Psychological Science Needs the Entire Globe, Part 2

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In this three-part series, a team of researchers in Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America explores the longtime dominance of psychological science by researchers in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) countries. Part 1, [published in the September/October 2021 Observer](#)*, explored the problems with U.S. dominance specifically.* [The series concludes in the January/February 2022 Observer](#)*.*

There are growing calls for diversity of samples and researchers, large-scale collaborations, and initiatives to make psychological science more representative and more generalizable to humanity ([Apicella et al., 2020](#); [Forscher et al.](#), 2020; [Hruschka et al., 2018](#); [Medin et al., 2017](#); [Rad et al., 2018](#); [Syed, & Kathawalla, 2020)](#). Yet discussions of the WEIRD problem in psychology will inevitably need to face the elephant in the room: colonialism.

Colonialism: The elephant in the room

Colonialism and its role in mainstream psychology are minimally discussed as substantive topics in themselves—for example, as potential moderators for various social, developmental, and clinical explananda, such as well-being and self-identity ([Bobowik et al., 2018](#); [Krat et al., 2011](#); [Okazaki et al., 2008](#)). Colonialism is also only minimally tackled in metapsychology and current global reform

movements. Part of this may be due to how daunting the issue is. How does one even begin to remedy it? As Pillay (2017) wrote, "the question of decolonizing psychology seems a sub-section of the more depressing question of whether or not we can decolonize society" (p. 136).

Further, the topic induces general discomfort—scholars from previously colonized countries don't want to feel unnecessarily shackled by history, and scholars from previously (and, let's be honest, currently) colonizing countries may feel some impotent guilt but have no tools to remedy the problem of colonialism. Alternatively, researchers may be siloed in the daily academic grind, where hundreds of worries leave little energy to think about deep-seated and pervasive problems and inequalities.

Of colonial history's many legacies, we will explore two primary impacts on psychological science: first, its effect on material reality (i.e., research infrastructure and funding), and second, its effect on the intellectual approaches across the developing world and the consequent countermovements that have tried to tackle colonialism in psychology.

Material realities: Producibility crisis and differing research cultures

The global reform movement has justifiably focused on psychological science's credibility and openness, creating what has become known as the replication or reproducibility crisis. However, before many previously colonized countries can tackle the reproducibility crisis, they must grapple with ensuring *producibility* in the first place (Doble et al., 2018). Research in many of these countries is underfunded (for details on African countries, see UNESCO, 2021; for details on some countries in the Arab region, see Saab et al., 2020 and Zebian et al., 2007). With the exception of a handful of top universities in these countries, there are few of the lab models that exist in countries with richer and more dominant research institutions. Moreover, there may not be a strong or coherent psychological science research culture within these countries, where psychology as a profession is often largely relegated to applied occupations (see, e.g., Thailand and Indonesia: Kiling & Bunga, 2015; Sarwono, 2005; Tapanya, 2004). The public may not even use the term "psychology," and the discipline might not be thought of as empirical or scientific. In East Africa, for example, psychology is seen as an artistic or humanistic discipline. Research in such countries can often be seen as something exclusive (Doble et al., 2018), further lowering the viability of involvement for both participants and potential researchers. Consider also the logistical difficulties of conducting research in developing areas, where something as "simple" as virtual meetings can be challenging because of poor internet connectivity.

Further, it's been our experience that local methodologists and open science advocates face an uphill battle to educate and organize for the local adoption of global methods reforms. Open science is important, and it has clear benefits for researchers in developing countries (Adetula et al., 2020), but open science does not exist in a vacuum. The adoption of open science practices in research production can be beneficial only if there's something to be open *about* in the first place.

Despite these limitations, there is great local theorizing and research being produced in these countries. For example, in the Philippines, the *ginhawa-pagdadala* ("burden-bearing") model has been developed (Decenteceo, 1999), and in Nigeria the clinical village system was implemented successfully (Awaritefe, 2020; Nabel, 2017; see also Adebowale, 2009). Both of these lines of clinical work incorporate local cultural frameworks in understanding individual distress and suffering. They also provide interventions that are appropriate for the local population—in particular, for low-income and under-resourced

individuals.[1] However, although great local research is done across developing countries, it is important to recognize the systematic inequalities that these researchers face that affect the production of their work.

Intellectual approaches and indigenous psychologies

Beyond material realities, the legacy of colonial history has impacted the field's intellectual approaches across countries. When psychology is just getting started as an academic field in a developing country, it is common for local scholars to perceive the discipline as imperial or colonial (see, e.g., Enriquez, 1988; Ojiji, 2015; Sinha, 1984), as psychological claims and methods may seem misleading or simply inapplicable in the local context (Adair, 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Pe-Pua, 2006). These criticisms were levied, for example, toward standardized tests that were imported and used but were neither translated nor adapted and toward research programs (e.g., rat-behavior studies) that could not solve pressing national problems but would benefit theory testing for U.S. and European research agendas. Besides these, there has also been the common experience of foreign researchers "parachuting" in to collect data but doing little to understand the local context (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Since the 1970s, as a direct opposition to what was perceived as U.S. and European imperialism, various forms of indigenous psychologies have developed across the world, including in the Philippines, India, China, New Zealand, and the Arab region (Kim et al., 2006; Sinha, 1997). Indigenous psychology takes an approach that aims to explicitly anchor psychology on the orientation, experience, and thought of the indigenous people (i.e., culture bearers) being studied and as understood from their perspective (Pe-Pua & Wright, 2015). The indigenous approach takes into account local languages and sociocultural realities to understand people's behaviors, thoughts, and affect within their local contexts (Enriquez, 1979; Kim et al., 2006; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). This approach fostered the development of what were deemed culturally appropriate methods of data gathering, such as participant observation and ethnography. These methods (which are largely qualitative in nature) aim to gather high-quality data from participants with different cultural realities and from particular settings and populations (e.g., rural, illiterate, low socioeconomic status, or poorly educated) in which common psychology methods such as experiments and surveys are difficult to implement and take much longer to adapt to the local context to retain their validity. Indigenous psychology is often also tightly bundled with certain ethical positions—for example, that participants are on equal footing with the researcher.

