

Positivism vs. Realism: Philosophical Foundations for Constructing Theories in Indigenous Psychology

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Positivism advocated radical empiricism for its ontology and argued that the only reality is what can be experienced by one's sensory organs. The only legitimate way for a scientist to recognize objects in the world is through their representations in his mind. It is unnecessary for scientists to seek the ultimate cause that creates the objective world beyond sensory experience. Such radical empiricism advocates for an epistemological view, believing that scientific theories represent truth. Therefore, Schlick (1936) proposed a famous statement that was followed by most logical positivists: "The meaning of a proposition is the method for its verification" (Schlick, 1936). In contrast, evolutionary epistemology adopts the ontology of "realism," which assumes that there exists an ontological reality beyond our sensory experience. A scientist has to construct a theory to describe the objective world by conjecturing about the nature of its noumena. According to the transcendental idealism proposed by Kant and the various versions derived from it. The goal of scientific activities is the construction of theoretical models to depict the natural order. Hence theoretical models are constructed by scientists, and though they might be independent from any particular individual, they cannot be independent from the scientific community. Because the noumenon of an object for study is transcendent, any scientific theory constructed by a scientist is just an approximation to the truth, but not truth itself. Therefore, it must be examined by members of a scientific community through various methods. Its methodology is falsification but not verification. In order to resolve the difficulties encountered in their theoretical construction, Indigenous psychologists have to adjust their mentality from positivism to realism.

Keywords: *ontology, phenomenon, radical empiricism, thing-in-itself, transcendental idealism*

Introduction

Taking logical empiricism and Popper's evolutionary epistemology as representative philosophies of positivism and post-positivism, respectively, Hwang (2016) indicated that the ontology, epistemology, and methodology of these two philosophies are incompatible.

Two Kinds of Epistemological Tasks

Positivism adopts a position of radical empiricism and argues that the only reality is the facts as they are experienced by the sensory organs. The only legitimate way for a scientist to recognize objects in the world is through the associated representations in his or her mind. According to positivism, it is unnecessary for scientists

to seek the ultimate cause that creates the objective world beyond their sensory experience. Such radical empiricism advocates for an epistemological view, believing that scientific theories represent truth. Schlick (1936) made a famous statement that was followed by most logical positivists: "The meaning of a proposition is the method for its verification" (Schlick, 1936).

In contrast, evolutionary epistemology adopts the ontology of "realism," which assumes that there exists an ontological reality beyond our sensory experience. A scientist has to construct a theory to describe the objective world by conjecturing about the nature of its noumena. According to the transcendental idealism proposed by Kant and its derivatives, the goal of scientific activities is the construction of theoretical models to depict the natural order. Because the noumenon of an object for

study is transcendent, any scientific theory constructed by a scientist is just an approximation to the truth, but not truth itself. Such a theory must therefore be examined by members of a scientific community through various methods, specifically falsification but not verification. Theoretical models are constructed by scientists, and although they might be independent from any particular individual, they are not independent from the scientific community.

Positivism and post-positivism (e.g., realism) have opposing concepts of the person. In post-positivism, a scientist cannot passively await the accumulation of empirical data collected through sensory experience. S/he must be actively engaged in the tasks of criticism, construction of the theory to explain the reality behind the observed phenomena, and the validation of his/her theoretical explanation (Figure 1).

Direction for the Development of Indigenous Psychology

From a philosophy of science perspective, indigenous psychologists should abandon the inductive approach advocated by positivists. They should instead adopt the philosophical assumptions of post-positivism to construct formal theories about the psychological functions of the human mind on the basis of previous findings using critical rationality (Popper, 1963) or creative imagination

(Hempel, 1966). Then, these theories can be used to analyze the particular mentality of people in an indigenous culture. In other words, indigenous psychologists should assume that the functions of the human mind are invariant across different cultural populations but that the contents and manifestations of these functions could vary widely in response to the diversity of cultural contexts (Berry et al., 1992; Poortinga, 1997). To achieve the goal of a universal psychology, indigenous researchers should first construct formal theories illustrating the functions of the human mind that are applicable to various cultures. Such theories can then be used to study the particular mentalities of people in a given culture by examining their psychology and behaviors in daily life.

Two Steps for Developing Indigenous Psychology

Hwang’s (2019) epistemological strategy for the future development of indigenous psychologies follows this line reasoning and consists of two steps.

The first step is to construct the universal models of *self* (Hwang, 2011) and *social interaction* (Hwang, 1987; 2012) to represent the functions of the human mind at the level of global psychology. The second step is to use these two models as a framework to analyze a given culture (an example of pre-Qin Confucianism) so as to construct “culture-inclusive theories” at the level of

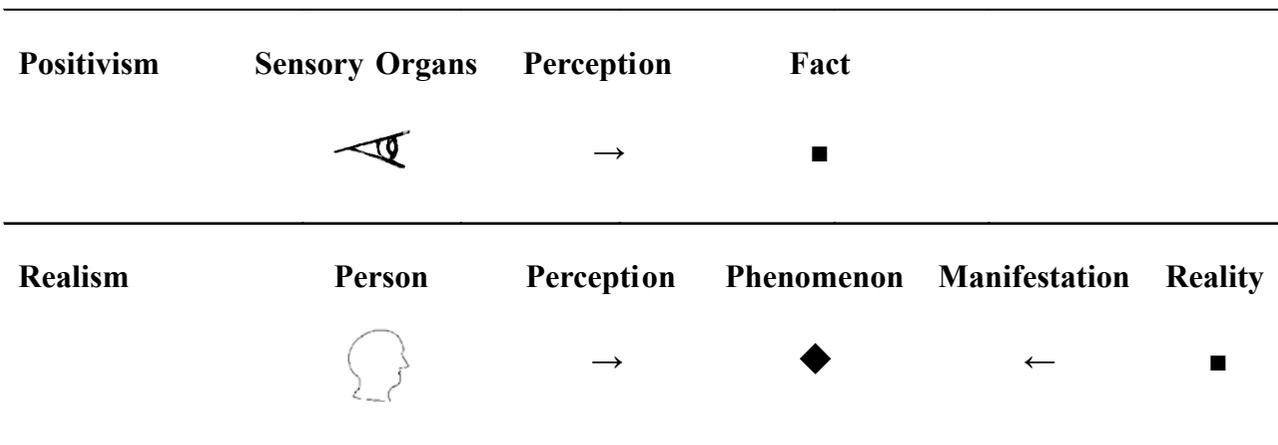


Figure 1. Epistemological Tasks for Positivism and Realism

community psychology (Hwang, 2015a; 2015b). Recently, the *Mandala* model of (small) self has been integrated with Jung's psychology of (big) Self. This integration constructs a psychodynamic model of Self-nature (*zixing*, 自性), or the nature of being human (Hwang, 2018b), which has been widely discussed in Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism (漢傳佛教).

It seems that East Asian philosophies of the nature of the human mind (心性之學, *xin xing zhi sue*) contain

abundant cultural heritage for maintaining one's mental health. The vast stock of knowledge contained in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism can be transformed into the modern language of psychology if and only if the universal models of self-nature (自性, *zixing*) and social interaction have been constructed using the foundation of Western philosophy of science (e.g., Shiah, Hwang & Yit, 2017).