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# Social Psychology for Social Change: Foundations for and Introduction to a Program of Action-Oriented Research

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The Special Issues series on social psychology of social change will provide a forum for research on the science and practice of interventions for social change that benefit individuals, organisations and society. This effort takes up Lewin's call for scientific research aimed towards solving social problems and generating new knowledge, but with a theory and practice of culture and cultural change at its centre. The effort elevates the dominant research approach in developing countries in Asia where there is more concern about opportunities for training and engaging in and publishing more applied work. The emphasis both on research excellence and on a holistic concern for society as central components for theorising about effective modes of realising social change in Asia and the Pacific is a long-term project that begins with the seven diverse articles in the special issue, which span different stages in the project — from clarifying its Asian philosophical basis, to empirical analysis of the problem and levers of change, to evaluation of the outcomes of action research.

**Keywords:** action research, social change, societal development, culture change

The Asian Association of Social Psychology (AASP) is delighted to present the inaugural Special Themed Issue of the *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology (JPRP)* on 'The Social Psychology of Social Change: Science and Practice in Asia'. Once a year over the course of the next 5 years we will provide a special forum for cutting edge research in Asia and the Pacific on the science and practice of interventions for social change that benefit individuals and society. This effort takes up Kurt Lewin's call for scientific research, aimed towards solving a social problem and generating new knowledge (Bargal & Bar, 1992), but with a theory and practice of culture and culture change at its centre.

The origins of this initiative derive from the AASP's efforts to articulate a new mission statement reflecting its mature status as a diverse organisation. The AASP was established in 1995, and began to publish its flagship journal, the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology (AJSP)*, in 1998. Since then, according to Haslam and Kashima's (2010) bibliometric analysis, it has been part of a massive rise in publications output, where Asia was responsible for less than 2% of world articles published in social psychology from 1970 to 1984, through a meteoric rise period in the 1990s to 2000s resulting in a 10% share by 2005–2008. Be-

sides this rise in simple productivity, Haslam and Kashima (2010) also asked about:

*the magnitude of its contribution, the degree of Asian research leadership rather than followership, and the extent to which Asian social psychologists are chiefly serving as collaborators on externally initiated cross-cultural comparisons rather than addressing Asian concerns, Asian samples, and indigenous Asian approaches. In short, we might ask: to what extent is Asian social psychology a significant, autonomous, and distinctive force in global research and publication? (p. 202).*

The choice of topic for these Special Themed Issues provides an answer to their questions. Through its organisation and membership-wide process of consultation, AASP determined that it had two parallel and intersecting sets of goals that were unevenly distributed across national boundaries. In developed parts of Asia, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan, there was more of a concern about the international standing of AASP and how it might provide a platform for increasing publications — this mandate is maintained by *AJSP*. In the developing countries, such as Malaysia, China, the Philippines and Indonesia, there was more concern about opportunities for training and for engaging in and publishing more applied work,

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and this is addressed by the current Special Issue series. The Mission Statement that was agreed upon by all was that AASP's mission is to provide scholars in Asia and the Pacific with a collaborative forum for the discussion, promotion, capabilities building, and publication of their research. It promotes research on Asian traditions, philosophies and ideas that have scientific merit and practical applications, and expands the boundary, substance, and direction of social psychology by supplementing and integrating Western psychology's focus on intra-individual processes with a broader and more holistic view from culture and society. The Special Themed Issues therefore emphasise both research excellence (particularly with respect to science) *and* a holistic concern for culture and society as central components for theorising about effective modes of realising social change in Asia and the Pacific.

