

**SOCIAL SCIENCES AND LITTLE COUNTRIES:  
WHEN “BIG” MAY MEAN “SMALL” AND *VICE VERSA***

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**Abstract.** The state of affairs of social sciences in Estonia can be discussed from an institutional, or from knowledge-constructive perspective. I assume the latter, and claim that the evaluative aspect of where the social sciences currently are is secondary to careful examination of how scientists from small countries (and limited conditions) can innovate their areas of science in ways that surpass their colleagues from big (and affluent) countries.

I am probably unable to say anything substantive about the current state of the social sciences in Estonia. And worse – it probably does not matter what is said about that topic by anybody, since *talking about* any science is not *doing* that science. For the actual state of affairs of the given science, it is the latter that matters. Talking about science is of course quite important in another way – it is a way to re-negotiate the social relationships between the institutions of sciences and of the societies within which they are embedded. This need emerges at times when the societies are undergoing change, which threatens the sciences, potentially throwing them out of their current equilibrium of relations with their social environments. For some sciences at some time this disequilibrium may lead to moving out of their “normal” into a “revolutionary” state (in Thomas Kuhn’s terms), for others – it may lead to their extinction. Interestingly, at the time of a social turmoil of science /society relations, it is not clear which of the directions is being born. Such uncertainty obviously triggers the very human need to do what we do best – talk. Of course we at times act as well – usually in ways that lead to even more talk.

**1. Social sciences: how does one look at them?**

What we are involved with here is a discourse about social sciences in a little country, which has a number of symbolic characteristics, depending upon whose

perspective we look at it. From a pan-Estonian perspective, the liberation from the Moscovite domination can lead to a narrative of unlimited possibilities to create one's "own" (i.e., "specifically Estonian") social science. Different images of the past (1920–40) or imagined future (of the flourishing of small countries, everybody's fascination with their unique ways of living etc.) could fortify this constructive erection of one's local castle. Yet it may be a castle the builder may find difficult to reach, or if reaching it – may find him or herself facing other castles of similar construction (see Hurme, 1997, pp. 123–124 on "scientific imperialism"). Others' perspectives can be very different. For instance, a Western-European (or North American) standpoint of "those poor countries, victims of Communism" may lead to missionaries of another narrow-visionary ("kolka-patrioot") yet economically lucky or politically large country to invest resources and personal careers in "going and teaching" the "natives" how to do "real science". Leaving aside the unfortunate interpersonal experiences such efforts usually entail (both for "donors" and "recipients"), this perspective as a social movement is built upon historical models of colonialism. Furthermore, any social science that claims linkages with socio-moral issues of any society is colonialistic, since the directions embedded in any socio-moral system are implicitly providing value to some perspective over the others<sup>1</sup>.

The social processes that create a science's relationship with its surrounding society (at its currently existing state) are of fundamental kind, and thus shared by different social sciences, and the same science in different countries (Mulkay, 1993). The discourse-based social construction of such relationships leads to a differentiated picture in which social processes surrounding a science set the stage for it (Rosa, 1994; Rosa and Valsiner, 1994; Valsiner, 1988, 1994).

Let us demystify the intellectual glory of scientists by a simple reminder that the makers of science are ordinary human beings. They are subjective and emotional. They assume social roles in accordance – as well as in defiance – with society's expectations. A co-constructionist perspective recognizes both sides of human existence – the living process via social roles, and subjective personal beings. By way of their self-regulation through social roles, persons construct novel versions of their personal cultures, and provide input into the reorganization of the collective culture (the collective entity). Thus, the persons living within their social worlds construct their individually unique versions of their social