Indigenous psychology also provides a way of rethinking how to do multisite studies, leveraging a more bottom-up approach that replaces or complements the top-down cross-cultural approach that is typical in the field. Top-down cross-cultural approaches have the vulnerability of presenting WEIRD situations to non-WEIRD societies and have a strong a priori assumption of comparability or equivalence across sites. In the typical cross-cultural approach, researchers aim to be as standard as possible across sites and treat culture as an external variable that causes variability in behavior. The cross-cultural enterprise therefore aims to "test the generality of existing [theories] by comparing the responses of different cultural groups on standardized measures of psychological processes" (Ellis & Stam, 2015). In contrast, the cross-indigenous enterprise aims to converge on (or show the lack of convergence of) universals through multiple independent explorations among source cultures. It treats culture as co-constitutive of the individual (i.e., in some important manner, culture is "within," or making up, the individual).

Despite the existence of cross-indigenous approaches, the indigenous psychology movement has had a

minimal influence in mainstream psychology, which favors the cross-cultural approach for multicountry research. There are many justifiable criticisms of indigenous psychology (e.g., that it tends to reify culture and treat it as static; Bhatia & Priya, 2019; Hwang, 2005; Jahoda, 2016; Long, 2019). However, it has provided tools, perspectives, and a general historical case that takes on colonialism at the forefront.

So what? Why bother discussing these states of affairs? There is a mantra in clinical psychology: Etiology defines intervention. These problems are easily swept under the rug in the current culture of "convenient" research that prioritizes cross-sectional pen-and-paper approaches administered to university student samples, which has very limited applicability to understanding broader human functioning and behavior (Antonakis, 2017; Baumeister et al., 2007; IJzerman et al., 2020) even if these standard designs are used across multiple countries. As the field more seriously tackles problems of the consequences of colonialism and the dominance of the United States and Europe in research, it will inevitably have to make decisions about what it means to "partner with local institutions," to plan for data gathering away from university samples, to obtain high-quality data from these nonconvenient samples, and to plan for collaborations' sustainability, expertise sharing, on-the-ground research logistics, needed resources, and so on. That is, when the field is ready to do the bedrock inconvenient research for generalizable psychological science, it will have to confront the inconvenient realities of where the science must take place.

Reform movement, big team science, and legacies of previous inequalities

The global reform movement in psychology has brought forth various calls for better measurement, theory, statistics, open science, and collaboration. Many of these reforms require a division of labor and big team science (Forscher et al., 2020). And for large-scale collaborations, diversity and generalizability are the raison d'être. However, large-scale collaborations also have vulnerabilities; as social activities, they are likely to reflect legacies of societal inequality, and unless existing biases are proactively countered, big team science may then perpetuate them.

For example, no first author of any current ManyLabs publications is affiliated with an institution in a developing nation. As we noted in Part 1 of this series, *The Problem With U.S. Dominance in Psychological Science*, even reform groups that are considered progressive by the field's standards, such as the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science, have starkly fewer members from the Global South. As one of us noted in his candidate statement for the Psychological Science Accelerator, "needing to rely on volunteer hours means that only researchers in more luxurious positions (i.e., those in richer countries, with a lower teaching load, and in situations where they don't have to worry about their immediate physical safety) can be a candidate for leadership roles in large scale collaborations."

Further, if big team science organizations begin with a heavy membership skew, they will be unlikely to expand their membership base outside those group boundaries without sustained, proactive measures. Skewed membership demographics may also make it harder for minority members to rise to positions of seniority, prominence, and influence.

In turn, as highlighted in our first post, the assumptions and biases that the research group brings with them affect which studies will be run, which methods will be employed, what aspects of human phenomena are explored, what constitutes good evidence, and ultimately, what problems are deemed

worth solving.

Why bring up the sobering topic of inequalities? And, echoing Pillay (2017), can we change science without changing the world first? Many psychological scientists would find doing so too high a burden. The field already has to contend with nonreplications, *p*-value debates, learning advanced statistics, formal theory, programming, open science practices, philosophy of science, and large-scale collaborations. On top of all that, you want to change the world as well?

As the writers of this series, we have many ideas of how to go about making these fundamental changes (stay tuned for Part 3!). But no change can happen without eyes wide open to the problems that need tackling. This includes the need to understand how historical (colonial) forces have shaped where our science takes place: how they have affected material realities, research cultures, and people across the world—and how alternative intellectual approaches such as indigenous psychology have tried to do quality research in settings and populations left vulnerable in an unequal world. ?

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