# Going Indigenous: Integrating Science and Culture in Psychology

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First, a disclaimer is in order: Indigenous psychology (IP) is not a unitary phenomenon; there are probably as many IP's as there are cultures. My take on this topic, therefore, reflects only one particular approach to IP.

Privileging indigenous categories has been a strategy among many IP theorists (e.g., Bhawuk, 2008; Fang, 2010; Li, 2011; Sundararajan, 2002, 2010). In this paper I use the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1931-58) to explore the advantages of capitalizing on indigenous cultural categories. I first define two key terms: culture and sign. Then I proceed to put forth an argument in three parts: First I explore the tension between life and language as endemic to the sign; second I demonstrate how indigenous cultural categories are integrated signs that has the capacity to bridge the gap between life and language; third, I show how IP contributes to the development of scientific study of culture as an integrative sign/discourse by grounding science in categories indigenous to a culture.

## What is Culture?

Culture can be differentiated from civilization, accordingly to Scruton (2007). What is generally understood to be culture in psychology should more properly be referred to as civilization, which is defined by Scruton (2007) as "a social entity that manifests religious, political, legal, and customary uniformity over an extended period, and which confers on its members the benefits of socially accumulated knowledge" (p. 2). Culture, by contrast, is more narrowly defined by Scruton (2007) in terms of "high culture" which is "the accumulation of art,

literature, and humane reflection that has stood the 'test of time' and established continuing tradition of reference and allusion among educated people" (p. 2). Or as Matthew Arnold put it succinctly, "The best that has been thought and said" (cited in Scruton, 2007, p. 44). Scruton (2007) claims that it is through its culture that a civilization "rises to consciousness of itself and defines its vision of the world" (p. 2).

This emphasis on high culture is in accordance with Kuo-shu Yang's (1997) insistence for Chinese IP to base research squarely upon the Chinese intellectual tradition. It is also consistent with Shweder's (1990) vision for cultural psychology to "seek mind where it is mindful" (p. 13). Scruton's (2007) definition of high culture also resonates with what is referred to by Sapir (19 24) as genuine culture, which consists of traditional ideals of a good and proper life willfully pursued.
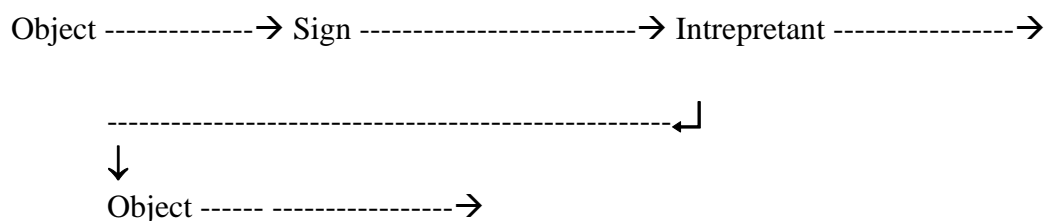
## What is a Sign?

At the risk of over simplification, the Peircean notion of the sign may be understood as a matrix of inference making that has three anchor points: *object*, the sign proper, and *interpretant*. The *object* has to do with life or experience (Fox, 2005); the sign refers to language broadly defined as signifier; the *interpretant* is the mind that interprets the sign. From this matrix of sign relations emerge two central themes of Peircean semiotics--tension and translation. Tension refers to the fact that the sign is a site of contradictory and conflicting forces characteristic of what Bakhtin (1981/1935) refers to as heteroglossia. Translation underscores the importance of heteroglossia which has room for difference, or the other, without which there is no translation possible. In the following sections, I first examine how the internal tension within the sign system is a reflection of the tenuous link between life and language, and how a

well integrated sign, such as indigenous cultural categories, helps to enhance this link. Then I argue that both scientific and cultural categories are needed in order to make translation possible, and how a psychological discourse that grounds science in culture helps to strengthen the link between language and life.

<u>Sign as a crucible of conflicting forces</u>

The sign system consists of two inerlocking vectors, or as Peirce puts it: "two infinite series, the one back toward the *object*, the other forward toward the *interpretant*" (cited in Parmentier, 1994, p. 10). According to Lee (1997, pp. 131-132), the feeding forward vector constitutes an "upshifting" movement to a symbolic, experience distant mode of representation; the feeding back loop otherwise known as the "reflexive undertow" (Wiley, 1994), a "downshifting" movement to an experience near mode of representation. Together, these two vectors constitute a triadic circuitry of the sign as represented in Figure 1:

Figure 1. The Triadic Circuitry of the Sign.

