
Tibetan-American Differences in Anger

Randall Horton
Seattle, Washington, USA

Last Summer at the IACCP proceedings in Bremen, Germany, I was honored to receive the Henry and Pola Triandis Doctoral Thesis Award for my work comparing Tibetan and American understandings and experiences of “anger.” The project came together only through a series of frustrations and false starts.

When I arrived in northern India in the fall of 2000 to begin a one-year field visit in the Tibetan refugee settlements there, it was with plans to conduct a quite different, clinically-focused research project. Before describing what ensued, a bit of back-story on how I arrived at that point might be in order.

From English Lit to Cultural Psychology

I came to an interest in cultural psychology later than many of my peers. I had been an English literature major as an undergraduate, and, over the years that followed, I had drifted into the field of psychology through work in a community mental health program in my home state of Virginia. My schedule was flexible, and, when I could save the money, I enjoyed traveling internationally. It was actually while backpacking through South Asia in 1995 that I decided to pursue doctoral training as a clinical psychologist. More precisely, it was while staying at a Tibetan monastery



Harry Triandis Presenting the award at the Opening Ceremony of the IACCP Bremen Congress, July 2008.

on the rim of the Katmandu Valley, while taking part in an extended Buddhist retreat.

Although I had been intrigued by Buddhism for years and had keenly anticipated taking part in such a retreat, my actual response to the experience was the opposite of what I expected. There I was immersed in a Buddhist community, and yet, I felt less Buddhist than at any point in my adult life. As I was confronted for the first time with the full breadth of the values, beliefs, and assumptions that comprised a Tibetan ecclesiastical worldview, I realized how profoundly American I was. My cultural beliefs seemed to pervade every aspect of my being: my ways of learning and thinking, my bodily sense of self, and the ways I related to others. I began to realize my cultural experiences growing up in the United States had contributed in no small measure to my basic sense of what it

means to be human.

During that retreat, I had taken to passing time after the midday tea break in the monastery's library. I recall reflecting on these impressions and, around the same time, discovering, among the ornamentally wrapped Tibetan woodblock prints of sutras and commentaries, a small cache of books in English, which included volumes by Maslow, Adler, and James. I was quickly engrossed with them. While I was struck by the accuracy of these writers' observations as an account of my own values and experiences, I registered a deep skepticism about whether their theories offered a meaningful account of Tibetan psychological life. Although I had no name for it at the time, in retrospect, this was probably the moment at which I became a cultural psychologist.

Finding an Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program

Upon my return to the United States, I was determined to find a doctoral program that would allow me both to train as a clinical psychologist and to pursue long-term field based research on culture and mental health issues. I was dismayed to discover how few programs would accommodate such interests. I eventually found a home at one of the few, a joint degree program at the University of Chicago in the departments of Psychology and Comparative Human Development. There, while pursuing doctoral research as student of Richard Shweder, I was able to take coursework in clinical psychology and anthropology, as well as South Asian languages and history.

Diss Research Plan #1

In launching my dissertation research, I obtained a year's worth of competitive funding from the Social Science Research Council. I proposed studying a project called the Tibetan Torture Survivor's Program (TTSP), a psychosocial rehabilitation program for former Tibetan politi-



Photo: Randall Horton

Ganden Monastery The pitched and gilded roofs of Ganden Monastery rise improbably from the wheat fields in rural south India.

cal prisoners based in the north Indian town of Dharamsala. During an earlier stay in the region, I had discussed the program with its administrators in the Tibetan Government in Exile's Department of Health. The stated goals of the TTSP were to adapt European clinical interventions for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for use with traumatized Tibetan refugees, and to train local health care workers to administer culturally appropriate care for these individuals. The program was said to include group therapy sessions for former prisoners led by senior Tibetan lamas. As an aspiring cultural and clinical psychologist, I must say, I was quite intrigued by the possibility of studying the operation of this program. The town where I would be based also boasted the main offices of a general psychiatric and psychological treatment program serving the Tibetan refugee communities. With support of the Government in Exile, two European clinicians, a psychologist and a psychiatrist, had established and overseen the operation of this clinic for over five years.

This, then, was my research plan in fall of 2000. I would spend a year in the Tibetan communities, improve my language skills, develop research contacts, pilot interview protocols, and make detailed ethnographic observations of one or both of these clinical programs. In the year that followed, its every facet fell apart.

