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Universal Pluralism: Appreciating and Exploring Both Similarity and Difference Across People and Cultures

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Are people from the world's various cultures essentially the same or fundamentally different? Answers to this perennial conundrum can sometimes be forced through habits of binary logic into either universalism or pluralism/relativism. However, this article argues that both are true, a perspective we might call universal pluralism: There really are universals experienced by people globally due to the existential condition of being human, but these universals can be expressed and experienced in meaningfully different ways depending on the cultural context. The article moreover argues that most scholars would endorse some variant of this perspective—even if they might have an academic commitment to *focusing* on either universal or relativistic dynamics—so it is a unifying pathway for the field in studying and conceptualizing cross-cultural phenomena.

Public Significance Statement

This article argues that rather than viewing people from different cultures as essentially similar (“universalism”) or fundamentally distinct (“pluralism”), both perspectives are correct (“universal pluralism”) and moreover should ideally be used in combination (since exclusively prioritizing just one or the other can have damaging consequences). Such ideas are well accepted in cross-cultural psychology but may be less familiar to those in other fields who may nevertheless find this kind of unifying perspective helpful, whatever their specialty (even if not focused on cultures *per se*).

Keywords: culture, cross-cultural, universalism, relativism, pluralism

“Culture” has been conceptualized in many ways, but a particularly influential definition is that of Schwartz (1997), who argues that we all “carry within us patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that we acquire and modify throughout our lifetimes,” which are one’s “mental programs.” While people have unique elements (i.e., their personality), much is “shared with other people in our society,” with this “shared programming” constituting culture, defined as “the patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that are shared by the members of a society or other bounded social group (ethnic, religious,

national, etc.).” People do not just inhabit “a” culture but myriad sociocultural spheres at varying scales, as delineated by Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory, which includes microsystems (immediate social setting), mesosystems (interaction between microsystems), exosystems (wider community), and macrosystems (broader systems that impinge upon exosystems). Nevertheless, comparing people from different “cultures” (in an exo- or macrosystemic sense) has been a source of fascination and discussion for millennia.

The debate is often framed—especially by those not particularly close to it—as a binary choice between opposing perspectives. Berry et al. (2002) describe these as (a) universalism (also known as a “culture-comparative” approach), which focuses on *commonalities* between people and cultures, and (b) relativism or pluralism (also called a “culturalist” approach), which addresses *differences*. Universalism expresses the insight that people are essentially similar worldwide on account of their shared humanity, with apparent differences being merely trivial. Pluralism/relativism captures the contrary perspective that such differences are much more significant than, and may even render obsolete, apparent

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similarities. Crucially though, while there are sometimes “extreme” iterations of both perspectives, Berry et al. suggested most scholars lean toward more “moderate” versions—prioritizing one but still acknowledging that the other has some validity—which together one could call universal pluralism (UP). There are universals, due to the common condition of being human, but these are expressed and experienced in different ways depending on the cultural context. Despite either-or logic suggesting one must choose one stance or another, most people would probably accept some version of UP, leaving a productive conversation on the precise *calibration* of the interplay between universalism and pluralism.

This article is thus situated within a tradition in *American Psychologist* of articles which introduce the broader field to an important but underappreciated advance in some particular area. Within cross-cultural psychology, UP is a well-established perspective (even if that specific label is rarely used), with decades of work that align with it in various ways. Crucially though, this synthesizing perspective is often overlooked when such scholarship is communicated to other audiences, including academics in other fields in psychology. Such audiences are more likely to encounter a simplified version of cross-cultural psychology where universalism and pluralism are framed as opposing sides in a disciplinary debate. This article thus introduces the broader field to a framework that can accommodate the nuances found in contemporary cross-cultural scholarship. Doing so not merely allows better understanding of cross-cultural psychology but is valuable to scholarship in all fields, even if academics are not specifically engaged in cross-cultural work. In all psychological research, a crucial question—even if it remains implicit—is the extent to which the findings can be generalized. In that regard, all psychologists need to have an understanding of cross-cultural dynamics, including the merits of universalism and pluralism. As a result, UP not only

represents a unifying pathway in cross-cultural psychology but is relevant across psychology. And even for psychologists for whom these insights are already familiar, it is still valuable to have the perspective be named and articulated. At present, the most prominent relevant terminology is Berry et al.’s labels of “moderate” universalism or relativism, but these are not ideal, as they still privilege, and nudge people, in one direction or another. As such, even scholars with a good implicit understanding of the UP perspective may find it useful to have a conceptual label that more equally balances the two component elements. This article explores these ideas over three main sections, beginning by elucidating the universalist and then the pluralistic perspectives, before presenting their synthesis as UP.

Universalism

The universalist stance is motivated by the belief in and search for human universals, focusing on similarities across cultures. Its animating spirit was articulated by “Terence” (Publius Terentius Afer), the Roman playwright and former slave of North African descent, in 154 BCE, with the sentiment (translated as) “I am a human being. I consider nothing that is human alien to me.” Until relatively recently, most work in psychology was arguably in this spirit. Crucially though, in hindsight, much of this reflected a *biased* or *skewed* universalism, where findings from a relatively narrow and privileged section of the world—described by Henrich et al. (2010) as Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD)—were taken as being universal and generalized inappropriately to other populations. Although the WEIRD label has itself come to be seen as problematic, as discussed below, it captures a critique that remains a helpful diagnosis of the field. This section looks at these ideas in three parts, beginning with the charge of biased or skewed universals, before considering what more genuine universals might involve, while also noting two fundamental constraints upon realizing these.

Whose Universalism?

The essence of the universalizing perspective is that, while cultures vary greatly, *people* do not. Such research is still attentive to differences between places, but focuses on how people respond to such differences in similar ways. Researchers might use surveys like the Gallup World Poll (GWP) to explore contextual factors that affect well-being, for example, and assess the extent to which societies differ in their prevalence, with people reliably affected as such. Biswas-Diener and Diener (2006), for instance, showed that homelessness is hugely detrimental to well-being, regardless of location. If poverty and deprivation invariably hinder well-being, researchers can explore and explain cross-cultural differences in the latter according to variations in the former (Lund et al., 2010). Such research thus tends to be animated by some vision of a common “human nature,” with societies appraised in terms of their capacity to meet its needs.

