



Social psychology in India: A Review

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Abstract

Social psychology is as old as homosapiens on this earth. Throughout the recorded history, social nature of man has intrigued scholars, artists, and social reformers. Their work has significant bearing on understanding how people relate with others and conduct their social life. Scriptures, artefacts, music, poetry, all have contributed to this endeavour. What has intrigued scholars is the evidence of both, universality and uniqueness of social behaviour in different cultures. People have lived together in all cultures as family, community and nation, though they may not have learned to live together in peace. Human nature has essentially remained the same ever since. It seems that many of the questions which ancient social psychology raised are the same which contemporary social psychology is striving to answer. However, rapid social, economic, and political changes sweeping across the oceans and continents have thrown up many new questions for social psychologists. Many new theories and methods are being developed to unravel general principles of social interaction.

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Introduction

What constitutes traditional social psychology in West can be rechristened as modern social psychology in India. As mentioned earlier, the traditional social psychology is largely a derivative of the scriptures of Dharmashastras, Arthashastra, Mahabharata, Puranas, etc. The concepts and principles of social psychology inherent in these texts not only mirrored the Indian society but also proscribed models of social behaviour up till the beginning of the twentieth Century. Historically speaking, sociology and social anthropology have much longer history in India than social psychology. For Britishers, India was a very different society, a mystical world of sadhus, snake charmers and supernatural. "The unique systems of caste, religion, tribal and rural communities, rituals, beliefs and traditions were baffling to an Englishman. It had no parallel in the experiences of western societies". Making mistakes in dealing with people without knowing their social background quite often landed them in



trouble. The mutiny of 1857 was very much attributed to this ignorance on the part of the Britishers who failed to fathom the consequences of violating cultural norms. For the smooth functioning of the colonial administration, it was imperative for them to learn about Indian customs and traditions. The Britishers supported sociological and anthropological studies and by the turn of this century these disciplines were well established in the Indian academics. Social psychological research did not have that advantage and was largely ignored by the colonial rulers.

What we know today as social psychology had a beginning in the establishment of the first psychology department at the Calcutta University. N.N. Sengupta, the first chairman of the Department, had his degree with Hugo Munsterberg at Harvard University. Though his basic training was in experimental psychology, he was deeply interested in the study of Indian society. When N.N. Sengupta moved to Lucknow University, he worked with an eminent sociologist Radhakamal Mukhejee to produce a book on social psychology in 1928. The book was published from London and coming soon after Allport's book (1924), it was widely noticed by the academic community. This fine precedence of scholars from sociology and psychology working together was, however, not followed in most of the later work in social psychology in India. Rather, it proved to be an exception to the rule. In the formative years, and even later, there was rarely any systematic academic exchange between sociology and psychology. As a consequence, social psychology could never become a bridge between the two sister disciplines. Social psychology within the sociological tradition was well established in India with its methods of survey and participant observation, focused on Indian social institutions and their relation with social role-specific behaviour. Their analysis of primary and secondary data was very much in the tradition of Marx, Durkheim, Manneheim and other European sociologists. Social psychologists from the psychology background worked primarily in the American tradition with emphasis on methodological sophistication. In only few cases psychologists dealt with Indian customs, traditions and social institutions. The distance between the two disciplines widened further with Indian psychologists making all out efforts to establish the identity of psychology as a scientific discipline. They were much inspired by the work done in the West.

Possibilities and Prospects

- **Need to expand data base:**



Whatever data and theory we have in the area of social psychology in India, they are from the samples of educated urban middle class population. The structure and pattern which we get is largely a methodological artifact. They hardly refer to the rural people or marginalized people. The social class bias is clearly present in sample selection

- **Need to entertain multiple perspectives:**

It is being realized that social psychology does not constitute a single theoretical perspective. These perspectives are complementary rather than competitive. It would be theoretically relevant and fruitful for applications if we could approach the perspectives from an open mind. Over enthusiasm for any given perspective may obscure the generative potential of theories. Sensitivity to different perspectives may enhance the range of social psychological discourse.

