



Teaching Social Psychology : Challenges and Possibilities

Dr. Sadhana Natu

Associate Professor and Head Dept. of Psychology

Modern College, Ganeshkhind, Pune University, Pune, India E Mail: sana.psychologist@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Social Psychology is one branch of Psychology which keeps the umbilical cord of the subject with other Social Sciences intact. Hence, Social Psychology is often taken to be a soft subject in comparison with other hard core branches of Psychology like Experimental and Abnormal Psychology. This paper will try to argue for a place in the sun for Social Psychology in teaching and in practice, both for theoretical reasons and also to create a more 'inclusive and multi- disciplinary Psychology'.

The content and the concepts in Social Psychology often demand a nuanced pedagogical approach and a multi- disciplinary approach – (borrowing from Sociology, Anthropology, Women's Studies etc.), why this is essential will be critically examined and illustrated in the paper.

In contemporary times, there are many challenges in teaching Social Psychology e.g. current socio political events, students from heterogeneous backgrounds and the gap between the Curriculum and ground reality. The paper will analyse some of these challenges.

At the same time, there are many possibilities like engaging with critical social issues in a meaningful way, consolidating diversity and creating a multi –cultural Social Psychology, to name a few. The paper will highlight some of these opportunities.

In the South Asian context too, Social Psychology offers a lot of scope to build bridges and engage in a dialogue on our common problems and similar solutions.

This paper will attempt to address some of the specificities of teaching Social Psychology in an Indian University while simultaneously keeping in mind, the South Asian context.

Key Words: *social psychology, challenges, possibilities, curriculum, teaching, Asia*

Introduction

Social Psychology is the only branch of Psychology that is concerned with the individual and the social. It is also a branch of Psychology which keeps the umbilical cord of the subject with other Social Sciences intact. Hence, Social Psychology is often taken to be a soft subject in comparison with other hard core branches of Psychology like Experimental and Abnormal Psychology. This is a myth that needs to be busted.

Teaching of Social Psychology requires nuanced pedagogical practices that combine theory with field experiences and contextual references. Not enough attention has been paid to this. The psycho- social, socio- economic and Geo - political factors within regions and nations which have an impact on the individual and social group, form the subject matter of Social Psychology.

Though there is plenty of on-going research on social issues of great relevance, both in academia and outside, it has to be included in the curriculum and has to get translated into teaching.

These are the concerns that are foregrounded in this paper and are the motivation for this paper. Against this backdrop, the present paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- Revisit the historical background of Asian Social Psychology and connect it to the present
- Emphasize the need for a Multi- disciplinary approach in teaching of Social Psychology
- A brief Curriculum analysis and its interpretation
- Suggest the way forward in the Asian context



Raison d'être of Social Psychology in Asia – Looking Backward

A Literature Review shows that *Asian Psychology* is a branch of Cultural Psychology that studies psychological concepts as they relate to Asian culture. Psychologists studying these issues are often aligned with Cross cultural Psychology. Asian Psychologists wanted to have an expanding role in the science of psychology, but felt limited due to the heavy western influence. In earlier times, the predominant figures in Asian psychology were Quicheng Jing in China, Hiroshi Azuma in Japan, Ku-Shu Yang in Taiwan, and Durganand Sinha in India (Kittayama, 2011)

Over the years there have been several studies that have pioneered the path of Asian Social Psychology, for instance Kao and Sinha's work in 1997, where the authors emphasized that Asian traditions provide alternative perspectives which are more practical in orientation, have greater concern for both larger societal issues and personal problems, and which take into account the transcendental and spiritual aspects—all of which are largely missing in Western psychology. Their work focused on a major exploration of indigenous psychological systems prevalent in the Asian region, alternative paradigms and perspectives that characterized current thinking in Asian societies. Beginning with a discussion of the fundamental differences between Asian and Western approaches to psychological knowledge rooted in ontological and epistemological issues concerning the nature of knowledge and reality, they examined specific areas in order to highlight the differences in the orientation and thinking of Asian psychologists.