Perhaps the most influential model is by Maslow (1943), with six overarching needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, self-actualization, and transcendence. His ideas have been somewhat misinterpreted, certainly in popular culture. There is no record of him developing the iconic pyramid configuration with which his work is associated today (Bridgman et al., 2019), and he did not suggest one might ascend “up” the hierarchy by fulfilling, therefore leaving behind, its more foundational levels, writing that people are “partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time” (p. 388). Misunderstandings aside, his framework is still not without pertinent criticisms. Its hierarchical nature has been questioned, since higher level resources can mitigate the relative lack of lower ones: meaning/purpose, for instance, can be achieved amid material deprivation, and indeed the very effort to address such deficiencies may *provide* purpose, which is often higher in countries with greater economic difficulties (Diener et al., 2011). The claim to total universality can also be questioned, as one can find people who appear not to share one of the needs, like monastics who prefer solitude. But claims to universality do not rest on *unanimity*; it is reasonable to still make such a claim if a vast majority of people endorse a given need as important.

But how representative is such universalism really? In diagnosing psychology as being skewed toward WEIRD populations, Henrich et al. (2010) highlighted a survey by Arnett (2008) of top psychology journals, in which 96% of subjects were from Western industrialized countries (host to just 12% of the world’s population). Even more problematically, Henrich et al. noted these “research articles routinely assume that their results are broadly representative, rarely adding even a cautionary footnote on how far their findings can be generalized.” Thus, despite the presumption of universality, the universality in question was rather WEIRD in nature. Not only was this bias problematic for being a bias *per se*; Henrich et al. suggested it was genuinely *weird* from a global standpoint, with those in relatively WEIRD places being described as “some of the most psychologically unusual people on Earth.” Though the WEIRD label itself has become critiqued, as explored shortly, Henrich et al. did capture a situation that other scholars have similarly challenged, namely, the way that psychology as practiced in Western cultures, especially the United States, came to dominate the field internationally, to the point where this power largely became invisible, accepted as natural and the “way things are,” as is the way with hegemonies. But these power dynamics have increasingly been recognized as problematic, generating a “universality crisis” (Hutmacher & Franz, 2025).

Danziger (2006) offers a useful history and analysis of how this situation unfolded. Ever since psychology emerged as a modern academic field in the 19th century, it has been influenced by the contexts in which it has developed, which affects all its aspects, from the choice of research questions to the theories used in interpreting data. One might thus speak of

multiple “ethnopsychologies” across the globe, at varying scales, down to the subnational, for example, “Ifaluk ethnopsychology” (Lutz, 1985). Yet over recent decades, Western ethnopsychology, especially an American version, has come to dominate the field, particularly since World War II. Before the war were numerous centers of knowledge and practice, but afterward the economic and military dominance of the United States meant American psychology was exported globally, effectively becoming the sole center, to the extent that the qualifying adjective “American” became erased as superfluous. So, even while this hegemonic version was still an *American* ethnopsychology, it has often been regarded uncritically—especially by scholars in the United States—as psychology *in toto* (Pickren, 2009). Yet this history of a false/skewed universalism does not mean one must give up the universalizing ideal.

A More Universal Universalism?

For people who appreciate universalism, the problem is not that it is wrong *per se*, but more that there have been issues with how it has been realized. Two key interlinked problems are that it has been conceived far too narrowly, and relatedly that power dynamics have influenced its conceptualization. These problems may not actually be, in principle, totally solvable, and so might always constitute an inherent limitation that prevents the complete ideal realization of universalism. Nevertheless, it may yet be possible to work toward their amelioration. In terms of narrowness, while efforts toward the decolonization of psychology have led to a flourishing of more pluralistic work—as considered next—some of this scholarship has kept the spirit of universalism alive but has expanded it to make it more universal. Such work thus exemplifies the UP paradigm, as discussed shortly, but is worth highlighting here to show universalism can be “rescued” from the biased way it has previously been constructed. In one of two *American Psychologist* special issues on decolonization in 2025, for example, Maypilama et al. (2025) articulated a philosophy, developed by the Yolŋu people indigenous to Australia, known as *Waka Durrkanhaynu* (“regenerating the existence of life”). This wisdom is not presented as something that should be viewed or kept as exclusive to the Yolŋu people but instead as having the potential to help humanity at large; the article subtitle describes “Indigenous and Western researchers engaging in two-way exchange to resolve our existential crises.” In such sentiments, one can see a hopeful spirit of universalism, one that has been greatly expanded to incorporate such ideas.

A similar expansion is found in the Global Wellbeing Initiative, which since 2019 has sought to explore well-being from a more inclusive perspective through a module in the GWP that incorporates perspectives on well-being deemed especially valued in Eastern cultures. While the GWP has excelled in researching well-being globally, its design has

still been subject to the Western-centric influences that characterize psychology more broadly. Tsai (2007), for instance, has argued that cultures vary in their “ideal affect”—“affective states that people strive for or ideally want to feel” (p. 243)—and that Western and Eastern cultures have preferences for high- and low-arousal states, respectively. The GWP has historically focused on high-arousal states, so the new module instead emphasized low-arousal states and the related phenomenon of balance and harmony. In the results though, these states seem to be relatively universally valued and have no particular association with Eastern locations; if anything, both levels of and preferences for such states were higher in *Western* than Eastern cultures (Lomas et al., 2024). Such findings echo research by Delle Fave et al. (2016) on lay perceptions of happiness across mostly Western nations, in which the most frequent psychological definition was “inner harmony.” Such work suggests that low-arousal states and balance/harmony are not particularly “Eastern”—even if they may have *historically* been given greater emphasis in Eastern cultures—but should instead be regarded as components of an expanded universal conception of well-being.

