

A psychology in our own language: Redefining psychology in an African context

Abstract

Psychology in Africa has for a long time and continues to be a contentious subject. Many scholars have pointed to the importance of acknowledging multiple forms of knowing and being in the world and understanding the complexities of understanding how people make meaning of their world. The urge to understand and define the notion of being human in universalistic terms minimises and obscures the complexities of human experiences in time, space and geolocation. This paper argues for the need to take the role of languages (indigenous) earnestly if we are to imagine a psychology (African) that takes local contexts within which it is practised and taught seriously. Furthermore, we insist on the importance of decolonising the psychology curriculum wherein what is deemed as legitimate at the exclusion of other forms of knowing becomes challenged.

Tshoboloko

Saekholoji mo Aforika e nnile e bile e tswela go nna kgang e e tlhorang boroko sebaka se seleele. Barutegi ba le bantsi ba bontshitse botlhokwa jwa go lemogwa ga ditsela tse di mmalwa le go nna mo lefatsheng le go tlhloganya mathata a gore batho ba bontsha jang bokao jwa lebopo la bone. Tsiboso ya go tlhloganya le go tlhalosa mogopolo wa go nna botho ka bolefatshe lotlhe go fokotsa le go tlhakatlhakanya mathata a maitemogelo a botho ka nako, sebaka le tikologo. Pampiri e e sekaseka tlhokego ya go tsaya seabe sa dipuo (tsa tlholego) ka tlhoafalo fa re tlhoka go akanya saekholoji (Aforika) e e elang tlhoko lemorago mo e diragadiwang gone le go rutiwa ka tlhoafalo. Go feta foo, re gatelela botlhokwa jwa go lokolola kharikhulamo ya saekholoji moo se se

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bonwang se le mo molaong go sa akarediweng ga ditsela dingwe tsa go itse go fetogang go nna kgwetlho.

Problematising Psychology

Re qala ka ho ipotsa dipotso hore na ebe ha re ngola ka bohlokwa ba maleme a Setho thutong ya botsebi ho tsa kelello, maikutlo, le maphelo a batho, re ka etsa jwalo ka leleme ya sekgowa na! Lefapha la thuto e phahameng le dibaka tsa thuto di sa ntse di le morao ho amoheleng bohlokwa ba tsebo e arolelanwang ka maleme a Setho a Afrika Borwa. Ke ka lebaka leo re ngolang pampiri ena ke leme la sekgowa ho hlahisa tlhokeho ya hore re emelle morao re ipotse hore na e be ke eng eo re e lahlehelwang ka ho se sebedise maleme a Setho thutong. Re ngola tjena re batla ho hlahisa tletlebo – re re thuto eo re e fumaneng e thatafatsa maipolelo ka puo tsa bo rona. Re etsa boipiletso hore jwalo ka ditsebi mafapheng a thuto re lokela ho etella phetoho pele, hoba phetoho e qala ka rona.

We start with the above assertion as a way to situate ourselves and to explain the importance of indigenous languages in academic spaces. We deemed it fit to do so in one of our indigenous languages, Sesotho. Ideally this paper should be written in an indigenous language however we are cognisant of the limitations we are still contending with; and these include publication spaces/allowance for non-English texts in many of our journals (including this one). One of the things we wrestled with was the translation of the very concept of Psychology. This paper therefore wrestles with the issue of what an African Psychology should entail in general, and what the role of indigenous languages is in these debates.

We start this paper by acknowledging that the call for moving away from solely relying on Eurocentric perspectives when teaching and practising Psychology is not new (see Nsamenang, 1995; Naidoo, 1996; Ya Azibo, 1996; Akbar, 2004; to name a few). Our aim is to open up conversations on the importance of indigenous languages and the role they play in how we come to know and define the world. As we continue journeying towards Africanising and decolonising psychology, we deem it critical to have indigenous languages as an integral part of the process.

