

# The Counseling Psychologist

<http://tcp.sagepub.com>

---

## Culturally Biased Assumptions in Counseling Psychology

Paul B. Pedersen

*The Counseling Psychologist* 2003; 31; 396

DOI: 10.1177/0011000003031004002

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/31/4/396>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Ψ<sub>17</sub>

Division of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association

Additional services and information for *The Counseling Psychologist* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tcp.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** (this article cites 2 articles hosted on the  
SAGE Journals Online and HighWire Press platforms):  
<http://tcp.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/31/4/396#BIBL>

• REACTIONS

## Culturally Biased Assumptions in Counseling Psychology

Paul B. Pedersen

*Syracuse University and University of Hawaii*

*Eight clusters of culturally biased assumptions are identified for further discussion from Leong and Ponterotto's (2003 [this issue]) article. The presence of cultural bias demonstrates that cultural bias is so robust and pervasive that it permeates the profession of counseling psychology, even including those articles that effectively attack cultural bias itself such as Leong and Ponterotto's. Readers are warned to not underestimate the power of cultural bias and cultural encapsulation as generic issues in the profession of counseling psychology. The internationalization of counseling psychology is a struggle to be consistent with the scientist-practitioner model and the scientific foundation of psychology itself.*

When “friends” of mine have approached me to ask why I have wasted my professional output by focusing on multicultural issues, I smile at them, then ask them whether “accuracy” is important to them. They look puzzled, pause, and then say that accuracy is “of course” important. Then I suggest to them that we are on the same side. Because all behaviors are learned and displayed in a cultural context, it is essential for psychology to address that cultural context to achieve accurate assessment, meaningful understanding, and appropriate intervention. Anything less is culturally biased and violates the scientific principles on which psychology is founded.

Leong and Ponterotto's (2003 [this issue]) article does a good job of raising issues for discussion on the danger of the implicit pretense that “American” psychology is a church and that “American” psychologists are missionaries in that church. However, their article is only a beginning point and leaves a great deal more unsaid. In reading it, I found a number of “assumptions”—even here, in an article about internationalizing the field—that reflect the cultural bias in psychology as a field. I will try to explain my observations in the next few pages.

### ASSUMPTION 1: AMERICAN LEADERSHIP

On pages 381 and 382, Leong and Ponterotto (2003) describe a series of factors associated with the globalization movement. The first assumption is

THE COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGIST, Vol. 31 No. 4, July 2003 396-403

DOI: 10.1177/0011000003254630

© 2003 by the Division 17 of Counseling Psychology of the American Psychological Association.

396

that American psychologists become part of a global community of mental health service providers, which is true. The second assumption is that we challenge the belief that American psychology is “in some ways more advanced or superior to other national psychologies,” which is partly true. The comparison of psychological perspectives across cultures is not a contest or a competition to see who is superior or more advanced. However, we cannot deny that the science of psychology has flourished in the past decades in the United States, even though it has flourished based on some culturally biased assumptions. The alternative of either throwing out American psychology or imposing it universally is not the answer. Let us begin with the admission of cultural bias in psychology and then figure out how our psychological research can be applied meaningfully across cultures in spite of that bias. The third assumption is that we must be leaders in promoting international perspectives in psychology, which is both true and not true. We must learn to become followers as well as leaders in the global context of psychology.

On September 12, 2001, I received an e-mail from a good friend and colleague who lives and works in an Islamic society. She asked me whether I thought American society would learn anything from the tragic events of September 11. At the time, I was not ready to hear such a question: I was absorbed in nationalistic self-pity. Since that time, however, I have repeatedly turned to that question. We have been all too ready to “teach” and to “lead” other countries but perhaps not nearly ready enough to “learn” and to “follow.”

## **ASSUMPTION 2: THE TRANSFER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TECHNOLOGY**

On page 384, Leong and Ponterotto (2003) suggest that Western countries need to cross-validate and test our theories and measures before they are used in other countries. It is unfortunate that many tests and counseling theories being used abroad have not first been validated for use in other cultures. However, this also makes the implicit assumption that we should be packaging psychology for “export” abroad in a way that other countries might find arrogant. In the 8 years I taught at Asian universities, I often heard of the “Berkeley Mafia,” which referred to those U.S. psychology graduates who lectured from their U.S. university classroom notes and—with some cross-validation adaptations—extended the influence of the psychological knowledge they had learned in the United States.