<sup>1</sup> Psychology becomes at times called (sometimes even proudly!) a "moral science". Such designations are not different from their counterparts like "Soviet science" or "empirical science", all of which carry (from the varied perspectives) implicit positive valuation. In contrast, as a general science, psychology is necessarily an "immoral science" (or, to avoid opposite valuation, "non-moral science"). Like other social sciences, psychology needs **to take into account** the implicit valuations in the social constructions of its main terms (e.g., see our re-analysis of Edward Banfield's story of amoral familism<sup>2</sup> in Southern Italy – Benigni and Valsiner 1995), yet without aligning itself with any valuational position other than its own (general scientific) stance. From that angle, science does not serve any needs of "a society", but uses societies to its own knowledge-constructive aims.

worlds within their subjective personal cultures. In the case of the lives of scientists, the personal-cultural and collective-cultural facets of their lives are further differentiated by the special social role of a scientist which regulates other aspects of their personal development.

Since the collective culture undergoes constant transformation as the socio-cultural system itself develops (Sorokin 1985), then the forms of interdependence of science and society are constantly being re-made. The SCIENCE $\leftrightarrow$ SOCIETY communication process is always multivocal and heterogeneous (Valsiner, 1994). It entails different kinds of story construction depending upon the goals involved in the discourse. All sciences are under the final fate control of the societal organization, even when they present themselves as if they were autonomous (Mukerji, 1989). The whole mythology about the independence and power of science may be a socio-cultural tool to regulate the constantly uncertain interdependence between a science and its socio-cultural niche.

## 2. Epistemological paradox of the social sciences

Social sciences at large, and psychology in particular, have developed in ways that have made them highly vulnerable to the expectations of society. On the one hand, social sciences strive to transcend the socio-cultural context of any given society. By constructing general knowledge, they try to reach the status of basic science. However, on the other hand, social sciences are directly dependent upon the social institutional background of the given society, as they take over from other social institutions a number of functions in that society. Thus, fortunetelling, soul-healing, providing of universally meaningful explanations and legitimization for social actions, and many other functions that have been catered for by other institutions, may become taken over by psychology. Or the focus on leisure (as an economic area of investment) leads to the establishment of "leisure science".

This establishment of psychology as a social institution within a society leads to a state of affairs where it cannot transcend its own socio-cultural context, since success in this amounts to a lessening of the immediate social value. The discipline is caught within a debilitating paradox— in order to arrive at basic knowledge it would have to diminish its immediate social usefulness (i.e., potential for application). However, as long it tries to build up knowledge on the basis of applied concerns (which are relevant for its success in any society), it cannot advance its basic knowledge. The ethos of social sciences' image as "socially helpful" makes it helpless in its own epistemological advancement.

### 2.1. An example of psychology: export of missionaries, and its cannibalistic impact

Histories of psychology in different countries provide ample evidence for tension between the basic knowledge and the social utility of the discipline. The

importation of psychology into the United States in the late 19th century led to a synthesis of psychology with basic socio-moral tendencies of the U.S. society (Dolby, 1977; Samelson, 1979) that makes much of contemporary psychology in the U.S. a unique cultural phenomenon. This uniqueness can be seen in the careful hiding of the socio-moral ideology behind the front of technicalities that – taken by themselves – resemble the *modus operandi* of other socially accepted basic science.

Historically, the widespread move towards applicability of psychology in the United States was a result of the socio-historical turmoils of World War I, and of American participation in it (Danziger 1990). Applied orientation in American psychology is well integrated with the missionary spirit that has characterized the collective-cultural worlds in North America over a few centuries. Psychology's recent export from the U.S. to other countries can be recognized as part of the socio-political relationships between the so-called "First" and "Third" World countries. Within these relationships, the takeover of North-American (or Western European) cultural models for building psychology as if it were science, has extra-scientific undertones similar to those in the "donor" country (see Bloom 1982; Enriquez 1992, Joseph, Reddy and Searle-Chatterjee 1990, Montero 1990, Nandy 1974).