Psychology in Africa, like other knowledge forms, is often treated as though its origins are distinctly Western. This has been made believable by the systematic erasure and inferiorisation of indigenous knowledge systems which began with colonialism. African knowledges, which sustained societies for centuries before colonialism, were brutally disrupted by the imposition of European knowledges and cultures and various spheres were left without a trace of indigenous wisdom. Mignolo (2011) argues that this process was made possible by the inferiorisation and exclusion of indigenous languages in the professionalised world. Mignolo (2011) further asserts that the exclusion of indigenous

languages allowed for the disregard of indigenous forms of being. This cemented the belief that these languages do not deserve a place in the world of rational thought and left people who come from the world considered inferior looking to assimilate the superior world and disassociating with their origins. Their languages were seen only as a way of exposing their inferiority with no real contribution to knowledge production. This inferiorisation has contributed towards African countries being subjected to knowledge systems that do not reflect their realities. This is found within the university spaces as well where the inferiorisation of knowledges that are “non-European” continue to be perpetuated. It is at this point where African Psychology makes its entry in order to critique and challenge the universalistic approach in understanding human behaviour. According to Nwoye (2015: 11),

“African Psychology is interested in engaging in field studies with the potential to generate relevant data for addressing the psychosocial needs and problems of the people of Africa, particularly those intended to help to bring to the fore the African Indigenous Knowledges deemed vital for attending to the peculiar challenges of living in the contemporary African world. In some cases, African psychologists engage in the exercise of restudying some of the themes and problems earlier studied but wrongly understood and coded or conceptualized by foreign researchers, due to lack of expertise in the language of the people they studied. Through such a language barrier, such researchers were unable to penetrate to the details and discover accurate meanings and significance of some of the issues studied, such as the psychological significance of the mortuary practices and naming rituals of the people of Africa.”

As alluded to above, if Africans are to respond to the realities of their context, the manner in which reality is perceived has to change drastically to allow multiple voices. This could redress the misconception that only the western forms of knowing are valid. Mignolo (2011) calls this disruption an epistemic disobedience and it relates to Nyamnjoh’s (2013) notion of epistemological conviviality which he describes as an openness to various forms of knowledge. Both Epistemic disobedience and epistemological conviviality advocate for the rejection of the colonial reality imposed by the western world. By rejecting the western realities, the colonized people would be refusing to subscribe to the notion that western knowledge systems are universal.

The rejection of western ways of knowing and relating to the world would be challenging the violence which has characterized relations between the colonizer and the colonized. This is the violence which Fanon (1986), wa Thiong’o (1986), and Biko (2004) have written about extensively. According to these three authors both the physical and the structural forms of violence have made the domination of the

colonized people possible. While physical violence ripped success in ensuring that the resistance of African people was muted, structural forms of violence ensured the mental enslavement of Africans where they were made to see no value in who they are due to the distortion and inferiorisation of their knowledge systems and cultures. Language was pivotal in ensuring this mental enslavement. Colonial languages were imposed to introduce European cultures and to ensure that they replace existing African cultures in the minds of African people. This was ensured, as Biko (2004) states, by the introduction of European cultures as universal and that made certain that African cultures existed as mere adjuncts to dominant European cultures. Colonisation, according to Nyamnjoh (2012), emphasised imitation of western ways rather than a co-existence of different realities. It replaced indigenous people's epistemologies with a western single dimensional epistemology which has served to oppress African people. For Biko (2004) this ensured the inferiorisation of African cultures and knowledges.

The introduction of western education was instrumental in facilitating the structural violence referred to above. Schools according to Fanon (1986), wa Thiong'o (1986), and Biko (2004) became a tool to engrain European cultures. In their very design, they served to define the world. Through an education that was single dimensional, the world therefore got to be defined by the coloniser. As Fanon (1986) states, schools did not only make European cultures superior, they were also rigorous in ensuring that indigenous cultures were distorted and inferiorised. This sentiment is re-iterated by Biko (2004) when he argues that imperialism cleansed black people's brains of all forms of substance by destroying and distorting their past thus ridding them of a cultural point of reference. Europeans perceived African cultures as barbarism and they dubbed African spirituality as superstition and the histories of African people were erased and misrepresented (Biko, 2004). All of this resulted in Africans looking only to the west for a cultural reference point. The discipline of psychology contributed in the delegitimisation of other forms of knowledges. As Makhubela (2016: 52) argues, "mainstream psychology in South Africa is seen as harbouring aspirations of becoming a local incarnation of an imperialist academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic standard, which discounts and represses other epistemic traditions". The call for African psychology becomes critical at this point. In the rest of the paper we attempt to highlight the importance of a psychology that is rooted within Africa and that acknowledges and takes seriously African ways of being. We zoom in on the importance of indigenous languages in our quest to make meaning of people's lived realities. Language is an integral part of our identities and it is through language that we can make sense of our world. For a long time indigenous languages have been in the periphery, and we argue that these languages need to be at the centre and form an integral part of the teaching of psychology.

