

Open Society and Open Mind

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Shinobu Kitayama began a one year term as APS President on June 1, 2020. [See the full APS Board of Directors and the APS Bylaws here.](#)

The world is facing an unprecedented threat from COVID-19. As a collective of scholars with a mission to better understand the human mind, APS has a unique opportunity to help address urgent societal issues and needs. In my first Presidential Column, I want to share some thoughts toward that end. It will help, however, if I begin by sharing some of my background as a scholar.

Formative Experience



Shinobu Kitayama

Early in the 1980s, I was a graduate student at Kyoto University, Japan. I was studying social psychology. My fellow graduate students and I looked up all the famous names that appeared in the textbooks. From time to time, we tried to run the studies discussed in the textbooks and, better yet, to add something new to such studies. Unfortunately, however, our ambitious plans to do something new were often shuttered even before they started. Why? Many of these studies did not replicate.

A few years later, I came to the United States for graduate training. I began to witness what was going on in the labs at my new home, the University of Michigan. My great gratitude goes to all of the esteemed students back then at Michigan for open communications and friendship. They were open, friendly, and fully sympathetic to someone coming from a foreign land without much English. Thanks to all this, I quickly realized that what we did in Kyoto was at least as good, careful, and meticulous as what was going on in Michigan. That was a liberating experience, which eventually made me wonder if part of the reason for the failure to replicate might have something to do with culture. Sometime later, Hazel Markus and I initiated a systematic effort to investigate culture as a fundamental dimension of organizing cognition, emotion, and motivation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). There were a lot of unknowns, but we had passion and enthusiasm for [identifying the nature of cultural influence](#). We had made a small initial step forward in the direction of globalizing psychology.

[See all columns by Shinobu Kitayama](#)

If there was any formative period in my career, those good old days were just that. My identity as a psychologist had been gradually set in stone while struggling to locate the mind at the intersection of psychological processes and social and cultural processes. If all the experience I had is a source of nostalgia right now, what I learned from it, the importance of openness, has become the basis of my scholarship.

What Will It Take to Open up Psychology?

Transparency. To make a more open field and discipline of psychology, the first indispensable component is research transparency. The term “open science” refers to the fundamental principle that science must be based on transparent procedures and honest reporting of findings. This term has been in high demand over the last decade for a good reason. In retrospect, the field was, indeed, in deep trouble 10 years ago. Some notable cases of scientific misconduct had been uncovered. Some findings in our beloved journals, including *Psychological Science*, were reported to be hardly replicable. And p-hacking and other questionable research practices were suspected to be common.

Research transparency is a prerequisite of all sciences that are open.

As a journal editor, I implemented some policies to promote transparency (Kitayama, 2017). At the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (which I oversee), we now require the sharing of data and analytic codes. We have instituted a new section for replication studies. And all of us, including editors, authors, and reviewers, have become very cognizant of some basics of science, including the significance of sample size, how to determine it, and the imperative of sticking to the target sample size once it is determined. Simultaneously, I have had the pleasure of getting to know many scholars who work hard to reform the field and make it more transparent. Needless to say, we are still only partway through. But I firmly believe that APS will lead this effort to keep our science transparent in every possible way.

[Research transparency is a prerequisite of all sciences that are open.](#) However, is that enough? What else do we need? I suggest two additional elements that must be added to create a truly open science.

Interdisciplinarity. To begin, I take it to be a strong human tendency to restrict your domain from all others and define it neatly and clearly. You build a hedge around your domain and call it your expertise. Not surprisingly, modern psychology has always defined several seemingly distinct areas of research. If you are a cognitive psychologist, you are sitting in a cognitive silo. If you are a social cognition specialist, you are sitting in a social cognition silo that is insulated against all its neighbors, including even cognitive psychologists. If you are a clinical psychologist, you may be best off if you focus exclusively on the mental illness of interest and, perhaps, nothing else. And this tendency to draw a sharp boundary to define the in-group that is marked against out-groups is reinforced by journals devoted to this or that field, scientific societies and newsletters limited to it, and all institutional roles and duties people find themselves in and feel connected and attached to.

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APS is different. It's a society established to maintain and promote the integrity of the science of the mind. Cross-fertilization across different branches of psychology is crucial. So is [the effort to connect to and learn from neighboring disciplines](#). Our science must be open to other sciences, not just within

psychology, but also with other neighbors, including neuroscience and biology (investigating micro-level processes that comprise the mind), as well as sociology, anthropology, and economics (examining macro-processes that afford and condition it).

