Relational Orientation and Methodological Individualism

Abstract

The present essay represents an attempt to weave two seemingly unrelated strands of inquiry together. The first concerns the search for a conceptual framework grounded in Asian cultures; the second concerns the nature of scientific explanations of social phenomena. These two strands of inquiry converge to support the thesis of relational orientation--that social behavior invariably takes place in relational contexts, regardless of social class or cultural variations; and that, accordingly, the unit of analysis is not the individual, but individual-in-relations. Relational orientation confronts the bias toward methodological individualism in contemporary mainstream social psychology. More generally, it provides a comprehensive framework for the conceptualization and analysis of social phenomena.

Relational Orientation and Methodological Individualism

My interest in Asian psychology began many years ago. At first, I was motivated by the uneasy feeling that relying on Western psychology may lead to an incomplete, even distorted, understanding of Asia or of Asians. Hence the need to develop an Asian psychology with an Asian identity. For a while, I was caught up with the idea of indigenization; it seemed to provide the spirit for a research agenda to develop Asian psychology. Soon, however, I became aware of the intellectual dead-end into which indigenization might lead us. Elsewhere (e.g., Ho, 1988), I have argued that indigenization is all too often misdirected--both emotionally and intellectually--to mean a rejection of Western psychology. Emotionally, the misdirection leads us into defensive isolationism. Intellectually, into particularism, and a dichotomization of psychological knowledge: Asian versus Western. Upon examination, statements asserting that Western psychology is irrelevant, inapplicable to Asia turn out to be dubious or fallacious. Such blanket statements are undeserving of the disciplined intellect, and it is disconcerting to note how often they are made, by Asian and Western psychologists alike. A correction of these misguided tendencies would unleash our creative energies to go beyond indigenization.

I would argue that Asian psychologists should set a more ambitious goal for themselves: making their contributions to mainstream psychology

felt through tapping the intellectual resources of Asian cultures. As I have stated:

> Were the treasure house of Asian cultures tapped and exploited more fully, it would provide fresh ammunition for innovation in behavioral science. The richesss of Asian conceptions pertaining to human feelings, relationships, and interactions are symbolically represented in Asian languages and are manifest in everyday life--waiting to be studied, abstracted, and utilized. (Ho, 1988, p. 63)

In a previous attempt to tap this treasure house (Ho, in press), I proposed using the term relational orientation to capture the essence of Asian social psychology, in contrast to the individual orientation of Western social psychology. I began with a search for an Asian conceptual framework. I ended with the realization that relational orientation holds a greater promise: making conceptual and methodological contributions to the social sciences. This realization comes from confronting the nature of scientific explanations of social phenomena--in particular, the controversy over methodological individualism that has absorbed the intellectual energy of countless thinkers, past and present.

Thus, two seemingly unrelated strands of inquiry converge to give relational orientation its potency. The first concerns the search for a conceptual framework grounded in Asian cultures; the second concerns the nature of scientific explanations of social phenomena. In this essay, I attempt to weave these two strands together.

An Asian Conceptual Framework

What is the defining characteristic which, more than any other, gives a conceptual framework its Asian identity, and marks it apart from Western conceptualizations? The answer to this question begins with recognizing the primary importance of relational contexts within which social behavior takes place. Asian concepts (e.g., face) in behavioral science are characteristically relational in character, in contrast to the individual character of Western concepts, such as actor, ego, and self. The use of relational concepts has pivotal significance in theory building (Ho, 1988). They provide powerful conceptual tools which promise to free behavioral science from its present intellectual encapsulation in overly relying on Western concepts.

At this point, the reader may object. The importance of relational contexts has long been recognized in social psychology; it is, therefore, not unique to Asian conceptions. A fundamental belief is that human character itself develops only in the social context--clearly a recognition of the crucial role of interpersonal relations in human development. But Asian conceptions of social existence go beyond this belief. Interpersonal relations are of crucial importance not only historically in the formation of human character but also contemporaneously in defining what it means to be human

throughout the individual's lifetime. The life of the individual is incomplete! It derives its meaning only from the coexistence of other individuals. Without others, the very notion of individual identity loses meaning. In this sense, Asian conceptions of social existence are relation centered--in contrast to Western conceptions which tend to be individual centered.

