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## **Commentary: Jeepneys: Tattoos on the Collective Soul**

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**Abstract** The interesting scenario and the methodological strategies chosen by Güss and Tuason in their study lead to the understanding that intra-cultural comparisons have an increased potential for connecting social structure and personal values. This point is briefly illustrated by a reflection on family-centeredness in the Philippines and in Brazil. I propose that the ‘jeepney,’ besides its nature as a ‘material of culture,’ could be taken as an example of a field-like, pleromatic iconic sign that is enriched with information and values, since it is, first of all, a vehicle of affective irradiation. In this sense, it is a semiotic device which carries social suggestions and promotes personal actions and goals. Indigenous psychology has the universal task of opening windows to the full and diverse psychological reality existent in the world—to open windows to recognition of otherness. That task is not incompatible with the search for general laws of human psychological functioning.

**Key Words** collective values, indigenous psychology, intra-cultural comparison, sign

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## Jeepneys: Tattoos on the Collective Soul

At the beginning of a new century, psychology still faces the challenge of establishing general laws of human conduct, but only timidly tries to remove its blinders concerning the awesome variability of human lands, languages, and ways of living. In this context, the idea of an indigenous psychology is necessary, since it derives from ‘psychologically relevant concepts that were not developed in mainstream Western psychology, but in the cultures being studied, thus also reflecting the particular way of thinking inherent in these cultures’ (Friedlmeier, Chakkarath & Schwarz, 2005, p. 2).

This is precisely the point that Güss and Tuason (2008) address when looking at Filipino studies, which clearly document the inadequacy and the insufficiency of Western concepts (the polarity collectivism–individualism, for instance) in addressing concepts built and expressed in national languages—of which there are eleven in the Philippines. On the other hand, indigenous psychology could take the risk of just

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producing very local reflections and, as a consequence, could walk away from the general theoretical work needed in every scientific field.

'Jeepneys: Values in the Street' is an inspiring reading, for several reasons. Going through Güss and Tuanson's article, the reader feels immediately attracted to the original scenario in which this study was conducted, as well as to the research 'participants': the artifact 'jeepneys' and their drivers. Another dimension that makes the authors' approach interesting is the spotlight focused on street life. Jeepneys are a very familiar, important resource for many Filipinos in their everyday lives. Using them for transportation, Filipinos print on the jeepneys, literally, their own souls and many symbols about which they care.

### **Jeepneys as Icons**

This unusual scenario is taken itself as a vehicle to develop an intra-cultural comparison of Filipino values and concerns. The authors initially refuse to consider the categories usually employed to address values associated with Filipinos in the field of cross-cultural studies (like collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, short-term orientation) and propose an intra-cultural comparison based on indigenous concepts already explored by cross-cultural research. One could say that the jeepneys become icons and carry, as tattoos, marks of a collective experience which is going through a relatively intense process of social change, still more visible when intra-cultural variation—observed when the study compares values and Filipinos' ways of life from northern (Manila) and southern (Davao) parts of the Philippines—is taken into account.

In the authors' specific study, besides the unusual scenario, the use of naturalistic observation of artifact data (the jeepneys) and of semi-structured interviews with a sample of a hundred jeepneys drivers is remarkable. The quasi-photographic depiction of jeepneys enables the reader's introduction to the daily experience of poor Filipinos as if it was a study in visual anthropology. The images—a resource that psychology should explore much more—surpass common language and open new perspectives, recording symbols and revealing worlds where religious (Manila) or aesthetic (Davao) symbols prevail. The focus on jeepneys as cultural artifacts renders Filipinos' cultural realities more universally readable, transcending specificities of verbal language schemes.

On the other side, the interviews could be considered as the 'making-of' this 'movie,' where the reader gets in touch with the hard

conditions in which the drivers spend most of their lives. It is necessary to emphasize that the strategies employed through data collection actually took into account cultural characteristics of local styles of conversation in the Philippines—the way in which the researchers asked questions and listened to the research participants was only possible because of their almost ethnographic insertion into the field. In these interviews, the drivers' worries concerning work, finances, and family are clearly expressed, preparing the next scene, that of family-centeredness—but not yet drivers' interpretations of the 'tattoos' on the jeepneys.

As in India (Chaudhary, 2004) or in Brazil (Rabinovich & Bastos, 2002), Filipinos' notion of a self is more attached to the family than to the individual. The authors stress the insufficiency of the Philippines' system of social protection, where the family is the main or the only source of security.

In Brazil, I have observed that there is a consensual recognition that it is around the family that day-to-day life is structured, chiefly when public policies have been, for a long time, minimal or uneven regarding the most basic human rights, such as housing, nutrition, education, and health. For better or for worse, the family environment is the first to provide the relationship experience that grants the human being the features that distinguish him/her as such. We are not referring solely to the inter-subjective processes involved in early development, observable already during the first year of life, of what Emde (1995) calls a sense of self, of a basic morality, and of the fundamental perception of the world as a place that one may or may not trust. The family environment presents itself to the developing child as a flow of practices and routines where cultural meanings and interaction patterns are built and socialized to become the stuff that frames the unique style of each family and of each person. This statement obviously considers the particular position of the family in a social structure and in a reference group.

