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Conceptual and methodological issues in contextualizing applied psychology research: A Malaysian perspective

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses the conceptual challenges, the associated methodological and fieldwork challenges, and the challenges to interpret and communicate research findings encountered by Malaysian researchers when contextualizing Western theories to suit the cultural needs of the Malaysians. The paper argues for a need to dialogue with the West in order to generate meaningful knowledge in specific contexts, such as Malaysia, where research in applied psychology fields is scant. This paper implies that conducting local research using a grounded-theory approach is also necessary rather than just relying on a dialogical process approach, to generate local wisdom. The integration of local wisdom and Western-based theories contributes to the expansion of knowledge. Suggested strategies for future research in generating culturally meaningful knowledge in the fields of applied psychology and general psychology are also discussed.

Keywords: Malaysia, research methods, multicultural counselling competency, personality, industrial stress

1 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is culturally-bound. The process of making sense of knowledge normally takes place among local people in a specific cultural context. However, most existing knowledge in various fields of studies originates from the West (Liu, Spector, & Shi, 2007). In fact, most existing concepts and theories used in psychological studies are Western-based, which emphasize more on Eurocentric values and bias. This poses some conceptual and methodological challenges for international scholars and researchers, especially those from the non-West contexts, to fully understand such knowledge and apply it to their specific cultural contexts.

In most research studies, international researchers tend to adopt-and-adapt Western-based theories to generate meaningful knowledge in their specific cultural contexts (Chang & Sue, 2005; Chen, 2010). By contextualizing or localizing knowledge, international researchers culturally adapt existing Western theories to prepare the conceptual framework that suits the design of their studies. Hence, this process helps them to address methodological issues and biases in most existing fields of studies, including psychology and counselling, raised by previous researchers (Ægisdóttir, Gerstein, & Çinarbaş, 2008; Cokley & Awad, 2008). Concerns for methodological biases in research have led some

Asian researchers to collaboratively engage with knowledge production and scholarship building beyond the Western world (Chen, 2010; Ha, 2011; Ha & Baurain, 2011). For example, Chen (2010) proposed the notion of Asia as method as a framework for Asian scholars. He encouraged scholars to take up the challenge to contribute to the growing fields of cultural studies or Asian studies in Asia and to address and incorporate local cultures and values into the process of meaning making. It is under these circumstances that we discuss our concerns related to applied psychology research in the specific cultural context of Malaysia Paragraph: use this for the first paragraph in a section, or to continue after an extract.

2 MALAYSIA AS THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Malaysia is one of the developing countries in the South-East Asia region (World Competitiveness Yearbook, 2007). Malaysia is a complex nation with unique historical and socio-cultural dynamics within the population of 27 million (Malaysian Census, 2010). It is a multicultural society, conservative (Schwartz, 1992), collective and holds power distance (Idris & Dollard, 2011). Although there are cultural differences between Malaysia and Western countries, in term of literacy, they have

