

Book Review

Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology by Louise Sundararajan, Ph.D, Ed.D.

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Understanding Emotion in Chinese Culture: Thinking Through Psychology is a wonderfully strange, marvelously unique and profound book that only Louise Sundararajan could have written. On a personal level: Sundararajan was born in China, married an Indian husband, and works in a forensic unit of a psychiatric center, thus dealing with cross-cultural issues daily. Academically and professionally Louise received her PhD in the History of Religions from Harvard University, and her EdD in Counseling Psychology from Boston University. She chairs the Task Force on Indigenous Psychology, which has over a hundred members from around the globe. She served as past president of The International Society for the Study of Human Ideas on Ultimate Reality and Meaning, and is also past president of the Society for Humanistic Psychology (Division 32 of the American Psychological Association). She is the recipient of the Abraham Maslow Award for 2014, from Division 32 of the APA. She is a Fellow of the APA, and also a member of the board of directors for the International Society for Research on Emotions. She has also published extensively on topics related to culture and emotions, and thus brings a lifetime of research to this book.

This is not an objective book review. It is written based on the way it has impacted me personally and professionally. My first reaction to Sundararajan's significant offering is that it should be re-issued as a paperback immediately, the price lowered (from \$130), and the title reversed. While it is not unreasonable to want to learn more about Chinese emotions in a world where China is such a huge economic reality, comprising about twenty percent of the world's population; the real thrust of the book for me is in the sub-title, "Thinking Through Psychology," or more properly, *rethinking* it. Though Sundararajan writes in a holistic (as opposed to polarizing) fashion, there are numerous places in the text where such phrases as "by contrast (to Western)," "conventional wisdom," "received wisdom," "mainstream psychology," "academic psychology" etc., are used, and Eastern experiential subtleties are introduced that confirm for me how limited, clumsy, and partial our Western approach to psychological science has been. While she argues for a creative integration of East and West, I am left with a strong sense that every serious Western student should use this book on emotions as an entry into rethinking the basis of our psychology today. Thus, I would like to see the book be more widely available.

Having said that, the book demands a lot of the reader. Sundararajan is a senior scholar who has published much in the field of affect herself, and is well informed on the general field of psychology. There is a veritable wealth of references throughout the book. These revolve around some 25 distinctions she puts in table form in chapter one (p. 7), dealing with two types of cognition; relational cognition generally privileged in the East, and non-relational cognition generally privileged in the West. She considers these two types of cognition to be East/West mirrors that must be integrated to support a paradigm shift into holistic psychology.

On her way to her concluding chapter, "What Is an Emotion? Answers from a Wild Garden of Knowledge," she presents the distinctions one at a time, constantly weaving them together into a coherent whole. Thus, there is a lot of built-in redundancy that helps integrate the wealth of intellectual input. Plus, she writes within the Confucian tradition of poetics that uses stories, poetry, sayings, and songs in the service of lived experience. Ideas are complexly nuanced while exploring elusive questions of how emotions are understood. There is deconstruction of simplistic stereotypes. Maintaining the relationship between opposites is considered more important than resolving the differences between them. Cross-cultural horizons of psychology are broadened.

Since there is a detailed wealth of material in the book, in the rest of this review I offer somewhat random, somewhat disjointed notes, often in Sundararajan's own voice, from an inadequate skimming of the book. I hope

the items emphasized have resonance for those impacted by Hakomi mindfulness-centered somatic psychology in particular. I hope these notes will move people to consider engaging the larger work.

Sundararajan begins by affirming, “This book is about lived experiences in search of a correct name” (p. vii). Paradoxically, it is not good to know too much too fast, which can keep us from being open to new possibilities.

The development of indigenous psychology that honors non-Western cultural wisdom is a special concern for Sundararajan (Sundararajan, Girishwar, & Marsella, 2013). Indigenous psychology is a

psychological inquiry that subsists in the gap between the canonical terms of mainstream psychology and the phenomenal world that has as its point of reference a Mecca that falls outside the pale of the epistemological universe of Western psychology. For experiences to remain nameless; or worse yet, to have to take on ill-fitting terms and concepts that falsify and distort them is the agony that drives the endeavor of this book (p. vii).

Addressing theoreticians she notes, “psychology is all about theory and constructs—the so-called empirical evidence, facts, and behaviors are all consequences of theory” (p. xi). Though she references numerous studies citing empirical evidence, she asserts that “terms—such as validation, truth, and facts—have no purchase in this book. This book is not about apodictic truth so much as cross-fertilization of ideas, especially ideas from different lines of inquiry or different levels of analysis in psychology” (p. vii).

She continues, “I offer an explanatory model of culture to explain the well-documented cross-cultural differences in cognitive styles. More specifically, I use the framework of symmetry and symmetry breakdown, derived from physics, to explain how cultures that differentially privilege relational and non-relational cognition are mirror images of each other” (p. viii).

