

# Editorial: Six theses on African Psychology for the world

## Thesis 1: All of human psychology is African psychology

Read from below, from the perspective of victims of slavery, colonialism and contemporary racism, histories of knowledge are reminders of subjection. Europe's triumphant march of progress expresses the destruction of indigenous know-how. European civilisation implies the dehumanisation of locals. Any history of indigenous African psychology is therefore a history of subjugated knowledge. Like all histories of victims of legislated dehumanisation, be they of the first nations, indigenous people, blacks, women and queers, such a history will always be entangled. It is outside history, against the archive, reflective of conquest. It speaks to loss, haunted by attempts at rediscovery.

And so African psychology cannot but have a short, highly complicated history, even if it might have a contested, lost, unacknowledged past. Thus, all of it – the past of Africans' psychologies, the beginnings of the history of African psychology, its "fathers", and how we apprehend the meaning of African psychology – is very much wide open to contestation.

Even then, colloquially speaking, where human psychology is taken as the mental make-up of a person or group, it could be said all human psychology is African psychology. Existing fossil evidence indicates that origins of modern human beings can be traced to Africa. Therefore, all human psychology is African psychology. African psychology is about all of humanity. African psychology might be psychology from Africa – but it is inevitably for the planet.

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## **Thesis 2: The spirits of European philosophers and United States (US) poets in psychology in Africa**

Psychology in the non-colloquial sense refers to disciplined knowledge. It is the systematic study of the psyche. That is one definition. It is not undisputed. Other psychologists prefer the study of behaviour. That is another definition. Not everyone agrees with it. There is actually no universally agreed upon definition.

What might be less controversial is the notion that modern disciplinary psychology is found in texts, transmitted through lectures, conferences, journal articles, books, letters, magazines, and increasingly, virtually. In that case, if Lionel Nicholas' (2014) sources are to be believed, African psychology born in South Africa can be traced to the late nineteenth century. In 1895 Jan Christiaan Smuts, a student at Oxford University and later twice prime minister of South Africa, completed a manuscript in which he analysed the personality of American poet Walt Whitman. Considered financially unviable at the time, the manuscript **Walt Whitman: A study in the evolution of personality** was eventually published in 1973.

Could Smuts be seen as the first father of African psychology? It depends. Among the conditions is, given the history where “bastard” offspring could be enslaved by their fathers, how are we to think of white men who fathered African offspring? Whatever answer is given, it will not be unanimous. Nevertheless, here, then, in the picture of young J C Smuts, a student at Oxford with a psychological interest in an American poet, is a sign: psychology students and psychologists from Africa have always been part of the world. They still are. In addition, psychology students and psychologists from other parts of the world have contributed to African psychology – even if that knowledge was not always for the good of the majority of people of the continent.

One could say though, the history of the discipline of psychology is not of manuscripts, but of university departments, with lecturers and students. In this light, where the history of psychology is viewed as entailing the establishment of a separate university department, African psychology begins at Stellenbosch University in 1917 with the first independent psychology department. Having graduated with a PhD with the title “Zur Erkenntnistheorie Hegels in der Phänomenologie des Geistes” from the University of Berlin in the same year, Reymond (sic) William Wilcocks was appointed the first head of a psychology department on the African continent.

Could Wilcocks be regarded as the real father of African psychology? It is subject to argument. Among the things on which the answer depends is whether someone like Wilcocks considered what he did as African psychology. And then there is also how he was considered by those who worked with him, those whom he taught, and those who

read of him today. No answer is likely to be unchallenged. Regardless, in Wilcocks' studies on Hegel in Berlin, we find yet another sign of the reach of psychology by those who live in Africa. It is a psychology that was influenced by German philosophy. The influence of European epistemologies, values, and interests persist today. What lies in the future of African psychology should be the mutually beneficial influence of new, not just the old, African-situated knowledges in European universities and other knowledge institutions.

The thesis advanced here is that Smuts and Wilcocks might have a claim to being part of the history of African psychology. Depending on the test of paternity, each has a claim to fathering modern African psychology. But white males as fathers of African psychology, illegitimate or otherwise, is not something that is going to be readily accepted by some psychologists. Yet both men were citizens of an African country after all. However, ranged against that claim is the recognition that the two men were of European origin and that the indigenous Khoi and San and blacks were oppressed, their knowledge discounted.

