specific historical-political-cultural reasons, or 2) as invoking specific processes to explain psychology because of historical-political-cultural reasons, or 3) resulting in certain politically functional understandings, that 4) are often mystifying. Instead, indigenous constructs – from hormonal explanations of behavior, to mystical life forces, to face -- declare non-cultural reasons for psychology as a matter of fact, without any cultural-political-historical reflexivity. This is a double depoliticization by indigenous psychological constructs – they depoliticize the causes of psychology, and they depoliticize their own origins, features, effects, and functions.<sup>2</sup>

MCP reverses/corrects these dual depoliticizations. MCP explicates the political-historical-cultural origins, content, and effects of indigenous constructs and interventions. MCP is an analysis of indigenous constructs and interventions that understands them better than they understand themselves from their introspective cultural gaze. Vygotsky (1978, p. 63) says, “real, scientific analysis differs radically from subjective, introspective analysis, which by its very nature cannot hope to go beyond pure description. The kind of objective analysis we advocate seeks to lay bare the essence, rather than the perceived characteristics, of psychological phenomena.” (Indigenous constructs often eschew this kind of objective, political analysis critique by disparaging “Western epistemology” as inherently ethnocentric and imperialist. This rejects scientific epistemology as well as deductive logic and analysis.)

The ahistorical, apolitical, acultural accounts of psychology inherent in Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese psychological concepts, culminate in individualistic solutions to, social-



psychological problems (see Gross-Loh, 2013). Hinduism says that, “The source of our suffering is our attachment to things, which is driven by our desires and our failure to realize that everything we passionately crave for, including our ego, is merely transient. The cessation of suffering can be reached by extinction of desires” (Chakkarath, 2014, p. 187). Thus, social suffering is caused by human ignorance generating false passions. This is cured by extinguishing passion, not by reforming society and its problematical structures.

Indigenous psychology’s deficient politics and psychological science are interdependent.

Indigenous psychological constructs are cultural in certain respects, however, they are anti-cultural in other respects. They are cultural concepts that often mystify themselves, culture, and behavior. They are a form of ideology, as most kinds of cultural constructs are. For instance, political concepts, such as “People’s Republic of China” misrepresent the character of China, just as “Anyone can be successful in the USA” misrepresents the American class structure, social mobility, and psychological competencies. Accepting such political concepts at face value prevents understanding the full character of the societies and peoples’ behavior. Psychological constructs share this character of cultural concepts in a particular society. Where cultural concepts in general are ideological and mystify the social system and behavior (in order to mask its deleterious aspects), psychological constructs will share this character. For instance, highly developed, indigenous, bourgeois economic constructs fail to comprehend the capitalist economic system (that spawned them). Not a single mainstream American economist predicted the Great Recession of 2008 through utilizing bourgeois economic constructs. (In contrast, Marxist economics did

predict the Recession.) Why should indigenous psychological concepts be any more prescient?

Culture-obscuring, cultural concepts have limited value for cultural psychology. They explain part of cultural psychology, but they also obscure part of it. They obscure concrete cultural elements of a people's psychology that stem from concrete cultural factors such as government policies, economic dynamics, the power structure, the class structure, ideology, and indigenous cultural concepts.

#### MCP's scientific and political differences with TCP

The reason for indigenous psychology's shortcomings are rooted in TCP's blindness to issues of power and politics, oppression and emancipation, in culture, psychology, and Psychology. TCP's oversights are rooted in its circular model of culture that excludes the political economy. This deprives it of a full comprehension of culture and culturally-formed psychology. It also deprives it of any critical element regarding culture and psychology. Indeed, we have observed that TCP is part of the multicultural movement that seeks to validate indigenous cultures.

The circular model of culture is less robust and less clear than the conical model about the origin, character, organization, reorganization, and function of cultural and psychological factors.

MCP utilizes the political economy to explain the fundamental impetus, character, organization, and function of cultural factors and psychological factors (Ratner, 2018; Marcus & Fischer, 1999). The political economy provides a systematic unity of form and

content that pervades all the cultural factors (Williams, 1973, p. 7). Critical Discourse Analysis is a guide for elucidating the ways in which the availability and localized uses of certain discursive constructions maintain and legitimate existing power relations within institutions and institutional practices.

The political-economic core of society additionally affords an entry point that can effectively and comprehensively transform the system. Other cultural theories, that reject the conical, historical materialist, model of culture, lack this specific entry point that radiates into the whole of society and can produce systemic change. They must address individual factors in relation to others, in piecemeal fashion.