In her chapter on Confucianism she “shows how in contrast to Plato and Aristotle who privileged reason and logic, Confucius considered the cultivation of emotions (*qing*) the goal of education, and used poetry as a primary means for the this goal” (p. vii). In the Daoist influence on Chinese emotions, she notes that “spontaneity is considered the hallmark of true feelings” (p. ix). As she considers the autonomy and independence of Daoism alongside the Confucian concern with group living, dealing with how these two traditions coexist, she notes, “Daoism shares with Confucianism an interest in intimacy in relationships

except that in Daoism intimacy has shifted to the transcendent context of communion with Nature” (p. viii).

In chapter one Sundararajan outlines a chain of consciousness, symmetry, and a progression of measurement from order to entropy that includes Market Pricing/ratio scale; Equality Matching/interval scale; Authority Ranking/ordinal scale; Communal Sharing/nominal scale; Oceanic Merging; and Dao (p. 16). In general, the West privileges the heroism related to market pricing and authority ranking,

whereas the East transcendence. In Daoism transcendence entails moving up a notch in symmetry, via consciousness, to open up a new frontier in conceptual space. This new frontier OM (Oceanic Merging) . . . [is a] relational cognition with ultra-symmetry. “Oceanic Merging” . . . is defined as “the perception of being united in love with everything” (Bolender, 2010, p. 107). . . . Without differentiation, knowledge representation becomes impossible—this takes us right to the realm of mysticism where the real Dao transcends all representations (p. 65).

She does point out that “the Daoist version of nonhierarchical interdependence has relevance for modern management that privileges decentralization, flat structure, and employee discretion. A far more important contribution of the Daoist version of interdependence lies in its ecological vision” (p. 70), which counsels humans to find their place *in* nature as opposed to *over* nature.

“Approaching cultures as styles of being present entails a shift from the undue emphasis on explicit beliefs in cross-cultural psychology to lived experiences, which are multifaceted and rich in meanings that are encoded and decoded experientially through affect” (p. 1). The book hopes to demonstrate “how folk theories of non-Western cultures can function as potential competitors and valued interlocutors in the theory construction of emotions” (p. xi).

Learning to mindfully savor, as opposed to intellectually analyze, is part of an Eastern contribution to theory construction. In her chapter on savoring she writes that, “In contrast to emotional regulation prevalent in the West, the Chinese privilege refinement of emotions” (p. ix).

In addition, “one of the best fruits of the relational cognition is the arts, which constitute the core of the Confucian curriculum. In contrast to the world of objective reality which is the primary focus of science [mind to world trans-

actions], art resides in a world of subjective reality, a reality made possible by mind to mind transactions” (p. 53).

In terms of moral-emotional development, “feeling plays a more important role than thinking.

. . . Being moved is essential to emotional development” (p. 87). And, our “innate vulnerability to being moved by the suffering of another can be interfered with by rational deliberation, such as utilitarianism (p. 86).” “The unbearable mind brings into sharp relief the difference between the two pathways to morality—cold (non-relational) cognition privileged by the West and hot (relational) cognition privileged by the Chinese” (p. 88).

As might be expected, Sundararajan calls attention to how mindfulness can help work with overly rational objectifying aspects of Western thought and education. “Metacognitive skills consist of decoupling components that have melded into cognitive schema through habitual living” (p. 119)

Challenging the received wisdom that attention and appraisal are tightly intertwined, mindfulness has demonstrated the possibility of decoupling attention and cognitive appraisal “by allowing inputs to enter awareness in a simple noticing of what is taking place” (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007, p. 213). This decoupling goes with inhibition of appraisal: In mindfulness practices, emotion scripts are held in check while awareness of the emotion’s impact is gracefully accepted. As Germer (2009) puts it: “Mindfulness is the ability to feel our pain—if there is pain to feel—and stay out of the drama” (p. 132). These metacognitive skills lie at the core of the Daoist notion of refined pleasure (p. 119).

Research on mindfulness makes a twofold contribution to Chinese psychology of emotions. First, it calls for a moratorium of cognitive appraisals. Brown and Cordon (2009) claim that appraisals are “self-generated accounts *about* life” (p. 227) that interferes with living. Echoing the concern about filtering in Chinese poetics (see Chap. 7), Siegel (2007) claims that filtering events and experiences through cognitive representations of self and others “twist our capacity to read our own cues” (p. 70) and “obscure direct experience” (p. 99; p. 197).

As is so central to Hakomi Therapy, it is crucial to use right brain interventions in psychotherapy that can only be responded to by bringing awareness to experience: “How do

you experience the sadness in your body?” This, in contrast to asking left brain questions such as “Why do you feel you are sad?” that ask for *a theory about one’s experience*.

Second order awareness (awareness of awareness), is referred to in mindfulness literature as mindful awareness or “reflexivity” (Siegel, 2007, p. 98). Mindful awareness can be differentiated from simple awareness, which is on a lower level of consciousness. According to Siegel (2007), mindful awareness “permits the decoupling of automaticity” (p. 144), whereas mere attention to the present moment is not able to do so (p. 164).