The question of the genealogy of African psychology, which is a question of history, triggers other questions: who can be part of African psychology, what is it for, who is it for? But above all, asking about progenitors cues the issue of definition. Regarding knowledge, lineage instantiates authority and the very problematic of what kind of psychology flows from such origin. As such, the spectre of definition cannot but haunt the history, and therefore the future, of African psychology. Wahbie Long (2016: 429) has said that one of the reasons "that the Africanization of psychology in our country has failed revolves around the unhelpful obsession with what it means to be 'African'. More often than not, definitions of 'the African' are framed in racially and culturally exclusive ways that make it difficult for non-blacks to imagine a place for themselves in the field." It is not incorrect that the interrogation into the definition of African psychology recuperates rows about African identity. In their contribution to the present special issue, Puleng Segalo and Zethu Cakata wrestle with precisely this "issue of what an African Psychology should entail in general, and what the role of indigenous languages" is in this regard.

Yet whilst the questions related to what is African about African psychology is inevitable, it is incorrect though that African psychology has failed. African psychology has been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and arguably thriving. What troubles African psychology, and might make one see failure where there is a complicated history yet well-established African psychology departments, is not so much the fixation of what it means to be African but precisely what is African psychology. The question of definition is unavoidable. It trips many. Definitional issues are never fully resolved. Africa is irretrievably marked by coloniality, an immersive phenomenon. Europe is still in Africa. African psychology exemplifies the profound entanglement of colonial conquest.

It can be seen as comic that African psychology had white fathers. But it is tragic too. And it is, as we say, what is. African psychology in South Africa gets born out of the fatal intimacy between the colonial and the indigenous. And so whilst one variety of African psychology might inevitably be white and colonial by birth, it is the mission of another variety of African psychology to resist, to decolonise. All the same, African psychologists, of all creeds, are condemned to live with and work with/in the (post) colonial entanglement.

### **Thesis 3: A need exists for more interchanges and more openness to influence each other**

To state that psychology in Africa has been influenced by European presuppositions, notions and morals is not to be interpreted as arguing for expunging all foreign ideas. In his contribution to the present issue, Augustine Nwoye, contends “although some Eurocentric theories of the human personality or personhood ... already exist, including those developed by some African American psychologists ... some of which are very relevant to our experience, a continental African version of the theory of African human personhood is still needed”. Nwoye is arguing for a universal psychology of pluriversal psychologies, a multiplicity of views of the personhood instead of a domineering Euro-American centred perspective of the self. In passing, given the dearth of African centred theories of personality, I conjecture that over time Nwoye’s article, “An Africentric theory of human personhood”, is going to be very influential and well-debated.

On a more general note, it is my contention that African psychologists ought to assert their right to and avail themselves of the European archive. It is common knowledge that Africa’s encounter with Europe from the 15th century forever changed both. Additionally, European civilization contains stolen property from Africa and the New World. Most significantly for African psychology, a pronounced need exists for more interchanges and more openness to influence each other among South Africa and other African countries and the diaspora. In this respect, regarding mutual intra-African influences, mobility between different countries, and exchanges among continental psychology students, researchers, teachers, therapists, one of the contributions to this special issue includes a contribution by the Zimbabwean community psychologists Mpikelelo Mpawusi Maseko, Levison Maunganidze, Benjamin Mambende and Sibangilizwe Maphosa on the fit of the speciality with Zimbabwean and African cultural values and worldviews. We would have liked to have more contributions from psychologists in African countries, but did not get many. Which raises the question, why are there still so few psychologists from, for example, Zimbabwe or Zambia, Algeria and Angola, Nigeria as well as Niger, visiting South Africa and publishing in South African psychology journals; which goes together with the question, why aren’t there more South African psychologists publishing in outlets and visiting for work, for example, Agadez, Asmara, or Aswan?

## Thesis 4: Black psychology is linked to but not identical with African psychology

In 1969 Noel Chabani Manganyi (2013) published his paper on hysteria among African women. The following year he completed a doctorate in psychology at the University of South Africa. Because he is black, Manganyi could be seen as the rightful father of African psychology and, therefore that the history African psychology begins in the late 1960s.

Knowledge by black scholars in psychology and other disciplines is a necessity. There is also pressure on some of us to draw out the ties and crossings between African psychology and Black Studies (as well as other fields such as African studies and cultural studies). There is, however, a perennial danger: African psychology gets conflated with psychology by black scholars. Even worse, African psychology can be relegated as studies on black people by black psychologists. To be clear, psychology by black scholars is linked to but is not identical to African psychology. And *African* in African psychology is silent. That implies that African psychology should not be seen as a (sub)discipline: it is both much wider than a (sub)discipline of psychology and at the same time more delimited than psychology or African studies.

