

# African (situated) psychologies of boys, men and masculinities

## Abstract

*How might psychology less alienatingly study African men and boys? What potential contribution, in other words, might a situated psychology make towards understanding men and boys? Urged by these questions, and grounded in the view that there is still relatively little concerning Africa for itself, as well as much that is dehumanising of Africans within (North American and western European-centred) psychology this article seeks to present what I refer to as (African) situated psychologies, and more specifically (African) situated psychologies of boys, men and masculinities. Whilst the article is generally meant to contribute to the development of African psychology, because of an abiding interest in boys, men and masculinities, the article is also specifically intended to show how we might go about centring Africa in psychological studies of boys, men and masculinities. The basic argument is that attachment to (North American- or Western European-centred) psychology and Africa is inherently estranging, and what may be necessary is to critically trouble globally hegemonic traditions into which psychology students, teachers, therapists, and researchers located in Africa and with an interest in boys and men are hailed. Four different orientations in studies of psychology of masculinities are outlined, namely, a psychology of African boys, men and masculinities; psychological African studies of boys, men and masculinities; a more cultural African psychology of boys, men and masculinities; and a more critical African psychology of boys, men and masculinities.*

In this article, framed as part of the broad historical call within South Africa (and more generally Africa) for

## Kopano Ratele

Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa (Unisa), & Medical Research Council-Unisa Violence, Injury and Peace Research Unit  
[kopano.ratele@mrc.ac.za](mailto:kopano.ratele@mrc.ac.za)

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African psychology, the broad aim is to participate in the development of a(n) (South) African-centred psychology. The principal contribution of the article is to present what I refer to as (African) situated psychologies. However due to an abiding interest in boys, men and masculinities, the more specific objective is, to present (African) situated psychologies of boys, men and masculinities.

The idea of situated psychologies is per definition not limitable to any one continent. All that is psychology is produced in specific conditions which in turn shape the psychology that is produced. The difference is that some psychology researchers, teachers and therapists simply refuse the idea that psychology is a *social* or *human* science; in other words, that it is informed by the social conditions in which it is produced and by the human realities and limits of those who produce it. Therefore, what I refer to as (African) situated psychologies (of boys, men and masculinities) are defined as bodies of work – including courses, studies, therapies, community interventions, socio-political campaigns – that situate Africa and African at the centre of psychology as well as placing psychology at the service of Africa and Africans. Situated African psychologies situates Africa and Africans at the centres of their field of vision. Situated psychologies are, perhaps above everything, not alienating. A situated psychology is one that is conscious of African people not as appendages of others but as living meaningful lives complete in and for themselves. Instead of working from what Paulin Hountondji (1990, 1995) referred to as an attitude of scholarly extraversion (from which arises an extraverted model of psychology), situated psychologies of boys, men and masculinities are conscientised to the conditions in which work is generated and boys and men exist, experience the world, relate to others, and attempt to create meaning.

The departure point for the article is that while a growing body of work on boys, men and masculinities has developed in South African psychology, the area is marked by a superficial problematisation of the South Africanness of masculinities of interest (e.g., Boonzaier & de la Rey, 2004; Joseph & Lindegger, 2007; Henderson & Shefer, 2008; Mankayi, 2008; Ratele, 2008). As a result, I contend that for those of us who identify with Africa a sense of failure will haunt our work until there is richer presence of (being in) Africa in the psychology of boys, men and masculinities. Developing the basic coordinates for African situated psychologies of boys, men and masculinities is therefore warranted. However, since the larger body of psychology in South Africa is equally troubled by a skin-deep engagement with and situatedness within Africa and Africanness, my engagement is also intended to contribute towards the broader project of Africanising psychology (Mkhize, 2004a; Ratele, 2006a; Cooper, 2013; Nwoye, 2015;). Two common limitations are evident, that is to say, in case of both the larger body of psychology in (South) Africa and the sub-field of psychology of masculinities, namely,

that colonial and alienating notions of Africa and African boys, men and masculinities are reproduced, possibly unwittingly; and the knowledge that dominates the discipline of psychology and the topic of masculinities is extraverted.

