

REWRITING PSYCHOLOGY

REWRITING PSYCHOLOGY: AN ABYSMAL SCIENCE?

David Y. F. Ho



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Rewriting Psychology: An Abysmal Science?

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PREFACE

The title of this volume *Rewriting psychology: An abysmal science?* is at once audacious and provocative. Audacious because to rewrite an academic discipline is a task that few would dare to undertake. And provocative because even to question if psychology is abysmal would ruffle feathers among psychologists. But I have compelling reasons for raising the question: Dissatisfaction with the current status of psychology in both its applied and scientific aspects.

Let me deal first with the applied aspects. Confronted with psychosocial pathologies or violence, psychology has yet to make its corrective impact felt. Witness the mass shooting in Las Vegas in 2017, for instance, psychologists can only look in awe of a tragedy as it happened, in a collective state of impotence. Here is an irony indeed: America with its army of psychologists, more than the rest of the world combined, appears nowhere near to solving its psychosocial or mental health problems.

As to the scientific status of psychology, an article in *Science* published in 2015 reported that, in a massive international project, independent researchers were able to replicate unambiguously only 39% of 100 studies published in three prominent psychology journals. Replicability or reproducibility is a central pillar of science: How can you trust reported results that are not replicated by other researchers? Actually, after decades of reviewing the literature and of serving as a reviewer for academic journals, I have developed an “instinctive” skepticism of the “findings” reported. Among the malpractices by authors are following faddish trends without critical scrutiny or innovation; making pretensions of being scientific, a symptom of scientism or “physics envy.”

In view of what I have said, a collective professional self-examination is long overdue. As a teacher and practitioner of psychology for over half a century, I feel compelled to rewrite psychology with the goal to base psychology on better grounds for countering the charge of being abysmal; more importantly, to provide a new vision of the direction that psychology should take.

Psychology has great potential to advance our understanding of human nature and behavior; of the good life and our place in the cosmos. Regrettably, it has fallen short of actualizing its potential. Why? Largely because of an implicit bias rooted in individualism. I proffer a dialectical stance in which the best elements of individualistic and collectivistic values are integrated.

From a conceptual point of view, my first principle states: Relational orientation or relationalism offers a perspective for viewing human behavior, as an alternative to the Western perspective preoccupied with the individual. The potency of this perspective derives from a fundamental principle, namely, *social interaction takes place invariably in relational contexts*,

regardless of cultural variation. The unit of analysis is not the individual, but individual-in-relations. Relationalism, therefore, redresses the current imbalance in social psychology resulting from its bias rooted in individualism.

And we must ask for more: Of what use is psychology if it does not help to solve the pressing problems of the day at the individual and collective levels? Or to face the threats to humankind such as environmental degradation, mass migrations born of despair, interethnic strifes, the increasing disparity between the haves and have-nots, mass shootings, and outbreaks of war (civil, regional, or global)? I feel powerless in the face of these problems and threats. As a psychologist, however, I have no choice but to accept the challenge of making a contribution, however small, to their solution.

Psychologists cannot be expected to provide solutions alone; they need to work together with allied social scientists. Accordingly, the reader may find in this volume interdisciplinary dialogues that cut across traditionally distinct disciplines such as sociology and political science. Additionally, this volume draws generously from philosophy, logic, even theology; as well as advances in the biological and cognitive sciences (including artificial intelligence). The result is a text with psychology as the central pillar supported by knowledge derived from the sciences and humanities.

Some chapters expand the traditional boundary of psychology. For instance, the chapters on spirituality and spiritual emptiness raise existential and transcendent questions facing humankind that psychologists cannot ignore, particularly in the modern age preoccupied with materialistic and mercantile values. The chapters presenting imaginary dialogues between Jesus and Lucifer entwine theology with psychology in questioning some of the entrenched doctrines of Christianity.

The reader will also find some new materials or distinctive features in various chapters of the present volume: the author's "secret thoughts" and self-revelations; principles and strategies of Dialogic Action Therapy that I have developed; pointed attacks on hedonic psychology and the industry of subjective well-being research; cautioning against importing Confucian-heritage education into American society; making a distinction between teaching creativity and creative teaching; a discussion on the birth of evil. I share with the reader the insights I have gained from decades of clinical practice and reflections upon my own life experiences—not to instruct, but to inspire.

