

Abstract: *Theoretical perspectives shape the ways that we examine the world. Most theoretical perspectives embedded within research methodologies are based on Western philosophies. In our contemporary multicultural, global society, exclusive use of Western theoretical perspectives impoverishes our research. Conversely, theoretical perspectives derived from other intellectual traditions might enrich our research. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the theory of yin-yang can be used to expand the theoretical toolkit available for developing and conducting research and for exploring epistemological implications.*

Key words: *yin-yang theory, body, power, epistemological implications*

Exploring Epistemological Implications of the Yin-yang Theory

Philosophical perspectives guide how researchers design and conduct research as well as make claims about knowledge. Philosophical perspectives, also known in the social and health sciences as theoretical perspectives, underlie the choice of a certain methodology, whether or not these choices are explicitly recognized (Carter & Little, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 2006). Recent research in the social and health sciences has examined and employed a wide range of theoretical perspectives. The most common ones include positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, critical inquiry, feminism, and post-modernism (Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 2006). Although most of the existing theoretical perspectives embedded within research methodologies are based on Western philosophies, these perspectives have guided research on social life in both Western and non-Western societies. In our contemporary multicultural, global society, exclusive use of Western theoretical perspectives impoverishes our research; whereas, theoretical perspectives derived from other intellectual traditions might enrich our research.

Among non-Western epistemologies, yin-yang theory appears to be a good candidate for enlarging our theoretical toolbox. Yin-yang theory has been widely analyzed as an *object* of research by both Western and non-Western scholars, but it has not been widely employed as an epistemological basis for research. This article explores the possibility of using yin-yang theory as a research epistemology. Yin-yang theory has its roots in ancient Chinese cosmology. It is characterized by the principle of dualism, the idea that every aspect of existence has a dual character and that the duality of one thing is structurally analogous to the duality of something else, enabling comparison and analysis of correspondences. This dualism is represented by the yin-yang dyad, which represents categories of complementary forces and natures.

Perhaps the easiest way to understand yin-yang dualism is to begin with the original meanings of the two words. *Yang* means the sunny side, the north bank of a river or the south slope of a hill, while *yin* means the shady side, the south bank of a river or the north slope of a hill. As a river must have both north and south banks, and a hill must have both north and south slopes, everything in the world has a corresponding duality—a yang aspect and a yin aspect. Yang represents male, active, hard, daytime, summer, growth, heat, sun, and life, while yin represents

female, passive, soft, nighttime, winter, decay, cold, moon, and death. Nothing is pure yang or pure yin, but many things are more yin-like or more yang-like. Thus, a man is predominantly yang but also has a female side; nighttime is primarily yin but is part of a duality that includes the alternation of night and day. The original symbol of the yin-yang dyad is seen in Figure 1.

In the yin-yang dualism, yin often represents a lesser power, and yang a greater power, but both are necessary for the functioning of any system, whether it is a person, a day, a year, or, for that matter, a river or a hill (Furth, 1999; Needham, 1974; Schwartz, 1985; Unschuld, 2003). Such complementary dualities in a human being or a social system form the foundation of philosophies of health and illness in Chinese traditional medicine (Ma, 1994; Unschuld, 2003). An excess of yang or yin, or yang or yin in the wrong place or at the wrong time, is the cause of illness; a proper balance of yang and yin is the basis of health.

Yin-yang theory has not been fully explored in the social and health sciences. Transcultural nursing and health studies have focused only on reporting the connection between yin-yang theory and certain health practices in Chinese culture (Barbaso-Schwartz, 2004; Chen, 2001; Cioffi, 2004; Lu, 2002). As such, yin-yang theory has been an object of analysis rather than a theoretical perspective that guides analysis. Chinese traditional medicine uses the yin-yang framework to analyze physiology, but the yin-yang framework of analysis has not spread to the social sciences. Further exploration of yin-yang theory is needed, particularly in terms of its utility in conceptualizing social relations and power within such social relations. Such an understanding is necessary because the theory provides a lens through which to examine Chinese individuals' health in a manner that takes into account their culture. This theoretical perspective also can be used to expand the theoretical toolkit available for developing and conducting research in both Eastern and Western traditions and for making epistemological implications. The purpose of this article is to revisit yin-yang theory and to explore the epistemological implications of using the yin-yang dyads as a framework for analysis in the social and health sciences.

