Sharpening Our Understanding of Social Problems in Asian Societies: The Roles of Culture and Theory in Socially Engaged Social Psychology

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This thematic Special Issue is the second in a five-year series on social psychology of social change that aims to feature the science and practice of interventions for social change. But, current work in the social psychology of social change still focuses on theoretical analysis of social problems; the action-oriented approach to social psychology research is not yet a strong movement in social psychology in the region. This is reflected in the research features in the Special Issue, where only one exemplifies the action research approach. Nevertheless, there is progress towards applying the theoretical lenses and methodological tools of social psychology to develop sharper understanding of particular social problems and the theoretical analysis that draws from close social contextual analysis and from indigenous concepts plays an important role in this progress. Even as we reflect on the challenges for moving towards action-oriented social psychology research, we note how social psychologists in the Asian and Pacific region are focusing their attention on local social concerns.

Keywords: social change, social problems, psychology, Asia, action research

This thematic Special Issue is the second in a series entitled 'The Social Psychology of Social Change: Science and Practice in Asia', which has been organised by the Asian Association of Social Psychology for the *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*. The series that was launched in 2014 aims to:

> over the course of the next five years . . . provide a special forum for cutting edge research in Asia and the Pacific on the science and practice of interventions for social change that benefit individuals and society . . . [and] takes up Kurt Lewin's call for scientific research aimed towards solving a social problem and generating new knowledge (*Bargal & Bar, 1992*), but with a theory and practice of culture and culture change at its centre. (*Liu & Bernardo, 2014*, p. 29).

This issue coincides with the 20th year anniversary of the establishment of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, which has as part of its mission:

> to promote research on Asian traditions, philosophies, and ideas that have scientific merit and practical applications, and expands the boundary, substance, and direction of social psychology by supplementing and integrating Western psychology's focus on intra-individual processes with a broader and more holistic view from culture and society.

Although there has been noticeable progress in this mission (Haslam & Kashima, 2010), there have been concerns raised about whether progress towards realising it has focused too much on fundamental personality and social psychological processes at the expense of more applied societal problems, especially those in economically developing societies (Leung, 2007). With these concerns came calls for a more socially engaged Asian social psychology (Atsumi, 2007) and proposals for a more action research orientation in social psychology research in the region (Liu, Ng, Gastardo-Conaco, & Wong, 2008). But, social psychology research of this type is still not well represented in the published literature, with articles from the previous thematic Special Issue (Su, Pan, & Chen, 2014; Wang, Shiahhou, Wu, & Liu, 2014) being some of the few exemplars. More time and advocacy might be needed before more progress in this movement for action research oriented social psychology is seen, and the thematic Special Issue series hopes to be a forum within which this movement can take more concrete forms.

However, social psychology in Asia has not turned a blind eye on societal problems in different parts of the region. Recent research has focused on very timely social

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issues, such as distrust of political institutions (Anindya, Leolita, & Abraham, 2014; Lu, 2014), the rise in terrorism in Southeast Asia (Milla, Faturachman, & Ancok, 2013; Putra & Sukabdi, 2013), religious prejudice (Clobert, Saroglou, Hwang, & Soong, 2014; Kanas, Scheepers, & Sterkens, 2015), attitudes towards immigrants (Du, Li, & Lin, 2015; Mashuri, Burhan, & van Leeuwen, 2013), beliefs and attitudes related to climate change and environment concerns (Jang, 2013; Zhang, Wang, & Lai, 2015), and psychological experiences of low socioeconomic status groups in different Asian societies (Noor & Alwi, 2013; Reyes & Yujuico, 2014), among others. Such studies affirm Kurt Lewin's (1952) basic assumption that good theory provides valuable ways of understanding and conceptualising social problems and also of pointing to potentially effective ways of dealing with the social problems.

In this thematic Special Issue, seven empirical studies further attest to the beneficial relationship between social psychological theory and socially engaged psychology. These articles apply personality and social psychological theoretical lenses and methodological tools to illuminate our understanding of some psychological processes that arise from interrelated social changes affecting numerous societies in the Asian and Pacific region: socioeconomic transformation, evolving political spaces, migration, and increased intergroup contact. Consistent with the aspirations of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, all the studies in this Special Issue are drawn from culturally sensitive theorising about the social psychological processes, with a couple of studies drawing significant theoretical insight from indigenous psychological concepts.

