

# INTERNATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC PSYCHOLOGY: AT THE CROSSROADS FOR THE FUTURE OF PSYCHOLOGY

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The discipline of psychology as a science and the newly emerging field of international psychology are at a crossroads in terms of a conflict that has developed in their views. By means of comparative analysis, this article examines how the proponents of international psychology describe their area, how that description conflicts with the concept of psychology as a science, and what that conflict means for the development of psychology as an overall discipline. The analysis reveals weaknesses in the way international psychology has presented itself, and in the objectives it proposes, which, if followed, could lead to failure in achieving those objectives, and in collateral damage to the way psychology is regarded by researchers outside the field of psychology. This article ends with several prescriptions for the future of international psychology, including suggestions for revising the way international psychology should be conceived, such as regarding its relationship with cross-cultural psychology to be complementary rather than disparate, that it should adjust its objectives to be more attainable, and, especially, that it should accept rather than reject psychology as a science.

**Keywords:** international psychology, scientific psychology, cross-cultural psychology

## Statement of the Problem

The field of psychology is at a crossroads, and the term “crossroads” is used intentionally to emphasize that it is at a critical turning point where two courses of action diverge. The problem at this juncture is compounded by two factors. The first factor is that there is no “guide map” to help psychologists determine where to go from here to advance either international psychology or the science of psychology. The second compounding factor is even more complex as it involves several issues, namely, many authors of books and papers on what international psychology should be are arguing that the mainstream history of psychology is too American or too western, that the history of psychology should be rewritten in a way that reduces the influence of western thinking or be replaced with books that describe the history of

psychology as it developed in every different nation, and that the idea of psychology as a science should be abandoned.

Thus, the two “roads” are: (1) the historical route that was paved over the last hundreds of years of scientific progress in the field of psychology, and (2) the recent path that has emerged as modern times (post World War II) reduced barriers (e.g., the time it takes to travel great distances) between people in different locations, which increased the interactions between people from many different ethnicities and cultures. In other words, this paper examines whether the new area of “International Psychology” should be incorporated into the main road, or should take a separate path that some psychologists have been advocating.

This article is written in four parts to examine: (a) The Present Dilemma, which analyzes the conflict between psychological science and international psychology; (b) Weaknesses in the Current Thinking on International Psychology, which provides responses to the criticism against psychology as a science; (c) Timelines in Psychology: Locating International Psychology, which diagrams the alternate views; and (d) Prescriptions for the Future of International Psychology, which suggests ways to resolve the future of international psychology

### **The Present Dilemma**

The dilemma for today’s psychologists is that some individuals have been criticizing the way psychology has developed and are saying that psychologists should abandon what has gone before by writing entirely new “psychologies” for the many different countries and cultures that exist in the world. Thus, the dilemma is whether the history of psychology should be revised in favor of an “International Psychology” that elaborates on the different views about human beings and their behavior in different societies.

**Definitions:** Before proceeding, it would be useful to define what psychology is. The definition used here is the traditional one, i.e., “*Psychology is the scientific study of behavior.*” This is a concise and useful definition, but some critics would argue that even this definition should not be used because it derives from western (particularly American) culture; that is, the critics complain that psychology should

be redefined; not as a science, but to accommodate the views that different cultures have about human behavior. That criticism, however, cannot be entertained because the logic of dialectical thinking (which, incidentally, is found in both European and Indian philosophy) requires that the two sides of an argument begin with an agreed-upon definition of the topic being discussed for a meaningful debate to occur. Without such a definition, the two sides would be talking about different things, which would result in a chaotic and meaningless exchange of unrelated ideas. For this reason, the traditional definition of psychology is used in this article.