To this end, the first part of the article focuses on what is understood about yin-yang theory and presents a rationale for revisiting the theory. The second part concerns

Figure 1. Original Yin-yang symbol.



reconceptualization of the human body, both male and female, in view of yin-yang theory and how such a conceptualization realigns the social positions of men and women in social and health sciences research. The third part concerns the reconceptualization of power through the lens of yin-yang theory. Finally, the epistemological implications of such power relations are discussed. Through the yin-yang theoretical perspective, the conceptualization of body and power is different from that seen through a Western lens. This conceptualization contributes to the broadly defined agenda of expanding theoretical perspectives in the social and health sciences. The methodological rationale for such an exploration is the utility of yin-yang theory, conceived in Chinese society, as another way to study and understand health.

Why Revisit Yin-yang Theory?

What is Known about Yin-yang Theory

The concept of yin and yang was first used as a framework for understanding health and illness in the first century B.C.E. and gradually became a more broadly developed theory (Unschuld, 2003). According to Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen, the earliest and most important medical text in Chinese intellectual history, the emergence and expansion of yin-yang theory is closely related to the concept of qi (Unschuld, 2003). Qi is defined as the energy circulating in one's body and is sometimes known as "vital energy" in English (Yang, 1994). The health of a human organism depends on unimpeded and balanced flow of qi through vessels in the body. This flow is affected by exposure to various climatic factors, such as wind, cold, and heat (Unschuld, 2003).

The application of yin-yang theory to health and illness is a foundational philosophy in Chinese traditional medicine (Ma, 1994; Unschuld, 2003; Yan, Yan, Pi, Zhu, & Zhou, 2005). Yin-yang theory is also fundamentally connected with the concept of body in Chinese society. From a medical anthropology perspective, Farquhar (1994) illustrated the yin-yang principle within a unified Chinese body. From a division of labor

perspective, Bray (1997) explained yin-yang as two gendered bodies in a complementary relationship and discusses how the demarcation evolved historically. Zito and Barlow (1994) used yin-yang theory as an anchor for critical inquiry into the conceptualization of bodies and power and noted that the theory functions as a basis for the Chinese conceptualization of body and power. We propose to go one step further by exploring the possibility of using yin-yang theory as a research epistemology.

Yin-yang Theory Revisited

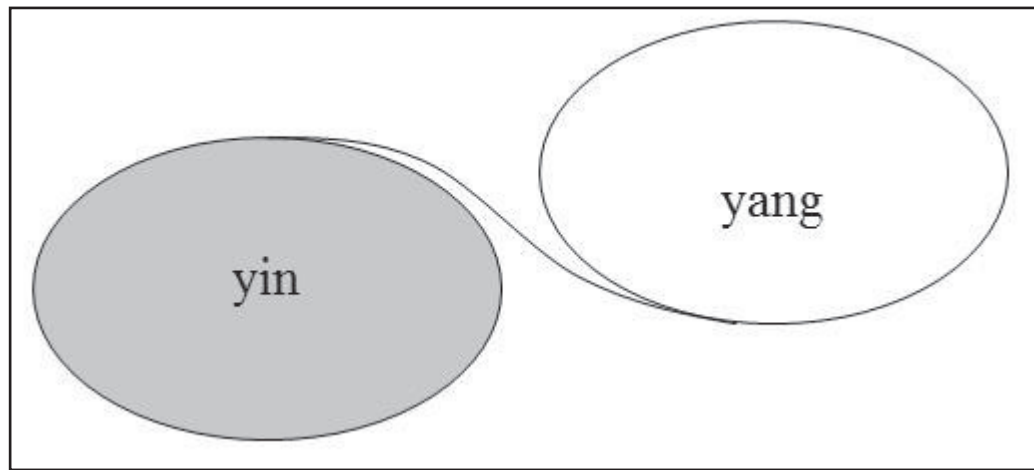
The concepts of yin and yang evolved from references to light and dark on a hillside to general abstract terms that refer to all dualities (Schwartz, 1985). Furth (1999) presented the dualism underlying the yin-yang doctrine.