Introduction to the Papers in the Thematic Special Issue

Several papers address phenomena that arise from rapid socioeconomic transformations occurring in many Asian societies. The first article focuses on some psychological consequences of socioeconomic transformation that relate to students' career education. Liu, Lu, Deng, Wang, and Keng note that one long-term effect of Taiwan's transformation into a knowledge economy is the profound change in the educational system and how students can be helped to find careers in the knowledge economy over the course of a lifespan, through processes aligning with Chinese principles of yin and yang. Liu and colleagues adopted an action research approach in their attempt to understand why existing career development programs were not helping junior high school students in their career planning as they prepared for university studies. They developed the Virtue Existential Career (VEC) model by drawing from important tenets of Confucian philosophy, which contrasted with the Western person-environment fit models adopted in the formal educational system. One of the key assumptions of the model that derives from Confucian principles relates to the importance of integrating concerns of family in one's own personal development; this

principle is in contrast with the Western model, which emphasises the centrality and stability of an individual's traits (hence, the need to find a fit with the work environment). The VEC model underscores how culturally rooted theorising can lead to potentially more potent psychological interventions — in this case, pertinent to the career development process of high school students. But, consistent with the reflection-on-action and critical-emancipatory principles of action research, Liu and colleagues address how various actors in the system (staff members of relevant government agencies, guidance teachers, parents, students) engage and respond to facets of the VEC model. They also promoted and implemented the VEC model using strategies that are aligned with action-research principles: mandating, attracting, and simplifying (Liu et al., 2008). As reported in the article, the feedback and reflections from the various actors suggest that the components of the VEC model have gained strong acceptance.

Economic developments in many societies are often accompanied by practices that strain the environment's natural resources or create risks for the people who depend on these resources. The next two papers in the Special Issue inquire into people's attitudes related to two environmental concerns: pollution brought about by carbon-based energy sources and the use of nuclear energy as an alternative energy source. In the first of these two articles, Gu, Huang, Zhang, and Wang contrast between how subjective wellbeing (i.e., hedonically oriented) and eudaimonic wellbeing (i.e., the search for meaning) relate to individuals' experiences of air pollution and to pro-environmental behaviours of people who live in Beijing, China. The rapid economic growth in Beijing and its surrounding areas has resulted in various forms of stress on the natural environment, most visible of which is the increasingly severe air pollution throughout the city. In their first study, Gu and colleagues found divergent effects of changes in the air pollution index in Beijing and the subjective and eudaimonic wellbeing of a sample of students who were tracked over a 10-day period. Increases in the air pollution index were positively associated with the students' eudaimonic wellbeing, but were negatively related with their subjective wellbeing. They clarified this relationship in a second study, in which they found that perceived air pollution improved working adults' sense of purpose and increased pro-environment behavioural intentions; they also found that these relationships were stronger for those who have stronger emotional attachments to Beijing and those who were future-oriented. Gu and colleagues make theoretical sense of an unexpected finding regarding the positive relationship between air pollution and eudaimonic wellbeing by suggesting that the severe air pollution in Beijing threatens the people's world-view based expectancy, and that people cope with this threat by reflecting on meaning in other life domains and by aspiring to do acts that would help improve the situation. The two moderating variables — emotional place attachment and future orientation — are important theoretical elaborations on existing models

that predict pro-environmental behaviours (Liu & Sibley, 2012); but, more importantly, the two moderating variables refer to psychological concepts that could be enhanced in action research interventions aimed at strengthening the psychological pathways that lead to stronger environmental protection behaviours.

The third article, by Park, Bain, and Kusumi, extends the notion of eudaimonic wellbeing as a mediator of pro-environmental behaviours with the construct of 'collective futures' drawn from extensive previous work using the collective futures framework (Bain, Hornsey, Bongiorno, Kashima, & Crimston, 2013). Park and colleagues explored Japanese people's support for policies related to the use of nuclear power. They found that support for policies to either shut down or to expand nuclear power was influenced not only by perceived danger, but more importantly by perceptions of the broader social implications of the policy options or their notions regarding the collective future of Japanese society. Note that while eudaimonic wellbeing focuses on the search for meaning and realisation of one's potential, collective futures consider the individual's visions of their future society. Visions of collective futures have both sociological and character-level dimensions, and the participants in the study perceived that benevolence (warmth and morality) would decline in Japanese society if use of nuclear power is expanded. On the other hand, beliefs that expanding the use of nuclear power would lead to economic and technological progress were associated with the participants' opposition to shutting down nuclear energy plants; and beliefs that use of nuclear power would lead to improvement in national security and a sense of community was associated with support for expansion of the use of nuclear energy. These findings underscore how beliefs related to the collective wellbeing of one's society are important factors that shape people's attitudes towards environment-related policy options. Park and colleagues further note that the pattern of sociological collective futures from the Japanese participants' responses reflects a structure (societal security and progress) that is different from those found in Western cultures (development and dysfunction), underscoring how culture-specific psychological processes shape people's policy-related attitudes.