Things Fall Apart

Within two months of my arrival in India, I learned that since I had visited the settlements, the psychological dimensions of the torture survivor's treatment program, while thriving on paper, had largely withered away in the real world. Attendance at the Buddhist group therapy sessions, for instance, had become so bad that the organizers had been obliged to schedule its meetings immediately before the monthly disbursement of living stipends. Recent meetings had been poorly attended, then cancelled entirely. The senior lama leading the sessions was engaged in activities outside of the area, it was uncertain when the meeting would resume. Administratively, the Health Department staff was reticent about having an outside researcher observe the program. Though the Tibetan and Western allopathic medical components of the program were strong, these were outside the purview of my interest and expertise.

Diss Research Plan #2

Though disappointing, I still had the psychological clinic as a potential focus for my work. I redoubled my efforts at developing contacts within it. The organizers of the clinic were welcoming, but overburdened. They suggested I meet with one of the two Tibetan mental health workers, offering that I might serve as a mentor to the young man, sharing with him perspectives from my clinical training and work in community mental health, and learning from him in turn about the local Tibetan communities and the activities of the clinic. We began to meet regularly. After the first month, he approached me with a request to help develop a proposal to provide social work outreach services to the Dharamsala community. We began to draw up such a proposal, one that included distributing blankets and material support to elderly monks and nuns living alone in the community, providing periodic shelter and meals for some individuals with chronic alcoholism, and some other projects. The proposal got no further than a first clean draft.

In quick succession, the clinic's organizers, the two European doctors who had dedicated years of selfless service to sustaining it, announced it would be closing its doors. They had decided

to scale back their involvement. They would be turning over the remnants of the program to the Tibetan mental health care workers whom they had trained. Two weeks later, one of the two most senior of those individuals, my research collaborator, informed me, apologetically, that he would be leaving the settlements indefinitely. As a competent bilingual Tibetan-English interpreter, he had been presented with an opportunity to translate for a Tibetan lama on a speaking tour of New Zealand. Once there, he said, he would try to settle permanently if he could. Onward migra-



Photo: Randall Horton

Accumulating spiritual merit An elderly Tibetan woman accumulates spiritual merit by circumambulating the library at the offices of the Government in Exile, Dharamsala.

tion and the brain-drain of talented young people to the West were a fact of life in the refugee settlements, and every agency, public or private, had to cope with it. This, I told myself, was just my turn. Nonetheless, it was demoralizing.

Frustrations in Language Learning

The language learning was not going well either. My stateside language classes had left me ill-prepared for the proliferation of regional dialects in the exile settlements. Unaware of the pitfalls, early in my stay I had engaged language instructors from two different regions of Tibet. My main instructor, Ajam, was a youthful former literature teacher from the province of Amdo in Eastern Tibet who had gotten into political trouble after sharing with his students his discovery there were two differing versions of Tibetan history, a Chinese and Tibetan version. Sporting a lush ponytail, denim jacket, and an oval rim pair of John Lennon specs, he was constantly enlisting my help in composing letters of ardent romantic longing (in English) to his German fiancé. Ajam would spend two hours each morning trying to groom my tonally deficient Tibetan accent and prose style to the graceful contours of literary Amdo intellectualism.

I had engaged a second instructor for conversational practice in the evenings. Deykyi, a young woman from Central Tibet, was employed during the day cleaning rooms in one of the town's more upscale tourist hotels. Competing directly with Indian-born locals for cleaning and restaurant work, newly arrived refugees faced chronically difficult wages and working conditions. It was a measure of my confusion with the language that it actually took me several weeks to figure out that Ajam and Deykyi were giving me contradictory instructions. Things improved only marginally when I brought them together to discuss the problem, as each thought his/her own dialect and pedagogy was the preferable one.

By now, almost seven months into my fieldwork, all of my research plans had gone bust. Casting about for ideas, I decided to try to develop

a study of coping responses to PTSD and acculturative stress among former political prisoners in the settlements. I could employ, I thought, something like Arthur Kleinman's explanatory models of illness framework and seek to docu-



Photo: Randall Horton

Bus stand Monks, laypeople, tourists and Indian merchants jostle through the bus stand in upper Dharamsala.

ment ethnographically the conditions of life for these individuals. Toward this end, I approached the leaders of the Association for Former Political Prisoners, the Gu Chu Sum, a non-governmental organization based in the town. They were open to the project.