The cyclical mutations of nature were propelled by yin and yang as an overarching binary principle of growth and decline governing the tempo and pattern of change in phenomenal things. Archaic Chinese may have first understood them as the changing aspect of things in the play of light and shadow, shifting with the movements of the sun. As the world in the aspect of shadows, yin evoked darkness, cold, moisture; that which is hidden, latent or passive; the moon, night and the feminine. Yang symbolized brightness, the sun, fire, warmth, activity and the masculine principle . . . They also ordered the qualitative oppositions of the body into masculine and feminine aspects, and into its spatial divisions of upper and lower, inner and outer regions, extending to its somatic attributes of the heat or cold, moisture or dryness. (pp. 21, 23)

The principle of dualism makes analysis of correspondences among phenomena possible. This categorization is readily understandable because it is based on the concrete properties of things observed in nature and the human sphere. Importantly, its prominence in Chinese medicine is attributed mainly to its practical applications to health and healthcare. As the concepts of yin and yang settled into categories of opposing forces, they came to provide an explanatory apparatus applicable to opposites, contraries, and hierarchical pairs. Yin and yang are viewed as powers that balance the order of nature. The theoretical underpinnings of the yin and yang relation are (a) yin and yang are in a mutual struggle over power, with harmonious, instead of equal, relations as the goal; (b) yin and yang are interdependent and viewed as a whole—neither can exist without the other in the real world; and (c) both yin and yang have the capacity to dominate, and disharmony occurs when either yin or yang becomes too powerful (Farquhar, 1994; Furth, 1998; Ma, 1994; Unschuld, 2003).

The most primitive relationship adopted from the original yin and yang symbol is presented in Figure 2. Yin is represented by a shaded circle and yang by a non-shaded circle. In the figure, there is a curved line that connects the dyad. This connection forms the basis for the relationship between the dyad. Further, in the yin-yang conceptualization, the yin-yang power nexus is viewed as a whole and is dynamic. This is congruent with Foucault's (1972) critique of power. Foucault maintained that power must be analyzed as something that circulates and is never entirely localized (Foucault, 1972; Kelly, 1994). What the yin-yang conceptualization adds to Foucault's perspective on power is the idea of power balance, which is the concept of harmony. Ways to maintain the balance are either to increase the power of yin, while decreasing the power of yang, or vice-versa. However, with the yin-yang conceptualization, it is also possible that yin can become too strong or yang too weak.

Figure 2. Yin-yang relationship.



This re-conceptualization of body and power is built upon the idea that yin and yang are interdependent, and both have the capacity to dominate. A more complicated relationship between yin and yang can be represented by circles within circles in a hierarchical order, and the yin-yang dyad can become fourfold, six-fold, eight-fold, ten-fold, and so forth (Furth, 1999; Schwartz, 1985). This provides an explanation for why, in Chinese society, the body is “constructed within an ensemble of social relations” (Zito & Barlow, 1998, p. 10).

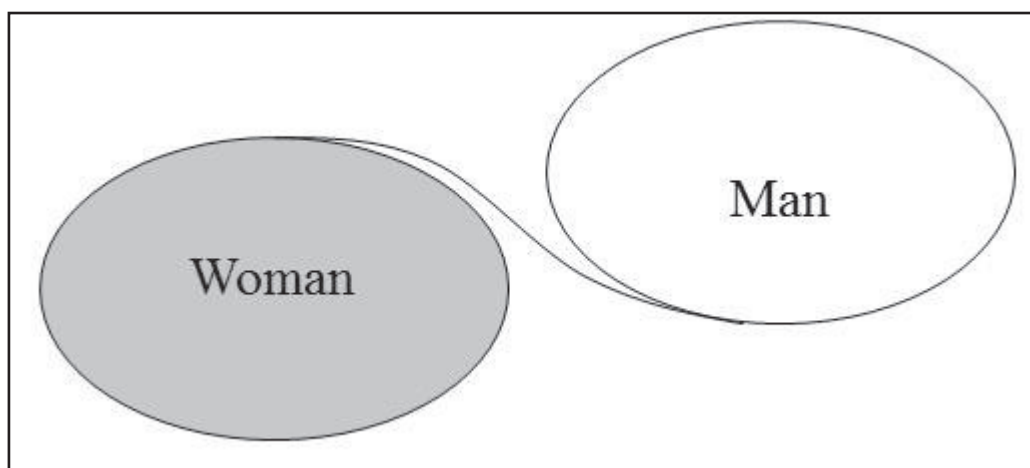
Re-conceptualizing the Body Using the Yin-yang Theory Yin-yang Theory as Representations of Body

Yin-yang theory forms the basis for the Chinese understanding of the body and affects representations of masculinity and femininity. Bray (1997) stated that the difference between women and men is signaled not only by the spatial domains that they occupy but also by the work that they perform. Yin and yang, however, cannot exist without each other; male and female are not absolute categories but, rather, contrasting values of a single variable; and the man is more yang and the woman more yin.