This volume makes bold assertions that psychologists have seldom made. First, dialectical thinking is the apex of human cognition. This assertion repudiates the claim that the attainment of formal operations (e.g., hypothetical-deductive thinking) is the final, highest stage of cognitive achievement, a claim that has been repeatedly presumed in psychology textbooks. Dialectical thinking does not negate but presupposes formal-operational thinking; it integrates formal-operational thinking within a more general cognitive system. The reader will find that dialectical conceptualizations permeate the present volume.

Second, in metaphorical-existential terms eating the forbidden fruit by Adam and Eve represents the humankind's exercise of free will, as an act of self-assertion rather than of mere disobedience.

Third, madness may enrich your life, an assertion is based on my self-study of 20 episodes of unusual mood elevation, none of depression. It is possible to retain a measure of madness

in dignified living and of dignity even in a state of madness—a central theme articulated in my book *Enlightened or mad: A psychologist glimpses into mystical magnanimity* published by Dignity Press in 2014.

The present offering is addressed not only to scholars but also to a popular audience, aimed to bridge the gap between academia and the general public. Theories and research findings are presented summarily; detailed citations are kept to a minimum. I endeavor to be accurate and relevant in presenting psychological knowledge without getting lost in technical details and to be simple without oversimplification. My purpose is to entertain, to inform, and to inspire the reader, who may or may not have a background in psychology.

Each chapter in this volume is centered on a psychological topic, self-contained and may be read without reference to other chapters. Together, the essays encompass diverse domains of psychology, including how we think and act during daytime and dream at night, how we learn and work, how we love and form intimate relationships, and so forth.

Psychology is hollow if it is irrelevant to life. Abstract ideas and principles in psychology come to life in the reader's mind when they resonate with his own experiences in daily life—and the reader reacts with the exclamation, “Ah, this volume is about me, useful to my life!” Accordingly, I devote particular attention to the dialectical integration of abstract ideas and life experiences, and to how psychology may be applied to solve problems of living and enrich one's life.

I feel humbled in the process of writing the present volume, given the demands that it puts on the author. Fortunately, I have had the benefit of receiving encouragement and critical comments from colleagues, among whom are Hubert Hermans, Jaan Valsiner, and Michael Bond. They too have been rewriting psychology for decades.

Finally, having completed this volume, I find myself unsettled still by a lingering thought: How can psychology be rewritten without paying full attention to culture? This deficiency will be redressed in my forthcoming parallel volume *Rewriting cultural psychology: Transcend your ethnic roots, redefine your identity*.

PART 1

PSYCHOLOGY IMMERSED IN PEOPLES' LIVES

1.1

REINVENTING PSYCHOLOGY TO “SERVE THE PEOPLE”: IS PSYCHOLOGY AN ABYSMAL SCIENCE?

“In America, dogs have largely replaced humans as companions.”

“The idea of mental health is an opiate of the mind when ugly social conditions under which people live remain unchanged.”

Psychology has intrinsic appeal: It satisfies our curiosity about why people behave the ways they do and provides a path to self-understanding. But I would demand more of psychology: How may psychology be applied to enhance the quality of life individually and collectively—as the Chinese express it, to “serve the people”?

Before answering this question, we must first challenge ourselves to a self-examination of what we have been doing as professional practitioners. How to serve the people rests on the value assumptions underlying practice. I must also express my discontents with psychology, both as a basic and as an applied science.

Psychology: An abysmal science?

Economics has long been dubbed as a dismal science in reference to Thomas Malthus who claimed that population growth would always strain natural resources and bring widespread misery to humanity. In my assessment, it is also dismal in a more general sense. Economists advocate divergent, often opposing, policies. Their predictions are often off the mark. In particular, armies of fund managers with advanced degrees in economics or business administration generally fail to predict market movements—no better than throwing darts at random. When they succeed occasionally with the help of mathematicians, investors wise up and pile money into recommended funds or stocks like a flock of sheep, thus altering the initial conditions for the prediction. In short, the prediction of market movements is notoriously difficult; success, if any, is shortlived.

The reason for economics to be so dismal, economists say, is rooted in the inherent difficulties of predicting behavior, that is, in psychology. In decision making, humans are predictably irrational—an article of faith that has been incorporated in behavioral economics (see the discussion on predictability in “What qualities and capabilities make us human?”).