An expanded view of culture that includes its political dimension can ameliorate the political and scientific shortcomings of cultural psychology and indigenous psychological constructs (Ratner, 2018a, b). This expanded view adds politics, power, and economic social relations to psychological phenomena and the cultural factors that bear on psychology. This enables us to perceive, critique, and transform their political effects, such as maintaining oppressive elements of the status quo. Politicizing culture – as Foucault insightfully does -- elevates scientific cultural psychology to an emancipatory science.

For example, cultural psychological work on Chinese traditional, psychological constructs, and psychological interventions, along with modern Chinese psychiatry, reveals an emphasis on individual deficiencies rather than systemic, structural problems and solutions. This is a form of psychology of oppression that mutes social-psychological understanding, critique, and reform. This political analysis of psychology of oppression traces oppression from human subjectivity to macro cultural factors and leaders which promote the psychology of oppression. Moreover, cultural psychology reveals particular

forms that oppression takes. In China, as in the U.S., one form that oppression takes is social-political-economic individualism, or neoliberalism. It mystifies people about the structure and principles of society and its relations of power. This is an important contribution to understanding Chinese society and Chinese psychology. It corrects Chinese ideology about China being socialist, which implies democratic, collective empowerment, collective solutions to problems, and de-mystifying ideologies. A politically-informed cultural psychology would suggest directions for reforming the full panoply of cultural influences on Chinese psychology and Psychology. These include political, ideological, and institutional influences, as well as indigenous concepts, that limit psychological fulfillment.

This cultural-political critique of cultural factors includes critiquing the psychological reaction (experience) that these cultural factors generate. Blaming oneself, and feeling depressed and guilty, about one's unemployment, is misinformed and misdirected by indigenous psychological tools that mediate the unemployment. This reaction (experience) must be revised to reflect the true causes of unemployment. This adjustment of experience requires adopting a new psychological tool -- in Vygotsky's sense of a macro cultural frame or template, that structures cognition, perception, and emotion -- which apprehends the political and economic causes of unemployment. This cultural-political understanding that inheres in the new psychological tool should alleviate the misdirected, oppressive, self-blame and guilt, by generating a different psychological reaction (experience), namely, resentment at the macro cultural factor of unemployment and its causes and effects. Moreover, this new psychological reaction, that is generated by the new psychological tool, potentiates social action to generate new, humanizing cultural factors.

This new, cultural organization of subjectivity will a) enhance the worker's understanding of his society and his experience, and b) improve his society (working conditions) and his experience. Immersion in culture, as a cultural insider and loyalist, does not necessarily achieve what our macro cultural psychological perspective achieves.

Social policy must not be based upon subjective fears or desires that have been formed by oppressive cultural factors; for that would codify the culture and psychology of oppression (the fact that people love many injurious things – junk food, Donald Trump – and hate many valuable things).

In taking these critical, political positions toward culture and psychology, cultural psychology can become a powerful factor for understanding and enhancing psychology and society.

MCP's critique of indigenous psychology and Psychology applies to political movements that work for human emancipation. Movements for multiculturalism and diversity, for example, accept indigenous cultures and psychology as a way of correcting and resisting historical oppression and marginalization. Our MCP critique of indigenous psychology demonstrates that it does not oppose oppression, alienation, mystification; it does not usually provide deep fulfillment, harmony, emancipatory agency, creativity, and cooperation. Chinese medicine and religious notions do not "recuperate the social person and reconstruct a whole socio-moral-cosmic world...In so doing, they granted their lives meaning, reclaimed agency, and negotiated change..." as Ma (2012, p. 223) asserts. She describes traditional Chinese notions that the body is possessed by ghosts and spirits which are sometimes abducted and encounter supernatural beings. She concludes "These religious narratives broke the boundary of the individual constructed by biomedicine,

seeking instead to build a social world in the great cosmos” (ibid., p. 219). This idealizing of Chinese constructs as a humane alternative to Western biomedicine, overlooks and promotes their alienating, individualizing, and mystifying psychological effects that we have observed. (It is distressing that social scientists like Ma accept mystical, ignorant, irrational, stupefying, nonsensical, notions – e.g., spiritual possession by ghosts -- as reclaiming authentic agency, building sociality, building cosmic harmony, and negotiating change (!), while ignoring the need for political transformation to achieve these. (Clark, 1965, pp. xii-xx1, provides historical examples of this error.)