Relational orientation captures the essence of Asian conceptions. It is not identical to relation-centeredness, which connotes a more extreme focus on the relation and a corresponding deemphasis of the related individuals. Similarly, individual-centeredness connotes a more extreme focus on the individual than does individual orientation. Relational orientation differs from Hsu's (1963) situational determinism. Relationships may be culturally defined--called role relationships. They may also be socially defined, as in the case of status or authority relationships. Role and status relationships have enduring, structural properties that are invariant across social situations. However, other relationships are temporary in nature and are subject to situational influences. Acquaintanceships formed by chance encounters belong here. Relational orientation also differs from collective orientation. The emphasis is put on relationships, rather than on collective interests. Loyalties based on personal relationships within a collective often contradict, even sabotage, the larger interests of the collective. It is thus important to specify the kind and quality of relationships between the individual and the group or between individuals in the group in order to assess the impact of relationships on social behavior.

Relational orientation is more fundamental than other-directedness. It implies reciprocity, interdependence, and interrelatedness between individuals. Social actions follow not so much from the individual's own inclinations, sentiments, or needs as they do from the individual's perception of his or her relationships with other people--largely conditioned by cultural definitions. The social "presence" of others is always entered into social calculations. Moreover, this process is bidirectional. One assumes that one's own presence is taken into consideration by others; in the same way one also assumes that others assume that their presence is considered by oneself. An appreciation of this relational orientation explains why attempts to predict social behavior by personality variables alone are, in principle, doomed to failure. Not only in the Asian context, I might add, but in any social context--a prospect psychologists have become more aware of (see the section Methodological Individualism below). The reason is that, again, the potent determinants of social behavior are more likely to be located externally in the relational context, not internally within the organism.

Relational orientation is a field concept. It takes full recognition of the individual's embeddedness in the social network. A methodological consequence is that the psychology of social actions, even when pertaining to a single individual, must extend its domain to include: (a) actions by the individual, either self-initiated or in response to those of others; (b) actions

by other people closely associated with the individual; (c) actions directed at the individual by people with whom the individual is interacting; (d) actions directed at the individual by people closely associated with those with whom the individual is interacting; and, finally, (e) actions directed at people closely associated with the individual by those with whom the individual is interacting directly or indirectly. Clearly the domain of social actions to be included for analysis is more encompassing and more complicated than what has traditionally been envisioned. The social arena is alive with many actors interacting directly or indirectly with one another in a multiplicity of relationships. It is a dynamic field of forces and counterforces in which the stature and significance of the individual actor appear to have diminished. No longer at the center, the individual is not the measure of all things. This new perspective cannot be characterized by anything short of psychological decentering.

Methodological Individualism

In the history of intellectual thought, two opposing camps have been engaged in a running battle concerning the place of the individual in the understanding and explanation of social phenomena. In the social sciences, this battle centers around the controversy over what has come to be known as methodological individualism (see Lukes, 1973, pp. 600-601). Proponents of methodological individualism insist that no explanation of social phenomena can be complete without a knowledge of facts about individuals. A more extreme position insists further that all attempts to explain social phenomena must be couched in terms of such facts. According to Popper (1950):

> All social phenomena, and especially the functioning of all social institutions, should always be understood as resulting from the decisions, actions, attitudes, etc., of human individuals, and ... we should never be satisfied by an explanation in terms of so-called "collectives."

Opponents of methodological individualism, on the other hand, argue that facts about individuals alone are inadequate to account for social phenomena. The facts or principles of social phenomena are not reducible to a knowledge about individuals. They are "emergent" from the formation of relationships, groups, and institutions among individuals, independent of individual characteristics. Furthermore, facts about individuals are in themselves to be understood only in reference to social contexts.

The controversy over methodological individualism has recurred under many different guises, most notably in the endless disputes between sociologists and psychologists. One might say that all explanations in the social sciences ultimately reduce to a psychological or a sociological type, or a combination of the two.

In Western social thought, three towering figures, Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, share a common reliance on sociological explanations. Psychological explanations are relegated to a secondary position, even excluded from consideration. Durkheim (1895/1938) stresses the analysis of social behavior and social systems in terms of "social facts"--external to, originating apart from, and not dependent upon facts about the individual. He puts it in the most uncompromising terms: "Every time that a social phenomenon is directly explained by a psychological phenomenon, we may be sure that the explanation is false." Indeed, Durkheim's whole sociology may be said to be founded on the denial of methodological individualism. Weber attempts to define the ideal type of bureaucratic organization by abstracting its most characteristic properties--again, not reducible to the psychological attributes of individuals. To Weber, bureaucratic organizations operate according to the principle of conformity; their impersonal rationality leaves little room for psychological elements, such as motivation or emotions. In Marxism, psychological conceptions occupy no major role. Class struggle, not psychological drives, constitutes the primary force in history. Historical forces have objective existence: "History is independent of men's wills." Marx (1904) states:

> The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and intellectual process of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary their social existence determines their consciousness. (pp. 11-12)

As a historico-economic determinist, Marx leaves no room for the causal efficacy of individual actions. The chain of causation operates as follows: mode of production--relations of production--class antagonism--social existence--and social consciousness. In short, individual psychology is a consequence of antecedent socioeconomic reality; it belongs to the "superstructure" dependent on its "economic base." Human nature is not conceived as abstract qualities inherent within each separate individual, but as the ensemble of social relations. This position is more akin to that of psychologists who view personality in terms of a person's social stimulus value rather than internal structures or traits. Nevertheless, none of the contemporary theories of personality have taken seriously the notion of class antagonism, so central to Marxist thought.

Freud stands in stark contrast to these three thinkers in his reliance on psychological explanations. His investigations into diverse domains of intellectual life, art, literature, religion, anthropology, even civilization itself, are ultimately grounded in unraveling intrapsychic conflicts within the individual. Psychoanalysis provides the intellectual instrument for these investigations. Among academic psychologists, Allport may be mentioned as a champion in defense of the individual in explanations of social phenomena. He asserts: "[Social] background factors never directly cause behavior; they

cause attitudes (and other mental sets) and the latter in turn determine behavior" (Allport, 1931, p. 173).

In psychology, it is the personality theories, especially the dispositional or trait variety, that are the most intimately wedded to methodological individualism. Since the 1960s, however, scathing criticisms of dispositional theories have been voiced. In terms of the trait-situation controversy, a major difficulty confronting dispositional theories is that they fail to specify the conditions or circumstances under which personality traits are manifest in behavior. The disturbing evidence is that frequently minimal or zero correlations between behaviors ostensibly representing the same disposition or trait have been obtained in different situations. And, different dispositions of the same individual may be observed in the same situation. Thus, in most cases, self-report or similar measures have little value in predicting actual behavior (Krasner & Ullmann, 1973; Mischel, 1968).

More generally, the concept of personality, which has enjoyed almost unquestioned scientific respectability for decades, came under attack. Mischel (1968) concluded that there is little consistency in personality dimensions across situations and over time. This is, of course, a direct affront to the very concept of personality itself. Krasner and Ullmann (1973) stated their case no less forcefully, calling into question the utility of the concept: "The more we know about the antecedent, current, and consequent conditions, the less likely we are to use the concept of personality" (p. 489). Feshbach (1978) stressed the importance of the sociocultural environment in the study of personality. He considered the effects of the sociocultural environment upon not only experimental findings obtained at the situational level but also theoretical models and modes or interpretation of experimental findings. He argued that "social forces in the environment may affect the theoretical importance ascribed to internal psychological states and personality processes" (p. 447). There is thus disquiet within academic psychology itself over the scientific status of the personality concept. The root of this disquiet, I would argue, is traceable to the ideological bias toward methodological individualism in contemporary personality theories.

In the extreme, sociological explanations assume the form of sociologism, that is, attempting to explain all social phenomena without any reference to a knowledge about individuals; and psychological explanations become psychologism, attempting to explain social phenomena on the basis of a psychological knowledge about individuals alone. Sociologists are academically socialized to avoid "the fallacy of psychologism," a form of reductionism which would render their discipline superfluous. A well-known example of reductionism was the attempt, prompted by psychological studies of authoritarianism after World War II, to explain Nazi Germany in terms of the authoritarian German character. Sociologists (and other social scientists, e.g., economists and political scientists) tend to treat

psychological explanations with disinterest, disbelief, even disdain. Their view of psychologists: preoccupied with the individual, socially indifferent, and politically naive.

Equally adamant, psychologists eschew "the fallacy of sociologism," which would leave them unemployed. Traditionally, their greatest aspiration is to discover "objective," universalistic principles of behavior. These principles are to be discovered through the study of individuals; moreover, the tacit assumption is that they may be discovered without reference to social contexts, and hence without a knowledge of sociology. Of especial annoyance to sociologists is the presumption that they are class transcendent. Ideally, psychological principles, like those in physics, should be invariant through time and space. For instance, the principles of conditioning apply at any time (i.e., yesterday, today, and tomorrow) and at any place (i.e., in the laboratory and in real life, in American as in Chinese societies)--and, it might be added, to dogs and humans alike. The psychologists' view of sociologists: knowledgeable about sociology, but not of society!