The economists’ excuse for failure, it may be noted, is also an admission of psychology’s status as a propaedeutic science, that is, a prior or preliminary science comprising a body of

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knowledge and rules necessary for the study of other social sciences. More fundamentally, psychology may be viewed as propaedeutic to all forms of inquiry. The reasoning is that all inquiries are conducted by human agents whose cognitive activities are subject to the principles of psychology, according to which human agents are far from being rational or logical.

If so, psychology would be the first to blame for all failures in human inquiry. It may thus lay claim to being an abysmal science. Poor psychologists! But I have a less captious, more reality-based rationale for such a harsh assessment of psychology, presented as follows.

Scientific status

An article in *Science* published in 2015 reported that, in a massive international project, independent researchers were able to replicate unambiguously only 39% of 100 studies published in three prominent psychology journals. For example, one of the studies reported that participants who were asked to recall the Ten Commandments were less likely to cheat on a later task than those who were asked to recall the names of 10 books they read in high school. Not surprisingly, the replication found no difference. Also, the average size of the effects found in the replicated studies was only half of that reported in the original studies.

Replicability or reproducibility is a central pillar of science: How can you trust reported results that are not replicated by other researchers? Actually, after decades of reviewing the literature and of serving as a reviewer for academic journals, I have developed an “instinctive” skepticism of the “findings” reported. Among the malpractices by authors are the following.

1. Following faddish trends without critical scrutiny or innovation.
2. Making pretensions of being hypothetical-deductive, a symptom of scientism or “physics envy.”
3. Using technical terms inconsistently.
4. Being careless in data processing, the figures sometimes don’t add up.
5. Milking the data to come up with statistically significant but practically useless results.
6. Drawing conclusions that are not supported by the results obtained.
7. Reporting findings that are toothless, commonsense.
8. Including too many citations, often unnecessary, out of place, or inaccurate.

Not unusually, I decline to serve as a reviewer to academic journals simply because I can’t understand the writing of a submitted article, as explained in the following example.

The reader is taxed to the limit in order to follow the author’s tortured arguments. Many sentences are unclear; connections between sentences, between paragraphs, and between sections are not explicit. The abstruse writing does not help. Verbosity gets in the way of readability. The profuse use of jargon serves a pedantic, rather than a scholarly, purpose.

Under pressure to “publish or perish,” many aspiring academics play the academic game: The short-cut route to success is to follow a fad in a particular area of inquiry, get hold of

a well-established instrument in that area, obtain data from a bunch of college students, run the data, and report the results in a journal. “Garbage in, garbage out,” as it commonly called in academia. It may be far worse when the garbage is pronounced by some famous psychologist as truth: What we then get is “garbage in, bible out.” Meanwhile, the number of publications in psychology continues to multiply, without a corresponding increase in quality or trustworthiness.

In all, psychological research has largely failed to provide so-called “evidence-based” practice. The challenge is to use our critical faculty to filter out the garbage from the massive available psychological information to get to the gems of knowledge, much like the gold hunters’ labor of sieving out sand to obtain nuggets of gold.

Psychology in China

The status of Chinese social sciences pales in comparison with that of the physical sciences; in particular, my overall assessment is that psychology has always been the least developed among the social sciences (excepting sociology). The system discriminates against publications in Chinese. Academics scramble to publish in English-language journals or books because of the fact that publications in Chinese don’t count as much in promotional evaluations.

My perusal of psychology journals in China reveals many of the same “malpractices” that I have found in Western journals. In addition, copycat research borrowed from the West is common. There is an overabundance of technical, soulless research aimed at the development of measuring instruments; but a dearth of needed research devoted to addressing pressing societal problems. It pains to see scarce resources diverted to socially irrelevant activities (e.g., constructing yet more self-report questionnaires and administering them to students). We may know more about psychology, but less about people (similarly, more about sociology, and less about society).

Environmental and population psychology, both urgently needed, are still only at an embryonic stage of development. As regards mental health, there is the same bias as in the West for treatment over prevention and for intervention at the individual level over the group or collective levels. I question the direction into which clinical psychology in China is going. Look at the *Chinese journal of clinical psychology*, the first Chinese language journal in clinical psychology. It is clear that clinical psychology (as elsewhere) is heading for scientism, overspecialization, and narrow professionalism.