The next two papers in the Special Issue address questions related to the evolving sociopolitical spaces across the Asian region. Kou, Wang, Fu, and Zhang's paper focuses on evaluations of a particular transgression, bribery, which although it is not limited to the political sphere, resonates very strongly in China's current political landscape. Kou and colleagues looked at factors that might influence whether children and adolescents in China would tolerate bribery. In two studies, they focused on two variables that have strong socially constructed features: moral evaluations and descriptive norms, while paying attention to developmental patterns across different stages of adolescence. The study involved three age groups: primary school children who were around 10 years old, middle school children who were around 13 years, and high school children who were around 16 years. They found no age-related differences in moral evaluations of poverty, but older adolescents were more likely to perceive that bribery was a common behaviour in Chinese society. More importantly, they showed that tolerance of bribery was likely associated more strongly with the effects of descriptive norms of bribery that increase with age, than with moral evaluations of bribery. The patterns of results were established in correlational data from a survey and in an experiment that manipulated descriptive norms. In their discussion of their findings, Kou and colleagues underscore how descriptive norms are shaped by social institutions, and point to the Chinese government's important role in shaping public perceptions of the descriptive norms related to particular transgressions like bribery.

The next article, by Park and You, investigates how online media may or may not be affecting political engagement of Koreans. They authors note how Korean society is perhaps the most 'wired' society in the world, and inquired into whether online media and communication have influenced political engagement differently to offline media and communication. They explored the roles of online and offline media and communication with reference to individuals' political efficacy, which is an important individual psychological variable strongly associated with political engagement. Their theorising about the roles of online and offline media draw from a detailed understanding of political movements and access to offline media technology in Korean society. In particular, they note that older generation Koreans (referred to in Korea as the '4050 generation') were more likely to have been active participants in anti-government activities when they were students during a time of strong government oppression, whereas the younger generation (or the '2030 generation') were more likely to have participated in fewer political and more social and economic protest movements during their student years. Aside from the difference in the type and form of actual engagements, the two generations are also likely to differ in access and use of online media technology, with the younger generation being more actively engaged in online forms of communication. Interestingly, online media use was found to be significantly associated with political engagement in both generations, although this relationship was mediated by use of online forms of communication with other people in the case of the younger generation, but it was a direct relationship in the case of the older generation. The results also indicated that offline communication with other people, but not offline media use, was still an important predictor of political engagement among the older generation. The theoretical consideration of the key variables in the study were clearly rooted in a deep analysis of the culture and sociohistorical context of Korean society.

The final two articles in the Special Issue refer to psychological processes associated with intergroup contact, both in the context of Chinese society. The first of these

two proposes a new construct that factors in Chinese intergroup perceptions. This construct, called civilised behaviour (文明的行為; 'wenming xingwei'), derives from an indigenous concept typically used when comparing a Chinese ingroup with foreigner (in this case Western) outgroup members. In three studies, Liu, Shan, and Jin explored how this dimension marks distinct forms of intergroup bias in Chinese society. They first shows how stories referring to civilised and uncivilised behaviours of Chinese and Western people are characterised in two popular news websites to indicate in-group derogation on civilised behaviour. They then used implicit measures and explicit measures of intergroup attitudes, and found different patterns of attributions of uncivilised behaviours for Chinese and Western people in the implicit measures compared to the explicit measures. In their final study, Liu and colleagues demonstrated asymmetric effects of stereotype-confirming media reports on implicit outgroup favouritism and ingroup derogation based on characterisations of uncivilised behaviours. The empirical results follow the typical patterns associated with stereotype explanatory bias that results in ingroup derogation, but the dimension of intergroup perception is an indigenous Chinese construct that has not been heretofore investigated in the social psychology research literature. The focus on media portrayals of Chinese and Western uncivilised behaviour in the research methodology was not an incidental feature of the study. The authors understand that mass media is a powerful force for shaping group perceptions, and as such they discuss the various ways by which mass media can be a more positive force in managing intergroup perceptions both for ingroups and outgroups.