Returning to the subject of savoring: as with mindfulness, it is not the same as self-reflection. “Savoring is the mind talking to itself about how X makes it feel. Self-reflection, by contrast, is simply attending to X, where X happens to be oneself. This formulation of savoring makes it clear why self-analysis, self-criticism, and many other kinds of self-reflections do not qualify as savoring” (p. 165).

“There is a long tradition in the West, from Plato to Sartre (with the exception of Heidegger), that considers emotions to be somehow distorting reality. The Chinese believe, on the contrary, that emotion (*qing*) discloses something that is true about the person and the world. . . . Feng claims that it is *qing* that grounds us in reality; it is humans who distort reality when they fail to be true to their *qing*” (Feng, 1983, p. 192).

“The compound ‘*gan-qing*’ literally means ‘simulating-responding’ which entails not a simple S-R (stimulus-response) relation, but rather a resonating feedback loop based on an intrinsic affinity between all things in a sympathetic universe” (p. 192).

“Together, *qing* and *gan* make one important claim about what it is to be human” (p. 192).

Feelings are an integral part of human nature, the essence of which is affectivity. In contrast to the reactive response to occurrences or events that constitute the primary framework in mainstream psychology, the Chinese notion of *qing-gan* resets the focus by underscoring the affective dispositions of responsiveness as being primary (p. 192).

[In] “the framework of *gan-ying* . . . emotions emerge as ‘unfolding reactions to a responsive social environment’” (Parkinson, 2010, p. 160) (p. 197). Emotions are not just subjective reactions within one’s head that leave out the world.

“In the [Western] appraisal framework, knowing is not doing. . . .By contrast the Chinese account shares with the

transactional framework the assumption that knowing is doing (Woodward, 2009)—one learns about the world not through knowledge representation of it, so much as by world engaging actions” (p. 197). This helps us understand why watching TV can actually make growing children lose IQ points. Instead of trying to make sense of a cartoon character going over, under, around, and through something on a two dimensional screen, the child’s curiosity needs to lead it in exploring their world by literally going over, under, around, and through physical things that then provide a bodily, experiential, implicit referent for what they might one day see on a screen.

“The innate capacity to be impacted (*gan*) more than one can conceptualize is capitalized by the impact-focus approach to emotion” (p. 197).

As an ensemble of undulating affective states, *qing* (emotion) is the manifestation of the human capacity to be impacted affectively (*gan*). . . . The Chinese notion of *gan* (affectivity) puts a premium on the expression and sharing of one’s personal take on impact. In contrast to the Western notion of emotion as a disruptive force to be regulated by reason and cognition (Chap 10; Averill & Sundararajan, 2006), the Chinese consider the human capacity for responding to impact affectively as a positive quality to be enhanced through expanding consciousness. (p. 200)

“Chinese poetics also owe much to Daoism for its unique appraisal profile, in which the relatively simple and automatic processes are privileged as the hallmarks of spontaneity and genuineness, whereas the more cognitively elaborate appraisals are distrusted for being calculative and infested with value judgments” (p. 121). This Daoist view is supported by various research studies that asked Holocaust helpers, or others who voluntarily put themselves in danger to help others, “Why did you do that? What were you thinking that led you to do that?” The non-predictable answers for Western researchers are often: “I didn’t go through a thought process. I didn’t do a cost-benefit analysis. I just did it because it was right.” Sundararjan notes that: “Processing strategies . . . that privilege attention to experience over attribution of cause can make a significant contribution to emotion research” (p. 121).

When Sundararjan considers William James’ question, “What is an emotion?” she argues it is more productive to ask how do we model emotions? In her book, she then considers the perspectives of Chinese folk models of emotion. Here, the conclusion is that “the Chinese privilege

relational cognition which puts a premium on symmetry, as evidenced by a tendency to capitalize on harmony, resonance, and mind-to-mind transactions. By contrast, the West tends to privilege non-relational cognition that capitalizes on symmetry breakdown which is necessary for tasks of differentiation and cognitive control” (p. 201). The East is more relational; a non-linear dynamic process that makes reality available. The West is more object centered, oriented to cause and effect, mechanistic, mind-to-world transactions, where appraisal and purposive action predominate, and the emotional distortion of reality is assumed.

While this East/West summary evokes deep humility in me as one schooled in classic Western psychological theory, Sundararajan maintains a balanced view: “Since all cultures need both relational as well as non-relational cognition, differences between cultures is not a matter of presence versus absence so much as that of prevalence in one or the other modes of cognition” (p. 201).

She concludes by affirming that, “this formulation of cultural comparisons is consistent with Shweder’s (1991) vision of cultural psychology: ‘To discover other realities hidden within the self, waiting to be drawn out into consciousness’” (p. 69).

There are many more realities she deals with related to intimacy, love, authenticity, freedom, spontaneity, creativity, the emptiness that comes from savoring negative experiences, and more. The width and depth of the more is available in the full text, along with inspiration to follow her lead in rethinking psychology, and hopefully adding to, or bringing more appreciation to, the richness of a more holistic approach to psychology and psychotherapy.

Reference

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