

# **AASP Conference 1999: Striving for a new era of Asian social psychology**

## **The Third Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology in Taipei, Taiwan**

After only its third conference, held in Taipei, Taiwan, August 4-7, 1999, the Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) has moved from organizational infancy to robust adolescence.

The first conference, held in Hong Kong in 1995 was an entrepreneurial effort that demonstrated that it was possible for Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and other Asians to come together in an atmosphere of cooperation and harmony (Liu & Kashima, 1995).

The second conference in Kyoto, 1997 showcased the contributions of Japanese social psychology and increased the group's international profile (Liu, 1998).

The third conference signaled the beginning of a more professional era: the keynote speakers were internationally recognized figures from both Asia and the West, the facilities and materials for the conference were sparkling, and the overall size and quality of presentations continued to increase. The AASP meetings have rapidly established themselves as one of the premiere forums for culture-oriented psychology in the world.

### **Attendance patterns**

After three meetings, certain patterns have become apparent in conference attendance.

There were 344 participants from 23 countries and societies in Taipei who presented 155 papers and 147 posters, compared to 306 participants at Kyoto and 70 at Hong Kong.

In Taipei as in Kyoto, Japanese scholars were the single largest contingent, with 121 participants, followed by Taiwan with 78, Korea with 30, USA with 27, Hong Kong with 19, mainland China with 15, Thailand and Singapore with 8 and 7 respectively.

These patterns are consistent with international structures of scholarship and economic power, with Japan and the various contingents of Chinese numerically outnumbering other Asian groups.

### **Promoting Southeast Asian and Indian participation**

The organization will have to continue to promote membership in Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent through free memberships and travel awards, but these alone appear insufficient to compensate for economic gradients. AASP will have consider other proactive measures to accord Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent greater salience at its future meetings. Otherwise, there is a danger of it becoming an "East Asian Association of Social Psychology".

In terms of demographics, it was also striking the predominance of men in higher ranking positions and women in lower ranking positions. Again, this is probably a reflection of naturalistic factors outside the organization, but something AASP should be aware of in the future.

In contrast to Kyoto, where the author was staggered by the diversity of research interests, in Taipei there was again diversity but there were also three clear themes.

### **Cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous psychology**

The first, overarching theme was provided by Professor K.S. Yang and the organizers of the conference, who asked 6 eminent psychologists to provide keynote speeches addressing what was similar and what was unique about cultural, cross-cultural, and indigenous psychology. These talks, by Triandis, Greenfield, Berry, Shweder, Kim, and Yang offered a remarkable clarity about the positioning of terms in the field.

Indigenous and cultural psychology are closely aligned, differing primarily in who does it and for what audience. Cross-cultural psychology stands a bit apart because of its more universalistic epistemology. However, proponents of all three views were united in calling for synergy and cooperation in challenging the culture-free assumptions of mainstream psychology. The term “North American indigenous psychology” was heard more than once, and this author even overheard a few comments about too much emphasis on culture at AASP. Be that as it may, developing a culture-oriented social psychology is clearly among one of the major goals and themes that defines Asian social psychology.

### **Individualism-collectivism**

The second theme was more circumscribed, as its adherents hailed mostly from Japan, and to a lesser extent the United States. This is the issue of how well individualism-collectivism (IND-COL) and the independent/interdependent self describe differences between Asians and Westerners, or more precisely, Japanese and Americans.

The work of Markus and Kitayama, following in the footsteps of such scholars as Triandis, Hofstede, and Bond has provided the primary beach-head from which culture-oriented psychologists have made forays into the mainstream. But there is dissent among this group as to how well these constructs capture differences in behavior, and to what extent they are a gloss over complex issues of social construction. These issues encouraged some controversial debate.

Opinions in this group appear to be approaching some sort of compromise that the “beach head” metaphor used previously can continue to describe. If culture-oriented psychology is to make in-roads into mainstream psychology as called for by the “Big 6”, it needs to do so from a variety of directions.

The general consensus seems to be that the IND-COL paradigm involves some simplification. But to tear down the beach-head before the in-roads have been firmly established appears to be self-defeating. Fighting over a few meters of sand next to the Pacific Ocean should be undertaken only if this will serve to carve out new territory in the heartland of both shores. If so, the value of this debate will be judged by the extent to which

it provides stimulus to perfect existent paradigms, and forge ahead along inroads that have already been made.

### **Doing psychology to make a difference**

The third theme was more diffuse. This theme related less to the heady intellectual issues of the day but was a consistent zeitgeist in the poster sessions and in a few symposia. This is that Asian social psychology is intimately concerned with application: health, social issues, justice, the family, aging, education for children, academic achievement, identifying bullies, and managing disasters. It is concerned with the epistemology and practice of doing psychology to make a difference. In the social psychology that is emerging in Asia, applied work that is now on the periphery should eventually make its way into the center. The development of IND-COL and indigenous psychology should furnish theory capable of enriching and uniting effective practices.