**Psychology and Culture:** Related to the definition problem is that many psychologists are confusing the definition of culture with that of psychology. The concept of culture and how to define it has been long debated, but that does not excuse confusing the terms. For clarity, culture is “*the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors shared by a group of people*” [1, p. 1052, from [2]). Thus, whereas psychology is a science, it is distinct from culture, which is not a science. In fact, this distinction is so profound that psychologists can readily study culture and its components, while people interested in culture cannot meaningfully analyze the science of psychology, i.e., the beliefs and attitudes that compose cultures are so greatly varied that they provide no systematic method of analyzing the science of psychology.

Furthermore, this distinction reveals how some psychologists have clouded the view of psychology. In particular, this problem is most obvious when the idea of “indigenous psychology” is discussed. For example, in one article [3] on “indigenous psychologies,” contributing authors from several countries discussed aspects of their culture as if culture is indistinguishable from psychology. The fact that they were speaking of different cultures and suggested that there is a different psychology for each culture explains why they used the plural term “psychologies.”

But using the term “psychologies” is a naïve way of thinking and is misleading because it asserts that the science of psychology must be different for different cultures. Such a naïve assertion reflects those authors’ failure to understand what science is. For reference, science is defined as the systematic study of materials or

phenomena based on observation, experiment, and measurement, and the formulation of laws to describe what is being studied [4]. Consequently, in essence, those authors are saying that every culture must have a different science!

**Psychology as a Science Compared to Physics as a Science:** If one accepts the argument that the science of psychology should be different for every country, then the same should be true of the science of physics, which also originated in western culture. In other words, what they are suggesting is the equivalent of saying that the laws of physics would change when one travels from one country or culture to another. Physics developed using the scientific method to discover laws about the nature of the universe and how it works. Therefore, whereas the science of physics largely originated in western nations, international psychologists would have to argue that the laws of physics should be rewritten to accommodate the cultural beliefs and values of other nations. No logical person would accept the idea that physics textbooks should be rewritten to incorporate the cultural beliefs of different nations; in other words, there is no reason to accept the idea that there should be many different “physicses,” with one for each nation or culture. Psychology developed in a parallel scientific fashion to physics, and has come to use the scientific method to discover laws about the nature of human beings and how they behave. Therefore, if there is no need to develop different “physicses,” then there should be no need to develop different “psychologies” for different nations or cultures.

**Psychological “Laws”:** The authors who propose having different “psychologies” further declare that psychology is different because different cultures (such as those in Asia and America) have different values. While it is true that the societies in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and even Korea and Japan, share a similar underlying set of social values that differ from those in western societies, this does not mean that those different values will change the laws of science.

This raises the question of whether there are any psychological principles, or “laws,” that transcend cultures. In fact, there are several psychological principles that occur in all cultures, such as classical conditioning [5], and operant conditioning [6], of which the Stimulus-Response (S-R) paradigm is a prime example. In fact, the S-R

paradigm is so profound that it can be found not only in humans but in all animal kingdoms, from amoebas (which move toward nutrients and away from harmful stimuli [7]) to elephants.

Taking an example with a dog, it is possible to teach a dog to lie down on command using the S-R paradigm (more precisely, the S-R-CS paradigm, where S = Stimulus, R = Response/behavior that is desired, and CS = Contingent Stimulus, i.e., a reward given for the correct response). In this case, speaking the phrase “lie down” is the stimulus, and as soon as the dog lies down, which is the response desired from the dog, the dog is rewarded with a piece of food, which reinforces the response. (This, of course, is a simplified rendition, but was used only for illustrative purposes.)

This paradigm can be tested and confirmed whether the dog is in England or Egypt. The fact that the spoken phrase (the stimulus) is in English or Arabic does not require different psychologies to be created for every dog in every country. Rather, one analyzes the circumstances underlying the behavior, recognizes it as a phenomenon that occurs for all dogs, and notes that there is a universal psychological principle at work. Thus, why should anyone suggest that the S-R paradigm, which was discovered using the scientific method, works only in western and not in other societies? And whereas it works, why should it be rejected?

Furthermore, if the S-R paradigm is acceptable to international psychologists, then what can be said about operant conditioning? Whereas operant conditioning uses the S-R principle, and there is abundant research evidence based in the scientific method that operant conditioning works in every society, then why should international scientists reject the scientific method?