We return to such sentiments in the UP section, but first must note that efforts to address this narrowness issue may never be completely successful. One inherent problem is that the world’s cultures are so many and complex that one can never be sure the net has been cast wide enough. An example of such limitations is my own efforts toward creating a lexicography of “untranslatable” words (i.e., without exact translation in English) relating to well-being (see e.g., Lomas, 2021). A central issue with the Western centrism of psychology is that English is its default language. Language is an emergent product of culture, so there are many linguistic “maps,” producing variation in how people experience and conceptualize the world, as explored further in the section on UP. This means there are myriad concepts that have been identified and named by another language but which, for many potential reasons, have not been “lexicalized” in English, and so have tended to be overlooked by the field. Some such words may be quite specific to a given culture, with little applicability beyond it. Others, though, may have more universal relevance, which, if they are “discovered” by speakers of another language, often become adopted as loanwords, with a classic example being *Schadenfreude* (pleasure at another’s misfortune). One premise of the lexicography is that psychology would be greatly enriched by studying both kinds of words—those more specific to a particular culture (which thus provide insights into it) and those with wider relevance (which therefore expand the general nomological network in the field, making it more universal). Indeed, the field has *already* benefitted considerably from embracing concepts in non-English languages, with one analysis estimating that perhaps around 60% of the terms commonly used in articles could technically be regarded as loanwords (Lomas, 2020). However, despite the lexicography including nearly 2,000 words at present (see <https://www.drli>

[mlomas.com/lexicography](https://www.drli.com/lexicography)) and generating nine different articles seeking to bring greater conceptual richness to different aspects of well-being—from spirituality (Lomas, 2019a) to character (Lomas, 2019b)—these words are only from around 150 languages out of more than 7,000 estimated to exist (Ethnologue, 2026). Even if researchers may now be able to harness AI for such endeavors, it seems unlikely that this project, or any similar one, could ever be *completely* comprehensive, and an exhaustive universalism (e.g., in terms of “untranslatable” concepts) that is totally realized seems in principle out of reach.

Power Dynamics

A second related issue with seeking a better universalism—which may also be unsolvable in principle—is that power dynamics are inevitably involved. This point can be broached in two main ways: international power imbalances between the United States and other countries, and internal power imbalances within the United States. Regarding the first, even if some psychologists may seek to create a more expansive universalism, encompassing people and ideas from more of the world, the international power dynamics discussed above remain operative. While the geopolitical scene in 2026 is as unstable as it has been for decades, and the international role/position of the United States has become increasingly questioned (both within the United States and abroad), the country remains a superpower. Even if no longer the *sole* such power, given the rapid ascendancy of China, its actions still dominate the world agenda, especially given its legacy of sustained hegemony over decades. These dynamics also influence psychology, including even attempts to make it more universal: The macrolevel international dominance of the United States in geopolitical terms is replicated in microterms with the ongoing dominance of U.S. academics and academic institutions, from universities to journals, even if China’s ascendancy is altering the balance, as reported in *TIME*: “U.S. and U.K. universities continue to lead in academic performance, while China’s universities are catching up in innovation and economic impact” (Chetty & Friedman, 2026). Such dynamics mean movements toward universalization, even if well intentioned, can reproduce dominance. A perennial concern with universalism is how supposed universals themselves get produced, legitimized, and taken up within systems of power. This point applies of course to the biased universalism critiqued above but also applies to efforts toward more universal forms.

This point is evident, for instance, in my own lexicography. An example of psychology’s Western centrism is the ongoing hegemony of English as its default language. But even attempts to challenge this hegemony, such as engaging with untranslatable words, are still defined and constrained by it. The project is, after all, still from an English-centric perspective (its words are untranslatable from the perspective of English), being produced in English (with descriptions of

words in English), and disseminated in English (in English-language journals). Such critiques do not negate the value of the project, but they show how dominant power systems can shape or co-opt even attempts to resist them, much as the corporate capitalist system can commodify even anticapitalist messages (Gilbert, 2008). This stranglehold of English may not be breakable in practical terms, but, even if it was, another language would need to take its place, and that too would involve the exercise of power. With the myriad languages across the world, scholars in different countries need to find some common tongue in which to communicate. Even if the shared international language in 100 years became Chinese rather than English, its choice and operation would equally be a manifestation of geopolitical power.

Besides international power dynamics, efforts toward universalism must also reckon with internal power imbalances within the United States. The United States has a complicated history and indeed present, marred by mistreatment of minority racial and ethnic groups, especially the original native inhabitants and those brought unwillingly from Africa into slavery and their descendants. Conversely, power has historically tended to be mostly wielded, and often still is, by White people with roots in Europe. These power dynamics have shaped psychology itself, given that those groups who have been marginalized in society have likewise lacked equal representation and power in the field (Dupree & Boykin, 2021). Instead, academia is still dominated by the kind of people who often have power in society at large, namely, those from affluent backgrounds and likewise—given how intertwined economics and race tend to be in the United States—from White ethnic groups. There have been laudable attempts to redress such imbalances over recent years, notably the efforts to decolonize psychology, as considered shortly. However, power tends to be tenacious and hard to dismantle, and these inequities remain an issue, especially at senior levels (Venkataraman et al., 2024). As such, when psychology is described as Western centric or American centric, one must ask, whose West or whose America? Similarly, efforts toward universalism—even those that seek a more inclusive form—will inevitably bear the imprint of those in the field whose hands are on the levers of power and influence. This does not mean universalism is a lost cause, but it does mean these inequalities must continuously be wrestled with and addressed, as considered further below in the section on UP. First though, we turn to the perspective of pluralism.

Pluralism

Standing in contrast to the universalizing impulse is one of pluralism or relativism. Its spirit is captured by Kruks (2000) in relation to feminist politics: “The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of ‘universal humankind’ on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect ‘in spite of’ one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as

different” (p. 5). Scholars animated by this impulse, who may identify as culturalist or indigenous, would surely not deny there are universals, given the existential and biological basics of the human condition; needing air to breathe for instance applies to every person. But their attention and priorities are firmly turned toward the meaningful differences among us, on what is not shared. This section elucidates this perspective by considering work which has “complexified” the West, East, and finally the world more broadly.

Complexifying the West

Efforts toward redressing the historical Western-/American-centric nature of psychology are often known as “decolonizing” the field, the significance of which is highlighted by *American Psychologist* having two special issues on this theme in 2025 alone. Much of this scholarship can be seen through a pluralistic lens, amplifying perspectives that have been marginalized by the field and moreover emphasizing what is distinct about them, which above all makes such work pluralistic. This is not to imply all authors would necessarily endorse a full-throated version of pluralism. Some may align with UP but decide to strategically emphasize pluralism as a counterbalance to the previous dominance of universalism (especially a biased one). Some though do articulate stronger forms of pluralism that eschew more universalist sentiments. In “Race versus the human,” for example, Bell (2025) suggests one of the “mechanisms of power” by which Western societies have asserted “colonial control over the world” has been “the meaning given to race and its enforcement of racialization of the body and self.” Bell argues that the “psychological damage inflicted by race is severe and dehumanizing,” to the extent that the “meaning of race and racialization practices prohibits the possibility of people produced as Black from experiencing themselves as human.” One can perhaps still see traces of universalism in Bell’s hope and determination that such dehumanizing practices should end and all people should be allowed to experience their full humanity. But the emphasis is on understanding the unique lived experience of people “produced as Black” by racialization ideas and practices, and not erasing this within a broader, vague universalism. Part of decolonization means centering voices from other countries that have been marginalized in the Western-centric dominance of psychology, with articles highlighting the unique experiences of peoples in places from Palestine (Atallah et al., 2025) to Peru (Velázquez & Ruiz Bravo, 2025). Yet many voices within America have also been neglected historically and need amplifying.