Ironically, in the early days of the People’s Republic, Marxist critiques of psychological testing held sway. Now, development is largely instrument driven, rather than concept driven. Clinical psychologists seem to rely on instruments to define their identity and maintain their respectability. Without their tests, would they know what to do? Do they “serve the people”?

During the Great Cultural Revolution, psychology was banned as an academic discipline for ideological reasons—in a way that outperformed Lysenko’s suppression of genetics, supported by Stalin, in the Soviet Union during the 20th century. The decisive blow to psychology came from the propaganda chief of the Communist Party, YAO Wenyan, who denounced psychology as bourgeois metaphysics, not only useless but also dangerous in undermining

communist ideology. Bizarre as it may now occur to us, he began his denunciation with the choice of an unlikely target: a psychological study of color and form preferences! This led to a complete shutdown of all psychological activities in academic and research institutions. I have to admit that YAO's "creative use of language" as a weapon has few equals in terms of perversity and destructiveness.

Why is psychology such a dangerous thing? Because it is privileged to make pronouncements on human nature (see "Knowledge is a dangerous thing: Authority relations and ideological conservatism in Confucian-heritage cultures"). To MAO Zedong, bourgeois pronouncements on human nature serve to nullify class antagonism and blunt class struggle. The so-called "theory of human nature" is an ideological product of the ruling classes enshrined as a universal truth. Mao insisted that people's thoughts and feelings, even love, are invariably stamped with their class character, without exception. He stated in 1942:

There is only human nature in the concrete, no human nature in the abstract. *In class society* [italics added for emphasis], there is only human nature of a class character.... The human nature boosted by certain petty-bourgeois intellectuals ... is in essence nothing but bourgeois individualism.

The statement leaves open the question of what human nature would be like in a classless or communist society. Individual variation is a given in MAO Zedong Thought, as it is in Marxism. Marx's statement, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs," clearly implies a recognition of individuality (see related Marx's thoughts in "Spirituality and spiritual emptiness: Toward universality and transcultural applicability").

Thus, what Mao repudiated was bourgeois individualism (indiscipline, selfishness), not creativity or individuality; what he upheld was the solidarity of the working class, not total uniformity. Unfortunately, this important point has not been grasped by his dogmatic, doctrinaire followers. During my visit to mainland China in 1971, when psychology was in a state of clinical death, the cadres I talked with negated individuality: Uniformity in following MAO Zedong Thought was paramount; individual differences were of no consequence (see "The politics of education: My secret thoughts, until now").

Translated from Chinese, MAO Zedong Thought is a noun phrase in which *Thought* is capitalized and grammatically singular to underscore its established status as an integral body of knowledge. It results from the collective efforts of learning from the summation of experience and is characterized by dialectical thinking (see "Dialectics of action and thought: A general method of problem solving"). I am not amused when Mao's followers, infected with a syndrome commonly known in China as "cognitive ossification," follow MAO Zedong Thought as if Mao thought only once.

In my article, "The conception of man in Mao Tse-tung Thought," I concluded:

The question of how faithfully Mao Tse-tung Thought has been put into practice ... is a matter best left to the judgment of history.... Mao, as a person, must be distinguished from Mao Tse-tung Thought—which certainly cannot be regarded as the property of one man.... Mao Tse-tung Thought has a built-in flexibility for self-transformation according

to historical conditions and the state of human knowledge. To regard it as absolute or everlasting truth is to violate the spirit of Mao Tse-tung Thought itself.

The demolition of psychology during the Great Cultural Revolution is surely the darkest chapter in the history of psychology. What can we learn from it? Never forget that psychology or any other social science does not exist in a vacuum: It is always under the influence, even control, of the sociopolitical system within which it operates.

The limitations of psychologism

According to the United States Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), there were over 552,000 mental health professionals practicing in the U.S. whose main focus is the treatment and/or diagnosis of mental health or substance abuse concerns. In particular, the psychological establishment dwarfs all those in other countries. The record of accomplishment, however, can only be depicted as collective impotence.

Witness the deadly shooting in Las Vegas on October 11, 2017, the latest in a seemingly unending repetition of senseless mass slaughters in American society. One noteworthy—and perverse—reaction was the rise in stock prices of firearm companies following the shooting, which means that more people will die from mass shootings in the future. In contrast, gun-control laws enacted in Australia have resulted in a dramatic decline in firearm-related deaths, especially suicide.