Chinese medicine views the organs of the body as interrelated in the same ways as are other natural phenomena.

The common terms in critical social theory in regard to the body, however, are subjectivity and subject positionality. Subjectivity refers to the perception that one has of oneself and one's place in the world, to the ways in which one defines oneself as an individual or member of a group, whereas subject positionality refers to the place in the world that is part of subjectivity, the place from which a subject reviews the world. Theorizing bodies as subject positionalities in critical social theory stems from the notion that human beings are engaged in and produced through social life, which means that human beings are only human insofar as they are engaged in social life (Morris, 1962); it is this engagement that makes them the kind of individuals they are (Zito & Barlow, 1998). Yin-yang theory provides a basis for a non-dichotomized male and female body, meaning that, in yin-yang theory, every person or thing can only exist insofar as it combines opposite elements, as a river has a shady and sunny bank. Thus, human bodies contain both yang elements, primarily associated with the male, and yin elements, primarily associated with the female. Every female has a little maleness in her, and every male has a little femaleness in him. The existence of one depends upon the existence of the other. Through the lens of yin-yang theory, the dyad of a man and a woman is viewed as a whole (Figure 3). In other words, masculine is defined

Figure 3. Yin-yang dyad depicting the relationship between a man and a woman



by its relationship to feminine and vice-versa; more generally, personhood is part of a matrix of social relations.

Epistemological Implications of the Body Conceptualization

The yin-yang conceptualization of the body is particularly useful when examining men's and women's health in the context of family and society. For example, yin-yang theory can serve as a theoretical framework to interpret research findings; for example, women's emotional status may be dependent on how they are treated by their husbands (Liu, 2014). Further, yin-yang theory can provide a theoretical framework to understand the social hierarchy of Chinese society (Figure 4), which Fei Xiaotong, a founding father of Chinese anthropology and sociology, referred to as a "differential mode of association" (Hamilton & Zheng, 1992). In yin-yang theory, individuals, although not equal, are interdependent. As such, the theory provides an understanding of the relationships between generations within a family or between family and society. This is congruent with the idea that the dyad of yin and yang can be multifold, that there is yin-yang within each yin or yang. Using yin-yang theory, the relationship between an individual and a society can be analyzed either as a basic yin-yang dyad or as a multilevel hierarchy or manifold web of yin-yang dyads that comprise networks of personal relationships.

Yin-yang theory also can provide a framework to deepen our understanding of the "collectivist" relations of the Chinese social structure, which have existed since ancient times. Many studies of Chinese culture explicitly or implicitly maintain that the influence of collectivism is deeply ingrained in Chinese society and culture (Biderman & Scharfstein, 1989; Farquhar, 1994; Furth, 1999; Goldman & Lee, 2002; Guo, 1998; Kim, 2006; Kleinman, 1980; Lloyd, 2006; Ma, 1994; Nakayama, 1984; Needham, 1974; Porkert, 1974; Schwartz, 1985; Sivin, 1989; Thurston & Parker, 1980; Unschuld, 2003; Waley, 1956; Wei, 2003). We maintain, however, that collectivism is a misleading or incomplete way to analyze Chinese social relations. Every collective is, in fact, a web of individual relationships. The collective looks different from the perspective of any individual within it, and each individual's perspective is defined by the hierarchical web of relationships, each one a yin-yang dyad. Through the lens of yin-yang, collectivism can occur at the couple, family, or society level (Figure 4).

Yin-yang theory, when used as an explanatory framework, usually has been confined to the analysis of Chinese or other East Asian societies or to health and illness in these same societies. In fact, however, the model is more broadly applicable to society in general, including Western societies. We think that the yin-yang framework can help resolve the seeming contradictions between

individually-based and collectively-based, as well as between so-called top-down and bottom-up explanations of power in the social sciences (Elster, 1983; Taylor 2006). The epistemological struggle between individualism and collectivism is itself a yin-yang dyad: The individual exists only as part of the collective, and the collective exists only insofar as it is composed of individuals.

We can use the current debates over the healthcare policy in the United States as an example. On the one side, we have strictly biomedical explanations that account for health and illness either in purely biophysical terms or as a result of individual behavior choices. On the other side, we have socioeconomic explanations of health and illness that explain disease prevalence, for example, as a result of race, education, economic status, or geography. These debates, however, can be better framed as yin-yang dyads. Individuals make choices within the constraints of social frameworks, while these choices, in turn, shape and reshape the frameworks. Such a methodological yin-yang dyad also is relevant to other research paradigms, such as the relationship between structure and agency or Latour's (2007) actor-network theory.