- **Need for a Cultural Social Psychology:**

So far, social psychology has been a cultural. It was treated as an independent force operating invariably across cultures. In actual practice it was inclusive for western cultures and exclusive for non-western cultures. This discrepant conduct of researchers was possible because of camouflaging and power differentials in the groups of researchers from different parts of the world. If culture was used, it was a source of problems.

- **Need for a Critical Emancipatory Perspective:**

In recent years, there has been development of a critical perspective in psychology. It recognizes that the traditional practices and norms of the mainstream social psychology are often contrary to social justice and often prove detrimental for people and communities in general, and of oppressed groups in particular. Fox and Prilleltensky (1997) argue that by promoting individualistic ideal, it encourages individual pursuits and interferes with interaction and communication.

Some Dilemmas in Practicing Social Psychology

(1) Interdisciplinary vs. Loosing disciplinary identity:

The choice to make social psychology interdisciplinary simultaneously raises the threat of curtailing the academic freedom to maintain the identity of social psychology. The



traditional division of labour had some (conventional) markers which in subtle ways decided to do's and don'ts for different disciplines. This led to vigorous effort for differentiation amongst them. Their adherents behaved like rival groups and did everything to preserve separate identities. This included separation of teaching departments, research problems, methods of investigation, journals and professional bodies. With all these creations the stance of separate identity has hardened in due course of time. This has created barriers in communication. The recent upsurge of interest in inter/multi/cross disciplinary perspectives is therefore often considered as confusing.

(2) Indigenization vs. relevance:

In recent years there has been call for indigenizing psychology in general and social psychology in particular. This movement draws heavily on reconstructing the discipline through using symbolic resources and practices available in specific cultures. However, there is no one mode of undertaking this venture and it is operating at different levels. Also, its outcomes are yet not assimilated by the main body of social psychology. Apart from these reasons there is also a fear of becoming irrelevant and incongruent with the contemporary mode of social psychology. The question of relevance is also posed in the context of applications of indigenous psychology. Many psychologists think that being more concerned with tradition and culture the application of indigenous psychology becomes questionable. At present the situation is really ambiguous because indigenous psychology is yet to develop.

(3) Disciplinary advancement vs. Significance for the society:

The pursuit of social psychology has proliferated mainly as an academic enterprise dedicated to theoretical advancement in the field. This was being achieved through designing and conducting more and more sophisticated studies with newer variables and increasing degree of control over relevant variables. In this way scientific work progressed as a filtering mechanism. While undertaking a scientific study the question of application does not occur. It is the job of subsequent research or reflection to see whether the study has any potential for application.



(4) Theory driven research vs. Data driven research:

The orientation of psychologists has generally been more in favour of theory driven research. Thus a given theory makes a prediction and researchers try to demonstrate the empirical viability of such predictions. Researchers often examine the combination(s) of variables as predictors of dependent variables under study. In contrast, data driven research which begins with observation of a phenomena is infrequent and rare. The grounded theoretic approach has not been very popular. In practice, the dichotomy of theory and data is false because none of them operates in isolation.

Conclusion

The social psychological research in India has been predominantly concerned with describing reality with the help of available (western) conceptual categories having little concern with their cultural roots. In recent years rethinking has started and sensitivity to cultural context has increased. There are many examples of this welcome change which have not only expanded the range of variables but has enriched our discourse by enabling insiders view of Indian society. Attempts are being made to examine the boundaries of concepts and the way they behave in different cultural contexts. It is hoped that by utilizing untapped cultural resources, symbolic as well as behavioural (used in practices) social psychology may find the solutions of Indian problems from an Indian perspective. The hallmark of this perspective would be the interdependence of individual and society, rather than a dichotomy or dissociation of these two aspects of social life.

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