The popularity and success of Social Psychology in the U.S. had created the impression that Social Psychology was purely a Western, if not a U.S. product. Many scholars from Africa and Asia accepted this claim that the roots of Social Psychology were American, and tried to emulate their research strategies and methodology. Only recently, the European Social psychologists have established their identity and distinctness different from the culture of American Social Psychology. Among Asian social psychologists,

there is a growing awareness of a distinct identity and a rediscovery of their cultural heritage. In particular, Indian social psychologists emphasize functional interrelatedness of the self, relations, society, and universe. With this indigenization process, social psychology in India is taking on a character distinctive from that of the West, is imparting a new look to social psychology, and promises to provide what the mainstream social psychology lacks. (Sinha, 1998)

Although applied practical knowledge of social behaviors can be traced to the rich Indian intellectual traditions in philosophy, religious texts, social-political treatises and reform movements from the ancient period, the scientific social psychology in India began in the 1920s mostly as a borrowed discipline from the West. (Pandey, Singh, 2009)

Social Psychological research in India revealed two predominant tendencies: understanding Indian social reality through a Western lens or replicating Western studies and extending them in an Indian milieu. Researches emanating from a genuine intellectual or social need were very few. (Dalal, Mishra, 2001)

The Asian Association of Social Psychology is a milestone in expanding the boundary, substance and direction of social psychology beyond its initial Euro-American base and also encouraging links between Asian and Western facts and principles of social psychology amongst its many objectives. It brings out *The Asian Journal of Social Psychology* to stimulate research and encourage academic exchanges for the advancement of social psychology in Asia. It publishes theoretical and empirical papers by Asian scholars and those interested in Asian cultures and societies.

In India, National Academy of Psychology (NAOP) has a Division on Social Psychology and Indian Academy of Applied Psychology (IAAP) has also paid attention to social issues. Both these national organizations have devoted themes and sub themes in conferences to Social Psychology.

Revisiting the history of Social Psychology and its review accentuates the need to create Social Psychology in the Asian context



with its specificities and also to engage with broader contexts of Europe and USA in terms of commonalities in order to create a vibrant discipline.

Need for a Multi- disciplinary Approach– Interconnections with other disciplines, sources of information

The concepts and content of Social Psychology underline the need to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and to borrow from Sociology, Anthropology, Gender Studies and Human Development to name a few disciplines.

In addition various perspectives have to be adopted in order to understand psycho-social phenomena. New insights can be obtained by incorporating biological, cognitive and evolutionary perspectives in the study of social psychological phenomena. These might include interpersonal relations, communication, cooperative behavior and emotions.

In order to understand the social psychological aspects of health, law, environment etc. disciplines like Law, Health Science and Environmental Science need to be studied.

With the increasing realization that Social Psychology does not constitute a single theoretical perspective, it is necessary to keep an open mind and view various perspectives. However, these attempts also lead to the danger of losing disciplinary identity. (Dalal, Mishra, 2001) This is indeed a tightrope walk.

Compartmentalizing knowledge and disciplines has led to lack of dialogue and collaboration. In order to make Policy Research in Social Psychology possible, this has to change. Social Psychologists, Sociologists, Economists and other Social Scientists will have to work together on issues of national development. This can lead to knowledge production and sound research which could in turn percolate into the curriculum.

Challenges and concerns in India and Asia

1. **Curriculum** – In order to interrogate the teaching of Social Psychology, the Methodology used was a brief curriculum analysis. It has been presented below -

In **India**, the curriculum designed by University

Grants Commission Syllabus at the national level is followed in most of the Universities.