Defining African psychology

There has been a call from various scholars of the need for African people to tell their own stories and not use (or rely solely on) imported theories to understand local realities. So why has African psychology taken so long to make its way into the classroom? It is due to the nature of the university in Africa? These questions will inform the arguments we would like to make in this paper. We deem it critical to engage first with why there is a need for an African psychology and what this kind of psychology would mean. Colonial influence played a role in what was regarded as legitimate knowledge and this further informed what was taught at universities; which was curricula that was imported (uncritically) from Europe. In many ways this remains the case today. African psychology is an epistemological frame of work that rejects exclusion of other ways of knowing. It encourages multimodal understanding of *being* (what it is to be human) and the importance of taking context into consideration.

In a talk he gave at the first international conference of the Forum of African Psychology (conference held at the University of Limpopo, March 2013) Nwoye described African psychology as a field of study interested in investigating and understanding what it is to be African. It is interested in understanding the psychological capital of the African people. It is a psychology that has a pre (before the colonialists came) and post-colonial reference to it; it moves beyond understanding a *one-person* subjectivity to a collective understanding of people. It is a field of study interested in theory building, research, critical practice and documentation. It has come into being to move beyond the limitations that it perceives within mainstream psychology. Furthermore, African psychology values multiple epistemologies as all instrumental in understanding behaviour and lived experiences. It is not limited to what is deemed objective, measurable and universal.

The African in African psychology derives from its focus and attention to the African content. It aims to understand the African people from the past, those in the present and the acknowledgement of the diverse realities they exist within (Nwoye, 2015). It acknowledges the multiracial aspect of what or who is deemed African. It comes in as a form of protest that aims to fulfil African people's need for wholeness. It is also critical to note that there are multiple perspectives in how African psychology is defined and understood (see Makhubela, 2016; Ratele, 2016; Nwoye, 2017). For example, Ratele (2016) proposes four African psychologies which he asserts are critical as they allow space for therapists, researchers and teachers to 'choose' orientations that speak to their area of focus (psychology in Africa, cultural African psychology, critical African psychology, and psychological African studies). This "slicing" up of African Psychology is deemed problematic by Nwoye (2017: 5) who argues that we need to "develop a postcolonial academic field of African Psychology" and not focus only on the individual parts of what forms African psychology. These multiple views force/afford us the opportunity to engage

and challenge us to be critical of definitions we employ. The interest and engagement with what African psychology means highlights its importance in our current debates of the relevance of Psychology in South Africa (Long, 2012; 2013; 2014).

There continues to be a silencing of alternative forms of knowing, in for example, what is validated as legitimate knowledge. As Nyamnjoh (2004) argues, the African university continues to be a colonial satellite of the western academy. With this therefore a space is needed for the decolonisation of the university in general and the curriculum within various disciplines such as psychology in particular. Decoloniality is a theory of social change, a theoretical perspective that seeks for a philosophical view to knowledge. It calls for the understanding of issues from the critical perspective of the indigenous (African) subject. An epistemological reconstruction and a humanising intellectual knowledge is critical if we are to truly get an understanding of people's lived realities. African Psychology is therefore a decolonising project that "can be understood as a psychology of rehabilitation of the culture and orientation of research in African universities, the type that will derive, anchor, not in comparing African and Europeans, but rather in people's everyday needs, epistemologies, and worldview" (Nwoye, 2015: 4).

