A Giant of Cultural Research: Seeing Further from the Shoulders of Kwok Leung

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INTRODUCTION

This is a special issue in honor of Kwok Leung, whose path-breaking career in social psychology, cross-cultural psychology, organizational behavior, and international management was cut short by his untimely death in 2015. Newton said, ‘If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants’. In cultural research, it’s Kwok’s shoulders that enable us to see further.

Kwok was a man for all seasons: an unflappable gentleman, a devoted father and husband, a mentor to countless students and junior faculty, a whirlwind organizer as department chair, journal editor, and conference organizer. He did a lot of things well and made them look easy! But more than anything else Kwok was a dedicated and tireless scientist, a true believer that the most complex and important questions about culture and behavior be elucidated by careful conceptual and empirical inquiry. While other tributes to Kwok have focused on his remarkable talents as a collaborator (Bond, van de Vijver, Morris, & Gelfand, 2016), this special issue focuses on his scientific contributions.

KWOK LEUNG’S SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS AND EXTENSIONS IN THIS ISSUE

Kwok’s scientific legacy is many sided, and we can only showcase parts of it through the articles in this issue. He contributed hundreds of articles and chapters as well as several books, starting from his undergraduate days in Hong Kong, through his doctoral studies in Illinois, and throughout his career as a professor at the Chinese University Psychology Department, the City University of Hong Kong Business School, and ultimately the Chinese University Business School.

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He made major contributions to many fields: social psychology, organizational psychology, management, and particularly cross-cultural psychology. He also made different kinds of contributions that rarely come from the same person. First, Kwok was a tireless empiricist, constantly conducting surveys, experiments, interviews, and content analysis to answer specific questions, producing findings that challenged sweepingly universalistic assumptions of traditional psychologists, on one hand, and the wildly relativistic proclamations of many ethnographers, on the other hand. Second, Kwok was a theory-builder, someone who brought order and integration to literatures muddled by confusing findings and inconsistent concepts. Finally, Kwok influenced the methods of cultural research by devising and pioneering techniques to expand the field’s tools but also by appreciating and articulating the role of many different tools. While his empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions were closely intertwined, some distinct strands of influence can be traced from each area.

Kwok’s empirical contributions reflected a combination of discipline and curiosity. He worked programmatically on the same topics for decades to build a strong evidence base of replicable findings, but he was constantly exploring new constructs and testing new hypotheses. He listened to his data. Kwok came into a field in the thrall of the contrast between individualism and collectivism but unsure how these macro patterns of societies got inside people’s judgments and decision-making. Kwok began by testing whether cross-cultural differences in justice judgments (Leung & Bond, 1984; Leung & Park, 1986) and dispute resolution preferences (Leung, 1987, 1988) could be explained in terms of value dimensions such as ideocentrism-allocentrism (Triandis, Leung, Villareal, & Clack, 1985). These efforts yielded only mixed support, and while most scholars blamed the instruments and proposed ever new variations of value surveys, Kwok looked beyond values to beliefs. He found that cultural differences in conflict and justice behaviors arise from expectancies (people’s beliefs about what actions would cause desired outcomes) more than from valences (the ends that people prioritize) (Bond, Leung, & Schwartz, 1992; Leung, 1987; Leung, Bond, & Schwartz, 1992). This led him to the beliefs, schemas, or implicit theories that channel attributions and predictions (Morris, Leung, & Iyengar, 2004). While prior work in this area tended to investigate particular schemas and beliefs in a piecemeal fashion, Kwok and Michael Bond worked to build a comprehensive model of axiomatic social beliefs and an inventory to measure them (Leung & Bond, 2004). This work influenced and presaged the recent wave of cultural research on social norms or intersubjective beliefs (Chiu, Gelfand, Yamagishi, Shteynberg, & Wan, 2010). Characteristically, however, even as Kwok’s research interests moved away from values to schemas and norms, he remained curious about how values, schemas, and norms operate as carriers of culture. A recent article sought to integrate these mechanisms by understanding them as situated dynamics (Leung & Morris, 2015). It proposed these three major types of mental representation carry cultural influences under different situations and conditions. For example, values are more
likely to matter under conditions of anonymity (weak situations) whereas norms are more likely to matter under conditions with salient social evaluation (strong situations).

One situation where social evaluations tend to be salient is negotiation and for that reason researchers have sought to understand cultural differences in negotiation behavior in terms of norms. In this issue, Yao, Ramirez-Marin, Brett, Aslani, and Semnani-Azad (2017) develop a model of dignity, face, and honor norms in negotiation. In study 1, they synthesized items from prior research to develop scales and demonstrated their construct validity. While past work on East-West differences using individualism-collectivism frameworks captured much of the difference between dignity and face beliefs and behaviors in conflicts and negotiations, the addition of honor elucidates new dimensions of cultural differences that are important in the Mediterranean and Middle East among other places. In study 2, they showed that dignity and honor norms explain cultural differences in integrative and distributive negotiation strategies.

