

THE TRANSPORTABILITY OF WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY

David L. Krantz

Senior Fulbright Lecturer

Gajah Mada University

and

Professor of Psychology

Lake Forest College

Lake Forest, IL 60045 U.S.A.

During the six months I was a Fulbright lecturer in Indonesia I became acutely aware that some topics in psychology travelled well while others did not. When I taught methodology or talked about laboratory, "hard" research findings, my students and I found the material relevant to the Indonesian context. Since the findings were generated in the seemingly context free environment of the laboratory and partially expressed in the universal language of mathematical statistics, it seemed reasonable that the setting in which the material was delivered should be largely irrelevant.

But when I presented findings from psychology's "softer", real world disciplines, such as developmental, clinical or personality, I felt like an anthropologist reporting on this strange, odd culture (at least for an Indonesian) called the West. This material was much more contextual, being dependent upon specific time and setting for meaningful interpretation. The students often responded with incomprehension and bemusement to research findings which which seem more appropriate to Western culture, but not necessarily their's.

The sharp difference between how these different kinds of psychological knowledge were received and interpreted raises the issue of how plausible is psychology's assumption that, for both "hard" and "soft" areas, there are universal laws of human nature which are robust for time and setting. That such an assumption exists is relatively clear. For example, research findings in all psychological disciplines rarely indicate, except in the most general terms, when, where and with whom the research was done. Seldom is there any discussion about potential limitations in generalizability or replicability. To be concerned with such contextual problems would throw doubt upon psychology's ongoing search for robust, universal laws.

Throughout the history of contemporary psychology there have been continuing arguments about the appropriateness and plausibility of such a search (see the work of Kenneth Gergen for a recent variant of these arguments). Some have pointed to the difficulty of finding any psychological laws that transcend time and setting. And even if laws were found they may have no better predictability than those based in "common sense" understandings.

(Interestingly, those research findings that initially appeared counter-intuitive usually are cannibalized, becoming the self-evident truisms of a newer version of common sense.) Others point to non-replicability and non-generalizability of laboratory findings particularly to the real world. They maintain that the laboratory is just another social setting, one that is, at best, a sterile, reduced version of the more complex settings it intends to illuminate. But mainstream psychological research and theory seems undeterred by such objections. The belief in universal, robust, context free laws of human nature still is the hallmark of Western psychological science.

In this paper I would like to examine the potential impact of using the outcomes of such a context free psychology in Third World countries like Indonesia. Psychology in Indonesia is totally dominated by the West. Most texts are written by Western writers, appearing in English (occasionally in Indonesian translations). Indigenous books are almost totally dominated by Western ideas. Faculty have been trained in, and teach, Western psychology. Thus, students learn about seemingly context free research which may, in actuality, be suffused by Western ideas. There is some awareness among Indonesian psychologists of how Western perspectives shape local research and thinking. For instance, Indonesian colleagues point with pride to Sumadi's reworking of the Graduate Record Exam as an case of research which overcomes such Western biases. His version of the test does not simply translate the items into Indonesian, which is generally the practice, but rather revises the questions in light of the way Indonesians think and conceptualize.

Let me offer an example of how Western context-free findings are handled by Indonesian university students and staff. I presented my 1979 research on radical career change, in which successful individuals chose to give up their careers for jobs of low status and low income (for example, a museum director becoming a construction worker). In interpreting my data, I presented the common explanation, from which I dissented, that my respondents were in the midst of a mid-life crisis. This thinking claims that men, approximately 40 years of age, experience intrapsychic changes that "run themselves off" in a process similar to other developmental changes in an individual's life; for instance, the oral stage or the "terrible two's". There is little mention of the context in which this mid-life crisis research occurred. Admittedly, the literature indicates, for example, that Levinson's now classic study is based on middle class men. But what is not mentioned is that the research was done in America's distinct society in a very specific historical period. There is no consideration of these dimensions because the research findings, and their many text book presentations, are based on the assumption that there are universal, context free laws of growth and development.

My Indonesian audiences were dismayed with this material. The bases of their responses are illuminating. For example, the literature points to a growing awareness of the immanence of one's death as an important trigger for mid-life crisis. During this stage of life, priorities are reassessed in light of one's mortality. Yet for those in my audience who were totally devout Muslims, death is viewed not as something to fear, not as a finality to an increasingly precious life, to be invested with new and increased meanings. Rather, death is interpreted within the strictures of the Koran as a stage in an evolving life. Death is not an end which is to be shunned and hidden, as the West tends to view it, but an ongoing part of a larger conception of living. Thus, death was seen by my Muslim listeners as an irrelevant contributor to an Indonesian's midlife crisis, if it should occur at all.