The decolonization of psychology is not only about making the field “less American” but also interrogating the idea of America and “the West” itself, especially around power dynamics pertaining to issues such as race and ethnicity, as discussed above. Such considerations also bring us back to the point that the WEIRD label is increasingly seen as

problematic. There are various issues, such as its implication of a WEIRD versus non-WEIRD binary, when in fact each letter of the acronym is a spectrum on which countries can be variously situated (Ghai, 2021). To that point, one may wonder how WEIRD the United States actually now is. In terms of democracy, for instance, in the *Economist Intelligence Unit's* (2025) influential index, the United States is placed 29th out of 244 countries/territories (falling from 20th in 2014) and, while ranking higher than most places, is still deemed a “flawed democracy.” Or on education, in the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (2023) most recent 2022 PISA ranking, among the 38 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development countries, the United States is 28th in math, 12th in science, and 6th in reading. It is still, of course, relatively democratic and educated (compared to all countries) but is hardly exemplary. More fundamentally though, one can even question what makes the United States “Western” at all and likewise what “the West” itself is (Lomas et al., 2023). While the United States is Western in a literal geographical sense, even that designation is based on the world's “center” (0° longitude) running symbolically through London, which is a legacy of the United Kingdom being the global superpower when Greenwich Mean Time was designated the world's standard in 1884. Ever since though, the United States has self-consciously defined itself as Western, or at least people with power have done so. This includes drawing on lineages of thought and tradition linked to Europe especially, such as its Judeo-Christian heritage, and recent eras such as the Enlightenment.

But the modern United States is a place of remarkable multicultural complexity and has also been shaped by myriad non-Western peoples and traditions. In self-identifying as Western, this has consequently also meant marginalizing voices who may not share these Western/European affiliations. As such, part of the movement to decolonize psychology includes celebrating multicultural diversity within the United States, giving fairer hearing to people who may not see themselves as Western and/or who might identify with other cultures (even if some also embrace a Western identity). Hence, there has been the emergence of paradigms like Indigenous American psychology (Blume, 2021), African American psychology (Neville et al., 2008), and Asian American psychology (Nagayama Hall & Okazaki, 2002). Moreover, just as America and the West are being complexified, so is the East.

Complexifying the East

There has been a tendency in psychology to view the East in relatively homogeneous terms, above all as being “collectivistic,” in contrast to the supposedly more individualist West. Yet both binaries—East–West and collectivism–individualism—have increasingly been critiqued (Lomas et al., 2022). In the contemporary era, the collectivism–individualism distinction was brought to attention by the likes of Markus and Kitayama

(1991), who described those with a collectivist orientation, for example, as having “distinct conceptions of individuality that insist on the fundamental relatedness of individuals,” with an emphasis on “attending to others, fitting in, and harmonious interdependence with them” (p. 224). Yet one can perhaps discern the deeper roots of the distinction in a mode of discourse that Said (1979) influentially disparaged as “Orientalism”: the process by which 19th-century Western thinkers came to understand their society by contrasting it with the “Other” of the Orient. This sometimes had benevolent, albeit still contentious, “romantic” forms, where the East was viewed through a utopian lens as superior in various ways, such as wiser and more spiritual (Taylor, 2004). More common and troubling though were discourses used in the attempt to justify colonialism, for instance presenting the East as inefficient and thus apparently “in need” of intervention. Within this Orientalist frame, the individualism self-consciously celebrated in the West became juxtaposed with a view of the East as more communal and conspicuously *lacking* in individuality (Martinez Mateo et al., 2013).

The individualism–collectivism binary has been explored in hundreds of studies, with this literature now so substantial that there are many meta-analyses covering various angles and aspects. Yet this scholarship has also complexified the distinction, both in itself and in its conventional mapping onto the East–West binary, with the latter similarly becoming problematized. The East–West construction presents the hemispheres as if discretely bounded, overlooking the dynamic intertransmission of people and ideas across borders. This criticism is particularly apposite in this era of globalization, with its cross-fertilization of cultures. Thus ostensibly Western ideologies such as consumer capitalism have been embraced in Asian countries, with the “modernization” theory of cultural change suggesting a general global movement toward greater individualism (Hamamura, 2012); likewise, socioeconomic development appears to precede preference for individualistic values and practices (Santos et al., 2017). Moreover, it is increasingly realized that East and West are vast oversimplifications that homogenize and obscure the heterogeneity of both arenas. Consider the Global Wellbeing Initiative GWP module introduced above. One item asked about levels of calmness, while another asked whether people prefer a calm or an exciting life (Lomas et al., 2024). Contrary to the stereotype that low-arousal positive states are more highly valued and experienced in the East, levels of and preferences for calmness were higher overall in the *West*. Most relevantly here though, to the point about internal regional complexity, the East included both the regions with the highest levels of and preference for calmness (Southeast Asia and East Asia, respectively) and the lowest (South Asia).

One must also reckon with the incredible pace of change in the East, which means even if Eastern cultures have *historically* prioritized low-arousal states and balance/harmony, these may not necessarily be emphasized today. Asian societies such as Japan and South Korea were among the fastest

growing global economies in the second half of the 20th century, but although such progress has been positive for the countries in many ways, the overall picture may be complex, a dialectical situation that Boman (2021) calls “parallelism,” whereby globalization means “many related events and processes are taking place at the same time,” including some negative consequences. These may include a detrimental impact on outcomes such as balance in life, with some scholars concerned that modern iterations of places like South Korea have become unbalanced in relation to education and work/leisure time (Matsuda et al., 2024). Or in Japan, its culture of overworking has been considered so severe that it has generated the term *karoshi*—“working oneself to death” (Kondo & Oh, 2010). Equally bleakly, while suicide mortality has fortunately declined among most Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development member states, Japan and South Korea are two unhappy exceptions (Jeon et al., 2016). The East is thus highly dynamic and heterogenous and from a pluralistic perspective demands complexifying.