Centring indigenous languages

"The absence of native language literacy obliges African psychologists to write in foreign languages, a practice which further reduces productivity and quality of work. Foreign languages also fail to capture or fully represent many African phenomena adequately. For example, many African idioms and proverbs cannot be translated appropriately into scientific jargon or European languages, except at the risk of impairment to their essence or distortion of their full meaning." (Nsamenang, 1995: 735)

In wrestling with the issue of indigenous languages, we asked ourselves this question: Should we develop our indigenous languages for psychology purposes or should we engage with our indigenous languages and in them find ways in which psychology can be defined? We sought answers from language scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o. In a talk he gave at the University of the Witwatersrand (2 March 2017) Ngugi wa Thiong'o asserted that there is a need to centre African languages and not allow these languages to be on the margins or below European languages. There needs to be a shift from perceiving European languages as keys that are there to unlock possibilities to a better life as this affirms the fallacy of these languages as superior. wa Thiong'o asked: How can languages spoken by only ten percent of the world be deemed as superior and as a normative measure of excellence? This assumes European languages to be superior. This perception and assumption of superiority is not an accident, but a legitimate aim of the conquest mission. Language did (does) to the mind what the sword did to the body, and thus being stripped of one's language wounds and hampers the ways in which

one perceives the world. wa Thiong'o further argued that we pamper English and other European languages and pauper(ise) African languages. The academia has contributed in people having what may be deemed as a death wish for their own languages while embracing European languages. The extreme humiliation and devaluing of African languages by mainstream discourses led to people despising their own languages. Who then would not want to busk in the sunshine glory of the "master" language? wa Thiong'o went on to assert that this cognitive conditioning leads to people wanting to move away from the object of shame (their indigenous languages). This cognitive conditioning is passed on from one generation to another; it is embodied and becomes normalised and as a result is never questioned. The discipline of Psychology with its dark history of racism, stereotyping and labelling people, is also guilty of not embracing the possibilities that lie within indigenous languages. Psychology needs to create space for the promises and wealth of knowledge that indigenous languages may offer.

The effort to make psychology respond to the African condition which is rooted in colonialism remains complicated. We argue for a need to make indigenous languages the main driver in such efforts. We believe that by putting indigenous languages at the centre we would be digging deep to ignored knowledge systems that have always shaped the well-being of African people. Languages would allow us to recover lost wisdom and allow us to reclaim our right to self-definition. This would allow Africans to view the world with a lens that refuses to recognize the inbuilt superiorities of the colonial world and will cause colonial languages to lose significance. By continuing to treat colonial languages with superiority we are affirming that the colonial world should shape who we are and what we consider as valid knowledge and we are declaring the deliberate mission to inferiorise indigenous life successful. It is important to remember that indigenous languages in Africa, as wa Thiong'o (1986), Bamgbose (2011), Ramoupi, (2011), and Biko, (2004) state, were placed in the position of inferiority deliberately by colonial powers whose aim was to dominate African people. Our failure, therefore, to not expose those roots would allow the continued domination of Africans by the colonial world.

Any discussion to include indigenous languages in the professional sphere is usually misconstrued as a call to translate existing Western knowledges into indigenous languages. This is not the call we are making, by calling for a Psychology that is founded on indigenous languages, we have reached a conclusion that the existing psychological knowledge is based on the epistemology and ontology that see the West as superior and Africa as inferior. A point also noted by Nwoye (2015; 3) in his assertion that "African Psychology emerged to serve as a protest psychology aimed at engaging in African image reconstructions; and, in that way, to add to and advance the incomprehensible determination of the African to recover from disturbance". Merely translating such

knowledges would be accepting those inhumane categories and Africans will continue to be just receivers and replicators of western knowledges and never key role players in the production of their own knowledges. The rejection of these categories would allow indigenous languages to give names to their psychologies and respond to the needs of their people. As Hikwa (2012) argues, indigenous languages make indigenous knowledges transmittable as they provide labels to indigenous concepts and processes. Hikwa (2012) is in agreement with Mkhize & Ndimande-Hlongwa (2014) that indigenous languages and indigenous knowledge are inseparable as languages are central in the transmission of indigenous knowledges. We therefore cannot speak of an African Psychology or African Psychologies that exclude the languages of African people. As demonstrated by Sobeicki (2014), indigenous languages have always played a role in indigenous medicine / psychology. The inferiorisation of indigenous languages has led to the exclusion of indigenous medicine/psychology in what is perceived as mainstream medical field. Sobeicki (2014) clearly demonstrates that the value of indigenous medicine/psychology is hidden in the languages that carry them. These languages carry concepts that explain the medicinal and psychological value of many traditional plants and various descriptions of the human condition (mental and/or physical). Sobeicki's (2014) work is a clear demonstration that sciences are not foreign to African communities but hidden in languages that are not given their due place in the academic world. Sobeicki's (2014) explanation of how plants are used by amaXhosa for medical/psychological purposes exposes that there is nothing unscientific about traditional healing as these plants are known to have chemical composition that have psychological effects.