The Undergraduate Syllabus includes –

2. Methods Prejudice
3. Aggression Theories
4. Social Influence Social Cognition
5. Communication Attraction and Exclusion
6. Attitudes Self
7. Group processes

The Post graduate Syllabus includes –

- Methods and theories (Indigenous Social psychology)
- Social Cognition and Communication
- Attitudes & prejudice
- Attraction and pro social behavior
- Aggression, terrorism
- Social influence, Group processes
- Applications Social change, Gender issues
- Poverty, disadvantage, social integration

The topics in the curriculum are between ‘mainstream’ and ‘modified’ i.e. they are a mixture of traditional topics along with some lip service to new concerns. Interpreting topics like aggression and terrorism is left to individual teachers, who will be at a loss to find resource material (text and reference books) in the local and regional context and will therefore not be able to do complete justice to such topics. While the motive behind introducing topics on gender issues, social change and social integration is very positive, a lot of training would be required to deliver such complex and nuanced topics in the classroom.

Therefore, the curriculum has to be viewed together with teacher training, availability of teaching material and a robust system of assessment and evaluation for the students. Also regular updating of curriculum is important to ensure that the relevance of the subject is maintained. Some of the leading Universities in India have managed to maintain this balance in the curriculum.

However, the biggest challenge is to ensure that both social conflicts (related to the issues of caste, region, race, religion, ethnicity, nation etc.)



and social change (social movements, struggles, reform) are enunciated in the classroom of Social Psychology with sensitivity and objectivity. If not, then the classroom will remain a sanitized place to transact the curriculum.

A look at the Psychology Curriculum of Taiwan University tells us about the “Personality and Social Psychology programme characterized by its indigenous approach with the objective to construct culture-inclusive theories for understanding Chinese psychology in their social, culture and historical context.” This is really important in order to foreground the cultural specificity of the region and at the same time teach the students some universal and broad western skills.

The Curriculum of Tokyo International University introduces a “Social Psychology Course where the students learn about consumer activities, taking leaderships in a company or an organization, techniques of persuasion from the viewpoint of social psychology.” Such a course rooted in the region and with universal objectives would be an asset for the students.

2. Teacher perspective – has always been a weak link in Higher Education all over the world since there are very few well defined programmes for teacher training in pedagogy, content as well as perspective.

Most of the concepts in Social psychology demand training in interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach e.g. social identity would require an understanding of sociological variables like class, caste, race, ethnicity, anthropological insights and some insights from Political Science and Economics too. While some Universities in India and other Asian countries have realized the value of such an approach, all of them are not geared for it.

The need for Indigenization would require that teachers are equipped to develop culture specific frameworks for concepts and theories. At the same time they will have to connect these specificities to research in the Western world.

Teachers also need to be trained in using audio visual material like films, short films, songs and advertisements effectively in a Social Psychology class for e.g. this resource material

is particularly useful to illustrate prejudice, attitudinal change, discrimination, gender roles, stereotypes etc.

All this requires a lot of specialized orientation and training for teachers of Social psychology.

3. Assessment and Evaluation - needs to be done in a creative manner with more focus on field experience, in – site learning and engaging students with the lived experiences of people embedded in specific contexts for e.g. impact of conflicts can be understood from newspaper reports, use of audio visual material and actual visits to relief camps along with structured classroom learning.

Students can make presentations and write reports based on such visits. Assessment of such experiential learning would aim at helping to students to apply Social psychology in real life and not merely rote learning.

Role plays and Group projects can be used to assess the social skills, team playing capacity and social cognition of students. Term papers and research papers, mini research projects on complex themes such as poverty, disadvantage, attraction, exclusion would help in teasing out the complexities and developing a nuanced understanding.

4. Applications - The issue of application was ignored to such an extent that social psychologists had to develop a new specialization called “applied social psychology” (Dalal, Mishra, 2001) Related to application is the question of relevance. Social Psychology will become relevant only when Critical and Multi- cultural perspectives will be developed.

At present the curriculum does incorporate an application aspect, but the nexus between theory and application has to be firmly established.

5. Text and Reference books – regional and international – There is no effort by any Indian psychologist to write a textbook on social psychology from the Indian perspective, including Indian empirical studies and conceptual framework. (Dalal, Mishra, 2001) is a charge that has been levelled time and again.