Even more alarming is what I call the Trump phenomenon, one that portends unprecedented perils facing humankind far more than Trump as a person per se (see “The pitfalls of psychiatric diagnosis: Is Trump immoral, mentally deranged, or both?”).

Confronted with such psychosocial pathologies, psychologists have no effective answer. Here again, is a paradox: A society that has an army of psychologists appears nowhere near to solving its psychosocial problems. In particular, a country that has more therapists (and other mental health professionals) than the rest of the world combined is also unable to solve its mental health problems.

Meanwhile, an industry of health promotion has emerged on an unprecedented scale. Transcendental meditation, yoga, and mindfulness-based stress reduction, and the like, all originating from Asia, appear to have gained more popularity in the United States than in Asia itself. Repackaged, they are now promoted in an organized business fashion, but devoid of their religious-philosophical roots.

Why does psychology have such a poor record of solving societal and mental problems? Partly because psychologists, preoccupied with micro phenomena, tend to neglect macro problems relevant to the human condition. Misguided by psychologism, they expend their energies on curative measures (e.g., psychotherapy) rather than on preventive actions (e.g., community-based programs aimed at enhancing the health of individuals and of communities, strategies for tension reduction and peace).

Let us examine the application of psychology to mental health. Psychologists are fond of talking about self-actualization. But what is the point of unleashing the individual’s creative potentialities, only to witness that they cannot be fulfilled because of degrading social

conditions? How honest is it to say that the individual has unlimited choice, when in fact most people in this world are locked in their situation and are severely limited in what they can choose? Self-actualization is escapism unless it entails active participation in social change.

Psychology has yet to make its mark at the macro level, in dealing with societal problems such as crime, mass shootings, social injustice, the increasing disparity between the haves and have-nots; or with survival problems confronting humankind as a whole such as environmental degradation, mass migrations born of despair, interethnic strifes, and outbreaks of war (civil, regional, or global). Thus, attention should be drawn to the fallacy of pan-psychological approaches to solving recalcitrant problems that have their roots in the pathology of sociopolitical systems (see “Of what use is psychology to political science?”).

That is why we must redefine psychology’s boundaries and priorities. We need a clearer delineation of problems that may be dealt with psychologically (e.g., through psychotherapy) versus those to which psychological approaches are irrelevant or non-applicable (see “Basic communication and counseling skills for healthcare practitioners”).

I contend that the potent determinants of mental health and, more generally, the quality of life are located externally in the sociopolitical system, not internally within the individual. Mental health professionals are handmaidens of those with the power to make decisions which have serious bearings on mental health, or caretakers of a society that has failed to meet the mental needs of its members. They promise little more than some emotional release or consolation—transitory, illusory escapes into “mental health”—while social conditions which dictate the quality of life remain unchanged. The idea of mental health then turns into an opiate of the mind—as Marx says of religion. In the face of ugly social reality, we make a travesty of enhancing the individual’s potentialities.

These cutting remarks, please note, are coming from a clinical psychologist who has had a cumulative experience of half a century.

Values underlying mental health practice

The imperative need for an examination of the value assumptions underlying psychological practice becomes all the more apparent when we reflect on the paradoxical situation in America: A society which has more clinical psychologists (and other mental health professionals) than the rest of the world combined appears nowhere near to solving its mental health problems. Clearly, the answer to these problems does not lie in escalating manpower and other resources alone. I submit that there are deeply entrenched value orientations in American society which impede mental health efforts and which, more fundamentally, lie at the root of many of its psychosocial pathologies.

Individualism

Presently, I confine myself to the discussion of one of the most salient of these orientations, namely, self-reliance rooted in individualism. Applied to the mentally disturbed, self-reliance a major determinant of how they will be viewed and treated by society. Two broad classes

may be distinguished: first-class patients who remain self-reliant and are in a position to secure professional help on a private basis, and second-class patients who have to rely on publicly funded institutions or drop out of the societal system altogether. Among mental health professionals, too, the same class distinction may be discerned, in most cases depending on whether the professional is engaged in private practice (or in a privately funded institution) or employed in a publicly funded institution.