Will international psychologists argue that this example is too simplistic, or that the principles might not apply to more complex phenomena, such as personality and how people respond to other people? First, the S-R paradigm was confirmed for animals in any country. In regard to whether personality or social behavior can be studied using the scientific method, great similarities among cultures in these areas can also be found.

Regarding personality, self-esteem may be taken as an example, i.e., varying

levels of this personality characteristic exist among all people in all societies; in other words, there are no cultures in which every person has a high level (or a low level) of self-esteem. As regards social behavior, there are also many similarities. For example, there is no society in which there is absolutely no crime. Instead, people in all cultures have been known to steal and commit murder. While there may be more such crimes in one country than in another, this difference may be a consequence of certain circumstance. That is, the crime might be a response [R] to some previous situation [S] that precipitated the criminal behavior, whereas the probability of committing a crime could be reduced by some “contingency,” e.g., the severity of punishment for the crime that is imposed by the controlling authorities. Thus, the situation may be explained by the S-R paradigm.

For example, in one culture, where physical aggression is (relatively) tolerated, a person might respond to a verbal insult with immediate physical aggression aimed directly at the person who spoke the insult; while, in another culture, where physical aggression is not tolerated at all, the person who was insulted might wait for days, weeks, or months to spread rumors that damage the offending person’s reputation, and do it in a way that never becomes known to that person. Although the response [R] to the stimulus (in this case, the [S] is the insult) may vary somewhat, the psychological paradigm of S-R nonetheless underlies both cases in the different cultures.

### **Weaknesses in International Psychologists’ Current Thinking**

To better delineate the disparity between scientific psychology and international psychology, three well-known publications on international psychology are described to reveal what they contain and analyzed to determine what they imply. One is a chapter from a book by Brock [8], which is examined by comparing it to a chapter on “Psychology’s Place in Science” by Marx and Hillix [9]. The second is an article by Gergen et al. [10], which is analyzed in regard to what it says and what its implications are. The third is a book by Stevens and Wedding [11], which is scrutinized regarding the appropriateness of what it claims international psychology should study.

**Refutation of the Brock Approach:** The introductory chapter in Brock's book on international psychology follows an idea from the late 1990s to "de-Americanize" psychology. Brock claimed that textbooks on the history of psychology ignored or purposely excluded work on psychology from other countries, and cynically states that American authors viewed work in psychology from anywhere outside the United States as being of no consequence. Thus, in his diatribe against textbooks on the history of psychology, he says that "*The content of these textbooks is not the history of psychology at all. It is the history of American psychology*" [8, p. 4].

Brock's arguments are flawed in various ways, with the most obvious being that he is wrong in saying that only American contributions are mentioned in textbooks. Marx and Hillix [9], in a chapter on psychology and science from their book on Systems and Theories in Psychology, describe the contributions made to psychology by thinkers such as Socrates and Plato (Greece), Copernicus (Poland), Bacon and Darwin (England), Descartes (France), Leibniz (Germany), Galileo (Italy), Linnaeus (Sweden), Van Leeuwenhoek (Netherlands), and many others who lived hundreds or thousands of years before the United States even became a country.

Another powerful refutation against Brock's complaint that American textbooks do not include mention of non-American psychology is the fact that Marx and Hillix's book includes 100 pages of discussion about psychology in (a) Europe, Australia, and Canada; (b) Russia, (c) the Orient (Burma, Ceylon, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand); and (d) Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Furthermore, the fact that Marx and Hillix's book was written 33 years before Brock made his argument completely undermines his accusation. So, why did Brock never mention Marx and Hillix's book?