### **“What is Asian about Asian Social Psychology?”**

The three themes described above all resonate with the question, “What is Asian about Asian Social Psychology?” Out-going President Kwok Leung remarked that such soul-searching is characteristic of adolescence, so it may be that after only 6 years AASP has already moved on beyond its entrepreneurial beginnings. To achieve this, a synergetic and evolving relationship between AASP and the Japanese Group Dynamics Association (JGDA) has been essential. From Kyoto to Taipei, Japanese social psychology has proven itself to be one of the pillars of Asian social psychology. President-elect Susumu Yamaguchi will be the first Japanese President of AASP beginning in 2001.

The mighty efforts of current President Kuo-Shu Yang and his colleagues at the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica and the Department of Psychology, National Taiwan University produced a truly first class conference at Taipei. The next conference, in Melbourne, Australia in 2001 (July 10-13), and in part a joint meeting between AASP and the Society of Australasian Social Psychologists (SASP, July 12-15) will have a hard act to follow. Having said that, the contributions of Taiwanese social psychologists to AASP have been, outside the massive efforts of a few familiar leaders, less salient than what might be desired.

Many Japanese and Korean scholars were initially shy about presenting their work in an international forum because of language reasons, but over time they have recognized that in AASP, English is a second language for the majority of participants, and this alone should not constitute a barrier.

### **Extending the reach of indigenous Asian psychology**

From the perspective of this writer, one of the major goals of AASP should be to extend the reach of indigenous Chinese psychology beyond the realms of Taiwan and China. Taiwanese social psychology is probably the strongest indigenous psychology in the world. It can serve as the focal organizing point for using cross-indigenous methods proposed by Enriquez and Yang to link the indigenous psychologies of Chinese, Koreans, Pilipinos, Malays, Japanese, Indians, and even Maori or Aborigines. Collectively, cross-indigenous research on such concepts as the relationalism implied by Chinese “guanxi” and Pilipino “kapua” could provide a second focal point for Asian social psychology fully as potent as IND-COL, and far less dependent on Western concepts and theories. However, the

organizational hurdles involved in developing truly cross-indigenous work are huge, and must begin now if there is to be any progress made by Melbourne in 2001. The Melbourne conference will surely be less lavish than Taipei, but it could be very useful for stimulating cross-cultural exchange in a number of directions.

### **AASP Editorial support for authors**

As AASP moves from adolescence into adulthood, it will need to become more financially secure, by increasing membership and institutional subscriptions to its flagship journal, the Asian Journal of Social Psychology (AJSP).

The second volume of its conference proceedings, *Progress in Asian Social Psychology* (Sugiman, Karasawa, Ward, & Liu, 1999) was launched in Taipei.

AASP offers a multi-cultural editorial process for both these publications: for *Progress*, papers are submitted in English but the editors provide support to ensure that the final manuscript meets international standards in English. For AJSP, papers can be submitted in English, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, and will be translated into English if accepted.

With these two outlets for publication, AASP has established itself as a voice in the field.

### **AASP Misumi Award for best published paper**

The potency of this voice depends on the quality of the work and citations they generate. As a first step in this direction, AASP and JGDA announced the Misumi Award for the best paper published in AJSP, awarded to Susumu Yamaguchi (1998) for his paper on biased risk perceptions.

### **Summary**

The Third Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology was a quantum leap forward in terms of the professionalism of the conference (in all respects except money, where there were no facilities for using checks or credit cards, and collecting money was in general complicated for the organizers).

The idea of getting six top scholars to comment about relationships between indigenous, cultural, and cross-cultural psychology was a masterstroke, providing an intellectual focal point for an otherwise diverse selection of papers. The thematic organization of both the papers and the posters also facilitated coherence.

AASP should accept that it has moved from being a small, intimate conference into a strong mid-sized conference and act accordingly; for instance, restricting each participant to one verbal presentation as first author might slow the proliferation of symposia streams, which expanded to six in Taipei. It has also regained a focus that was less easy to find at Kyoto compared to the first conference in Hong Kong: the three themes of

- culture-oriented psychology,
- evaluating the goodness-of-fit provided by IND-COL, and
- a concern for practical application

all provided satisfying answers to the question: What is Asian about Asian Social Psychology?

The cultural and methodological pluralism of the founding members of AASP has been reflected in each of the three conferences having a unique flavor and unique achievement.

We can only look forward to what Melbourne will bring in 2001.

## **REFERENCES**

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