Typically, departments of sociology and psychology within the same academic institution have little or no communication with each other. Compartmentalization! (Students also show symptoms of compartmentalization. Too often, little or no trace can be found that they have integrated their knowledge gained from having taken courses in both disciplines.) Knowledge is carved up into two separate worlds: One concerns the macroscopic study of collective phenomena, belonging to the province of sociologists; the other concerns the microscopic analysis of individuals, belonging to the province of psychologists. Territoriality! What explanation do we have for the phenomena of compartmentalization and territoriality? Sociological (e.g., "That's the nature of academia; it's nothing personal") or psychological (e.g., "Sociologists are antisocial people")?

Many academics, of course, deplore the mentality of compartmentalization and territoriality. I submit that, more fundamentally, the arbitrary division of knowledge into sociology and psychology is intellectually unsound. Sociological and psychological explanations need not, and should not, be regarded as mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary. When taken alone, each can only lead to a partial, even distorted, understanding of the total complexity of social phenomena. If marriage between sociology and psychology is unnatural, at least courtship is exciting. We may initiate courtship by turning to relational orientation and confront the problem of explanation in the social sciences.

Relational Orientation

The thesis of relational orientation is that social behavior invariably takes place in relational contexts, regardless of social class or cultural

variations. Accordingly, the unit of analysis is not the individual, but individual-in-relations. By relational contexts, I mean social, particularly interpersonal, contexts. Among most important relational contexts are those involving role and/or status relationships.

Consider the simplest case, the dyad, involving two persons, A and B. To give a complete account of the dyadic interaction, we need to describe at least the following:

1. Attributes of A and B. These are attributes pertaining to particular individuals, defined independently of the dyadic relationship.

2. Attributes derived from differences between the attributes of A and those of B.

3. Attributes of the socially and/or culturally defined relationship between A and B. These attributes are defined independently of the attributes of A and B. That is, a socially and/or culturally defined relationship has properties of its own, independent of the characteristics of individuals involved in the relationship. For instance, in Chinese culture traditionally the father-son relationship (one of the Five Cardinal Relationships) is governed by the Confucian ethic of filial piety. The attributes of the father-son dyad are structural, enduring, and invariant across situations. They have existed long before the father and the son came into being, and will continue to exist after they are gone. Furthermore, filial piety applies regardless of when and where father and son interact with each other.

4. Attributes of the relationship specific to A and B. These attributes pertain to the quality of the relationship between the two.   5. Attributes of the situation and/or ecology in which the interaction takes place. These attributes are defined independently of the attributes of both individuals and their relationship.

To use an analogy from logic, the enduring attributes may be thought of as constituting the "constant," and the attributes of individuals as the "variables" of the dyad. A dyad may be described in terms of its relational constant, without reference to its variables; such a dyad may be thought of as vacuous. A vacuous dyad becomes a fresh-and-blood interpersonal relationship once the individuals who occupy the dyadic positions (i.e., variables) are also described.

The case of the dyad may be generalized to other relationships. To facilitate the explication of relational orientation, I define a universe of attributes of interest to social scientists. The attributes in this universe are classified into different categories, with examples given in each.

Classification of Attributes

1 Attributes of individuals

1 biographical data--extrinsic to the individual

   chronological age
   sex
   birth order

2 attributes based on birth, blood or marriage ties
   extrinsic to the individual

   geographical origin
   ethnic group membership
   cultural group membership
   clan membership
   caste membership

3 attributes based on social connections and/or achievement
   extrinsic to the individual

   institutional affiliation
   formal membership in clubs, societies, associations
   informal membership in social groups
   face
   prestige
   socioeconomic status

4 attributes based on achievement--extrinsic to the individual

   educational attainment
   occupation

5 physical attributes--intrinsic to the individual

   height
   weight
   physical appearance, maturity
   physiological age

6 psychological attributes--intrinsic to the individual

   psychological maturity
   gender identity, sexual orientation
   ethnic identification, ethnic loyalty
   cultural identification, cultural orientation

social class identification
other attitudinal and personality attributes
(e.g., intelligence, anxiety level, and ego strength)

2 Attributes derived from differences between attributes of
   particular individuals--extrinsic to individuals

   sex of sibling(s)
   intergenerational differences in beliefs, attitudes, values
   differences in age, generational rank
   differences in ethnic group, cultural group membership
   differences in face
   differences in educational attainment, occupation
   differences in physical maturity
   differences in psychological maturity, intelligence, values