Still Another Disaster

At this point, one final mishap struck. I left town for two weeks to attend to some business in Delhi, and on my return, Deykyi came in quite excited to the teashop where we met for conversational practice. A group of Westerners had been in town, she said. They had been staying at the hotel where she worked, and they had been interviewing the ex-political prisoners all week long. "When they left," she said, "they left piles of these in their trash can." She pulled a set of stapled pages from her backpack and slid it toward me. I looked at the first few pages. It was an interview protocol—well-translated—in Tibetan and English. Whoever her hotel guests had been, they appeared to be studying PTSD among the former

political prisoners and assessing Western and indigenous coping responses. The head of the Gu Chu Sum confirmed a team of researchers from the United States had arrived, decamped, and just as quickly pulled out of town. I never found out

attending public talks that spring given by some of the ex-political prisoners. Earlier in the United States, and now in India, I had observed dissidents like the Venerable Palden Gyatso speaking to Western audiences. In a typical talk, after



Photo: Randall Horton

Remembering 1959 Public demonstration marking Tibetan uprising day in Dharamsala.

who they were, and, in the years since, their study seems not to have found its way into print. At the time, however, in my now entirely demoralized frame of mind, it did not matter. Having looked at a copy of their research protocol, I decided I could not ethically move forward with the project I had in mind. Likewise, it made no sense to duplicate efforts and research so similar a topic.

My sole consolation at the time was the approach of the Tibetan New Year's celebration. The nights, which had been bitterly cold at the town's 5,000 feet of elevation, were turning temperate again. Tourists were returning and the town was abuzz with news that His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama would be giving two weeks of public teachings in observation of the Monlam, the great Buddhist prayer festival.

**Diss Research Plan #3:
Success At Last**

I do not recall exactly when the idea for a cultural psychological study of anger in the settlements occurred to me, but I think it was while

discussing their lives and the political history of Tibet, the dissidents would describe—often quite graphically—the details of torture and human rights abuses they experienced in Chinese-run prisons. When their accounts were finished and appeals for political support had been made, I noticed that often a Western audience member would stand and ask some form of the following question; “After all that you have been through, all that has happened to you and to your people, do you hate the Chinese for doing these things?” And the answer from the Tibetan speaker was almost always the same, a simple; “No.” Instead of angry demands for justice

or retribution, they spoke about basic Buddhist teachings that rejected anger and hatred. Some went so far as to suggest the need to extend compassion (Tib: *snying rje*) to those who have committed acts of serious violence

Observing these interactions, the question occurred to me: Do Tibetan culture and the Buddhist philosophical views that permeate it extend to its members an unusual capacity to transcend anger and hatred? Here was the question at the heart of the Western interest in the adjustment of Tibetan political prisoners. Interest in it explained why teams of researchers might travel halfway around the world, translated PTSD measures in hand, to interview these individuals. As soon as I began to entertain it as a research topic, I sensed it was a good one.

Readers familiar with Tibetan Buddhism will know that anger-related emotional states are marked as profoundly destructive mental states within the Mahayana teachings. Further, a culturally distinct set of Buddhist practices, referred to as the mind-training tradition (Tib: *sblo sbyong*),

address specifically the goal of transforming anger and overcoming it in practitioners' lives. Although it has been widely assumed that such cultural understandings influence the experience of emotion among Tibetans, a search of anthropological, religious, and psychological writings

Tibetan settlements, a sample of Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, and a comparison sample of adults from Chicago. Some questions would be quantitative, to allow tests of formally hypothesized cross-group differences, others would be open-ended, designed to elicit and allow systematic coding and analysis of culturally-rooted constructs related to anger and emotion. For the second branch of the study, I would look at anger in the Tibetan struggle for political independence, examining its place in public and private debates about political violence and non-violence.

For the last two months of my stay, I was in constant motion; grilling my instructors on the nuances of colloquial and formal Tibetan linguistic resources on emotion, developing potential questions, interviewing monks, nuns, and anyone who would sit down with me about emotion and the Buddhist teachings. In the end, completing data collection

for the project entailed a second, year-long field stay in the settlements, with much of the work undertaken in the south Indian Tibetan settlements. This time, the planned project came off seamlessly.