Smith (2017) tests in a nation-level analysis whether the dimensions of tightness-looseness moderates the impact of values versus norms. Given that tight cultures present more strong situations and loose cultures present more weak situations, Smith proposes that personal values will drive behavior more in loose cultures and perceived norms will drive behavior more in tight cultures. By combining secondary datasets, he examines how value and norm dimensions relevant to collectivism predict two important dependent measures: helping strangers and emotion regulation. Results showed the utility of this model at the nation level. The values that promote helping strangers have less effect across countries as tightness increases. Conversely, injunctive norms have a greater effect on emotion regulation across countries as tightness increases.

Kwok’s theoretical contributions are closely intertwined with his empirical results but also go beyond them. In review articles Kwok had a gift for distilling the essence of a topic, the underlying principles or structure. His penchant as a theorist was not pretentious manifestos but clarifying overviews that synthesized complex evidence and elucidated complex topics. Kwok’s overview on a field had the effect of lifting the fog and revealing the terrain so that others felt able to venture into it. His reviews of different conflict and justice literatures had a catalyzing effect (e.g., Leung, 1997, 2014; Morris & Leung, 2000). In the last decade, Kwok turned his clarifying gaze on the creativity and innovation literatures (Leung, Au, & Leung, 2004; Morris & Leung, 2010) and contributed to a resurgence of research on the role of culture. Another area where his authoritative reviews have brought theoretical clarity is international management (Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, & Gibson, 2005). Kwok recently collaborated with scholars in this area on an authoritative review of the evidence about intercultural competence, including dimensions of cultural intelligence (Leung, Ang, & Tan, 2014).

An example of the influence of Kwok’s recent theoretical work to clarify theories of intercultural competence and of creativity comes in the article in
this issue by Xu and Chen (2017). These authors examine the antecedents of creativity of 219 Chinese expatriates working in 43 foreign countries and find that several dimensions of intercultural competence independently matter. Specifically, metacognitive cultural intelligence and motivational cultural intelligence are both positively associated with cultural learning, which in turn, is positively associated with creativity for Chinese expatriates.

No theoretical divide has been more pitched in cultural sciences than the question of whether to study cultures in terms of indigenous, natives-view ‘emic’ constructs or external, pan-cultural ‘etic’ constructs. Kwok’s theorizing has helped to bridge these two camps and scholarly traditions. While Kwok pursued pan-cultural theories, he firmly believed research on a novel topic should begin with ‘emic’ description. In this spirit, he conducted research on indigenous constructs throughout his career, starting with his work on values (Triandis et al., 1993), through his work on Chinese personality traits (Cheung & Leung, 1998; Cheung, Leung, Fan, Song, & Zhang, 1996; Cheung, Leung, Zhang, Sun, Song, & Xie, 2001), and notably continuing in his recent work interpersonal harmony (Chen, Leung, Li, & Ou, 2015; Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002). An important theoretical article identified how ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ research on justice not only passively complement each other but have actively stimulated each other at different stages of the exploratory-to-confirmatory research progression (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999). In a recent article on indigenous management research entitled ‘Like it or not, we need it’ (Leung, 2012), he made the pragmatic case to etic researchers for drawing on emic insights.

A topic where Kwok’s bridging of emic and etic yielded important theoretical progress is conflict and harmony. The prevailing dual concerns model of conflict management distinguished five styles, including the style of avoiding active negotiation of the disagreement which it regarded as an apathetic, dysfunctional approach. Cross-cultural studies found that this style is more widely practiced by Chinese than Western managers (e.g., Leung, 1988; Morris et al., 1998). Some explained this as Chinese concern for harmony, but Kwok didn’t find support for this. A review of indigenous Chinese ideas about harmony prompted the proposal of two distinct forms of harmony management: preventing disintegration versus enhancing harmony (Leung, 1997). In depth qualitative work in Taiwan found a similar distinction (Huang, 1999). While the preventative style would produce conflict avoidance, the enhancing style (which corresponds to the harmony ideals in Confucianism) would produce integrative negotiation. This stimulated etic research to develop etic scales for the two dimensions, confirm that they differ across cultures, and confirm their differing associations to conflict styles (Leung, Brew, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011). Furthering this work, Zhang and Wei (2017), in this issue, probe the relationship between the preventative harmony management style and conflict avoidance in Chinese society by exploring the role of anticipated costs to the relationship as a mediator. The studies measure conflict avoidance in ways with high external
validity in organizations, the reluctance to speak up in an unfair scenario by MBA students and a similar lack of voice by executives in field study. Results showed the predicted role of negative anticipations as a mediator, but this relationship was further qualified by relationship closeness, as the negative anticipations affect people more when close relationships at stake. Whereas classic Western models portray conflict avoidance as a result of low concern about economic interests of both self and others in conflict, these findings about relational concerns show that Chinese managers are not driven by economic apathy but by relational prudence.

