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Height Psychology and Challenges of the 21st Century: Commentary on Liu (2017)

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Abstract

The present article comments on Liu's target article while exploring the points of convergence and divergence of his Height Psychology with trends in non-Asian psychology, and points to the area of further expansion demanded by the challenges of the 21st century, namely, climate change and intergroup conflict.

Height Psychology and Challenges of the 21st Century: Commentary on Liu (2017)

Yoshihisa Kashima

James Liu has produced a challenging aspiration for Asian social psychology in his, "Neo-Confucian Epistemology and Chinese Philosophy: Practical Postulates for Actioning Psychology as a Human Science." It embodies Height Psychology that it advocates, a three-dimensional metatheory of psychology – not only should psychological science examine the psychological processes and constructs as they exist now (dimension 1) and as they are distributed across space at present (dimension 2), but also as they have been built over time in the past and may project themselves into the future, so as to construct and shape the human world across time (dimension 3). In emphasizing time, human struggle, aspiration, and hope as well as retreat, anxiety, and fear are all part of the on-going world-making inasmuch as human agency plays a part in its construction. This article represents a theoretical integration of Liu's on-going research program, an aspiration of where his scholarship may take us in the future, and a practical advice about the conduct of human science for Asian social psychology. It is an act of generosity that educates, inspires, and guides social psychologists, particularly in Asia, but also across the globe.

In this commentary, I attempt to provide my understanding of Liu's Height Psychology, to explore its convergence and divergence with contemporary trends in non-Asian psychology, and to point to its future possibilities in the face of contemporary challenges to humanity in the 21st century.

Height Psychology and its Directives

Here is my understanding of Height Psychology. At the expense of oversimplification and despite the fear of revealing my misunderstanding, I am compelled to lay down some common ground.

Assuming a degree of agency, humans as a physically realized, evolutionally generated, historically constituted, and situationally shaped and shaping being, human knowing, valuing, and acting are inevitably and inextricably implicated in the on-going process of the universe. As a theory of knowing, epistemology is critically involved in the process, and as a theory of valuing, morality is fundamental to human action; practical reason provides a guidance that fuses both epistemology and morality into the moment of doing and that projects a human into the next moment and beyond. Liu positions Mou's neo-confusianism, which was born out of Confucianism's confrontation with Kant's epistemology and ethics, as a foundational basis to regard as given the possibility of "intuitive illumination," in which the Kantian domain of noumena that transcends the senses is accessible through the domain of phenomena known through the senses.

This hope is justified, as far as I can tell, by the conviction that the Way of Heaven is immanent in all, that which encompasses all the living and non-living substances and objects, and the universe itself. The argument seems to go as follows. The Way of Heaven (□ , *dao*) exists in humans as well as all other things; the domain of humans as well as non-humans can become accessible to human senses by some form of knowing under some exceptional circumstances, in part justified by the principle of holism, which implies that all things are connected in some form and therefore interact with and influence each other. Thus, noumena must influence phenomena, and therefore must be accessible in some way to the latter as intuitive insights. These insights may be disseminated through discourse and realized through practical action; those who possess them may educate, inspire, and guide others. As relational and human-hearted (□ , *ren*) beings, every person is by nature not only to improve oneself, but also to improve each other by reflection and cultivation. The principles of

holism, relationalism, and human heartedness do not differentiate facts and values, and guide practical action in situ.

Without a doubt, psychological research is a type of human activities. Height Psychology directs us as psychologists to let our human heartedness guide our research, perhaps in selecting topics of investigation, interpreting results, and drawing implications. It suggests psychological theories and research should provide a holistic picture of human activities and conditions as situated in complex networks of social relationships and unfolding dynamically over time. It implores us to make the research relevant for action. In this sense, Liu's writing may be akin to Sen's (2011) in spirit. It attempts to provide a theory of human heartedness for Asian social psychology that can provide guidance for practical reasoning without attempting to specify a transcendental description of what it is.

Scope of Applicability of Height Psychology: Is It Asian or Human?

Are these directives of Height Psychology applicable only in the context of Asian social psychology? I do not believe they are. Sociality is a critical feature of *Homo sapiens* as a biological species. In particular, ultrasociality – "the most social of animal organizations with full time division of labor, specialists who gather no food but are fed by others, effective sharing of information about sources of food and danger, self-sacrificial effort in collective defense (Campbell, 1982, p. 160)" – appears to be rare, if not unique, in the animal kingdom. Unlike that of ants and bees, human ultrasociality enables a large number of humans to live a cooperative and coordinated life despite their genetic dissimilarity. The genetic endowment to generate and acquire culture, and the dynamic processes of cultural production and reproduction were necessary to enable human ultrasociality, which in turn appear to have co-evolved with human cognitive flexibility and cumulative culture (for a recent broad overview, see *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 2016, special issue on culture; Gelfand & Kashima, 2016). Human sociality, human cognitive capacity, and cultural dynamics go hand in hand. It is a plausible *hypothesis* that humans have constraints and tendencies to construe the universe (e.g., Kantian time and space), to moralize (e.g., the Golden Rule), and to act and interact, so as to live with other conspecifics, and that these species-specific constraints and tendencies are shaped by the planetary environment in which humans have thrived in the geological epoch of the Holocene. In a way, the principles that Liu (2017) laid down in the target article may be thought of as instantiations of these constraints and tendencies of humanity.