The ideological basis for this class distinction may be traced to the Protestant ethic, in particular, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Psychologist M. Rotenberg argues that the underlying beliefs of Protestantism and of people-changing systems are inherently contradictory. If people are unchangeable, according to the doctrine of predestination, then all people-changing systems are, in the final analysis, futile. Further, the same doctrine classifies people into two dichotomized groups, on the basis of their success or failure (mainly material) here on earth: the “good-elect” and the “wicked-damned.” In psychopathology, this dichotomy translates into classifying people into the “treatable-elect” (neurotics) and the “untreatable-damned” (psychopaths, psychotics) groups. Psychotherapists have shown a traditional preference for treating the former while shunning the latter.

I would argue that the same underlying ideology has been a major factor which impedes the community mental health movement in the United States. Despite the early enthusiasm for community mental health centers, their promises have remained largely unfulfilled. Worse, prisons have in large measure become our modern mental asylums (see “Madness, violence, and human dignity: Transforming madness for dignified existence”).

Deeply ingrained in the American psyche is a stubborn resistance, even hostility, to the idea of using public resources to help people who are unable to take care of themselves and have failed to meet the primary requirement of social adequacy, that is, self-reliance. If salvation is a matter of individual responsibility, then it is up to the individual to make the necessary efforts for change. If you live in a slum, then it is up to you, and you alone, to try to move out of the slum, improve your lot, and be counted among the “successful-elect.” Of course, the slum remains, and countless others remain the “wicked-damned.”

There is clearly an ideological bias underlying traditional approaches to intervention (e.g., counseling and psychotherapy) which define the individual, not the individual-in-community, as the object of treatment. At rock bottom, individualism is alien to the notion of community; and the doctrine of predestination, in particular, is antithetical to values embodied in the concept of community mental health.

Crisis in values

In recent years, perceptive observers have voiced their concern over the deterioration of traditional values in American society. Individualism vulgarized and reinforced by misguided moral relativism leads to the absurd and dangerous position that there are no standards of conduct whatsoever.

Bizarre behavior is sanctioned in the name of originality; antisocial behavior is rationalized on the ground that society, not the individual, is sick; even psychotic-like behavior may be somehow regarded as “normal” if it “fits” into some subcultural or countercultural context.

Ironically, individuality degenerates into conformity, under the social pressure that one has to display one's "uniqueness"—being apart and different from, and hence superior to, the crowd. Freedom degenerates into rampant irresponsibility, disregard for others, or just plain selfishness. The symptoms of a crisis in values can be read.

The late George Albee, a champion of primary prevention, attributes the deterioration of traditional values to the decline of the Protestant ethic, which Weber has identified as the spirit of capitalism. Albee states: "The ethic underlying the survival of capitalism is disappearing as the system struggles to create an impulse-indulgent society of consumers, and psychotherapists have become the new gurus explaining life's elusive purpose."

I would add that a cardinal symptom of the deterioration of traditional values is the manifestation of individualism in the mass culture under new guises, variously described as the "new narcissism" and "self-contained individualism." Peter Marin describes the new narcissism as a "trend toward deification of the isolated self" and "lifeboat ethics." A classic statement of the new narcissism is the so-called Gestalt prayer written by Fritz Perls in 1969.

I do my thing and you do your thing.
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.
You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful.
If not, it can't be helped.

In *Culture of narcissism*, Christopher Lasch considers narcissism to be both a cause and an effect of rampant individualism. His wildly popular jeremiad published in 1978 put narcissism on the cultural map of America, prompting intellectuals to become concerned with the purported rise of narcissism as well as to engage in endless debates about America's self-image as a nation of narcissistic individuals. A notable example is Elizabeth Lunbeck's *The Americanization of narcissism*, a scholarly book published in 2014.

Edward Sampson has characterized the self-contained individual as one "needing or wanting no one, avoiding interdependence and contact with others so as to secure one's own satisfaction." He argues that "in an era in which collective problem solving is necessary, the perpetuation of self-contained, individualistic conceptions can stifle psychology's efforts to contribute to resolving contemporary social issues."

