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Psychology and culture

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Psychology and culture: Back to the future?

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Abstract

Psychology has a poor record in addressing cultural phenomena. One response is to turn to ancient concepts from local traditions and to use these as alternative analytic categories to explain behavior. However, there are problems with such an approach. These concepts will be read from the vantage point of the present and interpreted differently so as to propose different diagnoses (and solutions) for contemporary social problems. As an alternative, rather than using ancient resources as analytic categories in the explanation of behavior, we could instead examine how they are used as categories of practice as people actively make sense of their social context and themselves. Attending to such contemporary 'lay' usage (and the contestation it entails) allows for a more dynamic conception of cultural processes than is typical in psychology. More generally, I believe that it is possible to use our psychological constructs so that we can see the distinctive particularities of the phenomena before us in new and interesting ways, and in ways that respect their cultural specificity. This claim is illustrated through reference to recent work using the concept of social identity to illuminate aspects of Hindu pilgrimage.

Keywords: culture, history, social identity, Magh Mela

The health of any academic discipline requires skepticism, and revisiting the past can help unsettle self-satisfied assumptions about the adequacy of contemporary theorising. Billig (2014: p. 240) puts it nicely: "It is often assumed that history belongs to the winners but academic history cannot be left to the winners, who will all too readily write the history of their disciplines in ways that celebrate current ways of thinking".

The past, the present and the future

Yet, re-visiting the past with an eye to revitalizing our academic stocks of conceptual understanding is complicated. The meanings of ancient texts are not unchanging but contingent upon the political, social and economic context of their readership in the present. Take scriptural text: Eickelman and Piscatori (1990) observe that the understandings of the Qur'anic terms 'mustad'afun' ('the oppressed') and 'mustakbarun' ('the oppressors') articulated in 1970s Iran were shaped by contemporary concerns (and by the earlier publication of Fanon's anti-colonial text '*The Wretched of the Earth'*, 1961). So, 'returning' to the past is unlikely to be straightforward. Try as one might, the reading of apparently timeless cultural resources is likely to be shaped by contemporary concerns. Moreover, at any one time different interpretations of the same textual resources are likely. Consider the Qur'anic description of the benefits of 'moderation'. This is interpreted in different ways by different people. Moreover, this is not random but is bound up with arguments as to how members of a community should make sense of their current situation, the social ills they experience, and how they could and should change themselves and their predicament (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009).

The wider corollary of these observations is that 'presentism' has a long reach: when one returns to early texts they will be read from the perspective of the present and with an eye to the (different) visions of the future people wish to bring into being. Accordingly, and as will become apparent below, I have doubts about the analytic gains to be made through returning to apparently 'traditional' concepts. However, this does not mean I believe these resources to be of no interest. Quite the contrary.

The use of culture

As a social psychologist, my interests concern how people actively make sense of their social context and themselves, and how these constructions organise behaviour (Hopkins & Reicher, 2011). In relation to this, research shows that talk about psychological concepts can feature in the rhetorical construction of group identities (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). For example, the psychological concept of 'self-hate' is a powerful rhetorical tool with which to psychologise the basis for others' social and political attitudes and thereby delegitimate those postions in favour of others (Finlay, 2005).

This potency is not hard to fathom. Edelman observes that 'the *fundamental* influences upon political beliefs flow … from language that is not perceived as political at all but nonetheless structures perceptions of status, authority, merit, deviance, and the cause of social problems' (Edelman, 1977, p. 21, original emphasis), and psychological concepts are powerful in this regard. Most obviously, psychological concepts typically highlight mental states and processes within the individual and are often associated with notions of health and ill-health, normality and deviance. Moreover, they are easily used to interpret behaviour, discern motives, and ascribe identities. All this implies that psychological concepts (whatever their origin) can be powerful resources with which to label particular attitudes as problematic and

as having their origin in psychological dysfunction. When they have the authority of 'tradition' they may be especially potent. Thus, for a social psychologist interested in the social construction of contemporary identities, much may be gained through examining how people employ the 'reflexive discourse' (Richards, 2010) and concepts from the past, as they seek to identify the psychological origins and dimensions to contemporary social ills (and how to bring about solutions in the future).

It should be clear to all that this approach does not entail using these concepts as analytic tools. Rather, it approaches them as categories of *practice* and asks what work they accomplish in the construction of social identities and the organisation of future behavior (Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2009). Thus, whereas it may be possible to use the concept of *anasakti* (non-attachment) as an analytic concept to help explain the degree of stress individuals experience (Pande & Naidu, 1992), one could also ask how social actors themselves use this concept to diagnose contemporary social ills and ask what such usage achieves in terms of ascribing identities, organizing social behaviour, normalizing and naturalising inequitable social relations, etc. Indeed, I believe this latter approach allows a more dynamic conception of cultural processes than is usual in psychology. Typically, and for various reasons, psychology works with simplistic, static and essentialised images of culture and cultural difference (Misra & Gergen, 2002). This is problematic in all sorts of ways for the reality is that cultural resources are topics of debate that are invoked and actively re-worked/re-constituted in everyday interactions. Indeed, it is precisely because of a desire to avoid the reification of culture that I am cautious about treating resources from the past as cultural 'givens' to be used as categories of analysis (rather than as topics of contemporary argument in the construction of identities).