Another extension of this theorizing comes in Ünal, Chen, and Xin’s (2017) work on group harmony, building on a prior paper with Kwok (Chen, Ünal, Leung, & Xin, 2016). Drawing on folk concepts in Chinese culture, group harmony was conceptualized as the degree to which group members experience positive affect, attribute benign motives to each other, and balance autonomy needs against the need for group unity. A measure of group harmony predicted innovative performance of Chinese top management teams beyond the traditional Western measure of group cohesion. The current article integrates further ideas from the group-value account of organizational justice (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Blader, 2003), exploring how justice climates influence group effectiveness through group harmony. Using data on 106 upper level management teams from Chinese organizations, they found this pattern of effects on team task performance and team helping behavior. Interestingly the effects differed for distributive, procedural, and interactional justice climates. Procedural justice climate was found to have a weaker effect on group harmony and group performance than either distributive or interactional justice. This research suggests that group harmony may be a more proximal construct that connects organizational justice to group performance outcomes at least in Chinese culture. An interesting question for subsequent research is whether group harmony is an etic construct with the same meaning across cultures.

Finally, Kwok’s methodological contributions involve both pioneering new techniques and clarifying the purposes of existing techniques. He was an early adopter of mediation and moderation analysis to uncover the psychological dynamics beneath a cultural difference (e.g., Leung, 1987, 1988) and using structural equation modeling to test measurement invariance (e.g., Leung, Au, Fernández-Dols, & Iwawaki, 1992). Further, he developed new measurement and analytic techniques to identify cultural dimensions at the individual and group levels (Chan, Ho, Leung, Chan, & Yung, 1999; Leung & Bond, 1989), presciently making the case for multi-level modeling (Leung, 1989). He even proposed constructive solutions to some of the issues fueling today’s replication crisis (Leung, 2011). To be clear, methodological innovation was not an end in itself for Kwok, but an organic outgrowth of his high standards as a scientist, and his quest for scientific validity in the study of culture. This is similarly evident in Kwok’s integrative writings about methods with Van de Vijver, which introduced a wide variety of study designs, measurement techniques, and
data analysis procedures as solutions to different kinds of threats to validity in cultural research (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Transcending pointless arguments about which methods are better, they explained what each tool is good for.

This influence can be seen in the diversity of methods used in current research to counter threats to validity. For example, a perennial challenge is language. Translations of verbal scenarios and questions can differ in their evaluative connotations, raising the question of whether different responses reflect different stimuli or different processing. When probing connotatively rich topics such as the appropriateness of criticism and punishment, Kwok used a mix of methods to guard against findings that arise solely from the words used in a vignette (Bond, Wan, Leung, & Giacalone, 1985; Deng & Leung, 2014; Leung, Su, & Morris, 2001). Likewise, in this issue Eriksson et al. (2017) evade this problem by using animated displays rather than verbal stimuli (see Heider & Simmel, 1944; Morris & Peng, 1994). Students in eight countries responded to the same abstract cartoons that showed one member of a community overharvesting its resource and getting punished. The animations varied in whether the punishment came from a lone peer or from the group collectively and whether it took the form restorative or retributive justice. A robust pattern of results emerged that contradicts the simple association between collectivism and collective punishment, which could have been evoked by the consistency pressures that affect responses to verbal stimuli. Indeed, individual punishers were evaluated negatively in the three Western individualistic countries as well as Japan, but not in the most highly collectivistic countries, such as Russia, the UAE, China, and Pakistan – a paradox to push forward research of culture and punishment.

An example of the insights yielded by a mix of methods is Cheng and Hong’s (2017) contribution to this issue. These scholars investigate an indigenous Singaporean construct similar to fear-of-missing-out. While it had been explored in emic interviews, these scholars developed a survey inventory to measure Kiasu thoughts quantitatively. They sought to identify the mechanisms through which Kiasu affects performance by measuring sequelae and varying situational factors. Their initial studies found that endorsement of Kiasu is associated with lower creative performance, and this effect runs through prevention focus, a self-regulatory orientation that inhibits creative risks. Next Cheng and Hong (2017) tested and found that this effect occurs for individuals’ high in ‘need for closure’, who tend to cling to cultural norms, which suggests that Kiasu operates not just as a value that people express, but as a norm to which they conform. Finally, when students were asked to free associate about Singaporean culture, this exercise reduced creativity for those who wrote about Kiasu, but it boosted creativity for those who wrote about Singapore’s multi-ethnic tradition. This final method of cultural priming not only helps to test a potentially problematic link between Singaporean identity and the creativity killing Kiasu syndrome, but it also provides hints of a solution.
CONCLUSION

The evidence of Kwok Leung’s legacy is not just the esteem felt by those of us who worked with him, but by the continuing impact of his ideas in many areas of cultural research. The articles in this special issue exemplify this.

Kwok’s mission was not to uproot Western psychology, but to help it grow beyond its Western roots by exposing it to other suns, in particular the light of Chinese traditions. He leaves us his life and work as an example to emulate.

此地一為別, 孤蓬萬里征。
浮雲遊子意, 落日故人情。
揮手自茲去, 蕭蕭斑馬鳴。

李白, 《送友人》

Farewell I bid you here;
Away ten thousand miles you drift, like lone tumbleweeds in the wind blow.
The floating clouds convey a traveler’s sentiment;
The setting sun the affection to a friend I owe.
Upon waving of hands and the neigh of the horse,
Alone, off you go.
Li Bai, Farewell to a Friend
(C. K. Ho, trans.)

REFERENCES


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