Complexifying the World

Beyond West and East, it is crucial not to overlook the rest of the world, as emphasized by Krysz et al. (2025), who critiqued the tendency in psychology, when it does attend to cross-cultural issues, for over-indexing on “WEIRD–Confucian comparisons” and a related “tendency to draw conclusions about ‘non-WEIRD’ cultures in general based on data from Confucian societies.” Analyzing 1,466,019 scientific abstracts and 60 large-scale cross-cultural psychological projects, they found “the underrepresentation of non-European Union postcommunist societies and the almost total invisibility of Pacific Island, Caribbean, Middle African, and Central Asian societies within the research database of psychology.” They therefore called for “a shift in cross-cultural studies toward midsize (7+ countries) and ideally large-scale (50+ countries) cross-cultural studies.” Even while we await further such research though, there is nevertheless a good base of relevant work, especially in fields like anthropology, that has already complexified the world.

There is keen attention in such fields, for example, to the impact of linguistic variation. It has been influentially argued by semioticians such as Korzybski (1933) that language is a “map” that allows people to represent and navigate the world, influencing their very understanding and experience of it. As with conventional cartography, language maps our worlds by imposing boundaries, parsing them into cognitively digestible elements. With this process of boundary construction, four points are particularly crucial, namely, boundaries are somewhat fuzzy, fluid, socially constructed, and culturally dependent (Lomas, 2018). Language is an emergent product of culture, so there are many linguistic “maps,” producing variation in how people experience and conceptualize the world, as alluded to above in relation to my lexicography (Lomas, 2021).

This recognition is known as the linguistic relativity hypothesis (LRH), whose most prominent modern advocates are the anthropologists Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1956), such that the LRH is sometimes referred to as the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.” As Whorf said, “we dissect nature along lines laid out by our native languages ... The world is presented as a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized ... largely by the linguistic systems in our minds” (pp. 213–214). The LRH has generated much debate, with a vast body of research teasing apart its nuances, such as whether variation in how languages parse the color spectrum influences how people actually perceive color (Cibelli et al., 2016). But the key insight of the LRH, which most scholars at least accept in some weak form, is that language affects the way people experience the world (with debates then centering on how and to what extent it does). The LRH thus provides a compelling lens through which to appreciate how culture can shape psychology in a fundamental way.

A key idea in the anthropological literature, for example, is that some seemingly common states are not widely experienced in certain cultures, or might be felt and interpreted in ways that diverge from their manifestations in Western contexts. According to Russell (1991), for instance, there is no explicit word for sadness in the Tahitian or Chewong languages; no word for fear in Ifaluk, Utku, or Pintupi; and no word for surprise in Fore, Dani, or Malay. These absences do not necessarily mean such people do not experience states that approximate to these labels. But it may suggest they do not encounter these widely or often enough to warrant coining words to represent them. Conversely, as discussed above, many languages have “untranslatable” words that lack a direct English equivalent, indicating phenomena that are recognized in other cultures but are not widely experienced in English-speaking ones (Lomas, 2018). There is also a substantial literature on culture-bound psychopathologies (Kohrt et al., 2014). This is not simply variation in how common disorders are experienced, but where sociocultural aspects of the disorder are inextricably connected to its pathophysiology, and thus are defining features of it. *Taijin kyofusho*, for instance, is a Japanese social anxiety disorder involving a fear of offending others through awkward social behavior or an imagined physical defect, which Kirmayer (1991) argues is not simply a cultural overlay of a universal condition but a pathological amplification of culturally specific concerns relating to norms of politeness and deference. There is thus plenty of evidence for meaningful psychological differences across cultures. But this literature need not be at odds with universalism but can coexist in a fruitful synthesis, as the final section considers.

UP

The sections above have articulated the two main cross-cultural perspectives in psychology, which are not only found among those who specialize in “cross-cultural psychology”

per se but anyone who engages in any cross-cultural comparisons, even just in passing (e.g., in a literature review), which perhaps includes most of the literature. The central argument of this article though is that these perspectives are in fact complementary, together offering a unifying synthesis that most people can embrace. Indeed, many scholars already align with a UP perspective, even if they lack an explicit label for, or acknowledgement of, this position. This section first articulates the UP synthesis and then briefly considers, as an indicative example, scholarship on happiness that points to such a synthesis, before closing by considering some broader implications for the field.

A Unifying Synthesis

In presenting the seemingly oppositional perspectives of universalism and pluralism, one could be led by binary logic into thinking one must choose one position or another. This bias itself may be an instance of pluralism though: [Peng and Nisbett \(1999\)](#) suggested “European–American” modes of cognition were shaped by a lay version of Aristotelian logic, with a “differentiation model that polarized contradictory perspectives in an effort to determine which factor is position is correct.” By contrast, “Chinese ways of dealing with seeming contradictions result in a dialectical or compromise approach—retaining basic elements of opposing perspectives by seeking a ‘middle way.’” Whether “either/or” thinking is indeed a particularly Western cognitive style or more universal, it does seem a prominent tendency, which makes it hard to appreciate that two opposing ideas can both be true. With universalism versus pluralism, the question, raised at the start, is whether people across cultures are fundamentally the same or essentially different. To which the response is simply “yes.” Consider, similarly, [Solzhenitsyn’s \(1973\)](#) answer to whether humans are good or bad: “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.” Such dialectical thinking is not necessarily easy to engage in, and people often revert to binary appraisals in which people are indeed categorized—frequently on the basis of identity or group affiliation—as either “good” or “bad” ([Beatty et al., 2021](#)). Yet dialecticism is often the most accurate position on many binary questions and certainly the one at hand of universalism versus pluralism.

It is also arguably the *better* position in most instances (e.g., from an ethical standpoint). Another crucial observation vis-à-vis these perspectives that can seem to confound simple logic is that while both are valuable and good, this generally only applies in *combination* and not in isolation. Universalism without pluralism risks obscuring what makes different people and cultures unique, flattening global complexity into a one-size-fits-all homogeneity that is prey to the power imbalances discussed above (e.g., determined by scholars in the West). And pluralism without universalism risks

splintering the world into increasingly fragmentary pieces, exacerbating tensions both within and between countries. A related point is that UP is best regarded not as some lukewarm “middle ground” between two poles but a creative tension and synthesis. The analogy here is not centrist politics, for example, whose advocates may argue for the value of balancing left- and right-wing positions—such as having moderately high taxation—in a way that might garner an electoral majority but still leaves people on the left and right equally disappointed that it does not go far enough toward their pole. The analogy is more the way that a healthy lifestyle requires both complete rest (i.e., sleep) and vigorous activity (i.e., heartbeat-raising exercise) and not some literal middle ground (e.g., constantly moving quite slowly). In the same way, UP does not involve “splitting the difference” between its poles but embracing both in their fullness.