Object -------------→ Sign --------------------------→ Intrepretant -----------------→

-----------------------------------------------------↵
↓
Object ------ -----------------→

The hallmark of an integrated sign is its completion of the triadic circuitry (Fisch,1982; Hoopes,  1991; Colapietro,1989; Wiley, 1994) which requires mutual constraint of theses two movements of the sign, a task which can be aborted when one movement overpowers the other.

For instance, the upshifting movement may generate an increasingly experience distant interpretations, unconstrained by the reflexive movement back to life and experience.

Indigenous cultural categories as integrated signs

The prototype of an integrated sign is the sunflower, in which there is an intimate connection between the sign and its *object*:  "If a sunflower, in turning towards the sun [*object*], becomes by that very act fully capable . . . of reproducing a sunflower which turns in precisely corresponding ways toward the sun, and of doing so with the same reproductive power, the sunflower would become a Representamen [proto-sign] of the sun" (Peirce, 1961, 1: 274).  Since Peirce prefers dialogue to perception as the metaphor for sign relations (Archer, 2000), I have adopted the Bakhtin-informed process model of Fox (2005) in my interpretation of the sunflower scenario and beyond.

Cast in the framework of dialogue, the sunflower story goes something like this:  The sun (the *object*) calls, and one particular organism answers with a sunflower (the sign), an answer that constitutes a particular relationship between the sign and the *object*, i.e., the sunflower will always turn toward the sun.  In order to answer life's call not just once, but to generate future answers, the sign needs the *interpretant* (the interpretation generating process), which in the case of the sunflower is the DNA that contains the genetic code and its interpretation capable of reproducing another sunflower that perpetuates the original relationship between the first sunflower and the sun.

The sunflower is not a bona fide sign, which requires the mind, not simply biology, to run.  A slight modification of the sunflower scenario, replacing DNA with the mind, and we

arrive at a bona fide sign, that of high culture: When experience (*object*) called, a young woman answered with a smile (sign). When this answer was reproduced through the artist's mind (*interpretant*), it gave rise to another sign (sign1) which is known as the painting of Mona Lisa. The *object* of representation for sign1 is *object*1, which perpetuates the original relationship between the young woman's experience (*object*) and her smile (sign). As a reproduction of the original relationship between experience and smile, *object*1 may be understood as the aesthetics of smile. This matrix of meaning making can be represented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.**
**Two vectors of the sign and their integration.**

Sign-----→ *Interpretant* -----→ **Sign1**
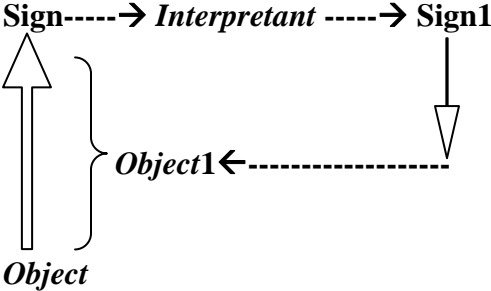
*Object*1←------------------

*Object*

**Note.**
**Upward arrow: upshifting to interpretation.**
**Downward arrows: downshifting to experience.**
***Object*1: The original relationship between sign and its *object*.**

Put in more general terms, categories of high culture are integrated signs where language, mind, and life meet. As the case of Mona Lisa suggests, language, which initially starts out as a non-verbal sign, needs to take a detour through the mind (*interpretant*) in order to better answer life's (*object*) call. What is the significance of this detour through the mind (*interpretant*)? Without taking this detour via the *interpretant*, the relationship between language (sign) and life (*object*) lacks a common space for all minds to share meaning. It is through the common space of the mind—such as that shared by the artist and the audience--that signs (such as a smile) are guaranteed their future answers (such as the aesthetics of smile) to life.

The compelling power of the *object* and its vicissitudes

To the extent that a sign is a motivated system according to Peirce (Lee, 1997), the distinction made by Frijda (2007) between two motivation systems--push and pull—can shed some light on the relationship between the sign and its *object*. In the push system, characteristic of simple organisms, action sequence is elicited by stimulus in the environment. By contrast, the pull system, characteristic of higher organisms, is capable of goal pursuits that are independent of the environment.