Psychology's need for self-proliferation as science is undoubtedly linked with the construction of scientific utopia in the history of European societies (see Hakfoort 1992). Furthermore, it has built up its normative conceptual system on the socio-cultural domain of problems that have been surfacing in European-type collective-cultural worlds (e.g., psychoanalysis emerging in the context of repression of sexuality in European affluent classes). When such extra-scientific (applied) bases are hidden in the general theoretical schemes of a psychological theory, potential oversights of different forms of psychological phenomena can be overlooked when these schemes are exported to other societies (see Kurtz 1992 for a re-analysis of psychoanalysis in the Indian context).

This situation in psychology is certainly shared with other social sciences. Thus, British social anthropology (and its North-American counterpart of cultural anthropology) has developed as a companion (even if at times oppositional one – Kuklick 1991) to first the colonial powers' social control efforts, and later as a culture-contact device between the societies "at home" and "overseas". The complicated nature of inter-societies' dialogue has existed in sociology (Peirano 1991), and has resulted in calls for authentic internationalization of the discourse in that discipline (Oommen 1991).

As a social institution, psychology is to benefit from successful application of the label of "science" in its relations with other social institutions. The missionary spirit in communication between psychology and different social institutions within a society is actively encoded in authoritative or persuasive messages that psychology is science, similar to other sciences. The actual guidance of psychology's activities by collective-cultural assumptions about human nature and

that of society, remain carefully concealed in these messages. Psychology presents itself as young, powerful, socially useful science that is ready to join its force with others trying to bring about further progress in society. This kind of presentation can be observed within European and North-American societies, as well as between those and the "Third World" countries.

The latter social presentation – when successful – leads to a crisis in psychology at large. This social propagation of one society's cultural heritage under the label of "science" necessarily leads to outcomes that at best are inconsequential for the recipient society (and at worst – end up debilitating both the application of psychology in the given country, and the general knowledge base of psychology). The problem is particularly complicated in the area of methodology. Despite the criticisms of existing dominant socio-political practices in psychological methodology (Espiritu 1989, Feliciano 1989) as well as careful historical demonstrations of how psychology's methodology has become driven by social consensus (Danziger 1990, Gigerenzer 1993) that is guided by the social institutions which organize the discipline, psychological methodology (in areas where dependency on social constructions apply<sup>2</sup>) shows no sign of taking its limits seriously. Psychology as a socially institutionalized enterprise protects its boundaries of expertise rigorously – and it succeeds as long as the world outside of the discipline accepts the image given of an ever-progressing discipline where new statistical techniques solve old philosophical queries by a simple click of a computer mouse.

Such social-institutional perseverance of normal science guarantees psychology's extensive self-proliferation within (as well between) societies at our time, which is only rarely paralleled with intensive (substantive) development of the discipline. Psychology seems to be governed by waves of social fashions for the use of different explanatory metaphors, which are transformed into myths along the lines of social-institutional semiotic needs (Sarbin 1990). Since those myths may repeat some collective-cultural beliefs, they may further amplify them – thus participating in the actual social organization of social processes.

Besides the social-institutional perseverance of making psychology socially applicable, there exist epistemological limitations upon innovation in psychology. Psychology is based on the shared semiotic codes of the lay persons and psychologists, and in case that basis is borrowed from the collective-cultural meaning systems of some selected societies and turned into axiomatically

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<sup>2</sup> Under no circumstances can psychology be considered a unified science, even in the realm of its basic knowledge. Some of the areas (e.g., psychophysics) are not dependent upon the cultural-historical construction of psychological methodology on the basis of social consensus of the First World psychologists. Yet many other areas – e.g., study of self, personality, affective functions, etc. – are intricately linked with such constructions. Furthermore, the axiomatic basis of some sub-areas of psychology – such as that of developmental psychology – may be in gross opposition to psychology at large, and might fit better with developmental biology, or embryology (from which it emerged, thanks to Karl Ernst von Baer)

assumed universal science, the universality of such science is always suspect. Even the culture-inclusive domain of psychology is largely ill at ease about its necessary reliance upon some collective-cultural semiotic reflexivity of common-sense kind (Obeyesekere 1990, Valsiner 1985), or tries to overcome that insecurity by glorifying the richness and logic of common sense (Siegfried 1994, Smedslund 1982).