Indeed, most scholars arguably do recognize the truth and value of a UP stance. While works of cross-cultural scholarship often lean more toward either universalism or pluralism, [Berry et al. \(2002\)](#) suggested most scholars themselves endorse both positions, acknowledging universals but recognizing these can be shaped by culture. Berry et al. called this accommodation either “moderate” universalism or relativism, depending on which stance is prioritized. But this nomenclature is still not ideal, as one is still forced by binary language to emphasize one pole. As such, some scholars have sought to combine the terms, such as UP ([Wilber, 1995](#)), universal relativism ([Lomas, 2015](#)), pluralistic universalism ([Corradetti, 2009](#)), and relativistic universalism ([Nicholson, 1996](#)). In some respects, the latter versions might be preferable, as the first two options are sometimes used to simply mean *relativism* or *pluralism*—as [Fernando \(2017\)](#) does with relativism in relation to international human rights, and [Teo \(2010\)](#) does with pluralism vis-à-vis psychological scholarship—in which the “universal” prefix simply implies that cultural relativism/pluralism is universally applicable. By contrast, the pluralistic or relativistic universalism labels seem to more equally acknowledge both components, as seen in [Corradetti’s \(2009\)](#) work on human rights, which seeks to transcend the conventional “naïve opposition” of the “adversarial positions” of universalism and relativism to advance a framework accommodating both perspectives. On the other hand though, [Wilber \(1995\)](#) used “universal pluralism” in this same even-handed spirit, so that shall be harnessed here, partly in honor of Wilber (whose work inspired this article) and partly because “UP” is a more appealing acronym.

This synthesis recognizes both universal similarities and cultural diversity. Wilber, for example, differentiates deep versus surface structures, both within people and cultures. Deep structures refer to the way people have universal needs, as articulated by the likes of [Maslow \(1943\)](#). Societies then develop deep structural systems to meet these needs, including housing (safety); laws (security);

systems of mutual recognition, such as names (esteem); relationship structures, for example, marriage (love); and value systems, for example, religion (meaning). While these deep structures may be universal, they can be expressed and experienced at a surface level in almost infinite ways, not as a superficial cultural overlay but involving significant differences in how these needs are experienced and met. Every culture has norms and traditions of marriage, for example, but there is great variation, and associated disputes, in the nature of these norms and traditions, such as around who is permitted to marry and at what age (Tambe, 2020). This variation does not undermine the suggestion that marriage is a universal way of recognizing stable relationships, while in turn its universal nature does not negate meaningful cultural variation within the parameters of the concept. Marriage is thus both universal and pluralistic, with UP an entirely appropriate lens through which to look at it. Moreover, this label serves this purpose across all aspects of life, as illustrated using the example of happiness.

Happiness Through a UP Lens

There is a vast literature exploring both commonalities and differences in how people experience and conceptualize affective states. Arguably the more dominant perspective is a universalizing “naturalistic” one that does not recognize much variation. Perhaps most prominent is the basic emotions paradigm associated with Ekman (2016), which sees emotions as “natural kinds,” involving six key ones (anger, disgust, fear, sadness, enjoyment, and surprise), as supported by an extensive body of research (Vytal & Hamann, 2010). Also influential is Russell’s (1980) circumplex model, which views affective states as being generated through the interaction of two parameters: valence and arousal (i.e., pleasant vs. unpleasant) and arousal (i.e., high vs. low). Juxtaposing them, Russell created a two-dimensional state space with four quadrants: low arousal, negative valence (e.g., depression); high arousal, negative valence (e.g., anxiety); low arousal, positive valence (e.g., calmness); and high arousal, positive valence (e.g., elation). These models are not necessarily in conflict. If emotions constitute a complex multidimensional “state space” (Fell, 2004), including not just valence and arousal but other dynamics such as duration, meaningfulness, and so forth, there are multiple valid ways of conceptually “carving up” this experiential territory (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023a, 2023b). The broader point is simply that some universals surely exist, at least in a broad-brush way. Some state approximating to “happiness,” for example, is found across all cultures (Lomas et al., 2021; Lomas, 2023), which aligns, albeit imperfectly, with “enjoyment” in Ekman’s schema (except happiness is broader) and “positive affect” in Russell’s (except happiness is conversely narrower). Similarly, happiness seems to be relatively universally

valued: The Global Flourishing Study (Lomas et al., 2025; VanderWeele et al., 2025) includes items asking people to rate the importance of seven different dimensions of flourishing on a 0-10 scale (Lomas, Felton, et al., 2026), with evidence for some shared priorities across the 22 countries, with “being a good person” rated the most important overall (8.9), followed closely by “being healthy” (8.8), “having good relationships” (8.7), and “being happy” and “having a meaningful life” (both 8.5), then slightly lower “having plenty of money to do what you want” (8.0), and lastly “having a religious or spiritual life” (7.0). Moreover, the variation across countries was mostly relatively narrow (apart from for religion/spirituality), with average happiness ratings ranging from 9.2 in Israel to 7.5 in Japan and Hong Kong (and with a standard deviation of 0.5).

Yet this near universality does not mean that considerable cultural variation cannot be found vis-à-vis such states, as articulated by Feldman Barrett’s (2006) conceptual-act model, which exemplifies the UP perspective. Per naturalistic theories, it suggests people experience relatively universal momentary states of “core affect.” But their interpretation and moreover *experience* depend on people’s linguistic-conceptual schemas, which incorporate the pluralistic insights of the linguistic relativity hypothesis. For a start, cultures may interpret notions like happiness quite differently; Joshanloo (2014) suggests that while Western conceptions of happiness now pertain to a positive emotional state, in the East it refers more to fortune and luck. Happiness used to have such connotations in English, deriving from the Old Norse root, *happ*, implying chance. But while these connotations have mostly faded in English, Eastern languages have retained them, perhaps due to reasons including more “fatalistic” life expectations and, relatedly, deterministic philosophies derived from Hinduism and Buddhism, such as the notion of *karma* (Shaw, 2011). Issues of interpretation are compounded by ones around translation: Finding exactly equivalent words across different languages is exceedingly hard. Consider Mandarin Chinese, which has several words all commonly translated as “happy,” yet all with subtly different meanings, including 快乐 (*kuài lè*), 幸福 (*xìng fú*), 高兴 (*gāo xìng*), and 開心 (*kāi xīn*). As the WuKong (2024) language resource elucidates, *kuài lè* implies “temporary joy and cheer,” with *kuài* depicting a flower blossoming (representing “the unfolding of delight”) and *lè* showing musical notes (i.e., “sensations that fade”), implying transient pleasure. *Xìng fú* by contrast is more about “enduring life satisfaction and contentment,” with *xìng* depicting hands cradling a baby, representing “care, nurture, family, and shelter,” and *fú* combining characters for temple, vessel, and arrowhead, suggesting “sacred offerings reaching their target.” Similar nuances are found in the other words.