Tibetan-American Differences in Anger

The following were some of the main findings from the study that resulted. Consistent with key doctrines from Mahayana Buddhist ethno-psychology, Tibetans regarded "*rlung lang*s" (a modal emotion in the family of anger) as uniquely harmful and destructive. Citing views grounded



Photo: Randall Horton

Bruce Lee can read Children in the southern Tibetan settlements. One shows off his reading skills to the researcher, another gives his best Bruce Lee.

on the topic confirmed that no one had ever made a systematic attempt to study whether and how Tibetans actually used these techniques in their day-to-day lives. The most difficult question the project entailed was how could one investigate this set of questions about comparative emotional experience rigorously and scientifically?

Mixed-Method Research Design

Drawing on the work of my advisor in Chicago, Richard Shweder, I eventually adopted a two-branched, mixed-methods approach. First, I would study anger in the day-to-day lives of the Tibetans. I would conduct interviews, make ethnographic observations, and research the classical Buddhist ethno-psychological and ethno-medical doctrines on anger. To be able to comment reliably on possible cultural differences, I would collect data from three sample groups and conduct formal cross-cultural comparisons. I would recruit a sample of adult lay people from the

Author Information

Randall Horton is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Seattle University, Seattle, Washington, USA.

hortonra@seattleu.edu

in Mahayana Buddhist ethical and metaphysical thought, Tibetan respondents, lay and clerical, tended to view “*lung lang*” as unequivocally morally bad. They assimilated it to the sentiment “*she dangs*” (anger/hatred), one of the “three moral poisons” (Tib: *dug gsum*) held to be the root sources of suffering for all sentient beings.

Americans, by contrast, viewed anger as a morally ambivalent, neutral, or natural process. While Americans recognized the potential harmful effects of anger for others, they were significantly less likely than Tibetans to insist on anger’s harmful effects for the person who experiences it. Indeed, Americans emphasized several positive aspects of anger: it gives one energy that can be used in a positive way; it can lead to problems being addressed that might otherwise persist; it can be beneficial to society. Tibetans, by contrast, viewed anger/*lung lang* as a fundamentally destructive sentiment. They viewed it as arising from an intrinsically flawed motivational state (a desire to harm another sentient being) and generative of ultimately bad results. Reflecting the local understandings of karma, they insisted upon the symmetry of *lung lang*’s harmful effects for all parties involved. Tibetans were much more likely than Americans to believe that anger/*lung lang* can be prevented and even per-

manently transcended. Further, many were able to point to individuals whom they believed had achieved such a state. Americans, by contrast, actively pathologized the hypo-expression of anger, doubting whether anger-free living was either possible or desirable.

When the characteristics of recent incidents of anger were examined, both lay and clerical Tibetans reported angry feelings of shorter duration than did Americans. Tibetan Buddhist clergy reported less intense feelings of anger than other respondents. These differences were significant when respondents’ age, gender, education, and time since incident were controlled in stepwise regression analyses. Tibetans, both lay and clergy, were much less likely than Americans to judge the other person’s provocative actions as typical or usual for them. American respondents, by contrast, tended—chronically and spontaneously in open emotion narratives—to connect the other person’s provocative behavior in the current situation with their past behavior and to assert that a dispositional pattern existed for the individual to act in that way. This attribution bias is consistent with prior cross-cultural research on the Fundamental Attribution Error and attributional differences across collectivist- and individualist-oriented cultures.

Online Readings in Psychology and Culture

The eBook, *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* (ORPC) was created by Walt Lonner and the Center for Cross-Cultural Research at Western Washington University in 2002. Center members Dale L. Dinnel, Susanna A. Hayes and David N. Sattler were instrumental in all phases of the development of the publication. Since then, ORPC has become a useful and important resource for teaching cross-cultural psychology, providing short, focused, readable chapters that can supplement a printed textbook or contribute to the reading list of a class that does not use a text.

In late 2008, the Center agreed to give the ORPC to IACCP for future development. The ORPC has been moved to the IACCP web site and ported to a new “content management system” (CMS) technology that will facilitate maintenance, expansion, and incorporation of new teaching-related features. The ORPC is an official publication of IACCP under the auspices of the Communication and Publications Committee (chaired by John Adamopoulos). An editor and editorial board will be recruited.

The ORPC can be seen at: <http://orpc.iaccp.org>

If you would like to contribute a chapter to the ORPC, please use the contact information on the web site to initiate correspondence with the editor.