

# What Should a Social Psychology for Social Change Look Like in Asia? Reflections on Scientific Research, Aimed at Solving Social Problems and Generating New Knowledge With 'a Theory of Culture Change at Its Centre'

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In late 2013, the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) signed an agreement with the *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology* (JPRP) to annually produce one themed issue in accordance with both organisations' missions, for a period of 5 years. For AASP, the annual publication of a themed issue on 'The Social Psychology of Social Change: Science and Practice in Asia' was the end result of 2 years of member consultation, undertaken by President-Elect James Liu from 2012 to 2013. This resulted in a Mission Statement, and a directive from members to develop a second publications outlet with an SSCI impact factor, but more focused on applied research, to complement AASP's eponymous flagship journal the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* (which is more basic in its research orientation).

AASP's mission is:

*to provide scholars in Asia and the Pacific with a collaborative forum for the discussion, promotion, capabilities building, and publication of their research. [AASP] promotes research on Asian traditions, philosophies, and ideas that have scientific merit and practical applications, and expands the boundary, substance, and direction of social psychology by supplementing and integrating Western psychology's focus on intra-individual processes with a broader and more holistic view from culture and society. (see <http://asiansocialpsych.org/about+us?src=nav>)*

The themed issues, launched in 2014 and edited by then AASP President James Liu and then President-Elect Allan

Bernardo, began this mission by attempting to publish 'scientific research, aimed towards solving a social problem and generating new knowledge (Bargal & Bar, 1992), but with a theory and practice of culture and culture change at its centre' (J.H. Liu & Bernardo, 2014, p. 29). The purpose of this introduction is to take stock of what has and has not been accomplished with the publication of three annual themed issues (2014–2016) in this ongoing series. We will ultimately introduce the five new papers in this year's themed issue, but along the way, we will review all 19 papers published over the 3 years, and summarise the reality of the publications relative to our original call for papers in 2013–2014. In doing so, we hope to simulate conversations about the future of applied social psychology in Asia (and other parts of the world).

## Source Countries and the Process of Submission

Of the total of 19 papers, nine were from the People's Republic of China (including one from the Special Administrative Region of Macau). This percentage mirrors AASP's membership, with about half of its members coming from China; this reflects the massive and growing influence of China as the second largest economy in the world, and the biggest in Asia. After China, there were four papers from Taiwan and three from the Philippines. These totals reflect the relational nature of Asian society: James Liu is

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from Taiwan and Allan Bernardo is from the Philippines, and they have employed their social network resources in these places to stimulate more high quality submissions compared to larger countries like India, which has less of an AASP presence. The remaining three papers were from Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand.

Towards the beginning of the calendar year, AASP would issue a call for papers (CFP) that aimed to 'showcase researchers and research programs that have both practical application and scientific merit in the area of social psychological aspects of social change in different countries in Asia'. Action and applied social psychological research on a wide range of topics were welcomed.

Bernardo and Liu were active in soliciting contributions for the themed issues. Liu made annual trips to Beijing and Taipei, where Beijing Normal University (BNU) and Fu Jen Catholic University (FJCU) have hosted fairly large, nationally advertised workshops (e.g., in 2016, 26 submissions were received by BNU, and 10 from FJCU), where members of the social psychological community have had the opportunity to submit draft papers and receive feedback as to the appropriateness of their papers for possible publication in the JPRP themed issues. Similarly, Bernardo has held three workshops in Manila in collaboration with the Psychological Association of the Philippines. This process was used to winnow out poorly targeted submissions, improve the language and structure of the papers, and to communicate the purpose of the JPRP themed issues prior to the papers being formally submitted online.

### **Content of the Themed Issues: Quantitative Empiricism**

Action research papers, describing research with direct positive outcomes for participants and researchers engaged in cycles of planning, action, evaluation, and reflection were few (five out of 19 papers). The participatory, emancipatory agenda of action research in Western societies (see Dick, 2015) was rarely in evidence among the collection of papers published. The JPRP action research projects focused more on providing systematic benefits to people in society, rather than individual benefits or personal reflexivity and/or wellbeing; for example, three action-oriented articles, all from Taiwan — S.H. Liu et al., 2014; S.H. Liu et al., 2015; Wang, Shiahhou, Ben Wu, & Liu, 2014 — reported the process and outcomes of the design and implementation of vocational systems designed to enhance career and study choices for university students. Only one paper out of 19 in JPRP used qualitative methods and emphasised critical reflection (Su, Pan, & Chen, 2014). The vast majority of papers (16 of 19) reported the results of surveys (and some used experiments) involving quantitative methods and scientific hypothesis testing.