Finally, specific forms of happiness might only be particularly recognized or emphasized in certain cultures. Consider an analysis of the Values-in-Action taxonomy of character strengths, identified through a universalizing approach of looking for qualities widely valued across cultures (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Its structure has generally been upheld, including in non-Western societies like China by Zeng et al. (2020). Yet such work also points to potential omissions, including a key quality in Chinese culture, *suí xī* (隨喜), rendered as “appreciative joy” or “gladness at the success of others.” This has roots in Buddhism—with the equivalent term in Pāli and Sanskrit being *muditā* (मुदिता)—being something practitioners are exhorted to cultivate, but has become “part of Chinese culture not limited to Buddhists.” Moreover, Zeng et al. argued it may be universally valued but has not been sufficiently *recognized* in English-speaking cultures and has therefore been overlooked by Western-centric psychology. As they note, appreciative joy does not “necessarily rely on a particular religion or culture,” with Buddhist texts exemplifying it with “a mother’s happiness when seeing her child playing,” which is “a common experience.” Relatedly, they cite data from Zeng et al. (2017) that Chinese and American subjects had similar scores on the Appreciative Joy Scale. Yet this quality has not been widely recognized in Western cultures, as reflected in *suí xī* lacking a direct English single-word equivalent. From a more universal UP perspective though, it would ideally have a place, both in English-speaking cultures more broadly and in the field specifically, with *suí xī*—or a suitable English rendering, like “appreciative joy”—being more widely studied as a mental state that is potentially relevant to all people.

A Program for UP Enquiry

What are the implications of UP for psychological research, and how might scholars engage in work through this lens? A very modest version could be that all articles, whatever the topic, are encouraged to have a brief section viewing it through a UP prism. Journals already have numerous requirements of that sort, such as sections on aspects of methodology like data availability or author contributions. This does not mean authors must *endorse* UP, which is not something one could or would want to enforce. Some may be committed to either universalism or pluralism, whether wholesale in principle, or perhaps just strategically in their work (i.e., they may recognize UP has some validity but still believe their scholarship ought to focus on just universalism or pluralism). But it would still be valuable to have at least some consideration of the topic at hand in terms of the potential relevance of UP. Ideally one would also have data to refer to, and the field should heed the recommendations of Krys et al. (2025) for more cross-cultural research, especially vis-à-vis relatively neglected regions (e.g., African societies). But even when scholars do not have cross-cultural data, it would still behoove them to

hypothetically consider their findings from a UP perspective, such as informed speculation as to the extent they think their conclusions might be generalizable to other cultures or alternatively are more locally specific.

The conclusion may be that the phenomenon at hand is not subject to UP dynamics. Even then, though, it might still be a question of finding the right context or level of analysis. Some phenomena might be very culturally specific, but if one expands out enough, some universality may nevertheless be found. Not all cultures allow alcohol, for example, so its use cannot be considered a universal, but arguably all cultures allow *some* form of psychoactive substances though. So a key question is what is the right lens, the ideal Archimedean point, from which to view a given phenomenon? One would not want to find false or unhelpful equivalence. From a birds-eye perspective, the experience of being Black in the United States could be viewed as one example of a broader phenomenon of discrimination that may be relatively universal. But as Bell (2025) shows, it would be unhelpful and even offensive to regard it as merely another variation of a universal phenomenon with which *all* people are familiar. Even if White Americans have also faced forms of discrimination, for instance on the basis of class, one would not want to say they have total experiential understanding of the plight of their Black compatriots, and the Black American experience must be regarded as unique. But, from a universalizing spirit of empathy, it is not *totally* without precedent elsewhere (and we can also recognize that Black and White Americans do share meaningful aspects of life in common, such as having some common cultural traditions and touchpoints). As such, from an UP stance, perhaps the proper universalizing lens is not generic “discrimination” but something like “mistreatment of a racial or ethnic minority by a historically more powerful majority identity group.” In that regard, there are *some* meaningful parallels with situations such as the Indigenous population in Australia or the Uyghurs in China. UP is not about erasing or flattening people’s unique experiences but instead emphasizing them while at the same time seeking kinship, wherever possible, with other people in a spirit of shared humanity.

More ambitiously, beyond merely a section in an article, one might hope UP could have a deeper impact on all aspects of psychological research and practice, including how studies are designed, implemented, and interpreted. This does not only apply to cross-cultural scholarship but any empirical work. Perhaps the best way to imagine this impact is to present UP as offering two simple but generative questions that scholars could ask themselves regarding any aspect of their work and that would compel them to interrogate their project through the UP lens: What are the universalist implications, and what are the pluralistic implications? In answering these, scholars ideally might also think deeply

about the issues raised above, such as power dynamics involved in constructions of universality. In engaging with these questions throughout the process, UP might then become a spirit infusing the entire project as a lens through which all aspects are appraised.

To bring this to life, let us again use happiness as an example, though these considerations could apply to any research question. Perhaps a study aims, for instance, to assess happiness among older men in the United States. From a UP perspective, it would be useful for researchers to have an idea (e.g., through their literature review), and moreover to communicate this in their work, how happiness plays out globally. One might cite the World Happiness Report, which annually ranks nations using GWP data on Cantril's (1965) 10-rung life evaluation "ladder" (whose bottom and top steps represent the worst and best possible life). In 2026 this was led by Finland (for the ninth consecutive year) with a score of 7.76, while last was Afghanistan at just 1.44 and the United States 23rd at 6.82 (Helliwell et al., 2026). One would also want to reckon with demographic variables and moreover also appraise these through a cross-cultural lens to avoid unwarranted generalizations. In terms of sex, for example, an analysis of GWP Cantril data found that females tended to have higher scores than males (6.06 vs. 5.94), but also that this varied by region (e.g., in the European Union, males had higher scores; Lomas, 2025). Or regarding age, the pattern has been widely thought to be somewhat "U shaped" over the lifespan (i.e., with a low point around middle age), although this may be changing in ways that moreover vary by region (Blanchflower & Bryson, 2025). Even a brief positioning in that respect allows the research to be situated in a global context, including some indication of the extent to which, in a universalist spirit, findings can be generalized.