The western scientific world's refusal to treat indigenous knowledges with respect is well captured by Nsamenang (2007) who exposes the manner in which the West has dehumanized African people through an imposed education system which has disregarded Africa's world view. Nsamenang (2007) argues that many programmes designed (often by the United Nations) to respond to the African condition often fails because the West is only attempting to fit Africa into its reality. This is a notion also highlighted by Shahjahan (2011) who reminds us of the importance of looking into what others bring with them, what they have to offer and the need to look at how spaces for acknowledgement can be created. The academia in general and the discipline of psychology in particular has been guilty of privileging other forms of knowledge over others. For a long time, African epistemologies were absent (and in many ways continue to be absent) in the psychology classrooms.

Efforts made by the many African governments to include indigenous knowledges have been more concerned with appending these knowledges to the existing western-defined sciences and expecting them to fit into western standards of what science is. A clear example of this lack of disruption are the attempts by the South African Department of

Health to make indigenous healers subscribe to western medical and health regulations, where they are required to have to be subjected to scrutiny which is based on western standards. Bogaert (2007) has argued that while it is necessary to ensure that the public is protected from harmful practices, the standard on which such protection is based should acknowledge that traditional and western healing systems are distinctly different. The current practice continues to let the west dictate even in an era where Africa is supposedly self-governing.

What type of psychology do we envisage in Africa (South Africa)?

We would like to align ourselves with Lebakeng, Phalane & Dalindybebo (2006) in their assertion that it is imperative to inscribe indigenous African epistemology into the curriculum and how we approach research. Lebakeng et. al (2006: 75) further argue that “underpinning education with African Philosophy is, in the first instance, a question of rights, and thus a matter of natural and historical justice”. It is about respect and dignity for multiple forms of knowing, acknowledging them as legitimate and worthy of being embraced and applied in our everyday encounters. It is critical to dig deep and deal with the core of what coloniality has managed to do if we are to truly understand and dismantle its roots and influence within the discipline of Psychology. Nyamnjoh (2004: 178) comes in here and reminds us that what is “often missing have been perspectives of the silent majorities deprived of the opportunity to tell their own stories their own ways or even to enrich defective accounts by others of their own life experiences. Correcting this entails paying more attention to the popular epistemologies from which ordinary people draw on a daily basis, and the ways they situate themselves in relationship to others within these epistemologies”. Knowledge is always within temporal and spatial dimensions. Society and historical context plays a role in what you know. Body, space, and geopolitics play a role in how knowledge is produced. Before going to empirical fact finding, human beings have a filtered understanding and therefore one can never really know the truth.

We need to think about the possibility for pluriversality which allows collective meaning making and situated knowing, taking into consideration the particularities of each context. Local histories and various forms of knowledges that reside within communities will contribute towards our understanding of how people approach their challenges and seek solutions. Nwoye (2015: 5) assists us by connecting this argument to psychology when he argues that “the inclusion of African Psychology in our university curriculum holds enormous potential for enriching and extending the contributions of the discipline of psychology and a means of breaking away from the spells of colonialism and white-centredness in the study of psychology in Africa. In this way the introduction of African Psychology as an academic discipline in African universities is perceived by many African students and scholars as a process of decolonization as well as reflecting one

aspect of the ongoing process of entrenchment of African-centredness in our university programmes”. This rethinking of curriculum where multiple forms of knowing and understanding the world is privileged and offered space we deem as a form of epistemic disobedience that encourages understanding, defining, and making sense of the world from the position of the subject (the African) whose voice (in his/her own indigenous language) and experience has for a long time been muted/silenced. Our quest is also in line with Manganyi’s plea (2013: 287) wherein he argues: “I was thinking about a psychology of everyday life, a psychology for and about ordinary women and men, a psychology that is to advance our society into a non-racist and humane society. I was imagining and proposing what I call a public interest psychology”. We would like to heed the call and together with Manganyi imagine an African Psychology that puts at the forefront the importance of indigenous languages and that takes seriously people’s lived experiences from the position wherein people exist. A public interest psychology would acknowledge and offer space to those whose voices have for a long time been denied and pushed into the margins; many of whom inhabit the black bodies. It is a psychology that allows the silenced to speak in their voices, and languages.