This perspective points to the possibility that there are some points of convergence of Liu's Height Psychology with various movements in *non-Asian* social psychology. And, indeed, there seem to be. For instance, there is a strong momentum in positive psychology, avowedly pursuing scientific knowledge in the service of human wellbeing. If its credo is not *ren*, human-heartedness, it is humanistic, and it does not eschew value-laden discourse. There is also a growing trend called moral psychology, it explores moral decision making and its implications for human action and wellbeing. There is an explosion of interdisciplinary research on evolution of cooperation, which spans not only psychology, but also other social sciences like sociology, anthropology, political science, and economics, as well as natural sciences including applied mathematics, physics, biology, and computer science.

Of these, the most pertinent for Height Psychology is the growing interest in human capacity to "experience" future, which Gilbert and Wilson (2007) called *prospection* (also see Seligman, Railton, Baumeister, & Sripada, 2013; Fukukura, Helzer, & Ferguson, 2013). This research puts the time dimension – dimension 3 of Height Psychology – squarely in the research agenda of psychology. Human tendencies to predict future and act accordingly may be built into the human biological

make-up (e.g., Clark, 2013; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Possible futures may be about an individual (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986) or a collective (e.g., Bain, Hornsey, Bongiorno, Kashima, & Crimston, 2013). Prospects of possible futures may raise hope or fear, inspire or apprehend, motivate or paralyse. Whatever psychological implications of future perceptions, it obviously influence human action in all domains of activity.

Liu (2017) echoes this call to take time seriously, but diverges from it in part, by also drawing our attention to the past. His research program on social representations of history is the case in point (Liu et al. 2005; Liu & Hilton, 2005). In *Asian Journal of Social Psychology,* Liu and his colleagues have established a solid body of literature on how people's perceptions of the past have a significant influence on the present – their beliefs, attitudes, identities, and emotions – in Taiwan (Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004), Malaysia and Singapore (J. H. Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2002), Malaysia (Hakim, Liu, Isler, & Woodward, 2015), and around the world (Paez, Liu, Bobowik, Basabe, & Hanke, 2016). It seems to me prospections are necessarily shaped by our memories; the motion towards future is shaped by the past (Cheng et al., 2010; Kashima et al., 2009; Shin et al., 2014). Asian social psychology can surely add the holistic time perspective – perceptions of the past and future condensed in the here and now.

Future Prospect: Scope for Further Expansion

In 2001, two events marked symbolic beginnings of our realization of the main issues for the 21st century. One was the September 11 Attacks, which clearly brought out the intergroup conflicts and frictions brewing globally under the surface. The other was the 3rd assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which warned of the global warming and possibilities of dangerous climate change (see Kashima, 2016, for a brief description and review). Intergroup conflict and climate change can exacerbate the potential threat to humanity by amplifying each other's impact on human populations. An increasing global temperature can exacerbate intergroup conflict (Hsiang, Burke, & Miguel, 2013); intergroup conflicts jeopardize international cooperation necessary for climate change mitigation and adaptation (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014). The nexus of global warming and intergroup conflict makes a dangerous mix. Goods and services necessary for human survival need to secured for all; the mechanisms of their production, provision, and processing need to be global in reach. Yet, the cooperation and coordination necessary for their realization is in tatters; movements for and against the closure of national and cultural boundaries are in a tussle.

Against these contemporary challenges, Liu's directives can, and perhaps should, be expanded further. The very absence of an analytical specification of what human heartedness means makes it open for future; therein lies the possibility for further expansion.

The intergroup conflicts and global warming do not pose threats just to humanity, but to the whole of the planetary ecosystem. The human activities of resource extraction, production, consumption, and waste disposal are pushing the planetary boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015) that have maintained the "safe operating space for humanity" (Rockström et al., 2009), known as the Holocene optimum. The Earth's biosphere appears to be currently undergoing the sixth extinction (Barnosky et al., 2011) following the fifth in which dinosaurs went extinct. The massive reduction in biodiversity threatens not only humanity, but also many of the life forms on the planet. In Asian social psychology, the directives of holism, relationalism, and human heartedness may be interpreted as confined to the domain within one's cultural boundary, or maybe the boundary set by the species of *Homo sapiens*. The intercultural and natural environmental challenges of intergroup conflict and climate change urge us to think beyond these boundaries. The scope of Liu's directives reminds us and inspires us to

go beyond the present without losing sight of the past, expanding from the context of here and now to the realm of the possible.

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