The final article in the Special Issue looks into the mental health consequences of a specific form of intergroup experience. Hoi, Chen, Sou, Zhou, and Hall investigated the experience of depression symptoms in samples of internal migrants and non-migrants in two districts of Guangzhou, China and the various social-level risk factors for depression in the two groups. The study is premised on the assumption that migrant communities face many challenges in their new intergroup contexts, and they also lose the usual social resources they have in their original social contexts. These different social factors converge to make migrant populations more vulnerable to psychological distress, including depression. The results of the study indicated a severe lack of social resources among the migrants compared to their non-migrant counterparts. As expected, social resources are implicated as either risk or protective factors in both migrant and non-migrant groups, but different sets of specific protective factors were associated with the two groups. Most important among the differences, the lack of community belonging among the migrants was the strongest predictor of depressive symptoms; this factor reflects the migrant groups' difficulties with integrating with the local communities. Integration with the local community is dependent both on the migrants' own efforts to integrate and also the local community's attitudes and behaviours towards the migrant outgroup. Hoi and colleagues point to possible intergroup interventions with host communities that may involve fostering stronger intergroup contact and other public messages that could strengthen the sense of community belonging among the internal migrants.

Conclusion

The series of Special Issues on 'The Social Psychology of Social Change: Science and Practice in Asia' was intended to feature action research oriented studies addressing problems in different Asian societies. However, only one article in the current thematic Special Issue utilised the action research framework — Liu and colleagues' action research study involving the implementation of the VEC model in Taiwan schools. Their study exemplifies some of the important qualities of effective action research studies where the participants are the actual internal and external stakeholders participating within their specific organisations and social contexts and acting in their specific roles and capacities in these contexts. The study also drew on important reflections on the actions implemented as it related to their specific positions as participants in the change process. Perhaps most notably, the study reports strong outcomes (i.e., significant increase in resilience, adaptation, and favourable attitudes toward the career decision processes), accompanied by stronger interconnectedness among the various actors in the change process. The theorising that guided the VEC model implemented in the action research project also exemplifies a strong and successful attempt to inform the career education process by drawing from indigenous concepts, such as yin and yang dialectics. By also referencing basic Confucian principles, Liu and colleagues effectively critiqued the current person-environment fit models and proposed a psychological model and an approach for intervention that more adequately integrated the roles and inputs of other actors in Taiwanese students' career decision process. As the study utilised an action-research approach in implementing an action or psychological intervention that was conceptualised in a culturally sensitive way, it is a good exemplar of the kind of research that we had hoped to feature in the Special Issue.

We must reflect on why only one article in the Special Issue exemplifies the action-oriented research approach that the series had intended to feature, and the current reflection echoes some of the reflections we raised in the first Special Issue. All the articles featured in this Special Issue, including some which were submitted for consideration but were subsequently not included for publication, articulated a clear interest in some important social problems and understanding of the problems using theoretically sharper lenses. All the articles also indicate a concern for possible action, as indicated in the attempts to articulate points of intervention. However, most of the

articles do not conceptualise possible interventions within the broader process of social change, and most of the studies do not yet envisage concrete actions that engage relevant internal and external stakeholders in a systematic manner towards some common outcomes. Compared to the articles in the first Special Issue, most of the articles in the current Special Issue are perhaps in earlier stages of the action-research process cycle; the articles theorise and analyse specific problems identified, point to factors that might be ingredients in solutions for the identified problems, but the studies are not yet at the stage where the 'action' can be undertaken in a systematic way that involves different stakeholders.

As we reflected in the first Special Issue, action-oriented research is not the norm in the Asian academic psychology communities, and many of the structures in the work environment of research psychologists in the Asian region are probably not supportive of the type of work that needs to go into full-blown action research studies. On the other hand, psychologists working closer to the ground, so to speak (in communities, organisations, and the like), may also not be too keen on working towards the types of research outcomes that are slow to come by as they are more interested in quickly and systematically dealing with the immediate needs of their stakeholders. Among the different groups of psychologists interested in the potential of social psychology for pushing for social change, new habits need to be formed, together with a healthy appreciation of how to engage new partners/collaborators in the research process and utilise more action-oriented research paradigms. On the part of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, we may need to rethink the current approaches for advocating this form of research.