MCP’s political analysis demonstrates that social, political, and psychological fulfillment does not lie, ready-made, in diverse, marginalized, cultural groups. Their oppressed cultural factors and psychologies must be emancipated through political transformation, just as those of capitalist cultures must be.

## II. Cross-cultural Psychology (CCP)

CCP’s culture theory is entirely different from TCP’s and MCP’s:

Culture =  $\Sigma$  Discrete, singular, cultural variables. Culture is not an integrated, concrete system of interdependent factors.

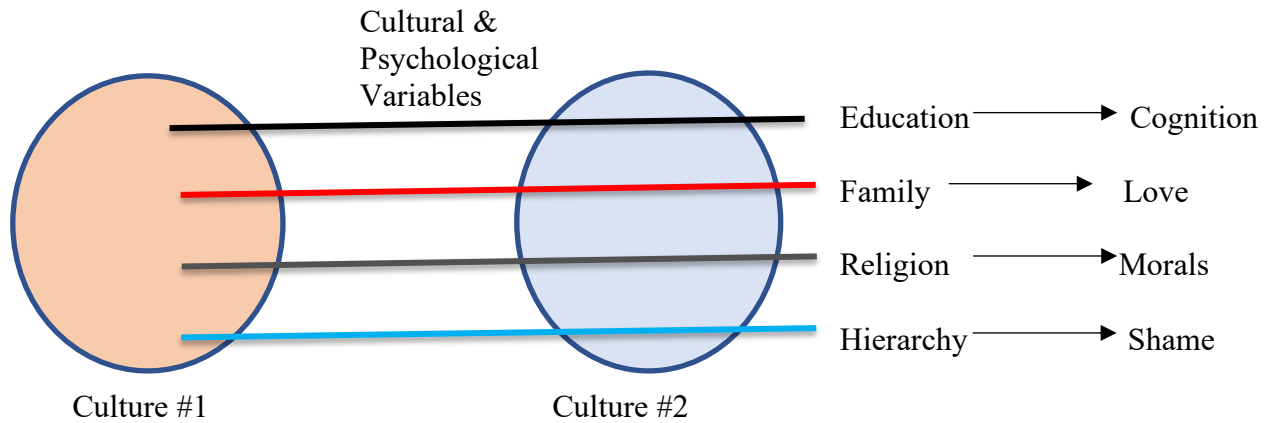
Cultural variables generate psychological phenomena in point-to-point, mechanical fashion.

Figure One





Figure One  
Cross Cultural Psychology's Cultural Model



A culture is a set of abstract, discrete, transcultural variables that link it with other cultures. A culture is not a concrete gestalt of interlocking components. Culture is simple, not complex, because its components are singular and independent. Each variable is qualitatively invariant, and only varies quantitatively in different cultures. This is why the focus is on measurement, because qualities are presumed to be transparent, abstract, and fixed, and only need to be counted/calculated by overt, simple, transparent, features that are operationally defined. This is why qualitative methodology is rare in cross-cultural psychology. The conception of culture determines the conception of cultural and psychological factors.

For example, one study compared “Instrumental Lying” among parents in the US ( $N = 114$ ) and China ( $N = 85$ ). Instrumental lying is the practice of lying to one's children to encourage behavioral compliance. 84% of parents in the US and 98% in China reported

having lied to their children for this purpose. Within each country, the practice most frequently took the form of falsely threatening to leave a child alone in public if he or she refused to follow the parent. This study treats instrumental lying as a quantitative variable that is qualitatively universal, and simply compares quantitative variability in different countries.

Cross-cultural psychologists frequently correlate superficial, discrete variables. Chopik, et al. (2017) used a sample of 104,365 adults across 63 countries to reveal that higher empathy countries have higher levels of collectivism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, self-esteem, emotionality, subjective well-being, and prosocial behavior. Each of these variables is a singular, abstract, qualitatively fixed factor that simply varies quantitatively across cultures. Each of these cultural variables affects the degree of other factors, not their qualities that are discrete, fixed, and universal (natural).

Rosaldo related the emotion of shame to the presence of social hierarchy. “Hierarchy” is an abstract dimension of the kind that cross-cultural psychologists work with. When Rosaldo utilized it in her psychological anthropological work, instead of using a concrete “emic” macro cultural factor of a particular culture, she crossed from TCP to CCP. Researchers often do this because they fail to emphasize fundamental differences in approaches to cultural psychology.