Psychology's reliance upon the common language is ambivalent. On the one hand, the richness of common language can allow psychology basis for sophisticated understanding. On the other, it limits psychological knowhow to those aspects which may be historico-cultural particulars of the investigator. Psychology, embedded in the common language as it is, needs to transcend the boundaries of that constraint system (Valsiner 1985). Otherwise it may remain part of the collective culture (of the persons acting in the role of "psychologists"), and as such create different kinds of socially desirable myths under the halo effect of science.

## 2.2. *Internationalization of – versus colonization by – psychology*

Psychology's appeal and missionary self-presentation open the discipline for different fates in international communication. The usual pattern – that of proliferation of some fashionable tendencies ("revolutions") from one country to another without constructive modifications is guaranteed to lead to subordination of the recipient country's psychology to that of the donor. We could observe a process of *de facto* colonization of the discipline in the recipient countries. Any kind of "national" psychology – be it "American", "Soviet" or "Uruguayan" – may become a vehicle of such colonization of other lands.

The mechanism of this process is relatively simple: the original "revolution" starts in country X, triggered by the dominance of a previous tendency in that country (e.g., "cognitive" revolution in American psychology was a movement against "behaviorist" power orthodoxy – Valsiner 1991), is then labeled in revolutionary terms and advertised worldwide. In country Y, the appeal of the label, and the efforts of advertising, do not remain unnoticed. Some psychologists (given their own social discourse around social relations within their institutions) will start to follow the new movement, and – with some latency – may succeed in making it central for psychology in country Y. However, the imported revolutionary fashion need not fit the cultural contexts (other than the academic, middle-class one), and by the time it has gained ground in country Y, there is a new revolution in the making in X. Thus, following fashionable tendencies from X keeps psychology in Y permanently one step behind the developments in X, and away from at least some of the relevant psychological issues that may be of high relevance in Y, and of almost none in X. For example, the value of reconstructing different psychological "standardized methods" in the context of Estonia – "*because Estonia lacks such methods*" – is a step that guarantees the lack of development of these methods (which might be of questionable scientific value in

the first place). Construction of new methods that the international psychological research community might lack (for whatever oversight or purposeful ignoring) would constitute a step towards progress in the given science.

A more goal-oriented scenario entails the use (by social scientists in country X) of some aspects prominent in country Y as a social resource for their advancement of their own goals in the context of X. Thus, representatives of X may persuade their colleagues in Y that the particular themes needed by X are to be studied in Y, by researchers from Y. Sufficient incentives (funding, symbolic capital in the form of co-authored publications in socially value-marked source, like “peer-reviewed journals”) are usually provided for Y. The result may be similar to uses of natural resources from other countries. Social scientists from the “First World” often eagerly study the phenomena of homeless children in Brazil, and of course tell one another moralistic horror stories about the poverty and homelessness of such children. This may look fine from the standpoint of the comfort of homefulness of the world from which the scientists come (“we are better than they”), yet it misses the point of what is really happening in the lives of these children. In a case of opposite valuation, cross-cultural comparisons between U.S. and Chinese or Japanese schoolchildren’s achievements in mathematics often are oriented towards creation of the “horror scenario” of “we are lagging behind” (and the hope for re-enactment of another “sputnik effect” in the U.S. educational system). And, after all, Margaret Mead’s stories about the sexual freedom of adolescent girls in Samoa were in dialogue with the state of affairs of cultural repression of sexuality in the U.S., rather than intrinsically oriented to make sense of them as they are developing on a different historical course.

In contrast to these examples of social uses of phenomena from one society for the sake of another, the movement of basic ideas (as distinguished from social fashions) in any science (including psychology) between countries has been constructive. Science is in its nature an international enterprise, and knowledge construction knows no country boundaries. Thus it is at the level of concrete (but basic) ideas in psychology where international co-construction of new knowledge takes place.