The social norms in Asian social psychology, as in global psychology, favour descriptive research with a natural science epistemology. This may require earlier interventions in the developmental arcs of young researchers to open them up to more determined theorising and action directed at interventions, rather than description as the end goal of research. It may also require rethinking the role of the social psychologist to act as a moral change agent able to employ science as a tool to serve humanity, rather than imagining oneself as a scientist capable of discovering natural laws that someone else should apply (see Liu, 2014; Liu & MacDonald, in press). Liu (2014) reminds us that in Confucian theory it is the role of the social psychologist as a teacher that has the most potential to act as a catalyst for social change.

But, even as most of the articles in the Special Issue do not feature action research studies, there is much to appreciate in the collection. As we noted earlier, all the studies have clearly identified social problems as the focal point of the research. Most of the studies are clearly directed at developing sharper theoretical models that would help understand the problem. Some of the studies use as their starting point theoretical formulations that are already established and credible in the psychology research liter-ature, then validate and/or interrogate the theoretical assumptions in the context of the identified social problem in a specific Asian context. Gu and colleagues work with positive psychological concepts of subjective wellbeing and eudaimonic wellbeing as they theorise pro-environment behavioural intentions among people in Beijing who suffer through increasingly severe levels of air pollution. Kou and colleagues appropriate the constructs of moral evaluation and descriptive norms as factors that may influence how children and adolescents, also in Beijing, develop tolerance for bribery, a form of transgression that is the focus on important political reforms in China. Hoi and colleagues apply well-established social resource models of mental health to inquire into the mental health status of internal migrants in Guangzhou, China. The use of existing psychological concepts and models provide important analytic tools to help us better understand the problems faced by particular societies and, in some cases, when the theoretical models do not work exactly as intended, the research results help in both further clarifying the cultural and social dimensions of the theory and in developing a more nuanced understanding of the social problem.

In the case of Park and colleagues' study of attitudes towards policies related to the use of nuclear power in Japan, a relatively new psychological framework was used and tested. The collective futures framework is particularly sensitive to social and cultural specificities, as even the structure of perceived collective future measures may be peculiar to some cultural or social groups, as was shown in their study. The use of similar social psychological constructs that are pitched at the individual level but that reflect constructions of social experiences and meaning systems has gained much ground in Asian social psychology. The study of social axioms, social representations of history, lay theories, and the use of dynamic constructivist and meaning-based approaches to studying cultural phenomena all exemplify this approach. This approach could prove to be useful in attempts to develop more precise ways of understanding local social experiences; but the use of a common underlying theoretical vocabulary in this local analysis allows us to also connect with similar analyses in other locales.

In some cases, the appropriation of existing social psychological theories is greatly enriched by the integration of indigenous cultural concepts, as was the case in Liu and colleagues' attempt to introduce 'civilized behaviour' as a dimension of intergroup perception and prejudice in Chinese society. Their study reminds us that the markers of ingroup and outgroup membership are not just those that are often studied in Western societies (race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation), but that there may be other markers of inclusion and exclusion in Asian societies, and there are also intersectionalities among these various markers. We can develop more culturally and socially relevant ways of theorising about important social psychological processes if we pay closer attention to local contexts, traditions, and ways of knowing.

We see the value of closely contextualising psychological models in Park and You's study on online media use and political engagement in Korea. By referring to two generations of media users and potential political actors in Korean society, Park and You highlight how the social context within which psychological models are supposed to apply is actually constantly shifting. Indeed, the sociopolitical spaces and issues that individuals have to engage with are not likely to be the same across generations, especially in those Asian countries where there are very substantial shifts in the political structures and processes. The developments in information and communications technology are outpacing developments in almost all spheres of social life, and this has affected how people in different generations engage different forms of media. The analysis of Park and You remind us that the 'social' in social psychology is constantly shifting, and the models we propose have to be respecified in order to build in these shifting elements.

The sharper theoretical analyses of social problem features in the articles of this Special Issue point to very substantial starting points for potential action research for social change. There may be many more steps to be taken before action-oriented research projects emerge from these theoretical formulations, but there is much to appreciate in how psychologists in the Asian and Pacific regions are taking a close look at the social problems in their respective backyards, so to speak. We believe that such studies establish very solid grounds for building up the science and practice of a psychology of and for social change, particularly as it signals how members of the psychology research community have clear and strong interests in social problems and social change. We need to continue to nurture this orientation and motivation, and collaboratively work towards developing action-oriented research approaches that will soon produce actual outcomes.

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