Self-loss in Indigenous and Cross-cultural Psychologies: Beyond Dichotomies?

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Abstract

Much confusion surrounds discussion of cultural and cross-cultural psychology with reference to a sympathetic understanding of indigenous psychologies. In this chapter I focus upon how the work of William James can be used in conjunction with the common core thesis in mysticism to explore how mysticism can be used to both substantiate a universal experience common in diverse Eastern and Western cultures yet expressed in experiences, beliefs, and values that respect and demand recognition of the unique expression of mysticism in various cultures and in the dynamic interaction between them. In order to explore this both conceptually and empirically I will divide this paper into three sections. First a distinction between cultural and cross-cultural psychology; second a discussion of why a return to William James might be useful. Finally, I will look at empirical American methods of measurement based psychology to indicate the limits of a cross-cultural psychology of self-loss that we have championed in light of indigenous cultural studies that show both the value and the limits of our previous work.

Keywords

cross-cultural – indigenous – mysticism – self-loss

The literature regarding the self is massive and beyond the scope of any single scholar to master or even effectively review. However, among cultural and cross-cultural psychologists dichotomous views of self are common (Markus

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& Kitayama, 1991; Dueck & Han, 2012). By whatever terms used, the contrast is between isolated and individualist reflections of self, contrasted with contextualized and interdependent reflections of self. Efforts to localize such dichotomies within different cultural domains often lead to contrasting Eastern relational views of self with Western independent views of self. Of course all such contrasts recognize the limits of such dichotomies, with clear themes of interdependence in the independent self that dominate American culture such as with the peace churches, especially the Quakers (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) and emerging themes of independence in the relational self that dominated at least pre-Maoist China (Yan, 2009; Hwang, 1987, p. 969). Furthermore, one ought not to overgeneralize the clear moral concerns for social harmony that characterize interdependent self-oriented cultures as if the similar concerns could not be identified in independent self cultures. For instances, Howe (2009, p. 5) has noted that individualism so characteristic of American culture is fully compatible with a strong sense of morality while Bellah (2011, p. 443) concurs with Roth (1995, 1999) in noting that Daoism, as one of China's indigenous religions, has strong individualist tendencies in the sense that it is concerned with self-cultivation without much concern for social context. In this sense, Roth supports Weber’s (1951, p. 182) classic claim that as members of China’s other arguably indigenous religion, Confucians were not mystics and, “In relation to Confucianism one tends to designate all heterodoxy as ‘Taoism’” (Weber, 1951, p. 181) which as we note below has undoubted mystical aspects. Thus, in this paper I want to address not simply the issue of the dichotomous tendency to view the self as either relational or individual, despite the numerous truths contained in such comparisons both within and between cultures, but to focus on a third issue, what is the nature of self-loss in cultures with either a relational or individualist sense of self? This question ironically suggests another dichotomy we have proposed previously, the distinction between the reflexive self, relational or individual, and the transcendent self that regardless of one’s view of its ontological status makes the reflexive self possible (Hood & Morris, 1983). In order to explore this idea both conceptually and empirically I will divide this paper into three sections. First a distinction between cultural and cross-cultural psychology; second a discussion of why a return to William James might be useful for the impasse many see in what is now identifiable as an Anglo Saxon (American) psychology that in the words of Pickren (2009, p. 88) fails to recognize that there are psychologies that are “functionally incommensurate in epistemology, methods, and practices.” Pickren (2009, p. 87) prophetically warns that “the 21st century is unlikely to be another American century in psychology.” Finally, I will look at empirical American methods of measurement-based psychology to indicate the limits of a cross-cultural