The humble sunflower is an example of the push system, in which there is a transmission of equal force—to be pushed/compelled and to push/compel in turn. This is consistent with the observation that the *object* underpins Peircean semiotics as the primary motivator of the sign (Fox, 2005). To wit, the sun (*object*) compels the sunflower to turn toward it; the sunflower (sign proper) in turn compels the *interpretant* (the genetic code) to produce another sign (sunflower) which will not only turn toward the sun but also perpetuate this orientation through future signs. A token of high culture, the painting of Mona Lisa, seems to work very much the

same way:  The *object* (life or experience) compelled a response from a young woman, generating a sign (facial expressions) which in turn compelled the *interpretant* (the artist's mind) to produce another sign (the painting of the smile) that has the power to solicit in the audience an orientation toward the original *object* (life or experience) that is comparable to the original relationship of call and response between life and La Gioconda.

The compelling power of the *object* (life) and its sign become attenuated in the pull system, such as science, which has a tendency to leave the phenomena behind in its pursuit of the essence of things.  Thus Geertz (1973) claims that the analysis of culture should not be "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning" (p.5).  That the quest for universal laws-- with its need for abstraction, and its metaphysics of presence— poses a challenge to the intimate connection between life (*object*) and language (sign) can be elucidated with the phenomenology (Wertz, 2011) of concealment.

As Heidegger points out, science shares with metaphysics a preoccupation with presence and a corresponding difficulty in "thinking absence" (Bernasconi, 1985, p. 83).  Art, by contrast, makes possible the welcoming acceptance of absence:  "It is art that endows things with something like a façade," writes Levinas (1969, p. 192).  Levinas (1969) goes on to say that "By the facade the thing which keeps its secret . . . gleams like a splendor but does not deliver itself. It captivates by its grace as by magic, but does not reveal itself" (p. 193).  Recall the smile of Mona Lisa, and we know exactly what he means.  Levinas points out further that only aesthetics sees the façade--the gaze of "observation" sees the behavior, but not the facade; the insight of the analyst sees defenses and denials, but not the façade.

Instead of the façade, psychology is invested in getting at the "essence" behind the phenomena. For instance, standardized coding of facial musculature can reveal the universality of facial expressions of emotion (Ekman, 1973). Equipped with such powerful tools of penetration, the scientist can get at the hidden intention behind a façade, thus catching liars (Ekman, 1985). Between the lived experience and the codification of emotions through muscle groups spans the widening gap between life and (scientific) language. To bridge the widening gap between life and language, IP counterbalances the hegemony of scientific categories by empowering indigenous categories.

Indigenous psychology: Grounding science in culture

Extending the Peircean notion of the *interpretant*, Wallner and Jandl (2006) claim that interpretation requires translation, and that translation is a necessary condition for true knowledge. Given that scientific and indigenous categories are each the other to the other, translation from one to the other is essential to knowledge creation.

But not all translations are created equal. The translation between science and culture can go either way--one may use cultural categories as resources for science; or the other way around, to use science as resource for indigenous categories. The former is the agenda in the conventional psychology of culture, which says in essence, "this is your mind/brain on culture." Here culture is an independent variable, interchangeable with other independent variables such as drug, sex, music, and what-have-you. The task of IP, in contrast, is to ground science in culture, an agenda which says in effect: "this is your culture on cognitive science, affective science, neuroscience, etc."

The difference between these two agendas may be illustrated with the science of wine reported in an article in <u>Science News</u> (Christensen, 2000). Chemical analysis of flavors can get at the essence of all wines, rendering it cost effective to mass produce generic wines. But generic wines are not much in demand—people want their wines to come with an indelible trace of culture. Many wine experts, especially in Europe, claim that the most significant aspect of a wine is its *terroir*, which refers to "a vineyard's particular combination of soil, rock, and geography" (p. 12). The appreciation of *terroir* is responsible for the new science of wine, which uses chemical analyses, not to make generic wines, but instead to authenticate where a wine was made and pin down the elusive nature of *terroir*. A wine expert points out that while "the [tested] elements may or may not be responsible for the special characters of the wines from a given region, creating an effective [chemical] 'fingerprint' will ensure that the production is from the region listed on the wine label" (p. 12). This is an example of science serving culture.

Likewise, applying the coding of muscle groups to Mona Lisa's smile can reveal the subtle incongruence in emotional expressions between the young woman's eyes and mouth (Livingstone, 2000). But Mona Lisa's charm can be appreciated only provided that we stay within the framework of the notion of façade—a category indigenous to aesthetics. Grounding science in this indigenous category has a twofold advantage: First, it helps us to avoid asking the wrong questions, such as whether La Gioconda is lying. Second, it contributes to the creation of true knowledge, which, according to William James (1907/1955), a close friend of Charles Peirce, stems from the integration of ideas and experience, or in a larger context, language and life:

. . . ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they

help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience.   (p. 49)

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