## **A Filipino Psychology of Street Life**

In parallel to Singer's *Semiotics of Cities, Selves, and Cultures* (1991), jeepneys could be seen as a narrative text of street life. I understand, as others do, that a narrative text could be 'a book, or it could be a sermon, a lecture, a song. It could also be a simple statement, a drawing, chart, figure, pantomime, dance, or whatever, as long as it represents some aspect of the world' (Holland & Skinner, 1997, p. 199). Güss and Tuason (2008) assume jeepneys as 'a material of culture': a 'substantial and

concrete artifact of Filipinos' beliefs and values' (p. 216); in that sense, they are representations or vestiges of the lived world. Such representations of the world are hardly neutral; they are vehicles of social suggestions which promote personal actions and goals. Jeepneys could be taken as an illustration of Valsiner's idea of a field-like, pleromatic iconic sign, enriched with information and values, as much as they are, primarily, a vehicle of affective irradiation—not of fixed thoughts which can be reduced to schemes (Valsiner, 2004, 2007).

As semiotic devices built by the drivers, jeepneys could be seen as a mediating resource with a potential for agency and novelty, interacting with the particular social and historical conditions prevailing in Davao or in Manila. This general frame explains the unique characteristics observed in each one of those regions: particular developmental contexts suggest different directions—as shown by the authors when discussing the diverse emphasis upon religious or aesthetic symbols. And, yes: jeepneys are, as the authors say, a glimpse into Filipinos' culture.

Indigenous psychology has an important, universal task: to open windows to the full and diverse psychological reality existent in the world, which means to open windows to otherness. That task is not incompatible with the search for general laws of human psychological functioning. First, because indigenous psychologies

... carry important aspects of how certain cultures 'think', allow essential insights into the self-understanding of these cultures, into their worldviews, their pictures of man, including their preference for certain values and attitudes, for example, with regard to the relationship between individual and the collective. (Chakkarath, 2005, p. 33)

As Chakkarath remarks, Western psychology itself could be considered from other perspectives as indigenous, and interested in different ideas, theories, and explanations which could act as a tool for criticizing and innovating mainstream psychological knowledge.

In countries like the Philippines, India or Brazil, it is easy for psychologists to follow mainstream psychology. In a country of *mestizos*, where mixed blood is part of Brazil's peculiar way of being, most Brazilian researchers get 'imbedded by "white" theories, ascribe the "white" meaning of Europeans, leaving out the "black" heritage from the Africans and the "red" one from the Indians, or looking at them as undesirable sub-products within the civilizing process' (Rabinovich & Bastos, 2002, p. 13). When a researcher tries to follow a different pattern—without emptying culture of its content—he/she has to fight very hard so that his/her work still can be recognized by

his/her peers as psychological research. This is why I consider Güss and Tuason's study important, and feel so pleased to have the opportunity to write a commentary on it.

Looking for indigenous concepts—whose full meaning can't be reached in a different language than that in which they originated—is a productive way to go beyond traditional cross-cultural comparisons. Güss and Tuason intend, in their study, to incorporate and integrate the supposed advantages of cross- and intra-cultural perspectives. Do they succeed? I would say they do, in its assumptions, goals, and data analysis strategies. It is challenging to approach, simultaneously, intra-cultural differences in their specificity, and the wide range of meanings in such a rich qualitative material, full of images and life. When describing and analyzing the data, the authors faced the risk of turning back to a more traditional model of conducting research in social psychology. At the same time, they elaborate interestingly on the issue of jeepneys as cultural artifacts and they succeed when demonstrating the uniqueness of Filipino values.

To compare is to open the mind to include the other—whatever this 'other' might be: parameters, cultures, people—so that some objectivity can be reached, beyond the relationship between knower and subject matter. To understand is to move, as a shuttle, through the different languages of knowledge, in a movement which is, in Laplantine's (1994) words, trans-linguistic, transcontinental, trans-geographic, and trans-grammatical. To understand is to be aware of our own perspectives and values. There is not a 'natural' human reality, but always a field where the researcher him/herself is an integral part and which is constructed from his or her own point of view. As Laplantine says, describing his work: 'I don't teach, I tell . . . I study systems of translation that are possible, trying to keep the spirit of the limits of the translation itself' (p. 279).

Comparisons are needed in the measure that they allow us to include in this complex relationship different perspectives, different voices. There is a long way to go before we fully integrate cross-cultural, intra-cultural, and cultural perspectives in psychology. Lehman, Chiu, and Schaller (2004) express clearly the dilemmas involved here:

In the rush to document the existence of psychic universals unaffected by cultural context, the very heart of the psychological process may be fundamentally misunderstood. This reflects an essential tension that accompanies any investigation into the intersection of the study of culture (which typically assumes meaningful cross-cultural differences) and the study of psychology (which typically assumes fundamental human universals). (p. 706)

Looking for variability and uniqueness through indigenous psychologies is undoubtedly an important basis to make this way secure—and valid.

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