This is in marked contrast to contemporary Western approaches, as exemplified by the Sage journal *Action Re-*

*search*, edited by Hilary Bradbury. As a crude comparison, in three issues from December 2015 to June 2016, only one article making central use of quantitative methods was published, out of 21, in *Action Research*. Only one article was published by authors outside of North America and Europe (predominantly Northern Europe, particularly the United Kingdom and Scandinavia) by *Action Research*. As a consequence of these observations, and considering the positivist and quantitative empirical focus of research training in the Asian region, we are not confident that participatory action research (Dick, 2015) is going to make headway as a rallying point for applied social psychological research in Asia.

### **Language and Power**

There may be two intertwined reasons for these outcomes. The first is that the Asian authors published in JPRP are almost all bilinguals who speak English as a second language. The degree of difficulty in presenting qualitative research in English is higher than that for quantitative research for non-native speakers. As editors who have worked assiduously with authors to refine the writing of the articles published in the themed issues, we can attest that achieving professional-level English language proficiency is not that easy for many Asian academics.

Combined with the factor of language is the fact that most of the authors published in the themed issues come from collectivistic and high-power distance countries (Hofstede, 2001). Moreover, most authors are from developing countries, like China, where modernist approaches to beliefs about science and progress are valued more than postmodern and post-industrial approaches to research; see Páez, Liu, Bobowik, Basabe, and Hanke (in press) for cross-national findings about valuing science and progressive accounts of history, and Inglehart and Baker (2000) for general theory and data regarding societal conditions supporting modernist and post-industrial values. With its central government's top-down emphasis on achievement in natural sciences (see the Shanghai Jiaotong University's system of university rankings, <http://www.shanghairanking.com/>), and central government visibly guiding society, with public discourses regarding the benevolence of centralised authority (Liu, Li, & Yue, 2010), mainland Chinese scholars are particularly unlikely to be engaged in participatory action research.

Across many Asian societies, action research that seeks to bring about social change through emancipation and action may not be aligned with cultural values like power distance and collectivist norms. Instead, the more plausible form of action research might involve technical or practical action research that seeks to bring about some action change within existing systems. This is action research without the participatory critical reflection about the current systems (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Collie, Liu, Posadliowski, & Kindon, 2010), and instead is closer to the traditional social psychological models of action research

that use technical knowledge to plan and take action to address a problem (Lewin, 1946; J.H. Liu, Ng, Gastardo-Conaco, & Wong, 2008). Without challenging the existing systems, this type of action research brings about changes among the actors in the systems and paves the way for change and improvements within the system.

We see such attempts in the Philippines, which appears to be fruitful ground for action-oriented research, especially given its need for post-disaster psychological interventions. The first article in this year's JPRP themed issue is an action-oriented 'Evaluation of a Group-Based Resilience Intervention for Typhoon Haiyan Survivors': Hechanova, Waelde, and Ramos (this issue) have adapted cognitive behaviour therapy principles to the indigenous conditions of the Philippines to increase resilience among Typhoon Haiyan survivors. *Katatagan* (the Filipino term for strength or resilience) is designed to provide a 'focused, non-specialised intervention to be delivered [in small groups] by trained lay facilitators'. It has six modules that aim to cultivate a wide range of adaptive coping skills for post-disaster survivors. These modules embed mindfulness training, and were particularly effective in enabling adult disaster survivors to harness strengths, seek solutions and find social support, and manage physical reactions. It is most encouraging that *Katatagan* was designed and administered by the Psychological Association of the Philippines, the major association governing psychology in this nation; this makes it more likely to be used and refined as an intervention in the future.

### **Describing and Theorising About Phenomena Rather Than Explicitly Theorising About Social Change**

*Katatagan* would be typical among JPRP papers in that it draws from mainstream Western scientific models to provide an adaptation useful in the Filipino context. Other attempts at this more technical form of action research involve drawing from indigenous theorising — most notably Shu-hui Liu and colleagues' work on a yin-yang model of career guidance (S.-H. Liu et al., 2014). Instead of drawing from mainstream Western technical knowledge on career development, Liu and colleagues (2014) drew from indigenous concepts related to wisdom and the processes of change to develop a plan of action or intervention for student career development.

But for most of the JPRP themed issue articles, there was no explicit theorising about change or social change. Instead, the papers typically describe phenomena important to society, and analyse these using scientific methods. Because of the volume of papers from China, the most compelling portraits of society changing also come from China, but through empirically grounded descriptions of phenomena. These include the impact of pollution on pro-environmental behaviours mediated by hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing (Gu, Huang, Zhang, and Wang, 2015), and this year's article, 'Polluted air increases per-

ceived corruption', by Huang, Zheng, Tan, and Liu (this issue). The phenomenon is that visible air pollution is on the increase in China, especially in its capital city of Beijing. The analysis Huang et al. (this issue) provide is to use a variety of quantitative methods from cross-cultural surveys to experiments to show that visible air pollution causes an increase in perceived corruption in society (perhaps mediated by embodiment). Rather than explicitly theorising about social change, Huang et al. describe a phenomenon, analyse a causal relationship between this phenomenon and subjective reactions to it, and their potential impact on society.