In 1999-2000, I was a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the National Taiwan University Department of Psychology. When the terrible earthquakes hit Tai-

wan, the clinical faculty of National Taiwan University decided to send 40 of their best students to provide counseling to the victims and rescue workers. However, the Chinese victims and rescue workers were not interested in counseling, and they saw talk therapy as, if anything, making the problem worse. All they wanted was help in connecting with a suitable Buddhist priest who could through the brief ceremony of *Sho-ji* call a person's soul back into his or her body. There is much we can learn about how psychological resources are applied in other cultures. It is not so much that we "counter the dominance and hegemony of Western psychology in other parts of the world" (384), as though we were a competing team in an international sports event, but that we find a balance of resources to fit the client's needs within that client's own cultural context.

### ASSUMPTION 3: THE SELF-REFERENCE CRITERION

One of the goals on page 384 is that "American students and professionals will be more successful" (Leong & Ponterotto, 2003). The goal, however, is not the success of any particular culture or group but rather the success of psychology as a field and as a profession. Non-Western readers may see an implicit arrogance in assuming that "our" success is somehow important. We rely on the "self-reference criterion" evaluating other people's ideas and behaviors according to our own viewpoint. We have been taught to "do unto others as we would have them do unto ourselves." What if they do not want what we would want for ourselves? Should we do it anyway? We need to take a broader perspective of psychology.

Most psychological services are defined by formal methods in a formal context. However, there are alternative perspectives of counseling that are more inclusive and that can be classified in a three-dimensional model of counseling services (Pedersen, 2000, p. 55) matching formal, nonformal, and informal contexts with formal, nonformal, and informal methods. The inclusive "formal/nonformal/informal" grid describes at least nine different combinations including the "formal method by formal context" alternative typical in Western cultures. Counseling psychology does not "belong" to any single cultural, national, or social group.

### ASSUMPTION 4: INTERDISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Leong and Ponterotto's (2003) article is focused on the professional discipline of "counseling psychology." However, many other disciplines such as clinical psychology, social work, and public health, to name a few, are work-

ing along parallel lines. The exclusion of other disciplines from the Leong and Ponterotto article encapsulates counseling (Wrenn, 1985). In 2002, Anthony Marsella and I presented a workshop at the American Psychological Association (APA) meetings in Chicago in which we discussed at least 50 different ways to internationalize psychology. Some of what we identified in the APA Continuing Education workshop overlap with the specific recommendations in the Leong and Ponterotto article, and all of the recommendations were drawn from previous publications of Dr. Marsella, which themselves drew on multidisciplinary sources (Marsella, 1998; Marsella & Yamada, 2000). In identifying initiatives, it is essential that readers be made aware of all possible resources available to them and that all resources across disciplines be networked with all those psychological providers who have made a significant contribution to the identification of cultural bias in psychology, whether those providers come from the narrowly defined profession of counseling or not. The problems we face are sufficiently urgent that we dare not ignore any of the relevant resources available to us.

In 1995, Robert T. Carter, Joe Ponterotto, and I organized a meeting just before the APA Annual Conference in New York City. We invited about 40 prominent authors of multicultural research publications to join us at Lubin House, where Sage Publications sponsored a 2-day meeting. Each participant/presenter was asked to bring five questions to which they did not know the answer so that each breakout session would begin with the discussion of those five questions rather than any formal presentation (Pedersen, 2000, pp. 101-117). The accumulation of unanswered questions was a powerful reminder of how inclusionary we need to be to identify resources for the internationalization of psychology.

### ASSUMPTION 5: UNINTENTIONAL CULTURAL BIAS

Leong and Ponterotto (2003) mention the excellent work of the International Forum (IF) series of articles in *The Counseling Psychologist (TCP)*. Fred Leong and Joe Ponterotto deserve a great deal of credit for having organized that series over the years. I worked with Fred Leong for several years in that series, recruiting international articles and getting them published. However, I resigned from the IF series in frustration over the difficulties encountered in getting manuscripts through the review process. One manuscript describing the unique ways that counseling was being applied to rehabilitation counseling among populations in Sweden was rejected by a *TCP* reviewer because "there's too much about Sweden in the manuscript." Culturally biased assumptions are especially influential in the review of manuscripts for publication in APA journals and for presentation at APA meetings.