Rosaldo explains shame and hierarchy as follows. Egalitarian relations do not generate shame over impulses and behaviors that escape individual control: “For Ilongots – and, I suggest, for many of the relatively egalitarian peoples in the world – there is no social basis for a problematic that assumes need for controls, nor do individuals experience themselves as having boundaries to protect, or as holding drives and lusts that

must be held in check if they are to maintain their status or engage in everyday cooperation” (Rosaldo, 1984, pp. 148-149). In contrast, “In reading recently about the hierarchical Javanese, I was impressed that “shame” for them is something of a constant sentinel, protecting the (male) self from a distressing mundane sphere” (ibid.).

However, Rosaldo’s abstract, apolitical dimensions (variables) cannot adequately explain or describe the issues she raises. “Hierarchy,” “distress,” “holding impulses in check,” are so general that they cannot explain specific behavior or psychology. For example, distress can refer to a huge variety of specific conditions that distress people in different ways and lead to diverse affects. As such, distress cannot explain any particular reaction such as shame. The same holds for hierarchy. There are many kinds of hierarchy – from parent-child, to teacher-student, to prison guard-prisoner, to social class. They do not all generate distressing conditions, or restraining drives, that culminate in shame. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that restraining drives (another abstract variable) generates shame in general. It could easily generate in its opposite, as in the case where someone wants to steal something but restrains herself and feels pride about this. Conversely, many people who commit anti-social, impulsive acts feel gratification, not shame. This is particularly true in the hierarchical societies of U.S. and China which are plagued by extensive egoism and corruption are unrestrained by shame.

Contemporary parent-child hierarchies find parents indulging children to express their wishes; these hierarchies do not restrain wishes via shame.

We have seen that when Chinese unemployed workers felt shame after losing their jobs, it did not derive from losing control over asocial lusts, as Rosaldo contends.

Unemployed workers felt shame because the Confucian cultural construct of *diu mianzi*

channeled their interpretation of unemployment into a personal deficiency. The concrete, cultural concept of shame – rather than “hierarchy” -- made them feel shame, personally.

### The politics of cross-cultural psychology



Only concrete, political, cultural and psychological factors offer the possibility of concrete political transformation of their oppressive features. We can transform neoliberalism, Wahhabi Islam, Saudi femininity, saving face, etc. We cannot eliminate abstract hierarchy, or femininity, or controlling psychological desires. Cross-cultural psychology thus impedes concrete emancipation. Additionally, independent, separate, cross-cultural variables are manipulated separately, one by one. This piecemeal, incremental, fragmentary change excludes comprehensive, systemic, thorough, revolutionary social change.

### Micro Cultural Psychology (mcp)

Macro cultural psychology’s ongoing, historical development has included an engagement with the scientific and political aspects of micro cultural psychology. Indeed, many current micro cultural psychologists formerly subscribed to MCP before rejecting it. Their rejection obviously provokes engagement from MCP. I shall comment on mcp with the objective of clarifying and advancing the scientific and political approach of MCP.

## Figure Two

### Micro Cultural Psychology's Culture Theory

Culture =  $\sum$  Individuals:  +  + 

The logic of mcp is:

1. Psychology is a function of culture
2. Culture is a function of the individual
3. Therefore, cultural psychology is a function of the individual and person-centric

This makes mcp appear to be a form of cultural psychology. However, this appearance is misleading. For its conception of culture is reductionistic to the individual. This makes cultural psychology a function of the individual, not culture. Micro cultural psychology contradicts the fundamental, essential, minimal tenets of cultural psychology that I outlined in the opening of this chapter. These are:

1. Psychology is cultural
2. Culture is supra-individual, collective, cooperative activity and products
3. Therefore, psychology is supra-individual and culture-centric.

Macro cultural psychology seeks to develop cultural psychology, in part by fathoming, correcting, and circumventing the individualistic errors of mcp. These construe individuals as constructing their own social reality and psychology in the form of personal meanings. This is based on an individualistic political philosophy of freedom.

Subjectivism construes external phenomena as stimuli and resources that individuals may select for their own purposes of constructing their meanings of things. Culture has no definite, structured form or content that constrains, organizes, or directs psychological

activity. Culture is essentially interpersonal relations that are negotiated by autonomous participants to serve their own purposes. Individual and interpersonal activities are the basis of social reality. This makes social reality readily changeable through individual, subjective changes in what society means.