Globalization. All open societies must, by definition, open their doors to all their neighbors. If interdisciplinarity is a vertical axis of this openness, globalization should count as its horizontal axis. The discipline of psychology must therefore aspire to open itself to all societies, cultures, and groups.

At this moment in the year 2020, psychological science remains strictly “closed” to some particular population of the world. More than 10 years ago, Jeffrey Arnett observed that American psychology is myopically focused on Americans, thereby ignoring 95% of the world population (Arnett, 2008). Shortly afterward, a similar point was made by Joe Henrich, Steve Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, who characterized the population studied by psychologists as “WEIRD”—an acronym for Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic (Henrich et al., 2010). Being closed to ourselves goes against openness. This, I submit, is bad enough. However, for our science—the science of the mind—this state of affairs could be causing colossal damages to the knowledge we build. Why? Because evidence could be biased, and even worse, the interpretation of this evidence could be ethnocentric.

It is the integration of transparency, neighboring disciplines, and world cultures and traditions that our science must aspire to achieve. Only through this integration can we, as a field, hope to play a significant role in addressing urgent issues facing our society.

In recent years, many scholars have revived longstanding thoughts about the social construction of daily life and argued that our world is a real world, but this real world is based on imaginations (e.g., “honor” as the worth of “man”), ideas (e.g., human rights and obligations to a group), and plans people make for themselves (e.g., the Declaration of Independence). I found a discussion by Yuval Harari, the historian, particularly lucid (Harari, 2011). Briefly put, the world many of us live in, the 21st-century Western-style democracy with much freedom and resources, presents one social reality. But this is only one of many possible worlds. Even within the boundaries of the United States, social class is increasingly crucial as a social divider. Race and ethnicity have also remained a significant divide. It is not easy to go back and forth across these societal divides. Of course, if we extend our perspectives beyond the U.S., there are many worlds out there, each presenting a unique reality that requires varying skill sets to navigate, let alone succeed in. These skills are ingrained into brain pathways, realized in psychological modules, and dynamically interacting with that reality.

Because our minds are adaptations to the reality they must adjust to, they are likely to show varying characteristics depending on the social realities they must contend with. As scientists, we aspire to pursue universal laws of behavior. But might these laws transcend the diversity of possible worlds on the globe? Or might they be contingent on it? At a minimum, we must agree that this question is to be addressed empirically. It would be a sign of immodesty at best, and could even be a marker of intellectual laziness at worst, to believe that our world is the only world we care about. This is an ultimate form of ethnocentrism that goes entirely against the very spirit of science. This amounts to saying that the globalization of APS is the next huge stride we must make as the premier scientific society in psychology.

Moving Forward

This brings me back to the nostalgia I shared with you to begin the column. Good science requires transparency. The open discussion with students at Michigan opened up my mind. Good science also requires interdisciplinarity. I benefited a great deal from collaborations with anthropologists, neuroscientists, and geneticists. And finally, good science must [give due attention to the divergent worlds the human mind adjusts itself to](#). Thus, globalization is indispensable if psychology is to remain vibrant and viable across the globe. When these three components are combined with creativity, there will emerge new ideas, new ways of looking at old phenomena, and hopefully, a positive transformation of the discipline.

Back then, in graduate school, I had no idea that I was to write this Presidential Column for APS a few decades later. Many things happened since then to me for sure, but more importantly, to the field at large. Psychology has changed. So has society at large. Science has changed. So have the people who practice science. We now know the brain in great detail. Genetics is no longer heretical in any scientific discourses due in part to the remarkable growth of knowledge on social and environmental influences on the expression of genes (Cole, 2014). Moreover, there is an increasing recognition that society and the brain are hardly separable in any strict fashion (Kirmayer et al., 2020). Our psychological dynamics, grounded in both brain and genes, are inherently intertwined with society and culture.

It is the integration of transparency, neighboring disciplines, and world cultures and traditions that our science must aspire to achieve. Only through this integration can we, as a field, hope to play a significant role in addressing urgent issues facing our society. For example, suppose we want to help people cope with the damages done by COVID-19, whether in mental health or job security. I submit that we must see the whole person in each of them and approach them from all possible disciplinary and cultural perspectives (Van Bavel et al., 2020). And I want to add that if there is any scholarly society that is well-positioned to respond to this challenge, it's APS. It's my honor and privilege to lead APS at this opportune time.

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