However some efforts have been made all over Asia to translate English texts into regional



languages and also to promote independent academic writing in regional languages. This effort needs to be strengthened instead of borrowing uncritically from North American models.

International books now have Asian editions and a lot of publishing does have a global approach in current times. This is a welcome change.

Possibilities

1 .Bridges, Dialogues in Asia - Conferences such as the current one organized by ICEPS is a good platform to engage in a dialogue and exchange of ideas. This will allow us to share our experiences about classroom teaching, curriculum, research as well as social issues. It will be an opportunity to observe our common contexts and concerns and do collaborative work wherever possible.

Within the country too, we need to conduct more and more multi- site studies which will give us valuable insights on several issues like terrorism, conflicts and violence.

2. Seize the Moment - Going Forward

- Tackling current issues, engaging in policy research and knowledge making are extremely important goals for social Psychologists.

To increase the relevance of social psychology research, Multiplism (Cook, 1985) as a strategy should be considered. Multiplism means the use of multiple methodologies; planned research programmes based on multiple interconnected studies. The synthesis of findings of multiple studies related to each other, covering various aspects of problems in a real context; make the findings meaningful for policy implementation. Multiplism is likely to widen the horizon and enrich the range of social psychology discourse and research.

Findings - Analysis and Interpretations :

A survey of challenges and possibilities brings the following points to the fore –

- In India – the First Survey of Research in Psychology (ICSSR) had one chapter on Social psychology but the third, fourth and fifth surveys have had an entire volume dedicated to the subject. This tells us that the importance of this subject has been recognized and acknowledged
- There is a need to conduct National Curriculum Analysis with a dedicated Task force to review critical parameters such as relevance, indigenization, cultural appropriateness, new theories and models, regional topics, reading lists, work of regional psychologists, incorporation of critical perspectives, connection between research reviews and teaching, cross disciplinary trends (Vindhya, 2008)
- The very nature of social issues is complex and demands an interdisciplinary approach. There is also a need to broaden the scope of inquiry by taking into account both societal and individual variables. Being confined to either individual or societal level variables limits the possibilities of complete analysis. One has to go beyond the boundaries of the discipline so that the complexities of the social reality can be grappled with. In the past, the focus has been more on individual level variables. There is a need to focus both on individual as well as systemic and structural variables, to enable both macro and micro understanding of social reality (Pandey, Singh, 2009)
- Need to create Alternative Social Psychologies such as Discursive, Narrative, Cultural, Activity, Symbolic Interactionism, Ethnomethodology (Moghaddam, Harre, 1995)
- Need to tie in with research outside the academia and move from Social psychology to Social Transformation (Natu, Pandit, 2013)
- Building a liberal perspective among teachers wherein they respect diversity and engage with concepts in a discursive manner
- Creating more resource material in regional and local languages and translating relevant and critical English texts
- Using more interactive and facilitative pedagogy in order to do justice to the rich and vibrant subject
- Using creative assessment techniques to make the subject more meaningful



- Working on collaborative projects within the country and in Asia

Conclusion – Need for reflection

This paper has been written keeping in mind the need to study the nexus between teaching, curriculum, research and context. The observations and analyses in this paper will help fellow teachers and researchers to understand the interdependence of the individual and society as the hallmark of Social psychology and thereby refrain from dichotomizing the two or creating binaries.

Binaries of East and West as well as Global North and South also need to be avoided. We need to contextualize and engage in more rigorous research and inquiry instead. In fact global issues have a distinct universal nature with regional variants. This has to be studied more carefully. Social Psychology offers us the scope to do so.

To become truly significant for society, Social Psychologists will have to engage in critical appraisal and reflection about the teaching of Social psychology. We will also have to think of interventions and policy research in order to contribute to national development. Creating a multi – cultural and inclusive Social Psychology that will engage with critical issues is the need of the hour.

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