This individualistic, subjectivistic sense of culture and psychology comes from diverse, intellectual sources: social constructionism, postmodernism, neoliberalism, and liberal-humanism. Many micro cultural psychologists have devolved from an initial attraction to traditional cultural psychology and Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. Examples are Valsiner, van der Veer, Gonzales-Rey, and recently, Cole, Engestrom, and Wertsch (see Ratner, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012b, 2015, 2016a, 2017c, 2018). Thus, Valsiner & van der Veer (2014, pp. 164, 162) now state, "The horizon is precisely indeterminate – it looks as if it is a contour, but it is only our ego-centered construction." "The objective of human development is the establishment of autonomy as an acting person." Gonzalez-Rey similarly declares, "the subject is always singular and grounded in his or her own subjective configurations" (cited in Ratner, 2015, p. 57, my emphasis).

Tateo (chap. 25 of this volume) similarly prioritizes the individual over cultural factors and systems. He dissipates culture into an abstraction, devoid of meaning, substance, and influence, so that it can always be interpreted and acted on as the individual wishes. Tateo says:

I would rather conceive cultural psychology as a way of looking at human beings. I do not like for myself the idea of asking all the time whether I am

a psychologist, a “cultural” psychologist, too much of a sociologist or not enough of an anthropologist. We must be aware of the fact that we basically work with a non-existing object. “Culture” is one of those world/word that indicates an archipelago of meaningful human activities. Culture has no agency, thus we cannot evoke it as *explanans* - justification, explanation or agent – to account for what we want to understand – the *explanandum* – about human beings. The peculiar gaze of cultural psychology is exactly the capability to look at human phenomena as wholes, in which the personal interpretation within a coordinated collective frame of reference represent an element of a open system. Culture can be understood as *a system of systems*, in which everyone is at the same time a whole and a part, a center and a periphery in a becoming.



Tateo reduces culture and psychology to abstractions such as archipelago of meaningful activities, system of systems, whole and part, center and periphery, personal interpretation, collective frame of reference, open, becoming. These are presented without definition or coherence or empirical examples or argument. Tateo says the person is a part of a cultural whole, e.g., frame of reference. But Tateo is silent about the nature of this relation. How much freedom does individual interpretation have within the collective frame of reference? Do all subjectivities inherently have the same degree of freedom? Does the slave have as much freedom to interpret a frame of reference as a slave owner? Tateo's abstractions do not deal with this reality.

After stating that personal interpretation is a part of a cultural frame of reference, Tateo declares that everyone is at the same time a whole. A whole composed of what? What kind of whole? And rather than answering this question, he tosses out another notion that everyone is both a whole and a part, a center and periphery. What does any of this mean? A center and periphery of what?

What are the systems that comprise a cultural system? Is personal interpretation a system? This would be an odd sense of personal interpretation. And if culture is a system of systems what are the other systems that comprise culture? And just how do these plural, nondescript systems congeal

to form a system of culture? All Tateo says is that culture is an archipelago of meaningful activities. But how is this a system of systems?

For him, everything and everyone is always open and becoming. But how does he know this? Why should we accept this bald statement? What does it mean? What is the process of becoming/change; what are the determinants of the change that guide the direction change takes?

Tateo's abstractions, like those of all micro cultural psychologists, are outside the conceptual universe of concrete, cultural factors and systems such as slavery, neoliberalism, fascism, Islam, Scandinavian capitalism, Chinese capitalism, economic austerity, economic depressions, centralized economic planning, commodities, capital, aristocratic upper class. These are all displaced by empty abstractions such as "everyone is at the same time a whole and a part, a center and a periphery in a becoming." Tateo's abstractions cannot lead to acknowledging, understanding, or transforming concrete, social reality. "Everyone is at the same time a whole and a part, a center and a periphery in a becoming" cannot conceptualize, much less understand or explain, the political economic demographic that in 2014, the United States' poverty rate was 17.2%, compared to 10.4 percent in the U.K, 9.1 percent in Germany, 8.8 percent in Sweden, and 8.6 percent in Switzerland. Even in Greece, hit hardest

by the Great Recession, poverty was lower than the U.S. in 2014, with a rate of 15.1 percent.

Micro cultural psychologists are simply not in this conceptual universe; they deny concrete culture, and they distract others from it(see Ratner, 2009).

If Tateo would descend from frivolous abstractions to real life, he would acknowledge that culture and cultural members have none of the features that comprise his notion of culture. Slaves were not centers of open systems of becoming in which their personal interpretations merrily interacted with frames of reference. Slavery was a definite, organized, structured, administered, punitive, political system that was objectified in macro cultural factors which coerced slave behavior. Slavery was not merely a frame of reference that slaves could refer to and define and open as they wished, by inserting their interpretation at its center (or periphery?). Slavery excluded this possibility. It whipped and beat and shackled and sold slaves who attempted to do what Tateo cavalierly proclaims to be normative human nature.