Re-conceptualizing Power Using Yin-yang Theory

Renaming the Power Struggle

The different levels of social relations, as depicted in Figure 4, comprise basic yin-yang dyads. Although each dyadic relationship is characterized as a "mutual struggle, interdependence, and the capacity of active and structive positions to transform into each other" (Farquhar, 1994, p. 78), historically and culturally, the concepts of harmony and disharmony have been used to describe the state of social relationships in a society (Furth, 1999; Mote, 1989; Schwartz, 1985; Zito & Barlow, 1994). In this passage, structive does not mean passive. In this pair, active is the verb and structive is the noun. Active is motion through a structure, and structive is the place where motion happens. Maintaining harmonious social relations is the core of one of the most profound philosophical teachings in Chinese society (Schwartz, 1985).

The concept of harmonizing is recognized as an important part of the world of thought in Chinese society (Furth, 1999; Mote, 1989; Schwartz, 1985; Zito & Barlow, 1994). The concept of harmony, from the yin-yang power nexus, is more appropriate for the narration of the deeper accounts of social experience. The use of yin-yang theory to analyze the power struggles in social and health research can provide a complement to the Western vernacular. Terms such as *disharmony* or *disharmonizing* can, for example, replace the terms *oppression* and

Figure 4. Differential mode of association

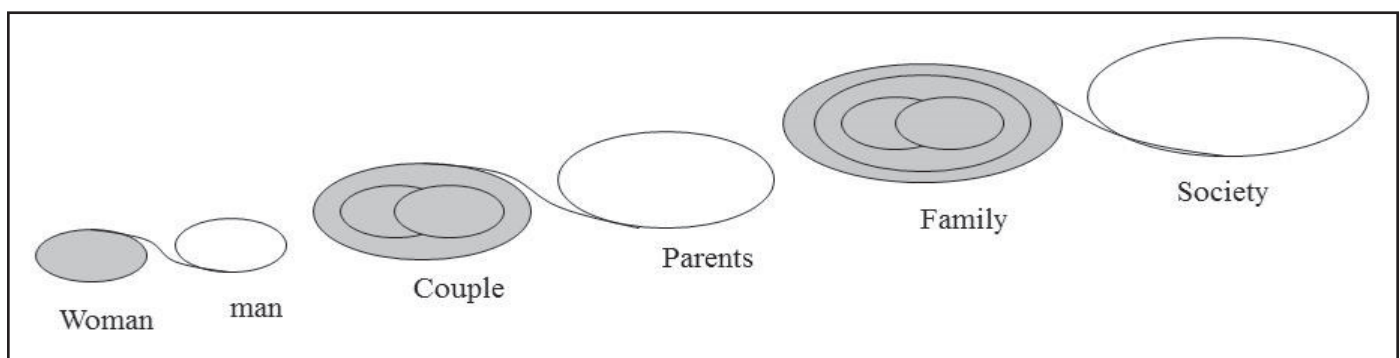
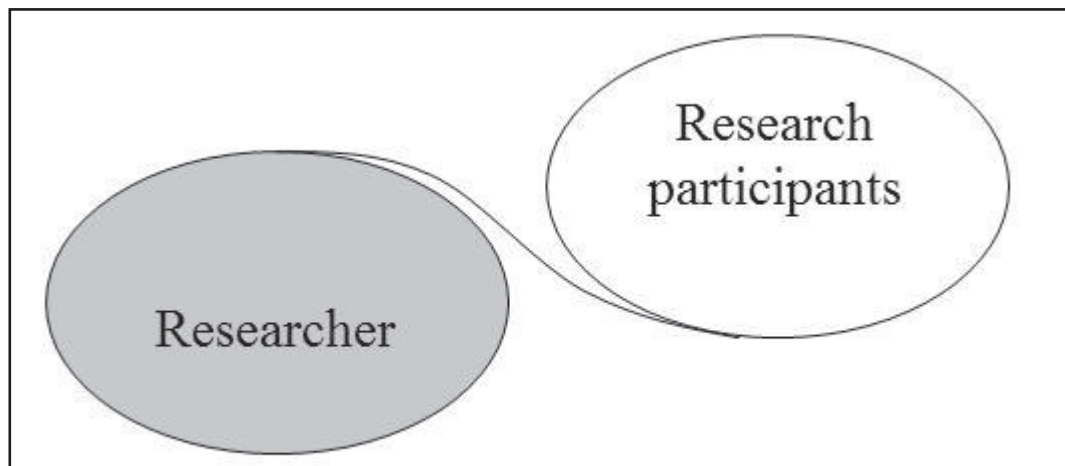


Figure 5. Yin-yang dyad depicting the relationship between the researcher and the research participants.



marginalization and, in the process, provide another, perhaps more useful, perspective. Yin-yang theory as applied is the yin component to oppression and marginalization. Hence, yin-yang theory can provide a culturally relevant theoretical perspective to examine and discuss issues of power and empowerment.