Since Manganyi, there emerged a number of several radical and many more conservative black scholars in psychology. Black psychology students and psychologists would call for a relevant, appropriate, non-European/US-centric psychology for South Africa. In recent times, the call became more insistent, and the debates more intense debates. It is true that the debates have also been characterised by prejudice, knee-jerk reactions, nastiness, and apparent frustrations (Baloyi & Ramose, 2016; Chitindingu & Mkhize, 2016, Makhubela, 2016; Ratele, 2017b). Despite all that, along with the demands for decolonisation and free education by university students, these debates about African psychology as well as the establishment of the Forum of African Psychology as a formal division of the Psychological Society of South Africa, which, as we said, has “reignited some of the old hopes and frustrations about psychology”; are what urged this call by **PINS (Psychology in Society)**. The intensifying call for and resistance to a transformed, decolonised or African psychology ought not to be ignored. In my assessment, the wish to enjoy our anesthetized existence under colonial modernity, to forget the collective historical economic, political and cultural trauma – that is what prevails. An unrecognized hope exists that this demand for African psychology, for a decolonised and decolonising psychology, will die, later if not sooner. As noted in the call for papers, “among some teachers of psychology, therapists, researchers and students, the term African psychology continues to conjure ideas of a psychology not simply different from American psychology, but of knowledge that is not real psychology”. These ideas arise from a deeply mistaken understanding of African psychology.

One must repeat then: like the black Manganyi, the white Wilcocks was an African psychologist. Black psychology is wanted, and yet just like white psychology, it does not amount to all of African psychology. African psychology is not by nature black, but rather that psychological work which comes *from* Africa. As such, the inspiration for the call for an issue on African psychology was “that whilst some unenthusiastic reactions are evident, the renewed calls for African-centred psychological thought and practice offers an opportunity for critical psychologists to think about their own suspicion of and alienation from Africa, the hegemony of concepts mainly born out of conditions in US and Western Europe, what might African studies contribute to critical psychology and vice versa, while continuing to contribute to global knowledge. And although the old question about a psychology in Africa without Africa in psychology still cries out for radical and sophisticated resolution, new problems have begun to press on us within critical psychology”. The “opportunity for critical psychologists to think about their own suspicion of and alienation from Africa” was not taken as enthusiastically as we hoped. What we were looking for, but we never managed to find, were contributions that would talk to “how critical psychology might give birth to a decolonised, transformed and African-situated conceptualisations, analyses, and insights without losing sight of global concerns that characterise psychology”.

### **Thesis 5: A distinction is made between extraverted, Western European/US American-centric psychology in Africa and introverted, African-centred psychology**

So confusion reigns when surveying African psychology. Elsewhere I have said, unless one twists oneself into knots, “all of psychology done in and for Africa, about Africans, by Africans as well as non-Africans (working on Africa) is African psychology” (Ratele, 2017b: 1). It is clearly a straightforward matter, I averred, except when it is not. And the latter, not the former, is usually the state of affairs.

It may be easy to comprehend that “all of psychology done in and for Africa, about Africans, by Africans as well as non-Africans (working on Africa)” is of course African psychology. However, it gets confusing when psychologists in Africa regard themselves as not African psychologists. It would seem logical that psychologists working in Europe are European psychologists. (Except, that is, those psychologists who hold Yemeni, Nigerian or Argentinian passports, or who identify with their birth countries outside of the European community even though they may have acquired citizenship, or who are stateless, among other facts that could nullify the professional identity “European psychologist”). Similarly, it would seem logical that psychologists working in Africa are African psychologists. Except, that is, it is not. One explanation is that some psychology teachers, researchers and therapists do not identify with Africa. Others are challenged from identifying with Africa. Still others feel deeply ambivalent about their own fortunes being tied to Africa’s.

Thus when thinking about African psychology nuance is warranted and distinctions have to be made with respect to how individuals are oriented towards Africa and psychology. The article by Kopano Ratele tries to articulate one such distinction concerning how to approach men and masculinities from African psychological perspectives. The major distinction to be drawn turns on the centre of gravity for one's work as a psychologist in Africa. As such, we ought to make a differentiation of what we should refer to as Western European/US-centrists on the one hand, and African-centrists on the other. The two categories of African psychologists can also be called scholarly extraverts and scholarly intraverts. The terms scholarly extraverts and intraverts are adapted from Paulin Hountondji (1987). They do not refer to personality. Scholarly extraverts look to the theories and models and problems arising in the global north to guide their ontological, epistemological, methodological and technical interests. Scholarly intraverts look to the experiences and realities, streets and paths in their countries for their ontological, epistemological, methodological and technical interests.