Concluding remarks

“African Psychology is both like and unlike the project of human self-reflection; a preoccupation that is found wherever human beings exist, but something that is different from the scientific project of a psychology created in the 19th century. Hence, over and above the idea of African Psychology as entailing the project of human self-reflection is its further social-cultural mission to promote a systematic understanding of the human condition and culture in post-apartheid Africa” (Nwoye, 2015: 12).

“IPsychology yama-Afrika, ifana, ingafani nelinge lomntu lokuziphicotha; linge elo elifumaneka nakuyiphina indawo enabantu. Eli linge lokuziphicotha lwahlukile kwimizamo yenzululwazi ye Psychology eyayiqulunqwe mandulo. Yi loonto ngaphaya kweengcamango zePsychology yama-Afrika emumathe ilinge lokuziphicotha, kukho iphulo elisekelwe ekufundeni banzi ngentlalo nenkcubeko ngenjogo yokukhuthaza ulwazi olucwangcisiweyo lwemo yoluntu kwakunyenkcubeko kwi-Afrika engaphesheya kocalucalulo”.

We close with the above quote from Nwoye as his sentiment successfully captures the importance of reimagining psychology as we know and practice it today. It is critical to think about the role of psychology today and embrace the possibility of allowing space for multiple and alternative ways of teaching and practising it. Many students have become vocal about the importance of an education that speaks to their lived realities; many are challenging and rejecting knowledge that undermines that which

they bring with into the classrooms. The speaking (from our students) back highlights the need to deconstruct and imagine new or different tools that could be used in the re-imagination of how psychology is understood. African psychology calls for self and collective reflection from scholars and practitioners who are invested in the project of understanding human relations and constantly seeking ways to achieve this goal. Stepping away from our comfort zones is a necessary step we need to take if we are to truly imagine a psychology that is African and one that respects, acknowledges, and embraces the pluriversal spaces we all occupy without needing to categorise and label for our own convenience.

Sigqibe ekubeni sivale ngamazwi ka Nwoye acatshulwe apha ngasentla kuba uwubeka ngokucacileyo umba wokubaluleka kokuqulunkqa ngokutsha izifundo ze Psychology ngokokuyazi nokuyi sebenzisa kwethu. Kubalulekile ukucinga ngendima emayidlalwe yi Psychology kulemihla siphila kuyo kwa kunye nokwamkelwa koluvo loku vumela iindlela ezahlukileyo zokufundisa nokusetyesiswa kwe Psychology. Abafundi abaninzi bathetha ngokuphandle ngokubaluleka kwe mfundo ethathela ingqalelo indlela abaphila ngayo: uninzi lwabo bacela umngeni bekwa khaba ulwazi olujongelaphantsi ulwazi abaza beluphethe kumagumbi okufundela. Okukunxakama kwabafundi kubonakalisa ukuba kukho isidingo sokuchitha kuphinde kwakhiwe ngokutsha izixhobo ezinokunceda ekujongeni ngamehlo amatsha indela iPsychology ebonwangayo. IPsychology yama Afrika inyanizelisa ukuziphicotha komntu siqusakhe kwakunye nokuziphicotha njenge lungu lequmrhu lwabanye abantu abanoxanduva lokufundisa uluntu ngokubanzi ngonxulumelelwano loluntu jikelele. Ngoko ke kubalulekile ukuba sizibhekise kwindlela esiqhele ukuzenza ngayo izinto, ukuba ngokwenene sizimisele ukubanomfanekiso we Psychology esinokuthi yeya Ma-Afrika kwaye ekwa hlonipha, yamkele iinkalo-ngeenkalo uluntu oluphuma kuzo ngendlela engafuni sithiye kwaye sahlulahlule izinto ukwenzala ubomi babantu abathile bubelula.

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