It is this integration of science and application, using methods ranging from qualitative interviews to quantitative surveys, and tools from computer software design to career counselling, that acts as the unifying force driving the AASP–JPRP Social Psychology for Social Change series to bring something new into the domain of action-oriented and applied research. For many years, Asian social psychologists have been sanguine about the ability of their cultural traditions to provide a holistic platform to simultaneously pursue science and application, while maintaining something as ‘unruly’ and difficult to define as culture as a central theoretical component of this endeavour. Atsumi (2007) claimed that narrative-design science (i.e., human science) and nomothetic-epistemic science (i.e., natural science) were ‘fraternal twins born of the same mother’ (p. 34) that could operate in complementary modes. He was building on the work of Kashima (2005), who stated that ‘There is nothing incoherent about adopting both an empiricist epistemology and the symbolic self reflexivity thesis in social psychology. More specifically, with regard to indigenous psychology, I would argue that an empiricist indigenous psychology is neither an oxymoron nor a self-contradiction, but a respectable stance’ (p. 23). Elaborating on his claim that culture can be conceptualised within a monist ontology allowing for scientific investigation, Kashima (2005) argued that ‘If we take a view that intentionality is materially realized, meaning is part of a causal chain, and social scientific investigation is also part of complex causal processes, we can adopt a monist ontology, in which human nature is not distinct from, but continuous with, material nature’ (p. 35).

Finally, summarising the pioneering work of neo-Confucian philosopher Mou Zongshan, Liu (2011) elaborated on the foundational arguments for the epistemology and ontology of action-oriented and intervention-oriented research adopted here:

*In general terms, Asian philosophical traditions allow for human beings to have the ability to grasp ontological reality, although they may reach radically different conclusions about what this might be. This means that rather than seeing methodology as the solution to problems involving the privileging of different value*

*systems in social science research (methodology), Asian implicit theory (or folk beliefs) is based on holism and perpetual change, where ‘a tolerance of contradiction, an acceptance of the unity of opposites, and an understanding of the coexistence of opposites as permanent, not conditional or transitory, are part of everyday lay perception and thought’ (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng, 2007, p. 265). In practical terms, this means that Asian traditions do not privilege scientific methods of observation above the intuitive illumination of the original mind but rather see these as complementary forms of knowing. (p. 217)*

A clear statement of epistemological foundations is essential for maintaining the continuity of the AASP–JPRP Social Psychology for Social Change series as an intellectual force for 5 years. We humbly acknowledge the degree of difficulty in this task, as many Asian social psychologists operate within boundaries that privilege dualist ways of knowing that build walls, not bridges, between science and action (Liu, 2011). We have already witnessed how action research, as articulated by Kurt Lewin (see Bargal, 2006), incorporating a dynamic and evolving cycle of planning, action, evaluation, and reflection, has faded from mainstream psychology and transmigrated to adjacent areas such as education, as a socially constructed form of reflexive learning rather than a mode of science-aided problem solving (see Dick, 2006). Without a clear statement of its philosophy of science, the motivating force behind this series will be challenged and torn apart by centrifugal forces claiming epistemological incompatibility between reflexivity in actions in the field and precision in the application of scientific principles in the drawing room (see Liu, Ng, Gastado-Conaco, & Wong, 2008).

### **Introduction to the Articles in the Thematic Special Issue**

Thus, the first article in this collection (J.H. Liu, 2014) applies the seminal work of neo-Confucian philosopher S.H. Liu (1998) to provide social scientists with thoughts about: (1) a set of ultimate concerns that can be used to guide life and scholarly endeavour; (2) an axiomatic world view, and a generative model of human nature that is adaptive for proactively organising society; and (3) an epistemology that is appropriate for social science research on social change. Liu (2014) states that ‘Confucian ethics are relational, reciprocal, and hierarchical, not supernatural. They are based in status differences that are not immutable, but incorporate inequality sourced from both the external mantle of social positions and from the internal virtues of self-cultivation’; Confucianism puts the human world of social and ethical relations at the heart of its philosophy, and it contends that human nature only requires the right circumstances to see its innate benevolence grow. This type of non-religious faith in humanity seems to be required for action-oriented research, because the initial results of any efforts to solve social problems are not likely to be met with unqualified success. Nor are the efforts of science-practitioners necessarily going to be celebrated by gatekeepers of the major academic journals. Thus, having

a moral, ethical, and epistemological system to provide support for scholars on the pathway of action-oriented research may be invaluable; and this is important because the outcome of an intervention depends on not only the quality of the intervention, but the cultivated character of the people carrying it out.