Organized, structured, objectified, political, slave culture does explain what we want to understand about the psychology and behavior of slaves; just as social class explains and justifies the psychology of its members – as all sociological research, and macro cultural psychological research -- concludes.

This is exactly what Vygotsky says about psychology, as we have documented in the previous chapter. Vygotsky refutes Tateo's opinions.

The mcp argument goes something like this: People use consumerism for diverse purposes and meanings. Some use it to make themselves happy, e.g., buying new shoes. Some use consumerism to express their attraction to someone else, e.g., buying a potential lover a gift. Some people use consumerism to inflate their status in the eyes of others, e.g., buying an expensive car to appear wealthy and important. Some people use consumerism to replace a relation with people, e.g., becoming consumed with upgrading to the latest model of some product. Where is there any objective, cultural property or meaning to consumerism, in all this diversity of motives?

Our answer is that one cultural quality does exist amidst all this diversity. The cultural property is the commodifying of human social relations and subjectivity. Marx explained this de-personalizing effect of commodifying human traits in the section on Money in his third Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts: with money, "what I *am* and *am capable of* is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the *most beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money. I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and hence its possessor. The distorting and confounding of all human and natural qualities, the fraternisation of impossibilities [e.g., ugliness obtaining beauty] – the *divine* power of money – lies in its *character* as men's estranged, alienating and self-disposing *species-nature*. Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*." This objective character permeates various subjective motives, intentions and objectives of consumerism. Subjectivity/agency does not displace or supersede consumerism.

Erickson (2011, pp. 41-42) debunks the ideology of individual free choice in explaining racial segregation:

The de facto model holds that current (and some past) school segregation comes from the actions of individuals as they enter the housing market, create or reinforce segregation, and then produce segregated schools. De jure segregation, usually juxtaposed with de facto segregation, comes from state action in explicitly discriminatory law or policy.

Although acts of individual racism helped shape [resistance to] desegregation, individual “choice” was never as autonomous as the de facto logic suggested. A deep field of historical work on housing has shown that federal policy frankly encouraged segregated white suburbs and segregated black city neighborhoods. The seemingly autonomous, free-market, white house purchaser was in fact responding to clear policy-based incentives and disincentives. Federal tax and lending policies made purchasing a suburban home both a more possible and a more seemingly desirable choice than remaining in city neighborhoods. Transportation policy helped, too, as low gas taxes facilitated longer commutes on newly opened interstates linking suburbs and the city—some of which opened just months before school desegregation via busing began. These highways facilitated white families’ departures to surrounding, non-desegregating, school systems. Simultaneously, without federally backed mortgages for existing urban homes or access

to many suburbs still barricaded by segregationist practices in the real estate industry, most black families, and nearly all poor black families, remained anchored in urban centers. Individuals, both black and white, did make choices, but they did so within boundaries formed by policy.

The subjectivism, individualism, and anti-scientific logic of micro cultural psychology culminate in the rejection of politics. Organized politics that aim at radically transforming macro cultural factors are a) impossible because there is no basis of common action, and b) unnecessary and irrelevant because all behavior is construed as individually created and individually changeable.

### Trends Among The Four Approaches To Cultural Psychology, And The Future of The Discipline

We have analyzed the four approaches to cultural psychology in relation to their scientific and political adequacy. These two dimensions are interdependent. Good science goes with good politics, and bad science is interdependent with bad politics. These interdependent dimensions are subject to ranking (high to low) as they exist in the four approaches.

