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The modernity/coloniality of being: Hegemonic psychology as intercultural relations

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ABSTRACT

Decolonial approaches consider modernity in terms of its inherent “dark side”, *coloniality*: ways of thinking, feeling, and being associated with European global domination. We apply a decolonial approach to illuminate the coloniality inherent in the independent selfways that constitute standards of hegemonic psychological science. On one hand, these modern ways of being are the product of colonial violence that enabled their characteristic sense of abstraction from context. On the other hand, the promotion or growth orientation associated with these modern/colonial ways of being reproduces domination. We trace consequences of the modernity/coloniality of being for intercultural relations in a discussion of limited-good or closed-system mentalities that are prevalent in many communities of the Global South. Standard scientific accounts represent these mentalities as a form of pathology. A decolonial response emphasizes not only how these mentalities contribute to collective well-being, but also how independent selfways and associated delusions about *unlimited* good afford intercultural relations of (colonial) domination inherent in modernity.

The theme of this special issue is to consider how the colonial past impacts intercultural relations in the present. One problem with this formulation is that it can imply a conception of colonialism as a historical period with a definite conclusion—something that existed *then*, such that we can wonder about its influence on *now*. In contrast, decolonial perspectives rooted in epistemic standpoints of the Global South emphasize the extent to which coloniality—ways of thinking, feeling, and being associated with European global domination—has persisted long after the formal end of colonial rule (e.g., Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2011). In its most obvious form, coloniality persists in relations of power that naturalize colonial domination and install colonial institutions (and their post-colonial custodians) as legitimate owners of resources plundered from Indigenous Peoples. Less obviously, coloniality persists in particular forms of knowledge and ways of being that colonial power imposed on the world as a hegemonic standard. Accordingly, decolonial perspectives propose that any proper understanding of global modernity requires recognition and acknowledgment of the coloniality that constitutes its inherent dark side (Mignolo, 2011). From this epistemic standpoint, the *modern/colonial* global order is not a fellowship of nations that emerged after colonial empire; instead, it represents a colonial present that is an ongoing manifestation of, rather than break from, the colonial past.

In this paper, we apply these ideas to rethink modern mentalities—habits of mind and ways of being—that constitute normative standards in hegemonic psychological science. Extending the idea of coloniality as the dark side of modernity, we consider implications for the coloniality of being as the dark side of modern individualist mentalities. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). On one hand, the coloniality of modern mentalities is a reference to their origins: specifically, how colonial violence created the conditions of

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possibility for modern individualism.¹ On the other hand, the coloniality of modern mentalities is a reference to their consequences for reproduction of colonial violence.

A primary implication of our analysis is to illuminate the extent to which hegemonic psychological science constitutes a form of intercultural relations. The reasoning goes like this: if coloniality and associated violence are forms of intercultural relations, and if the modern individualist ways of being that constitute standards of hegemonic psychological science are manifestations of coloniality, then it follows that the propagation of these standard ways of being via hegemonic psychological science constitutes a form of (violent) intercultural relations. From this perspective, hegemonic models of self, identity, health, well-being, motivation, emotion, cognition, and perception are neither the properties of a “just natural” organism or the reflection of politically innocent cultural developments apart from power. Instead, they are expressions of the coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2000): particular constructions of reality, rooted in modern/colonial experience, that masquerade as positionless or disinterested fact. The practice of hegemonic psychology imposes this particular regime of cultural knowledge as a global standard, often regardless of its fit for local ecology. The violence of this imposition lies not only in the mismatch with local ecology or even (extermination of particular knowledge or ways of knowing; i.e., *epistemicide* de Sousa Santos, 2014), but also in the reproduction and extension of modern/colonial realities that serve interests of global domination.

Theory from the west: modern individualism as hegemonic standard

A variety of writers have noted the extent to which modern mentalities have their roots in the neoliberal individualism prevalent in settings that are Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and supposedly Democratic—in a word, WEIRD (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Despite their particular origins in WEIRD settings, colonial power has imposed these mentalities as a hegemonic standard for global humanity and mainstream academic work. When scientists, practitioners, or administrators have encountered Other ways of being that differ from WEIRD standards, the tendency has been to interpret such differences as pathological deviations that reflect societal immaturity and are productive of harm.

The modernization paradigm

In the waning days of high modernity, before intellectual disruptions of postmodernism called into question the association of modernity with inevitable progress, researchers explored the psychological characteristics associated with economic growth and societal development. An important contributor to this project was Inkeles (1969) who analyzed interviews with participants from six “developing” countries—Argentina, Chile, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), India, Israel, and Nigeria—to identify the particular mentalities associated with modern lifestyles and economic achievement. These tendencies of “individual modernity” (Inkeles, 1969) included a shift in influence from traditional authority such as parents and religious figures to more secular authority such as government officials; openness to new experiences and new technologies; belief in science and medicine as ways to exert agency over human problems; ambition to achieve educational and occupational upward mobility; long-term planning; punctuality; interest in local and international news; and active participation in local politics (Inkeles, 1969; Inkeles & Smith, 1974).

Later work has confirmed a relationship between modern development and individual modernity in the form of modern individualist values (Triandis, 1995). Much of this work comes from analyses of the World Values Survey, which proposes a classification of societies based on two dimensions (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). One dimension contrasts traditional values based on religious, parental, or family authority with secular-rational values based on autonomy from such authorities. The other dimension contrasts survival values related to economic and physical security, low generalized trust, and low participation in local politics with self-expression values related to an emphasis on personal choice and subjective well-being. Research suggests that modern, affluent societies like those in the United States, Japan, Germany, and The Netherlands are high in secular-rational orientation and self-expression values. In contrast, formerly colonized, less affluent societies like those in Latin American, African and South Asian countries are high in traditional orientation and survival values (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

One can understand the relationship in terms of bidirectional causality. In one direction, modernization theorists proposed that societies promote tendencies of individual modernity by investing in the nuclear family, urban residence, formal education, employment in industrial factories, exposure to mass media, consumption in the market economy, and other modern institutions (Inkeles, 1969; see Garcia, Greenfield, Montiel-Acevedo, Vidaña-Rivera, & Colorado, 2017). In the other direction, modernization theorists and their intellectual offspring emphasized the causal potential of individual modernity as a source for transformation of societies (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Indeed, Inkeles and Smith (1974) described individual modernity as a precondition for modern institutions: “nation building and institution building are only empty exercises unless the attitudes and capacities of the people keep pace with other forms of development” (p. 3). Consistent with this idea, subsequent research suggests that an increase in individualistic ways of being leads to societal changes in the direction of WEIRD modernity (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

¹ Our reference to “the coloniality of modern mentalities” recalls the concept of *colonial mentality*: “internalized oppression, characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority ... that involves an automatic and uncritical rejection of [colonized ways of being] and uncritical preference for [colonizer ways of being]” (David & Okazaki, 2006, p. 241). Whereas theory and research in psychology has largely limited the concept of *colonial mentality* to the effects of colonial violence on people in colonized settings (e.g., Utsey, Abrams, Opare-Henaku, Bolden, & Williams, 2015), our use extends the concept to include processes associated with the coloniality of being—for example, high-energy lifestyles, pursuit of personal growth, and expansive modes of existence made possible by colonial violence—among people in dominant centers of the modern global order (cf. Fanon, 1952/1967; Fanon, 1952/1967; Memmi, 1965).

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