The confusion as well as battles around African psychology revolves around two kinds of centring. On the left side: those of us who see relatively little wrong with much of the (critical) psychology that we practice, or with much of the approaches to teaching and research we employ, or with much of the therapeutic healing practices we use on our clients. Even though we may recognise that the way we live and where we work contributes, by omission if not commission, to socioeconomic injustice and that the discipline of psychology is dominated by US and Western Europe patriarchal capitalist interests, we may feel that we are better off with the world of (critical) psychology as is. Ironically, those who see nothing fundamentally off-colour with much psychology as is include those of us who identify as critical psychologists. We may recognise and critique what is wrong with mainstream psychology and its methods and explanations. But we do hold very dearly to and, our distinction is marked by our knowledge of, our Brownmillers, Butlers, and Cixouses, our Chomskys, de Beauvoirs, and Derridas, our du Boises, Foucaults, or Lacans. That is to say, we privilege the major critical European and US thinkers, be they male, female or other genders/sexes, white, black or raceless. The centre of gravity for this offshore model of (critical) African psychology is Europe and the US. As an offshore, extraverted psychology, this (critical) African psychology primarily looks to places outside of the continent for legitimation and reward, mainly using the locals as a site of data extraction or application. This (critical) African psychology might be taught and written in some African universities but is actually epistemologically, ontologically, cognitively, or emotionally invested elsewhere.

On the right side: those of us who feel (critical) African psychology should centre Africa in psychology. In the call for contributions to this special it was noted that “contestations around what is African psychology and how psychologists might better theoretically

situate themselves in African realities are not new<sup>7</sup>. These disagreements, but also evasion, puzzlement, disapprobation and assertion, persist. That being the case, what those of us on this side have sought to articulate is precisely that while there is in South Africa an African psychology – even a well-established (critical) (African) psychology – it is *African* psychology in the nominal sense. Such a(n) (critical) (African) psychology is best captured by what elsewhere I called the “(critical) psychology in Africa orientation” (Ratele, 2017a). Hence, those of us on this side feel that African-centred critical reflections on global economics, continental affairs, national politics, knowledge, the self and its relations, and other topics, remain marginalised within global psychology and psychology as it exists on the African continent. In short, there is hardly anything of what can be referred to as (critical) African psychology *sensu stricto*. What is called for then is a meaningful and textured Africa in (critical) psychology, what might be referred to as an introverted, (critical) African-centred psychology. (Critical) African-centred psychology is a (critical) psychology that develops and makes the greatest number of African publics its primary audience, readers and users. This model of (critical) African psychology is centred on and intended to benefit the greatest possible number of people in the country in which one works.

These are not pure categories. Both those who look up to Europe or the US for inspiration as well those who want to immerse themselves in the lived realities in Africa are not internally homogenous. And (critical) psychologists can change. And nothing precludes one being a feminist psychologist inspired by Freud while aware of the subjugation of indigenous knowledge. And, again, the call for a critical African psychology springs from the desire for African psychologists to help us think how live better, meaning with critical consciousness, in the entangled world, all the world, we have inherited.

## **Thesis 6: A critical African-centred psychology between African psychology and critical psychology**

Following the founding of the African Psychology Forum in 2009 as a division of Psychological Society of South Africa, the debates on, among other things, the uses, definition, status, aims, and approaches of African psychology were reignited. However, there is still often more heat than light about what is African Psychology and why we might need it or not. The articles in this special issue of **PINS** directly and indirectly contribute to this debate and the development of African Psychology. What does not get adequate discussion are the overlaps and tensions between critical psychology and African psychology that could lead towards a critical African-centred psychology. A critical African-centred psychology is one that unmakes critical psychologists as experts in an “extraverted, alienated and dependent” knowledge (Hountondji, 1987: 386) and challenges African psychologists to be more critical of their own thought and practice. A critical African-centred psychology is simply a critical psychology that situates Africa



at the centre (Ratele, 2017a). That critical African-centred psychology that looks to the conditions, the thinking about, and the feeling for life and due to structures in African countries for its ontologies, politics, epistemologies, methodologies, publics, and technologies of living is still in the making.

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