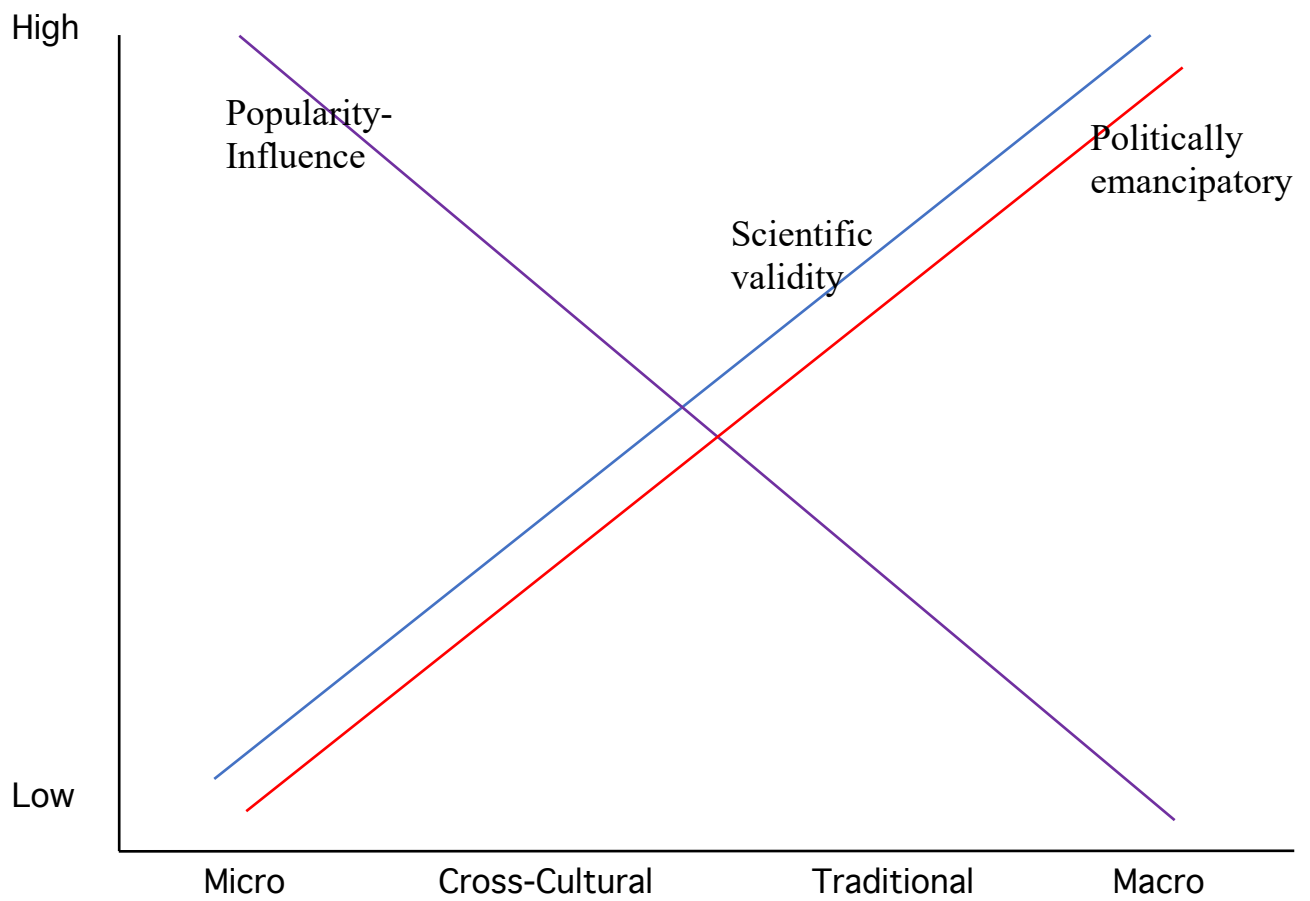
- 1) macro cultural psychology
- 2) traditional cultural psychology
- 3) cross cultural psychology

#### 4) micro cultural psychology

The scientific and political adequacy of these approaches should correlate with their popularity and influence in the field. Oddly, the opposite has occurred, as figure three depicts.

Figure Three

The Inverse Relationship between the Popularity of Cultural Psychological Approaches and Their Scientific and Political Value





The popularity of approaches to cultural psychology is inversely proportional to their value, and directly proportional to their deficiencies regarding science, and political emancipation. Let me explain their popularity rankings.

Macro cultural psychology remains neglected by cultural psychologists of the other approaches. It is too structural and political and complicated for the tastes of cultural psychologists.

The unpopularity of macro cultural psychology is revealed in the near extirpation of the terms “capitalism” and “neoliberalism” from cultural-psychology publications such as *The Asian Journal of Social Psychology*; *Transcultural Psychology*; *Ethos*; *Human Development*; *Culture, Medicine, & Psychiatry*; and *Cross-Cultural Research*. In its 13-year history, the leading journal *Culture & Psychology* has only mentioned capitalism two times a year. And the vast majority of mentions were references to books containing the word, rather than used by an author in a discussion of capitalism and psychology. The number of authors beside myself who used the word was a small handful. The same is true for the journal *Mind, Culture, Activity* which mentions the word capitalism in 4 articles over a 16-year history. The *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* mentions the word capitalism twice in 850 pages. *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* does not list capitalism in its index.