Another weakness in Brock's argument has two parts. The first is what he says over several pages at the end of his chapter, namely, that "*No one book can provide a comprehensive account of the history of psychology*" [8, p. 13], which contradicts all the arguments he made about textbooks on the history of psychology being not sufficiently comprehensive. The second part is his admission that he also does not include descriptions of psychology from all cultures when he teaches courses on the

history of psychology, i.e., he selects readings about only some but not other contributions to the study of psychology. Unfortunately, and disappointingly, he offers no workable solution to the problem he raised.

**Refutation of the Gergen et al. Approach:** In a journal paper that similarly opposed “American psychology,” Gergen et al. [10] also used flawed arguments in presenting their ideas. First, although the title (i.e., “Psychological science in cultural context”) would lead the reader to believe that their paper would stress the importance of psychology as a science, it started with the idea of giving culture primacy over science. That was their initial claim that they think psychology is contingent on culture, rather than psychology being a science, per se. They say that “*science itself [is] a cultural manifestation*” [10, p. 497], and furthermore suggest that “*each culture could be said to require its own separate psychological science*” [10, p. 499].

Gergen et al. also state that the scientific approach reflects western culture, as if other cultures do not think scientifically: They say the western “*scientist possesses a conscious or observing mind, capable of reflecting and recording the nature of a world external to it; that the scientist possesses powers of inductive and deductive logic*” [10, p. 497]. What is absurd about their suggestion is its implication that those cognitive facilities exist only among western people and do not exist among people in non-western cultures. They would not make such an argument if they understood human reasoning. That is, whether someone is a scientist or an average person, the normal human brain in any culture should have a conscious and observing mind that is capable of reflecting on and remembering what is observed in the environment, and should also be capable of inductive and deductive logic. Thus, whereas such reasoning abilities are inherent in all human brains it is illogical to argue that these cognitive capabilities are unique to western culture.

As a further denigration of science they state that psychological science cannot be universal by saying that science (scientific psychology) is merely an outward expression of western culture. But the foregoing paragraph demonstrates that is not true. Psychology as a science *can* be universal (just as physics is universal) as long as



psychology is conducted in a scientific way. Both the history of science and the history of psychology stress this point repeatedly.

Another problem in their argument is its implication that the scientific aspects of psychology, which have largely come from the United States, should be discarded just because such thinking comes from western culture, and they say it should be replaced with other ways of thinking about people. That, unfortunately, would negate the findings from a hundred years of research from America and replace them with ideas about psychology that originated in other countries, regardless of their veracity or scientific merit.

They also object to psychological “practices” [10, p. 497] in the West; but this contradicts the fundamental *raison d’être* of international psychology, i.e., that it should accept the way psychology is practiced in all societies; so why do they reject its practice in western societies? And their reference to “practices” is vague. Do they object to (a) practicing the scientific method in doing research or (b) practicing psychotherapy? If they are referring to the scientific method, they do not understand what science is. Alternately, if they are referring to the practice of psychotherapy, then they have a limited view of psychotherapy because the last 100 years have clearly demonstrated that Freud’s [12] approach to psychotherapy has been challenged both in Austria (where it originated) and in several other countries, including the United States. Thus, psychotherapy has already been revised many times, such that there are several different approaches from which to choose.

Whereas their arguments are illogical, one must ask why Gergen et al. are demeaning the western practice of scientific psychology. It seems that being anti-American is an essential aspect of the current thinking among international psychologists. This is revealed in another anti-western assertion, i.e., they say American psychologists have been insisting that all cultures should imitate the way psychology is conducted in North America regardless of cultural differences. Those authors imply that American psychologists want “*to exploit... [and] colonize other cultures*” [10, p. 497] by exporting western ideas and values, but they gave no evidence of that. If one logically analyzes the reasons for such anti-Americanism,

there are two possible explanations, namely, either they have a strong cultural bias against Americans, or they use the rhetoric to demonstrate to their non-western colleagues that they are being “politically correct,” i.e., sensitive to other cultures. In any case, the problem with their approach is that all their arguments are false.