Su, Pan, and Chen (2014) recount service learning as a practical means to cultivate the character of university students, through triggering a search for meaning of life. They surmise that fulfilling the search for meaning in Eastern societies (like Taiwan) involves shiming (使命), 'the fulfillment of an expectation, order, or mission delegated by a superior authority', rather than the freedom of self-actualising as in Western societies. Their service learning program took the form of an internet-based platform where university students become involved with teaching grade school children by picture book reading. In this process, interview and diary results suggested that the university students '(1) learned who they were, (2) learned ways to be with people that they care about, and (3) required realistic plans', not as a delegated mission, but as a form of cooperative learning wherein plans became more concrete through better knowledge of self in society. The authors found that the course helped students develop a sense of direction, but was insufficient to reveal their vocational calling. This is classic bottom-up participant action research common in the West (e.g., Dick, 2006), where increased reflexivity (e.g., self-awareness) in a qualitative sense is the main outcome. It remains for future research to see if a stronger scientific basis to this research emerges as the program is enlarged.

Another study focused on university students, particularly on poor university students in the Philippines. For many poor people in the Philippines, higher education provides opportunities for socioeconomic advancement, but the costs of university education strain the students and their families and possibly make poor students vulnerable to psychological distress. Reyes and Yujuico (2014) considered the objective and subjective dimensions of the students' experience of poverty and found that the psychological distress experienced by poor students was not directly related to their families' lack of financial resources. Instead, students' distress was related to their subjective evaluation of their socioeconomic status, which the authors refer to as their *sense of poverty*. Consistent with the action research focus, the study points to two important levers that could be targets of psychological programs that aim to protect these students from psychological distress. The authors found two variables that play distinct moderating roles: access to social resources (social contacts that could be approached in times of need) buffers the relationship between sense of poverty and distress, and students' participation in family or collective problem-solving reduced both sense of poverty and distress. The results of the study underscore the role of construals related to the experience of and solutions to financial constraints, suggesting targets for intervention in the first or second cycle

of future action research studies seeking to build poor students' protective resources against distress. Socioeconomic development programs focused on providing poor students with access to higher education opportunities could include interventions to help students frame these construals more positively.

The remaining articles in this Special Issue focus not on people, but on programs, and address social problems in society rather than personal growth. Not surprisingly, the two articles that deal with the largest social issues are also oriented more towards knowledge production and pilot testing a framework rather than direct intervention, whereas the two aimed towards a smaller social issue made more definitive progress towards a solution to the situation.

Zhang, Zheng, Liu, Zhao, and Sun (2014) report three studies about the impact of the *hukou* (residential permit) system in China on prejudice towards rural-to-urban migrants. The mass migration of peasants to the city has been one of the most pervasive demographic phenomena on the planet over the last few centuries, and the explosive growth of China's economy has to a large extent been driven by the supply of labour coming from rural areas to urban factories. This has been accompanied by prejudice towards these new migrants. The applied research reported here found that the perception of group boundary permeability was both correlated with and causally related to lower prejudice against rural migrants; increasing boundary impermeability, in terms of the experimental manipulations of the law regarding the hukou system, resulted in greater prejudice against rural migrants by urban dwellers. While the experimental manipulations provide causal evidence of the impact of the perceived impermeability of the hukou system on prejudice, it is not an intervention as such, and the evidence is not based on representative samples: policy makers have to consider many factors besides prejudice (e.g., housing and migration flows) to decide how to manage the balance between urban and rural populations in China. But this research shows that experimental data could be part of the equation used by policy makers to make these decisions.

Besides migration, corruption is also a social issue of perennial interest around the world and in Asia. Corruption is a serious problem in the Philippines, perhaps even endemic, so Hechanova, Melgar, Falguera, & Villaverde (2014) have adopted an organisational culture approach to understanding why corruption persists, and to reducing it in government-funded hospitals. Guided by a new model of organisational culture termed CRE-ATE ('communication of desired values, role modeling of leaders, engagement of employees in culture building, alignments of systems and structures to desired values, training and development, and evaluation and reinforcement of culture-consistent behaviors'), they report the results of a mixed-methods, sequential exploratory design in public hospitals. The initial correlations for their

model are promising: communicating desired values, leadership and systems reinforcement, and engaging employee norms are all correlated in varying degrees to perceptions of organisational norms of corrupt norms and practices. This would be an example of the first cycle or two in a program of action research: we hope to see in future years the full-blown deployment of CREATE in a hospital setting, with the full support of administrative leadership and staff so that actual behaviours and bottom lines associated with reducing corrupt behaviors are demonstrated.