3 attributes of socially and/or culturally defined role or status relationships--
   structural, enduring, invariant across situations; extrinsic to individuals

    kinship
    social-status relationships
    authority relationships
       superior-subordinate
       employer-employee
       teacher-student
    Five Cardinal Relationships in Chinese culture

4 Attributes specific to relationships between particular individuals
   extrinsic to individuals

   trusting--nontrusting (honest--dishonest)
   enduring--nonenduring (stable--unstable)
   deep--superficial (close--distant)
   egalitarian--nonegalitarian
   balanced--unbalanced (mutual--one-sided)
   complementary--noncomplementary (in meeting needs)
   congruent--incongruent (in perceptions of the relationship)
   affective--nonaffective
   possessive--nonpossessive
   mutually satisfying--mutually unsatisfying
   mutually attracted--mutually repulsed

5 Situational, ecological (e.g., physical, geographical) attributes--extrinsic to
   individuals and to relationships

It may be noted that attributes of relationships (3 and 4) are relational constructs, as are the derived attributes (2). Not so obvious is that some of the attributes of individuals are also relational constructs, as in the case of attributes based on social connections (1.3). That is, even the description of a single individual is incomplete without a consideration of relevant relational contexts. Relational attributes based on social connections function as a social map to identify a person or to locate his or her place in a given social network (see Ho, in press, for a relevant discussion of informal social identification).

Clearly, no social science discipline deals with all of the attributes in their entirety. Some have received relatively little attention in research: attributes based on social connections (1.3; e.g., face), and attributes derived from differences between individuals (2). Traditionally, anthropologists focus on the study of cultural group membership (1.2) and culturally defined relationships (3); sociologists focus on socioeconomic status (1.3) and social-status relationships (3); psychologists focus on psychological attributes (1.6); and social psychologists focus on attributes specific to particular relationships (4) and situational attributes (5). But this is only a convenient division of labor. Given a relational perspective, boundaries between academic disciplines would become more permeable, perhaps even disappear.

Traditionally, psychologists have paid little attention to relational constructs. But an approach focusing on the attributes of individuals alone is insufficient to account for social behavior. Attributes of individuals may interact with attributes of relationships, resulting in dramatic alterations of behavior. For instance, an intelligent person may function efficiently in working together with another person of comparable intelligence, but become ineffective with one of low intelligence--illustrating the interaction between the attributes of individuals and the derived attributes. A person who marries another person from a different culture may find that their conceptions of the marital relationship differ greatly, necessitating a drastic modification of behavior toward his or her spouse--illustrating the interaction between the attributes of individuals and the attributes of culturally defined role relationships. A person may engage in self-disclosure in the context of a trusting relationship, but remain guarded in a nontrusting relationship--illustrating the interaction between the attributes of individuals and the attributes specific to particular relationships. No wonder why the personality theorists have been so troubled.

But I would not advocate abandoning the concept of personality. From a relational perspective, personality may be defined as <u>the sum total of common attributes manifest in, and abstracted from, the individual's directly or indirectly observed behavior across situations and interpersonal</u>

<u>relationships over time</u>. This definition embodies a number of important elements. First, as in most other definitions, personality is inferred from observed behavior, as are its constituent attributes. Observations, which may be direct or indirect, are made in different situations and relationships over time. Second, the inference process entails abstraction. That is, attributes common to different observations are identified. Another way of stating it is that common attributes are abstracted from the invariant aspects of the individual's behavior. For example, if a man acts in an authoritarian manner in his roles as father, husband, employer, and so forth, we have some justification in saying that he has an authoritarian personality. Third, the definition does not negate personality as a cause of behavior; however, personality is not viewed as immutable dispositions which determine the individual's behavior regardless of situations and relationships.

In conclusion, the relational analysis above reveals how misleading it is to speak of "social facts" and "facts about the individual," in Durkheim's sociology, as if they were mutually exclusive categories. A social fact, though not reducible to facts about the individual, is nonetheless a fact about the social behavior of, manifest by, individuals; and a fact about the individual is a social fact wherever it refers to behavior occurring in the presence of others, actual or imaginary. Each contains and is contained by the other. A knowledge of one enhances, and a lack of knowledge of one diminishes, the understanding of the other.

Likewise, relational orientation confronts the bias toward methodological individualism in contemporary mainstream psychology. It makes a demand on the theorist to consider how social relationships are defined, before attempting to interpret the behavior of individuals. An adequate explanation entails, therefore, making explicit the normative expectations and behavioral rules governing interpersonal relationships. A systematic investigation of the individual-in-relations now demands due attention by psychologists as well as other social scientists.

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