**Refutation of the Stevens and Wedding Approach:** Stevens and Wedding’s [11] approach to international psychology is decidedly inappropriate for several reasons (due to space limitations, this analysis is brief). First, it is overly ambitious to have too many objectives; some of which are actually unethical, while others are naïve in what they wish to accomplish. That is, they claim they should be involved in interventions in national and international (including the United Nations) politics, economics, and ecology. This list of large-scale objectives is far more than any one organization, especially a small group of psychologists, could hope to accomplish (as even large nations cannot achieve these objectives), which makes their list unrealistic and over-ambitious.

Second, they want to make “macro-level interventions” in policy making among nations and even at the United Nations. This is the equivalent of political activism, but, according to all codes of ethics for practicing psychologists, it is unethical for psychologists to attempt to impose their will on other persons or groups. Also, political activism is illegal in many countries.

Third, many international psychologists have been rejecting ideas from western cultures, namely, they assume that their ideas are somehow superior to the ideas of people in other countries or cultures. In fact, this sounds like they are doing what Gergen et al. [10] condemned, i.e., if it is wrong for Americans to impose their ideas on other cultures, how could it be right for international psychologists to impose their ideas on Americans or on other cultures and countries? The same argument holds for any attempt by international psychologists to impose their ideas on national or international economies. It is also naïve and unrealistic for them to think that their ideas about the ecology of the environment are more informed than the ideas of experts in that field.

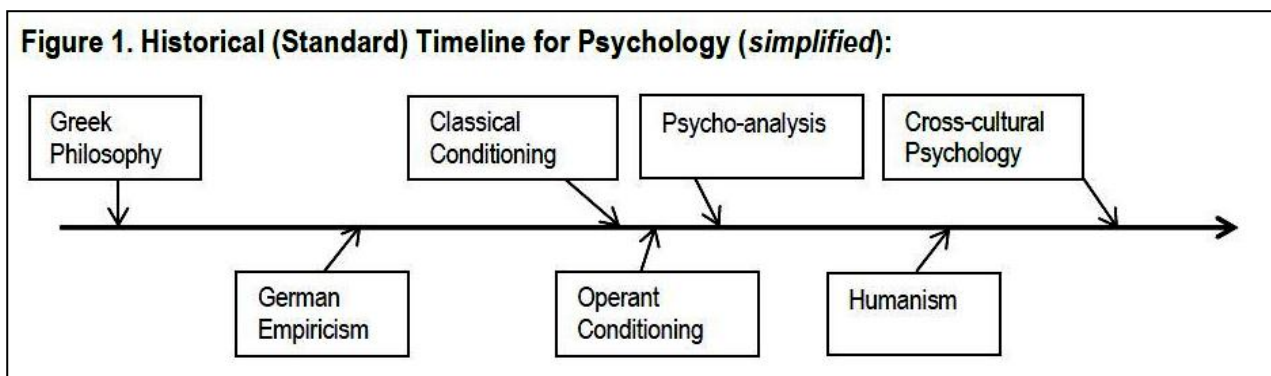
Also, those authors claim that international psychology differs from cross-

cultural psychology but emphasize cultural differences throughout their writings; and they also use cultural differences as the paramount reason for arguing against accepting scientific psychology. Thus, it must be asked whether their claimed distinctiveness from cross-cultural psychology is real.