Reframing the Power Question

The yin-yang dyad can function as a framework or a form of dynamic relationship that can be categorized as in harmony or in disharmony. Relationships of struggle and interdependence among phenomena naturally take the yin-yang form (Farquhar, 1994) and cannot be dichotomized as opposites. Yin-yang theory conceptualizes the power struggle as intrinsic to the dyad. In the yin-yang model, however, there is no absolute winner or loser due to the capacity to transform one into the other. Hence, in yin-yang theory, restoration of harmony is the goal (Schwartz, 1985).

What would a power analysis from a yin-yang theoretical context look like? Yin-yang theory provides a picture of interdependence and of the capacity to transform one into another; it rejects a view of dichotomized entities in opposition. When one aspires to an analytic perspective that operates by positioning the world as consisting of dichotomies, one also uses the associated language to describe and understand social problems, for example “winner and loser” or “successful and unsuccessful.” A yin-yang conceptualization helps us to return to the subject of power as understood in its constellation of social structures. For example, Liu (2010) used yin-yang theory in a policy discourse analysis study to explore how preconception care was defined in Chinese government policies and in a Chinese community. Liu aimed to: (a) define and critically analyze preconception care in the context of Chinese government policies and (b) explore rural women’s and healthcare providers’ views on preconception care related to government policies.

In terms of participants’ views on policies, the yin-yang dyad was used to conceptualize the power relations between participants and policy. Participants were considered yin, and policies were considered yang, as policy discourses were conceptualized as more dominant than the participants’ discourses. Yin-yang dyadic power relations helped to explain such discursive interaction between people’s views and the policy. It should be noted that Liu (2010) did not set out to explore how well participants adopted the preconception care policy language; rather, Liu focused on how the preconception

care language circulating in the selected community converged and diverged from the policy text. Therefore, the analysis focused on identifying both similar and different language in policy text and in the views of people. In the case of similar language use identified in both the policy text and the views expressed by people, no unidirectional conclusions were drawn about the impact of policy on what people state. This is because the yin-yang dyadic relation involves a mutual struggle and interdependence not commonly used in the analytic perspective.

Epistemological Implications of Power Conceptualization

The power conceptualization in the yin-yang dyad is applicable to the analytical processes of research. The dynamic relationship between the researcher and the research participants can be seen in the diagram of a shaded circle that connects with an unshaded circle (see Figure 5). The power dynamic within the dyad can be viewed as either giving power to or drawing power from research participants or communities. The concept of giving power to and drawing power from research participants or communities has been emphasized in several qualitative traditions, e.g., indigenous methodology, community-based participatory research.

The shaded circle represents the *researcher*, and the unshaded circle represents the *research participants*. This power layout is an ideal relationship between the researcher and the participants, in which, research participants are in the dominant position throughout the research process. This conceptualization provides the basis for the idea that co-creation of knowledge is the result of the dynamic interaction between the researcher and the participants.

Conclusion

In this article, the authors revisited yin-yang theory and presented its conceptualization of body and power as a new theoretical approach to research, especially in the social and health sciences. This theoretical perspective considers the power agenda of social relations within a broad historical-philosophical context, which challenges the premises of equality in power distribution. From the yin-yang theory perspective, so-called collectivism is reconceptualized as a hierarchical system of social relations, with levels from pairs of individuals, to family, and to society. Individuals are not passive subjects who are produced by a collectivist system, as a critical social theorist would view

them; rather, they are active subjects who give power to dyad relationships at each level in the hierarchical system. A yin-yang theory-guided methodology can reshape research and, in the process, deconstruct and re-create it. This new conceptualization of research expands the theoretical toolkit available for developing and conducting research and for exploring epistemological implications.

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Fuqin Liu, PhD, RN is an Assistant Professor at the College of Nursing, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas. **Stevan Harrell, PhD** is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. Dr. Liu may be contacted at flu@twu.edu.

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