Other audiences' responses indicated cultural differences in conceptions of identity and self. The literature suggests that work and career are central aspects in men's conception of their identity and is an important arena in understanding mid-life change. My audiences pointed out, in contrast, that their identity was defined primarily in terms of where they were born and their family interconnections. Their concept was more permeable and fluid than the more bounded ideas of the West. They cited their own research difficulties in getting Indonesian respondents to characterize themselves in terms of their work.

Perhaps the most general source of incomprehension of the mid-life change literature among my audiences could be summarized by their view that most Indonesians don't have time for a mid life change. Survival issues, coupled with a strong belief that national progress will resolve those concerns, are very significant in Indonesia thus making questions of life's meaning seem

secondary. Moreover, the deemphasis on the individual ego and a concomitant deeper embeddness in family, social organization and particularly in religion appears to provide sufficient answers to questions about life's meaning. These sources are often strikingly missing in the more secularized West.

Moreover, there may be the absence of categories, in language and thought, to name those feelings associated with meaninglessness. Indonesia, and Java more specifically, has a system of morality and normativeness which tends to suppress the expression of strong emotion and may not allow into consciousness any issues which could lead to such feelings. In other words, concerns about meaning may exist in Indonesian culture as they do in the West but may find little way into awareness or into expression.

There were clearly disjunctions between Western views of mid-life change and how Indonesians viewed their relevance to their culture. Whether the differences are in degree or in kind is difficult to assess. But what is important to recognize is that the discrepancy exists and it demands interpretation.

This issue goes beyond the current debate about the cross-cultural generalizability of psychological findings. It extends beyond examining the appropriateness of psychology's search for universal laws. The problem of the apparant inappropriateness of some Western psychological research to Indonesia suggests a more general question: can a Third World society, like Indonesia, effectively use the seemingly context free psychological knowledge imported from the West, and if so, in what ways.

Since America and the West are the home for most of the world's psychologists and produces almost all of psychological research it is clearly sensible for Indonesia to import texts, journals and teachers from overseas. Analogous to international trade, importing Western psychology is more efficient than creating totally new, specifically local products. The success of such importation depends on whether the imported items fit existing systems; in the world of manufacture one would never consider importing a square part for a local machine which has a round hole. Either the exporter must change the shape of the part or the importer must change the structure of his equipment. To return to the case of importing psychological knowledge, it is not likely that Western psychology will readily reshape its exported findings to suit the needs of countries like Indonesia, nor does it presently have the findings to support a refutation of its context free assumption. Both intellectually and economically this strategy would constitute a unlikely revolutionary shift in commitment. It seems equally implausible that Indonesia would create its own spare parts, its own psychological research. This is too costly and inefficient, given the current priorities of the country. More importantly, Indonesian psychologists and government officials see no reason to look elsewhere. What can happen is that Indonesia will begin to change its machinery to fit the imported part, that the society will shift so as to make Western psychological findings predictive and appropriate. Thus, in the example of mid life crisis, Indonesia might begin to see mid-life change and the forces that create it as the expected norm while its own indigenous factors, like commitment to religious belief, as deviations. Thus, the wholesale, unexamined importation of psychological knowledge can generate and sustain societal change rather than simply explain and predict it. I am not suggesting that the producers of psychological models are trying to colonize or change other societies by their belief in universal laws about behavior. Rather, I am underlining the potential problems if the uncritical importation and acceptance of Western psychology's seemingly context free findings goes unnoticed. What is needed is a careful examination of the appro-

priateness of Western ideas and research for Indonesian society and a projection of what a different approach might look like.

One alternative is the development of psychologies that can illuminate the context dependency of psychological findings (sometimes called indigenous psychologies). Although this idea of more local psychologies has been sometimes suggested, and echoed in Third World conferences, there has been little work done in such a direction. While it is conceptually unclear whether this approach will prove fruitful, the process of trying to find an indigenous Indonesian psychology could prove invaluable. Not only can such a critical study allow for determining the relevance of Western psychology to the local context, but it could clarify many important, often undefined, aspects of Indonesian society.

In turn, Western psychology could obtain for such an analysis a critical perspective on its important assumptions, such as its implicit model of finding universal context free laws of human nature. In this way, countries like Indonesia, which have always been passive importers of psychology, can become exporters, by initiating a much needed dialogue, within psychology and perhaps even between nations, about the nature of human nature.

July, 1993