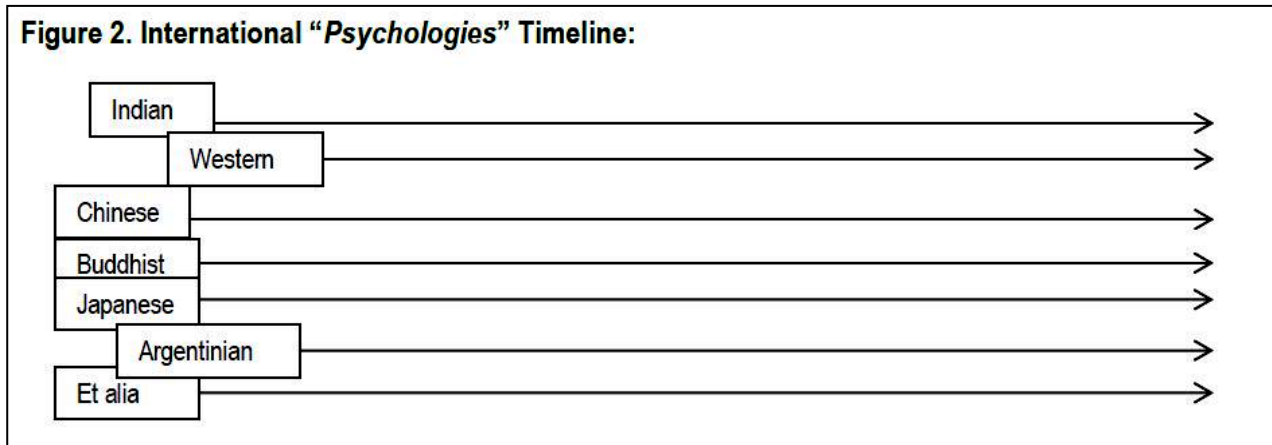
**Summary of Problems in the International Psychology Approach:** This summarizes the problems with the road international psychology is taking: (1) The objectives are overly ambitious because too many objectives are not achievable; (2) It is naïve to reject science and demand that history should be re-written; (3) It is unethical for international psychologists to impose their ideas on other nations; (4) Political activism is illegal in many countries; (5) International psychologists are still trying to define their own area; (6) Their definitions are contradictory, i.e., international psychologists try to distinguish their area from cross-cultural psychology, but their study focuses on culture and use culture as a reason to reject psychological science; and (7) To continue stressing imagined differences is divisive for all concerned psychologists.

### **Timelines in Psychology: Locating International Psychology**

What most international psychologists are proposing in abandoning scientific psychology raises yet another question, namely, how international psychology fits in the overall picture of psychology as a field of study. Consider how the historical timeline of psychology usually appears, i.e., with a singular line that shows contributions from various sources over time (NB: This diagram is only illustrative and simplified because of journal space limitations), as shown in Figure 1:

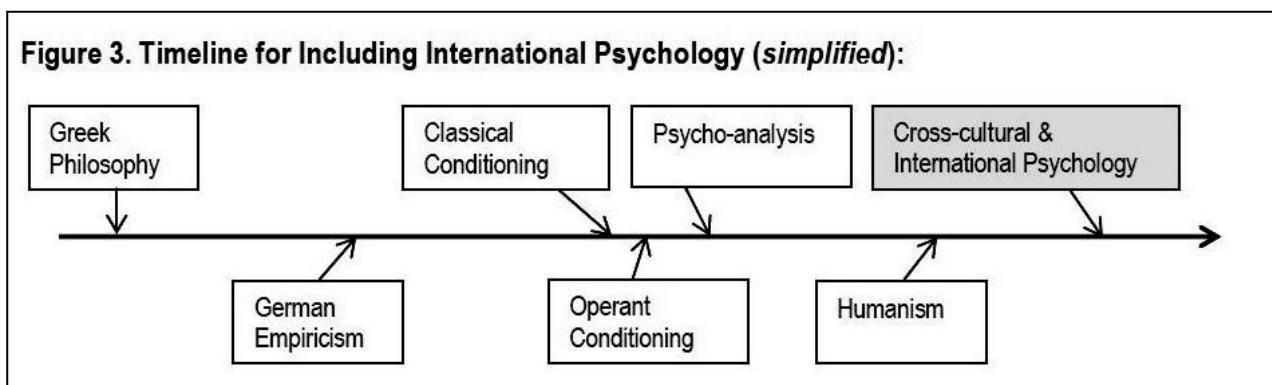


For Brock, the timeline would have to be split into hundreds of separate lines in order to depict the different histories of many countries and cultures (NB: only some countries are shown because there are too many to depict in this small space), as shown in Figure 2:



But even Brock realizes (at the end of his chapter) that it is impractical to write so many textbooks on the history of psychology for over 200 countries, cultures, and religions (which he and his colleagues believe also have separate psychologies)!