Fred Leong and I have sponsored a project through the Committee on International Relations in Psychology (CIRP) in which we suggested that international authors of APA publications and APA conference presentations be given a "needs assessment" form to describe the degree of cultural bias in the APA review process. I know of enough anecdotal situations where there was a bias against non-U.S. authors of proposals for publication and/or presentation that I would like to seek empirical data either supporting or not supporting the prevalence of cultural bias in the review process. As of about the year 2000, more psychological research is being done outside the United States than inside, yet precious little of it is published by APA journals or even reviewed by APA reviewers. American psychologists know far less about psychology in other cultures than international psychologists know about us. American psychology is in danger of being left behind.

#### **ASSUMPTION 6: ADVOCATING FOR VICTIMS**

There is an assumption on page 382 of Leong and Ponterotto (2003) that we need to "describe and discuss" issues related to international psychology. It seems to me that we need to proceed toward an action agenda beyond the continued rhetoric, which supports international goals. There is an apathetic passivity among psychologists toward international perspectives at a time in world history where rhetoric is a luxury we cannot afford. Somehow our colleagues and particularly our students in psychology need to be motivated toward international issues beyond disengaged observation of an interesting phenomenon. As we adapt counseling to fit with other global cultures, we will likely find a need to advocate for victims even at the risk of being involved in dual relationships with those clients who are being victimized.

Some years ago while a faculty member at the University of Minnesota, I organized a topical seminar for a half-dozen doctoral students on "advanced issues of multiculturalism." Each student was asked to bring the syllabi for her or his other doctoral classes into the seminar for discussion. As a group, we would discuss the other classes' syllabi and identify the "difficult" questions of multicultural perspective to be raised in those other classes. The students would then go back to their other classes and raise these difficult questions of cultural bias and the complexity of a multicultural context. The day before our first class meeting, the students as a group came to me and said they were withdrawing from my seminar. While they liked the idea and found it exciting, they did not trust their faculty enough to take the risk of confronting them with cultural bias in the curriculum. Perhaps we are now at a stage of advanced multicultural awareness where such an "action-oriented" seminar would work.

### ASSUMPTION 7: INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES

With the breakdown of traditional family and village social units around the world, other countries and cultures are looking for alternatives to maintain that essential social support function. In many cases, they are looking to psychology and psychological services as uniquely suited to their needs. As a result, there is a surge of "indigenous psychologies" all over the world where psychology is being reinvented in new and innovative ways. (Yang, 1997; Yang, Hwang, Pedersen, & Daibo, 2003). Professor Yang (1997) described, and Yang et al. (2003) expanded, a list of "10 YES" and "7 NO" propositions in the development of indigenous psychology for Chinese cultures that provides a starting point for discussion.

Yang's (1997; Yang et al., 2003) list of "7 NO" to promote indigenous psychology is as follows: (1) not to habitually adopt Western psychological concepts, (2) not to overlook Western psychologists' important expertise, (3) not to reject useful indigenous concepts, (4) not to adopt cross-cultural approaches that impose Western ideas, (5) not to use concepts that are too broad or abstract, (6) not to think out research problems exclusively in English or any single language, and (7) not to politicize research.

Yang's (1997; Yang et al., 2003) list of "10 YES" to promote indigenous psychology is as follows: (1) to tolerate vague and ambiguous conditions; (2) to be a typical Chinese with "Chinese" ideas when functioning as a researcher; (3) to consider the concrete and specific cultural setting of psychological phenomenon; (4) to consider the details of a behavior and its context before applying a Western conceptual theory, method, or tool; (5) to give priority to the study of culturally unique psychological and behavioral phenomena when studying Chinese people; (6) to make it a rule to begin any research with a thorough immersion into the natural setting; (7) to investigate, if possible, both the specific content (or structure) and the involved process (or mechanism); (8) to let research be based upon the Chinese intellectual tradition rather than Western intellectual traditions; (9) to study not only the traditional aspects or elements but also modern applications; (10) to study not only the psychological functioning of ancient Chinese relationships but focusing on contemporary Chinese people as well.