But then, from a pluralistic perspective, one would also want to critique claims toward universality, even if already differentiated in the ways shown above (i.e., variation by culture and demographics). For example, all studies, even those in a single country with a monolingual sample, should have *some* considerations of language, including variation in how ideas might be translated and interpreted across cultures, as explored above. Any reporting on Cantril's ladder must consider how this question might be conveyed and received in different languages and places, and also engage critically with whether this truly represents "happiness" per se, and likewise what happiness itself might mean and be called elsewhere. One might also reflect on issues raised above such as power dynamics involved in claims toward universalism. Cantril scores strongly correlate with gross domestic product per capita (Lomas, Koga, et al., 2026), and natural language analysis suggests the ladder metaphor encourages people to think about power, achievement, and success and to evaluate life in those terms (Nilsson et al., 2024). These considerations ought to prompt reflections on how the nature of the society in which the measure was constructed (i.e., the United States in the 1960s)

might have informed its design. One might likewise dwell on its selection as the measure of happiness for the World Happiness Report by Western economists (who founded the endeavor and constitute the majority of the editorial team) and the implications of that choice. The Global Flourishing Study, for example, which assesses well-being across 22 different countries, as introduced above, found that while Cantril strongly correlated (.58) with gross domestic product per capita, two ostensibly similar measures had negligible associations, namely, 0.05 for life satisfaction and -0.08 for happiness (Lomas, Koga, et al., 2026). The choice of measure then influences which countries are perceived as doing well (e.g., Indonesia was top for satisfaction and happiness) and hence what a flourishing society is deemed like (e.g., whether Indonesia vs. Finland is valorized as a place that policy makers and others might seek to emulate).

Such considerations are thus ideally not merely a brief reflection in a section but could inform how the entire study is conceived, framed, and interpreted. These points are not limited to constructs and measures but all aspects of the project. With the sample, for example, one might first aim for this to be as universally relevant as possible. The ideal, which is an impossible one, is a study that includes participants from all countries and demographics. No study will perfectly satisfy these criteria of course. But even inside the narrow parameters of whatever constraints the research exists within, one can still strive toward some universality. To return to the example above, even if only studying older males in the United States, one could still strive for the sample to be as broad and generalizable as possible with respect to other demographic variables, such as ethnicity or socioeconomic status. Equally though, to the extent that the sample is not universal (i.e., excludes people from particular cultural or demographic groupings), this can be explicitly highlighted as a limitation (as many studies do already). Nevertheless, a sample will ideally have at least some universal relevance and applicability. But it will also invariably have pluralistic implications, which can likewise be specifically highlighted, pertaining to the experiences of these particular people in this specific context. A study where the full potential of the sample was maximized would be one that was cognizant of and accentuated both implications: articulating precisely and explicitly the extent to which the sample allows generalizations and also conversely the extent to which it must be deemed unique.

Similarly, from a reflexivity standpoint, scholars might reflect consciously on their *own* perspectives and assumptions around universality (e.g., how these may have been informed by the culture in which they are situated), and likewise on their own specific pluralistic standing (i.e., with their unique background and lived experience), and how both these positions might have shaped the research process at all stages. Such reflections would ideally become a habit throughout the process (e.g., when writing the literature review) but could also be formulated as a specific reflexivity section in an article (which

is more common in qualitative journals but could also be tried even in quantitative articles). Relatedly, scholars could also reflect on their positioning within power structures and relatedly the impact of their work in terms of its universalizing potential. In almost any academic work, scholars invariably make myriad statements—even if not intending to—that convey universalist sentiments. Indeed, unless contextualized by caveats, many sentences have this characteristic, even ostensibly bland and uncontroversial statements like “human beings need affection.” Such claims may well be true, but scholars must still be cognizant that they are nevertheless engaging in a universalizing discourse. Moreover, they must also attend to the power implications involved: An established professor, for example, is able to advance such claims in ways that students or junior faculty may struggle to. That does not mean they should refrain from making such points, but they could also, for instance, seek to listen to and elevate the perspectives of people with less power, allowing their own views to be challenged, informed, and complexified by these other voices.

Finally, and more broadly, the UP perspective might be further useful to society at large. The current times are seeing changes at an arguably unprecedented rate, and often much for the worse—with Ahenakew et al. (2025) describing this confluence of challenges as a “polycrisis”—including a failing response to climate change, capitulation to autocrats and divisive leaders, failures to adequately care for the poor and infirm, fear of immigrants and the Other, and many more. Responding to all these issues requires some vision of common humanity to unite and motivate us while also requiring an approach sensitive to local conditions and needs, which is exactly the ethos of UP. One already finds scholars articulating pathways forward in this spirit, such as Maypilama et al. (2025), who as mentioned above showed the value of “Indigenous and Western researchers engaging in two-way exchange to resolve our existential crises.” In that respect, a UP approach can hopefully help society meet the daunting challenges of this moment. Psychology plays a vital public role in shaping how people think about themselves and their lives, including how to best respond to crises, and similarly informs policy and organizational responses. It may be that UP provides a much-needed perspective that can unlock new solutions to the challenges facing the world. At present, one can see both universalist and pluralistic approaches being deployed as the world navigates these difficult times. Crucially though, these are often wielded in isolation rather than in combination, which can be damaging. On one hand, some people are leaning hard toward pluralism, which risks splintering the world into increasingly fragmentary pieces. At the international level, this can mean leaders viewing their country in isolationist and protectionist terms, while domestically it can mean societies fracturing along identity-based lines (e.g., in relation to race/ethnicity). Conversely though, this very pluralism has arisen in part as

a reaction to perceived efforts to homogenize world into an overweening universalism, such as perceived efforts by international organizations—from the United Nations to the International Monetary Fund—to compel the world’s leaders to adopt policies, such as in relation to trade, that do not honor the needs and wishes of citizens in specific cultural contexts. While both universalism and pluralism are valuable approaches, their merits are arguably only properly realized if used in combination in creative synthesis. In that regard, one could hope that a UP perspective, if communicated to a broader audience, might help nudge the world’s societies and their leaders—even if only slightly—in a better direction.

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