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COMMENT

On Methods, Methodologies, and Continued Colonization of Knowledge in the Study of “Ethnic Minorities”: Comment on Hall et al. (2016)

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Multicultural scholarship continues to reflect unexamined assumptions regarding the exclusive use of natural science methodologies, reliance on dominant Western scientific paradigms, and entrenchment in institutionalized research priorities that privilege efficiency and investigators' career promotion rather than the needs of diverse communities. Current practices in psychological research with ethnic minority groups also may contribute to the potential for epistemological violence, which occurs when scientific investigations are used as a pretext to justify interpretations of data in research with “ethnic minorities” in ways that perpetuate oppression or are lacking in their focus on social action.

Keywords: multicultural research, human sciences, monoculture, social justice

The contribution by Hall, Yip, and Zárte (2016) offered an important challenge to the typical “add and stir” approach to empirical research with ethnic minority individuals, highlighting the still-long road ahead in efforts to address diverse communities' needs. However, their contribution could have been expanded. Systemic problems in psychology, which contribute to privileging White European worldviews, continue to be pervasive in multicultural research. Among these issues are the field's continued reliance on quantitative methodologies, institutionalized favoring of research that is not consistent with values of ethnic minority communities, and lack of focus on the sociocultural impact of research. Multiple sociopolitical-structural challenges often limit a research career to a competitive academic environment that places value on quickly producing empirical research without attention to their contribution to greater social good (Lykes, Hershberg, & Brabeck, 2011; Teo, 2011). This critique seeks to add to and

expand the call by Hall and colleagues to further the dialogue on this important topic.

Research methodologies have implicit philosophical and epistemological assumptions, which impact the gathered data and its interpretation. Within Western psychology, research has been rooted in positivism and reflects an approach to knowledge that attempts to measure, categorize, and label human behavior. Although Hall et al. appropriately acknowledged the problem by utilizing Western *measures* developed with Western research participants, they did not address the problems inherent in utilizing Western research *methods* to develop measures or using these measures in subsequent research designs. Scholars who have challenged the dominance of Western psychological approaches and theories highlight that, especially in research with multicultural populations, it is vital to include perspectives that value intersubjectivity and pluralistic notions of science as well as an empowerment and emancipatory focus (Rogers, 2009). Utilizing a Western research standard, with its epistemological assumptions, can be seen as a form of empirical colonialism (Hwang, 2005).

Through the utilization of a narrow subset of research methodologies, multicultural research risks falling prey to problems inherent in much of Western research. For instance, language is a social construction that is heavily influenced by context, including cultural context. Even when there is agreement on the value of a particular term or construct, such as happiness, there may remain significant cultural variations in the meaning of this construct. Quali-

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tative approaches specifically seek to identify and elucidate such differences through systematic attention to "meaning" of experiences and actions, multidimensional aspects of context, and "within-group variability" (Morrow, Rakhsha, & Castañeda, 2001). Although Hall et al. did include a discussion of focus groups, which represent one form of qualitative research, the exclusion of a broader consideration of qualitative research in the article reflects continued dominance of natural science paradigms that view unique human experiences as objectifiably measureable and decontextualized. This, oddly enough, is monocultural itself. A stronger multicultural research model begins with considerations of indigenous approaches to research and emphasizes the importance of utilizing diverse research methodologies to better understand the focus of the research.

It has been recommended that research with marginalized ethnic communities rely on the use of research methodologies that seek to engage and empower participants (Lykes et al., 2011; Rogers, 2009). Such research is typically lengthy and complex and is shaped by the needs of the community rather than interests of the researcher or granting agencies. In the current climate of emphasis on biological and behavioral assumptions about human behavior, systematic studies that seek to address the social and ethnocultural issues of significance to minority communities can seem peripheral. Moreover, as Wachtel (1980) noted several decades ago, much of research in psychology is driven by faculty's need to gain grants and receive tenure, which causes them to focus on more "efficient" research topics and methods and fails to promote an institutional atmosphere of support for culturally sensitive community-based research. Unless psychology—as well as broader academia—shifts its priorities and standards, research efforts that focus on marginalized groups run the risk of remaining sidelined.

Moreover, Teo (2011) highlighted that it is often not the research itself but the interpretation of research findings, presented as scientifically based knowledge and science, that is problematic. In fact, Teo referred to this process as "epistemological violence": a perspective that acknowledges not only how the knowledge is produced but how knowledge can be used to perpetuate oppression and injustice. He detailed the history of empirical "race research," which repeatedly utilized quantitative methods to study human characteristics and demographic categories such as "race," "culture," or "socioeconomic status" and then was further used to perpetuate existing social biases (e.g., IQ differences). In contrast, Massey and Barreras (2013) argued for greater attention to the impact validity of research, or the scholarship's potential to create positive social change.

As Hall et al. emphasized, there is a fundamental need for research with communities that have been the target of systematic oppression. Making implicit the unconscious institutionalized sources and expressions of racism, including internalized unconscious forms of oppression among marginalized

individuals themselves, should become the goal of psychological scholarship with ethnic minorities. Therefore, in all research studies, sustained attention should also be paid to embedded sociocultural forms of racism as well as to ensuring justice and empowerment. Organizations such as Psychologists for Social Responsibility (www.psysr.org) are among those who seek to actively engage psychological knowledge toward social transformation through engaging with such issues as racism, the prison system (its maintenance within racialized social structures), and environmental policies (exposure of marginalized communities to toxins).

In summary, this commentary expands and challenges the call by Hall et al. toward a focus on unexamined assumptions regarding the use of specific methodologies, entrenched institutionalized research priorities within psychology as a discipline, and reliance on dominant Western paradigms. This comment calls attention to potential for research to perpetuate epistemological violence that uses sciences as a pretext for justification of biased interpretations regarding data in investigations with "ethnic minorities" as well as to the potential lack of focus on social action in such scholarship. A multicultural psychology that deserves its name must reflect on and change, if necessary, the cultural underpinnings of current psychological science and practice.

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