Therefore, a more appropriate view would portray international psychology as another area of psychology that could contribute to psychology as a developing field of research (here, international psychology is depicted as merged with cross-cultural psychology), as shown in Figure 3.



### **Prescriptions for the Future of International Psychology:**

Before prescribing solutions to any problem, one must consider what will happen if no corrective action is taken. Thus, it must be realized that the road

international psychologists are taking when they make culture more important than science is a road that will end in a swampy quagmire, as if it were taking us back in time to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. That is, when psychology was first emerging as an area of study, it was not scientific, and that opened it to severe and cynical criticisms from the traditional sciences. This had two consequences: The first was that psychologists were regarded as charlatans. The other was a response by serious psychologists to endeavor to build psychology *into* a science by means of careful observation, quantification, and use of the scientific method, and thereby made significant contributions to legitimizing psychology. Therefore, it would be a terrible disaster to abandon the idea that psychology is a science merely because some modern writers with little knowledge of history wish to be seen as “politically correct” in the eyes of their foreign colleagues.

**Recommendations:** Based on the foregoing analyses, it would help to offer some guidelines for the road psychologists should take to develop the field of international psychology:

(1) First, do not reject the scientific method! Rather, accept it as a major advance in human history, and advocate and promote psychology as a science because it provides a wealth of knowledge about the behavior of human beings, their world, and their place in the universe.

(2) International psychologists should abandon the strong anti-Americanism that abounds in their books and papers. In some cases, American psychologists are depicted as people who “*exploit...and colonize other cultures*” [10, p. 497]. Such negativity toward one nationality of psychologists is prejudiced and exclusionist, which means international psychologists are practicing the very bias they claim to despise. Their bias would lead to a result for them that is precisely what they predict for others, i.e., “*collective distrust occurs when one group believes that another group harbors ominous intentions [and]... forms the core of out-group stereotypes and can reach paranoid levels, as in the collective delusion of persecution*” [11, p. 5]. Hence, international psychologists should cease and desist from their divisive rhetoric, and live by their own principles of open-mindedness and acceptance of psychologists

from other cultures, including the one they have been criticizing.

(3) International psychologists should readily accept the confluence of international psychology and cross-cultural psychology as a merged discipline, which could be renamed “Cross-cultural and International Psychology.” This would resolve the contradiction in the way those authors focus on studying different cultures and use culture to criticize the way science is used in some cultures, while claiming that their area is not cross-cultural psychology.

(4) Regard the history of psychology as an evolving body of knowledge composed of contributions that have been made by people from various fields and countries; and view international psychology as an added area of knowledge. In this way, psychology will continue to grow as more researchers around the world add to it; such that history will not have to be rewritten in hundreds of ways.

(5) Recognize that psychology is becoming international as a natural development of increased worldwide interaction and exchanges of knowledge. Thereby, international psychologists do not have to be antagonistic or reject American or western contributions. Evidence of this evolving international development is now overwhelming, particularly in the appearance of many papers from the entire world being published in traditional journals, and with many journals now including numerous editorial board members, as well as editors, from all over the world.

(6) Realize that psychologists can contribute to the betterment of people and the world by operating as responsible scientists and practitioners, without imposing ideas on other people or nations.

(7) Refine and clarify the objectives of international psychology to make them achievable.

### **Conclusion:**

The foregoing discussion reveals that psychologists argue about their topics and methods, as in any science, but this reflects how science progresses as well as the complexity of psychology. Thus, in conclusion, consider the words of James Grier Miller (1916-2002), a great psychologist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, who summarized the complexity of the field of psychology. He said most people think of physics and

chemistry as the “hard” sciences and psychology as a “soft” science; but, in reality, physics and chemistry are the “easy” sciences, while psychology is the “hard” science!

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