These journals and books also fail to discuss in detail elements of capitalism such as exploitation, alienation, commodification, ideology, mystification, hegemony, or social class (Ratner, 2012b).

The International Society for Cultural-historical Activity Research, belies its name by rarely addressing cultural-historical issues. This is evident in its 2017 conference program: [http://www.iscar17.ulaval.ca/sites/iscar17.ulaval.ca/files/iscar\\_preliminary\\_program\\_july\\_11th.pdf](http://www.iscar17.ulaval.ca/sites/iscar17.ulaval.ca/files/iscar_preliminary_program_july_11th.pdf). The cascading geopolitical and economic problems, exacerbated by the dangerous presidency of Trump, command no attention from these psychologists who claim to specialize on the cultural context and organization of psychology. Nor do any of the conference papers concern social theories, such as Bourdieu's, Foucault's, or Marx's, that could help direct cultural-historical psychologists to conceptualize cultural and political issues which organize psychology.

MCP is threatening to all oppressive societies because it exposes their political interests, social content, and destructive, social-psychological effects. These would be welcome in democratic, collective societies that exist to promote the fulfillment and empowerment of the populace by improving the social system. Consequently, the extent to which MCP is popular within a society is an indicator of society's position on the continuum of oppression-emancipation.

Traditional cultural psychology. In its heyday in the 1980s, it generated a great deal of impressive theoretical and empirical research. However, TCP has been slipping in popularity since then. Many of its advocates have abandoned it, along with MCP, in their devolution into micro cultural psychology. The subjective individualism of the latter allows them to jettison TCP's appreciation of macro cultural factors, social organization, social structures and conditions, as well as culture theory, psychological theory, and rigorous

methodologies – which are rejected for constraining subjective freedom. TCP thus stands in third position on the popularity index.

Cross-cultural psychology ranks second in popularity among approaches to cultural psychology. The reason is that it has become integrated into mainstream academic psychology where it is disseminated among masses of students. CCP conforms to positivistic ontology and epistemology of mainstream psychology and social science. It is not “hampered” by complex, holistic conceptions of culture and cultural factors; nor is it bothered by internal, organic, mutual relations between culture and psychology that concretize their qualities. Cross-cultural psychology is also supportive of the status quo through its piecemeal approach to social improvement.

Micro cultural psychology is the most popular approach to cultural psychology. It has seduced most former Vygotskyians and activity theorists, as well as many traditional cultural psychologists. It emphasizes and glorifies individual agency and facile, individual change. This feels uplifting in our demoralized climate of oppressive, corrupt, constraining, unfulfilling macro cultural factors. Micro cultural psychology resonates with contemporary populist political philosophy of identity politics and multiculturalism/diversity. Indeed, multiculturalism is equivalent to social constructionist “local truths” which people define for themselves, and which they demand to be respected in practice (Ratner, 2016b, chap. 2).

Micro cultural psychology is additionally appealing because it dispenses with scientific methodology, culture theory, and psychological theory. Psychological research is reduced to eliciting and recording agentive acts and patterns, as well as their personal intentionality.

This accepts and validates the subjectivity of people, untainted by external theories and methodologies and cultural conditions.

While my ranking of popularity is open to some debate – concerning the relative positions of TCP and CCP – the fact is that unscientific and oppressive approaches to cultural psychology dominate the field, and displace scientific, emancipatory approaches. Unless this trend is reversed, it will culminate in cultural psychology disintegrating into a complicit ideology for a deteriorating, oppressive society.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Since we desire things that stunt us, it means that our subjective desires are not valid indicators of what is objectively fulfilling. This is the phenomenon of false consciousness; it

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is a subjective consciousness that is unaware of its objective interests and even feels pleasure when the latter are stunted (Ratner, 2014b). This is a major challenge to democracy and social movements that are animated by expressions of agency. Giving voice to agency is not fulfilling/liberating. Liberation is a matter of realizing peoples' objective interests, not their subjective interests.

This important cultural-psychological issue is imperceptible by other approaches to cultural psychology that do not consider political issues such as oppression, manipulation, and mystification.

<sup>2</sup> These problems with indigenous constructs reveal that “indigenization” is problematical; it is not Westernization that is problematical. Western constructs are deficient because they are indigenous to a mystifying culture, not because they are Western. And indigenous, non-Western constructs are deficient for the same reason.