The next two articles in the Special Issue deal with the more limited issue of the implementation of a new information system in Taiwan to be used to steer university students towards majors and towards career choices. Both Wang, Shiah-hou, Wu, and Liu (2014) and Liu, Wang, Deng, Keh, and Lu (2014) offer information system (IS) challenges to the Taiwanese Ministry of Education's attempt to impose a one-size-fits-all curriculum and career choice IS imported from the United States and designed primarily for vocations and professional majors rather than the liberal arts and sciences. The disciplinary control imposed by imported technology is strongly resisted in both of these articles, each of which offers an alternative IS more suited to liberal arts and sciences majors that do not have a one-to-one relationship to professions in the job market. They both view career choice as a meaningful process requiring give and take between the disciplinary technology, academic curriculum, and student, who is to be treated as lifelong learner to be cultivated, rather than a worker to be conveniently steered. Wang et al. (2014) offer an alternative IS that functions like a navigation system, based on the principle of adaptive development that allows students to explore the fit between his or her interests and possible majors and professions, as well as the functions of different types of learning encountered across different curricula. Finally, their IS offers a school-to-work transition module that 'helps students define their scope of employment possibilities with their overall learning', linking their course work and interest with jobs available in the market. Their system demonstrated advantages over the Ministry of Education (MOE) system in terms of successful major-transfers and user satisfaction, and has been taken up by a sufficiently large aggregate of universities that it now offers an alternative to the MOE IS software system.

The IS described by Liu et al. (2014) is based on indigenous Chinese principles of yin–yang to guide the student as an active agent responsible for their own career development through alternating phases where they are shifting between choosing and controlling (yang) and appreciating and adapting (yin). This approach acknowledges that while human beings have agency, sometimes they have to cope with external circumstances using different modes of coping, sometimes highly rational and planned, and sometimes accepting the need to adapt to circumstances beyond personal control.

## Conclusion

This thematic Special Issue is the first step in what might prove to be a long march towards the development of an action-oriented social psychology for social change in Asia and the Pacific. The articles collected here span a broad range of issues united only by a concern for possible action and orientation towards social change. This is far less focused than what we had imagined when we issued first a call for topics and then a call for papers more than a year ago, and this probably reflects the current state of social psychology in Asia and possibly in the world. An action-oriented concern for intervention leading to tangible outcomes in society does not characterise the leading edge of the field today: rather, as noted by Atsumi (2007) nomothetic science dominates more practical concerns, and experimental studies are pre-eminent over field studies. Most of the articles in this collection demonstrate a concern for action and an orientation towards social change, but often fall short of being able to deliver *outcomes* in a systematic manner. The role of external stakeholders as institutional actors capable of realising these outcomes is frequently under-theorised and under-engaged.

Therefore, we have no choice but to continue to emphasise process as central to the development of a more action-oriented approach to a social psychology of social change. From the outset, we determined to set out on a 5-year plan, where each Thematic Special Issue could be seen as a point of evaluation and reflection in the action research cycle; the planning in this case was AASP engaging in the making of a mission statement and seeking to carry this out, not the specific implementation of action-oriented research designed to solve social problems. The evaluation is the articles in the collection, and this introduction serves as a reflection of the fruits of our labor. The cycle for the AASP–JPRP Special Issues may therefore be considered as a meta-cycle dedicated to setting a direction for research at the meta-level that will hopefully, over the course of coming years, engender research projects with smaller action cycles specifically designed to solve social problems and deliver societal outcomes. Each of these smaller action research cycles will have its own character and its own goals. The diversity of research presented here offers no specific prescriptions for future action, but rather points to the diversity of potentials for different types of work.