I submit that clinical psychologists, especially those enthusiastic about the encounter movement (sensitivity training, T-groups, encounter groups) in America, have been instrumental, wittingly or unwittingly, in promoting self-contained individualism. Psychologist Sigmund Koch has denounced the movement as providing "a convenient psychic warehouse for the purchase of a gamut of well-advertised existential 'goodies': authenticity, freedom, wholeness, flexibility, community, love, joy. One enters for such liberating consummations but settles for psychic striptease." The late Professor of Clinical Psychology at Berkeley, S. J. Korchin, has a more forgiving, balanced assessment:

The encounter movement started ... as a protest against the growing loss of a sense of psychological community in contemporary America. At its best, it is a groping toward

new social institutions and new life styles to replace those which no longer serve our profound needs for intimacy and community. At its worst, it perverts and cheapens those needs.... In a time of deteriorating social values, it may also represent a frenzied quest for individual pleasure and indulgence which serves as an escape from confronting the true problems.

Korchin is accurate in his diagnosis. It would then make better sense to identify, preserve, and enhance those social institutions and lifestyles rooted in the culture that serve “our profound needs for intimacy and community,” rather than to rely on the artificiality of creating new ones. If humanistic psychologists like Maslow and Rogers are the modern prophets of individualism, then Albee, Korchin, and Sampson are among the counter-prophets who insist that we must search for alternatives to confront “the true problems.”

Loneliness and social isolation are among the true problems in the age of narcissism and self-contained individualism. In the U.S., a survey by the American Association for Retired Persons in 2018 found 1 in 3 adults older than 45 is lonely. Loneliness and social isolation constitute one of the important factors contributing to suicide. There is also substantial evidence that being socially connected reduces the risk for premature mortality; conversely, lacking social connectedness increases the risk (see the *Public policy and aging report* published in January 2018). Moreover, the risk estimates exceed those associated with obesity, air pollution, smoking, and physical inactivity. Additionally, an American Cancer Society study of 580,000 people found that the most isolated White Americans were up to 84% more likely to die from all causes than the least isolated.

Clearly, in light of such evidence, loneliness and social isolation have yet to receive due attention from public health institutions. In this context, it is noteworthy to see a Minister of Loneliness appointed in 2018 for the more than 9 million adults who are “often or always lonely” in the U.K.

Everywhere, I see single individuals doing their own thing, without a partnership or family. In public places, it is quite a sight to see a line of individuals all looking at their cell phones, without paying the slightest attention to the people around them. The rise of Facebook, Twitter, and the like is both a symptom and a cause of loneliness: a symptom because they meet a need of the lonely; a cause because obviously the more time you spend on such media the less time you have for face-to-face social interactions. American society, as elsewhere, is in dire need of psychological prophets to preserve lifestyles and social institutions that serve our profound needs for intimacy and community.

Collectivism

In contrast to self-contained individualism, collectivism affirms that to preserve and enhance the well-being of the group is the supreme guiding principle for social action. As such, collectivism is exemplified by the traditional Chinese ethos. Individuality is negated to the extent that pressure toward conformity is exerted on members of the group. In return, the members are assured of collective economic and psychological security inaccessible to the individualist.

Built-in groups mechanisms would ensure that their basic needs are met. Each member of the group is related to other members in a network of interlocking responsibilities and obligations. The spontaneity in the readiness to give and to accept aid is an element lacking in formalized public aid institutions.

A strategy for prevention and intervention suggests itself: Support systems rooted in the culture may be mobilized to help people in difficulties. In this way, cultural forces are enlisted to serve psychology. Unfortunately, again, too many psychologists in China (and, more generally, in Asia), having been captivated by the values of Western individualism, fail to appreciate and capitalize on this strategy. This would contribute to their sense of alienation, which is rarely articulated. A moment of reflection, too, suggests that there is no reason why the same argument presently advanced cannot be applied in Western contexts as well. Collectivist values offer an antidote to the excesses and misdirection of self-contained individualism.

Maoist dialectics

In Maoist dialectics, individualism and collectivism are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they represent an instance of the identity of opposites, according to his philosophy of contradiction. The implication is that it is possible to create a form of social organization in which the best elements of both are preserved: individuality, freedom, democracy, human rights, and the intrinsic worth of the individual from individualism; selflessness, discipline, the unity of purpose and action, and collective creativity from collectivism. To be extirpated are indiscipline and selfishness from Western individualism; pseudo harmony, complete uniformity, paternalism, and hierarchical social ordering from Chinese collectivism.

Likewise, the individual and the group are not to be seen as antagonistic entities. To begin with, each depends on the other for its existence: Without individuals, there is no group to speak of; without the group, the very notion of individual identity loses meaning. With individual variation, there will be no contradictions to impel change, and the group would come to a standstill. Without a functional group, there would be no security for the individual. Hence, the individual must assume responsibility and participate in the betterment of society, in the process of which he may transform himself to be a better person.