Addressing culture

Whilst researchers in the Indian sub-continent and the developing world have been particularly aware of psychology's limits in relation to the conceptualisation of culture, others have voiced related concerns and encouraged attention to the cultural specificity of the phenomena before us. Thus, one of the founding figures of European social psychology – Henri Tajfel – was seriously troubled by what he saw as the tendency for experimental researchers to treat 'the experimental episode as if it were a "social vacuum", in which the norms and values that normally guided human social behaviour no longer applied' (Condor, 2003, p. 156-157). More recently, Billig (2014) has criticized social psychology's tendency to neglect the specificities of the phenomena we study and instead to use our constructs (e.g., 'stereotypes', 'attributions', 'group identity' etc.) to talk in general terms about what is before us. As he explains 'general concepts become greedy concepts, devouring the individual, unique features of the social world' and the result 'is less, not greater, theoretical understanding' (Billig, 2014, p. 236). Indeed, he argues that our social psychological constructs are only valuable if they actually enable us to see the particular phenomena in front of us in new and interesting ways without obliterating or flattening their distinctiveness.

Such observations suggest that we should use our constructs to sensitize us to otherwise neglected features of the phenomena before us and to do so in such a way that recognizes their cultural specificty. Take, for example, the experience of pilgrimage. This is a deeply personal spiritual act, experienced through the lens of particular religious traditions. However, we can ask if and how social psychological theory could illuminate aspects of pilgrims' experience that could otherwise go un-noticed without ignoring the cultural specificity and integrity of that experience. Needless to say, much traditional psychological theorizing fails in this regard. Take for example, the collective dimension to many acts of

pilgrimage. Traditional crowd psychology obliterates the cultural distinctiveness of collective events. Typically, crowd psychology is construed as entailing the loss of identity and a weakening of the role of social norms in shaping behaviour. Moreover, the intense emotionality of crowd participants is routinely taken as evidence of this reversion to irrationality.

However, alternative theoretical frameworks are possible which more properly respect the integrity of the phenomena before us, and my colleagues and I sought to use these in a recent exploration of the social psychological dimensions of participation in the Magh Mela at Prayag (Allahabad). This is a huge annual festival that attracts millions and many pilgrims (known as *kalpwasis*) undertake to live on the banks of the Ganges for a full month. Our analysis drew on the concept of social identity which holds that the self may be defined at different levels of abstraction (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Sometimes this may be in terms of individual uniqueness, sometimes in terms of specific group memberships. This shift in the subjective salience of individual-level personal and group-based social identities helps explain the shift from individual to group behaviour, with the behaviours exhibited depending on the cultural beliefs and ideals associated with the collective's social identity. Adopting this perspective in the context of the Magh Mela demands we pay due regard to these cultural beliefs (e.g., identity-relevant spiritual ideals) and leads us to ask if and how our psychological concepts can illuminate how kalpwasi pilgrims experience their physical and social environment. It also encourages us to ask if our concepts help illuminate the social processes that underlie crowd members' abilities to enact and realise these ideals.

In our own research we found the concept of a shared social identity useful in sensitizing us to aspects of the kalpwasi experience. For example, we found that the cultural beliefs and norms associated with being a kalpwasi shaped their experience of the event's auditory environment (Shankar et al, 2013). So too, we found that the social relations between kalpwasis were shaped by the degree to which they adopted a shared identification. Here, we did not assume that all kalpwasis would identify with each other. Rather, we expected variation in the degree to which kalpwasis saw themselves in terms of a common identification, and we asked if such variation could illuminate otherwise un-noticed aspects of the kalpwasi experience.

We believe it did. Ethnographic observation revealed that a shared identity was manifested in mutual support which helped individual kalpwasis overcome the challenges of what could be a harsh environment (Pandey et al, 2014). Moreover, the concept alerted us to the ways in which a shared social identity facilitated the alignment of individuals' goals and the social co-ordination of behaviour such that individuals could better realise the injunctions associated with their kalpwasi identity. Thus questionnaire data suggested that a shared social identity facilitated the realization of identity-related behavioural and spiritual ideals and that this helped explain participants' intensely positive experience of the event (Hopkins et al, 2015). It also explained the longer term impact of participation on individuals' identity and behaviour (Khan et al, 2015a) and the benefits on health and well-being that kalpwasis reported (Khan et al, 2015 b; Tewari, Khan, Hopkins, Srinivasan & Reicher, 2012). In all of the above, the culturally-specific ideals of the participants were key, and we used the concept of a shared social identity to offer insight into the social bases for individuals being able to realise these ideals.

Conclusion

My interests lie in how people actively make sense of their social context and themselves, and how this results in various psychological self-definitions. In doing so, I am keen to connect these psychological self-definitions with the social practices and interactions that take place in public and this requires analyses that engage with cultural beliefs and practices. Indeed, I believe that we should try to use our psychological constructs so that we can see the particular phenomena in front of us in new and interesting ways which respect the cultural specificity of those phenomena. I am not convinced that this requires we use traditional concepts as analytic categories. Rather, I'd be interested in how 'ordinary people' employ such concepts in the rhetorical construction of identities for themselves and others (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). I believe this allows for a more dynamic conception of cultural processes than is typical in psychology. Indeed, I worry that employing constructs from the past as analytic categories may be counter-productive. Such concepts may encourage essentialist and ahistorical analyses, and may also prove to be 'greedy concepts' (Billig, 2014), encouraging us to overlook the distinctive particularities of the phenomena before us and their contingency on social practice.

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