Liu's (2014) article is a philosophical rather than an empirical piece, aimed at setting a direction rather than launching a specific action research cycle. It therefore functions as an exhortation at the meta-level to consider cultivation of self in society and society in self as one of the outcomes and processes of action-oriented research. It does not imply specific outcomes, but rather deals with issues of meaning. Rather than being able to offer a science of social change, it offers a philosophy of science that might be of use for social change. Su et al.'s (2014) article



adopts a similarly *person-centred* philosophical orientation, though this is focused in the specific institutional setting of the search for meaning through service learning in a tertiary institution. Su et al.'s (2014) work has clear potential to develop through another cycle of planning, action, evaluation, and reflection: the authors could, for example, add quantitative measures to their evaluation of the effectiveness of their intervention; they could build up the engagement level of their intervention so that participants have a greater chance to find their 'calling'; they could extend their work in a more university-wide and systematic manner. We enjoin the authors of this article to consider their stakeholders very carefully, and approach the extension of their vocations in a systematic and sustainable manner in future years.

Zhang et al.'s (2014) article is a classic case of applied, but not necessarily action-oriented research. The participants are not embedded within a specific social or institutional setting but rather are generic Chinese city dwellers offering their opinions in response to certain experimental prompts; the project was generated by researcher interests rather than being prompted by outside stakeholders (e.g., government or an association representing rural-to-urban workers). While Zhang et al. (2014) demonstrate that perceiving the Chinese *hukou* system as impermeable caused increased prejudice against rural-to-urban workers, from the perspective of policy-makers this result must be weighed against others (e.g., the impact of rural to urban migration patterns, the demands on social services). Hence, communicating the results of this research in an accessible manner to policy makers would be a reasonable action to take from here, but no specific action research cycle necessarily follows, because external stakeholders were not involved in planning this research. We encourage Zhang et al. (2014) to consider building more explicit collaborative links to external stakeholders in future research of this nature.

Similarly, the role of external stakeholders, especially hospitals and their executive administrators, could be articulated more clearly in action research to follow from Hechanova et al.'s (2014) work. This would be an obvious candidate for a full-blown action research cycle, where the results reported here form the basis for a more extensive intervention.

By comparison, Wang et al.'s (2014) and Liu et al.'s (2014) contributions, like Su et al.'s (2014) article (all from Taiwan) were aimed at *internal* rather than external stakeholders: the university. It seems from this first round of articles that one of the most accessible social locations for university researchers to make an immediate difference is in their own backyards; that is, by participating in pedagogical improvement or institutional reform. The future evolution of the Taiwanese Ministry of Education's IS software versus the two alternatives presented here bear careful watching in the future: it would seem to be a perfect case where further empirical data should be collected to not only compare the strengths and weaknesses

of each IS, but to engage them in a process of continual improvement.

Finally, Reyes and Yujuico's (2014) article also has an internal stakeholder (the university), but is at an earlier stage in development compared to the Taiwanese articles. Their article could be regarded as the first round of an action research cycle, where a problem has been found and possible remedies have been identified, but outcomes have yet to be produced. Now they need to take steps to build an intervention to implement the actions they suggest. This will likely involve communicating and working with organisations in the university system responsible for facilitating student access to protective resources.

We think there is a lot of potential here. We are providing an academic forum where researchers are habitually encouraged (or, as the series matures, *required*) to consider how to develop collaborative practices where their scholarly work, from experiments to surveys to field studies, is augmented by consideration of how stakeholders can be involved to take research findings from the lab into the field of societal outcomes. This will require new academic habits to form, along with new relationships that will stretch academic psychologists into territories that may extend beyond their comfort zones. But we think this investment will pay dividends many times over, especially in times to come when the twin scourges of the end of cheap oil and the rise of climate change require the social sciences to be more actively engaged with society in collaborative problem solving (see Liu et al., 2008). We are grateful to Stuart Carr and the *JPRP* for providing AASP with this invaluable platform for collaborative research development, and encourage not only our authors published here, but all members of the academic community to take part in the developmental process that is underway. We welcome all collaborative inquiries, whether they take the form of offering suggestions, submitting papers, developing grant proposals, introducing us to end-users, or merely sharing the fruits of this enterprise with interested parties. All these are part of the science and practice of social change that we are hopefully envisioning.

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