Indigenous psychology is not a universal psychology but rather reminds us that psychological principles cannot be assumed to be universally similar. The functions of psychology are based on ancient historical traditions in history, religion, and many other fields or disciplines not typically seen as relevant to psychology. It recognizes how the individual is embedded in the social network and acknowledges how the social arena is interactive, dynamic, and relational in its processes. It recognizes the balance of forces

and counterforces in a society in which the individual self is often diminished or defined through harmony in relationships with others.

### **ASSUMPTION 8: EVIDENCE-BASED "HARD" DATA**

On page 385, Leong and Ponterotto (2003) talk about the need for original empirical research data, including both quantitative and qualitative studies. While we certainly need more research on internationalizing counseling, the only thing more dangerous than no data is the ready availability of bad research data. The culturally biased characteristics frequently associated with "empirical" research data are notorious for implicit—and sometimes explicit—cultural bias:

The usual psychometric concerns such as validity, reliability and practicality as well as ethical considerations are involved in all assessment, regardless of culture, ethnicity and other dimensions of diversity that contribute to an individual's personal identity. Added to these usual concerns are specific, culture-related considerations regarding appropriateness, meaningfulness and equivalence of the various concepts, constructs, syndromes and categories that psychologists and counselors have used to characterize and evaluate people. (Lonner & Ibrahim, 2002, p. 373)

Given the difficulty of conducting psychological research, it is essential that the presence of cultural bias be acknowledged in a global context so that we do not confuse the discipline of psychology with the more narrowly defined boundaries of "American" psychology. It is essential that the culture-centered perspective of human behavior be recognized as a "fourth force" (Pedersen, 1999) generic psychological perspective to strengthen the three prevailing clusters of psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic psychology by making culture central rather than marginal. Leong and Ponterotto (2003) are not just writing about "internationalizing counseling psychology" but more properly about the reinvention of counseling psychology as a profession in a global context.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Eight clusters of assumptions indicating some degree of cultural bias are identified from Leong and Ponterotto's (2003) article for further discussion. It is probable that any article about counseling psychology, including this reaction article, contains examples of cultural bias that need to be discovered and illuminated. Only as we carve away the cultural bias in counseling psy-



chology can we aspire to fulfill the scientific principles on which our profession is founded.

## REFERENCES

- Leong, F. T. L., & Ponterotto, J. G. (2003). A proposal for internationalizing counseling psychology in the United States: Rationale, recommendations and challenges. *The Counseling Psychologist, 31*, 381-395.
- Lonner, W. J., & Ibrahim, F. A. (2002). Appraisal and assessment in cross-cultural counseling. In P. B. Pedersen, J. G. Draguns, W. J. Lonner, & J. E. Trimble (Eds.), *Counseling across cultures* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marsella, A. J. (1998). Toward a "global-community psychology": Meeting the needs of a changing world. *American Psychologist, 53*, 1282-1291.
- Marsella, A. J., & Yamada, A. M. (2000). Culture and mental health: An introduction and overview of foundations, concepts and issues. In I. Cuellar & F. A. Paniagua (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural mental health: Assessment and treatment of culturally diverse populations* (pp. 3-24). New York: Academic Press.
- Pedersen, P. (1999). *Multiculturalism as a fourth force*. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel.
- Pedersen, P. (2000). *A handbook for the development of multicultural awareness*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Wrenn, C. G. (1985). Afterword: The culturally encapsulated counselor revisited. In P. B. Pedersen (Ed.), *Handbook of cross-cultural counseling and therapy* (pp. 323-329). Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Yang, K. S. (1997). Indigenising Westernized Chinese psychology. In M. H. Bond (Ed.), *Working at the interface of cultures: Eighteen lies in social science* (pp. 62-76). New York: Routledge.
- Yang, K. S., Hwang, K. K., Pedersen, P. B., & Daibo, I. (Eds.). (2003). *Progress in Asian social psychology: Conceptual and empirical contributions*. Westport, CT: Praeger.