Similarly, the next article in this year's themed issue (Geng, Thang, Zhou, and Ye, this issue) describes some basic social cognitive processes that could explain declines in pro-environmental behaviour in China. They demonstrate that acting in a pro-environmental way may elicit a cost on people and thus result in inhibiting future pro-environmental behaviours — called the licensing effect. Their study does take a step towards action, although this was done through a laboratory experiment. In their third study, they showed that goal commitment priming reduces the licensing effect, and thus suggests that keeping the long-term goals of pro-environmental behaviour salient should help in sustaining pro-environmental actions.

### **A Social Psychology of Culturally Grounded Interventions**

With the top-down focus on scientific advance as the central government's goal for research in China, it does not come as a surprise that we see more multi-experiment studies in this year's themed issue than in the previous two years. Geng and colleagues' (this issue) study on pro-environmental behaviours is one of these multi-experiment studies. In addition, Yang, Yang, Bao, Liu, and Passmore (this issue) experimentally manipulate a sense of awe from viewing mighty nature, and demonstrate that this functions to reduce aggression on experimental measures of aggression (i.e., behaviour in a simulated shooting game and a puzzle-solving task). The basic message can be applied (e.g., directing attention to phenomena greater than the self induces a sense of humility, which the authors describe as 'small self', and which reduces aggression). However, this article, like the previous article, uses artificially dependent measures that are difficult to relate directly to social action and consequences. These articles, like mainstream and applied social psychology, point to action and application rather than embodying it.

Finally, Xinqiang, Xiaoxin, Fan, and Dajun's (this issue) article on 'The structure and levels of meaning in life and its relationship with mental health in Chinese students age 10–25' reports the results of a large survey of adolescents and young adults' attitudes towards meaning in life. The authors find that the correlation between presence and search for meaning is positively correlated, unlike among Western samples. They attribute this to the

effects of Confucian culture (see J.H. Liu, 2014), where there is a constant push to better oneself, and describe cross-sectional changes in levels of meaning in life from primary school through to university. This is very applicable research, but it does not report any interventions.

Across these various studies, the attempts at action or intervention and the suggestions towards action could have been more meaningful and have more impact had the authors done a bit more theory building anchored in analysis of local experiences. Richer and thicker descriptions of the local contexts, processes, and problems might force Asian researchers to be more analytic in the necessary and sufficient conditions for theory building, not just about social psychological phenomena, but more importantly, for theory building regarding social change (Bernardo & Liu, 2015). At present, relatively little theory building is going on, rather there is the empirical analysis of existing social problems and processes, and some exploration of some of their causes and effects drawing mostly from existing theoretical frameworks.

## Conclusion

Kashima (2005) wrote that

For many years, Asian social psychologists have been sanguine about the ability of their cultural traditions to provide a holistic platform to simultaneously pursue science and application, while maintaining something as ‘unruly’ and difficult to define as culture as a central theoretical component of this endeavour.’ (p. 30)

More than 10 years later, Kashima’s observation still rings true as we consider the small sample of applied social psychology research in the JPRP themed issue articles. Culture is implicit in much of the phenomena reported in 3 years of themed issues, but it is not explicitly theorised in depth, which may be part of the reason why there is also no explicit theorising about social change within the societies being investigated.

This may be a developmental phase — an historical trajectory where developing societies admire modernist and progressive accounts of history that valorise science (see Paez et al., in press; and J.H. Liu, Fisher-Onar, & Woodward, 2014 for a general theory of historical trajectories). But at present, from our small and idiosyncratic sample of articles, it seems that (with some exceptional pockets of innovation), Asian social psychology today is largely derivative of the American mainstream — using theories and methods of Western social psychology that might be applied to social psychology in Asian societies. The ‘modernist’ approach to research taken by Asian social psychologists seems to afford a different set of opportunities than the more ‘postmodernist’ approach taken by action researchers in Western societies: the pathway of the ‘tender-hearted but tough-minded scientist’ theorised and exemplified by Kurt Lewin (1946). But Asian social psychologists may need to do a bit more thinking about what constitutes the proper relationship between research, cen-

tral government directives, and local community needs, in both theory and practice, to carve out a compelling historical trajectory for the future in terms of applied social psychology.

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