### 3. Sciences as transnational inventions

Following my story as told above, it should become clear why there is little I can say about *particularly Estonian* social science – it does not exist. Or – it exists as a symbol (perhaps as part of the Estonian cultural identity complex), but as a science *qua* science it cannot exist. Estonian scientists (if they are not just creating locally relevant symbols as cultural capital) do science that is necessarily international since any national science is by definition non-science. This applies in a similar vein to social sciences in any country, big or small. For instance,

“American psychology” as a cultural complex (= part of U.S. symbolic identity complex) is as much a non-scientific construction as would be that of any small country’s invention of similar kind.

Social sciences as practiced in big countries may have facilities that are better than those in small countries, yet they also have possibilities to waste their resources on locally relevant tasks. Or they may create local practices that effectively stop construction of new knowledge. It is often the “received” (or “expert”) status that leads to the lack of growth in a given area of science. The same is true of social sciences in small countries. Knowledge is constructed often in opposition to the local social demands, and under limited circumstances. In contrast, easily available and generous facilities need not by themselves lead to new knowledge. Compared to the two youngsters sitting in the cellar of Cavendish laboratories at Cambridge in the early 1950s (Francis Crick and Jim Watson), playing with wire-models trying to find a solution to the structure of the DNA (rather than doing experiments to add to the pertinent literature), Linus Pauling in his Caltech laboratory was the recognized “expert” in the field. Yet the expert failed, and the youngsters solved the problem. One of these young rebels who entered into contemporary cognitive sciences in his old age, yet maintaining his rebellious youthfulness, could trace a core problem of the contemporary cognitive science:

*In cognitive science the usual procedure is to isolate some psychological phenomenon, make a theoretical model of the postulated mental processes, and then test the model, by computer simulation, to make sure it works as the author thought it would. If it fits at least some of the psychological facts it is then thought to be a useful model. The fact that it is rather unlikely to be the correct one seems to disturb nobody. (Crick 1988:149–150)*

Crick seems to capture a very general problem of psychology – or perhaps of the social sciences at large – the belief that consensually sufficient fit of theoretical models to reality is also real fit between the two. Dependence upon consensus in any aspect of science is a temporary, local solution, and not a guarantee of absolute adequacy of what the consensus is about.

#### 4. Conclusion: big may be small, but small can also be big

I hope I have managed to transcend the evaluative issue – what is the status of social sciences in Estonia – in favour of a substantive one – **given the perspectives available for social scientists who have grown up under the conditions of Estonia** (as a small country, recently liberated, etc.), what are the general scientific advancements that these persons can produce precisely because they start from their (Estonian) perspective (**but not end in** recreating yet another Estonian perspective). The mere use of models amply provided by the missionaries or colonizers from other countries is no solution. In order to be internationally equal to others, scientists

from Estonia need to be better than their counterparts, in whatever possible aspect. Indira Gandhi was once reported saying (when queried by journalists why India supports basic sciences while being poor as a country) that it is exactly because of being poor that basic sciences are more important to the country than the applied ones. Years later, it is the Indian, Chinese, Japanese, etc. graduate students who dominate the knowledge construction in U.S. graduate schools and post-graduate laboratories in the basic sciences.

In the social sciences, this kind of internationalization is at an initial stage. No big country has the monopoly over what social sciences can do, yet of course the hyperactivity and visibility of social science production from large countries can become a lure that sidetracks scientists from small countries from their main goal of becoming big. This does not happen by publishing very many articles in different journals, but by creating serious scientific breakthroughs that are possible due to the scientists' looking at issues from a small place, yet facing the whole world. Social sciences in Estonia may be in a good starting position for that – yet the question is how to move on from there, instead of wasting oneself in the pleasure of feeling good in the local pond.

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