The importance that Mao accords to individuality counters the collectivist inhibition of individuation; his conviction in the inherently unlimited human potentiality for self-transformation adds a new, profound dimension to our conception of human development.

Concluding thoughts

In an American community for “active seniors” where I now live, I see elderly folks taking a walk with their dogs, but rarely with young children. The community seems intent on discouraging young people from being present, enforced by its many regulations. In large measure, dogs have replaced humans for companionship.

I think to myself, “Dogs show unconditional positive regard toward people unconditionally. In this respect, they excel over people. But they don’t talk back! I still miss the people I knew who talked back to me.” Meanwhile, an industry has sprung into existence—psychotherapy for dogs, which is probably more successful than psychotherapy for humans. You can guess why.

In contrast, going into a Chinese restaurant, I see many of the tables are occupied by families of three generations. Eating a meal is time for the grandpas and the grandmas to enjoy the company of their grandchildren.

We are now prepared to provide an answer to the question: What is the optimal role of psychologists, individually and collectively, to address the emerging challenges of the 21st Century? The first point to be acknowledged is that the challenges are grave, exemplified by the menace of the Trump phenomenon leading to an escalation of tension and strife “on many sides.” The second is the need to formulate strategies for social action that are rational, effective, and possible within the constraints of our limited powers. I must also ask if we are ready to take a stand on moral issues and assume responsibility for collective actions to meet the grave challenges facing humankind.

How can psychology be reinvented to serve the people? My answer: Why can’t we retain our life rooted in the security of family and communitarian institutions that meet our profound needs for intimacy—without losing our freedom, individuality, and respect for human dignity? Changing our conception from individuals-in-isolation to individuals-in community marks a starting point. A creative synthesis of collectivism and individualism, in which the best elements of both are preserved, points to a hopeful direction for the future of psychology in the East as well as in the West. On the other hand, a society in which the worst elements of both are present is not one people would want to live in.

Actually, I myself find it odd that, as a psychologist, I have attacked psychologism. In particular, I have “poured cold water” on the overreliance on individual therapy among mental health practices—even though I have devoted a bulk of my professional life teaching and training therapists. In the eyes of some of my colleagues, I may be viewed as a “traitor” to their cause. So be it.

The reader may find that my assessment of psychology is too harsh and may disagree with some of my viewpoints. If so, this might be the beginning of a fruitful dialogue. As Confucius says, “The gentleman is conciliatory but remains distinctive vis-a-vis others.” And nothing would please me more than to see the day when a reinvented psychology sheds its abysmal symptoms.

1.2

OF WHAT USE IS PSYCHOLOGY TO POLITICAL SCIENCE?

“A government may fall overnight, while the country’s political culture remains untouched.”

“Psychology’s record as a socially relevant science is not one that psychologists have reason to be proud of.”

The following is a dialogue between a psychologist and a political scientist on the relevance of psychology to the understanding of political behavior. The bone of contention in the dialogue concerns the validity of psychological explanations and the applicability of psychological techniques in solving societal and survival problems. The dialogue has special significance for examining the role of psychology in developing societies.

Psychologist. In recent years, psychologists have shown an increasing interest in the study of political behavior. For instance, the formation of the International Society of Political Psychology in 1978 was a milestone on the road psychologists have taken toward greater involvement in this study on an organized basis. Political psychology had been formally inaugurated as a distinct academic discipline. Considering the many contributions to the understanding of political behavior that psychology can make, this inauguration is rather belated.

Political scientist. With due respect, however, the question is not whether it is belated but whether it should have taken place at all. What possible contribution can psychology make? I maintain that it is largely irrelevant to political science.

Psychologist. Your remarks, unfortunately, reflect the attitudes of many political scientists other than yourself. Psychological approaches are received with disinterest, disbelief, and disdain, to be kept out of the territory of political science.

Psychologism and sociology

Political scientist. Yes, because we disapprove of the unnatural marriage between psychology and political science! We view psychology as an objective, socially indifferent discipline, concerned with universalistic principles of behavior and not with the concrete, practical affairs of the world. Psychologists, on the whole, have been singularly naive on political matters. More fundamentally, psychology is preoccupied with the individual. This level of analysis is