The broad call for a relevant, contextual, appropriate or indigenous psychology and profession in South Africa, within which I locate the impetus for an African psychology, is both not new and has tended to evoke feverish debates (e.g., Anonymous, 1986; Dawes, 1998; de la Rey, & Ipser, 2004; Mkhize, 2004a; Long, 2013). As far as the quest for African-centred psychology *per se* is concerned, an apparent source of these debates may be that South African psychology is influenced by the fact that, long after the demise of *de jure* colonialism, colonial, racist and culturally negative stereotypes and myths about Africa, blackness, and Africans continue to abound not only in the global North but also South Africa (Callaghan, 2003; Traoré, 2004; Krishnan, 2014). Given that teachers, researchers and practitioners within the discipline of psychology in South Africa (similar to teachers, researchers and practitioners in other countries in the global South), have tended to follow theoretical, research, pedagogic, and therapeutic trends and interests first arising in North America (specifically the United States of America [USA]) and western Europe, approaches to and ideas about Africa that characterise psychology in the latter parts of the world also influence work in South Africa. Another source of the debate is that in South Africa the term “African” can still arouse ambivalence, anxiety, antagonism, militant justification, existential doubt, uncertainty or complete identification. The reason is that historically the term “African”, instead of meaning *being in Africa*, was associated with race and/or tribe by the colonial and apartheid state (e.g., see Union of South Africa, 1950). A conflation of Africa and blackness persists under the post-apartheid state (e.g., Republic of South Africa, 1998; Statistics South Africa, 2015).

Despite the anxiety, rejection, ambivalence or suspicion about African psychology that may trouble the work of some psychologists in South Africa, this article posits that in fact there has always been an African psychology in the country. This is simply by virtue of the existence of long-established university psychology departments and professional psychologists in South Africa, a country in Africa. What is at issue in the debate about African psychology, is that in broad terms the psychology that prevails in the country is *African in name only*. In other words, African psychology already in South Africa but only because of the accident of geography. This issue of the Africanness of (South) African psychology has resurfaced (Cooper, 2013; Long, 2013; Nwoye, 2015).

Although African psychology of course exists in South Africa – in the sense that South Africans do study, teach, and practice psychology – this is exactly what we call an extraverted (Hountondji, 1990, 1995) or offshore psychology (Mbembe, 2015). Such a psychology is made up of concepts, theories, insights and tools that might be applied in

and profits from a particular society but is in fact invested elsewhere. It is a psychology that is not totally sold on benefitting the society from which it profits. It has no binding ties to the economic, social, cultural, political histories and fate of the society. An extraverted or offshore psychology can scarcely be referred to as African psychology *sensu stricto*, where African psychology in this strict sense is taken to indicate a psychology that is focused on African realities. It is suggested that an extraverted or offshore psychology produces a condition akin to what Pal Ahluwalia (2003) referred to as “Fanon’s nausea”: a psychical, economic, social, cultural, political, and/or epistemological sense of unreality and coloniality-induced alienation. As such, although there is a relatively large psychology fraternity in South Africa, include those who work in the area of the psychology of men, an endeavour to contribute towards a de-alineated African-situated psychology of boys, men and masculinities is warranted.

The peculiarities of making psychological knowledge in developing countries or societies outside the centres of the world, in particular the rich West, is not unique to Africa but extends to other world peripheries and former European colonies (e.g., Nunez, 1993; Jenni, 1999; Misra, Prakash & Verma, 1999; Kumar, 2006). As far as African countries are concerned, an issue to be confronted is therefore of a psychology in Africa and yet a nebulous Africa in psychology. This problematic originates from how we apprehend Africa as place where psychological knowledge is made; that is Africa as an ontological and epistemological subject, not merely a site of data collection and processing. In others words, the issue is how to retain an interest in both Africa and psychology, not merely psychology in Africa.

All psychology that is taught, studied, published, and applied in South Africa – where South Africa is my geo-, body-, and epistemo-political location of enunciation (see Mignolo, 2009) – has to be taken as *African psychology*. However, for the sake of making distinction between different orientations to African and psychology, only the kind of teaching, research and application that consciously views itself as oriented towards, identifies with and appreciates the fullness of Africa will be referred to as *Africa(n)-centred or African psychology strictu sensu*. The rest of psychology will be referred to as psychology in Africa. As Wade Nobles (2015: 402-403) has said: “We, therefore, should not be just talking about psychology in Africa. To simply bring Western psychology to Africa is to be complicit in the mental brainwashing and psychic terrorism ... of Africa and the adoption of the very tool and theories that have been used to demean, defame, debilitate, and damage us.”

The demarcation of an Africa(n)-centred psychology from the larger body of universalised (Euro-American or western-centred) psychology (in Africa) can be applied to all areas of psychology as taught, studied and practiced in South Africa – from assessment

to zoophobia. Such a concern with de-alienation can be observed not only in African nations but also other parts of the world outside the United States (US) and highly developed Western European societies (e.g., see Azuma, 1984; Jing, 1994; Oppong Asante & Oppong, 2012; Cooper, 2013). For example, Jing (1994: 670) remarked that “as psychology in China before 1949 was mainly Western oriented, after the founding of the People’s Republic, Chinese psychologists started a movement for reform and searched for independence from Western influences”. What this points to is that Western psychology has deeply, not always favourably, influenced what the rest of the world thinks and do. Western psychology is all around us – in our books, classes, the questions we ask, the therapies we offer clients, and the mental health policies we propose. Hence, the focus is on the area boys, men masculinities, that is to say, on how we might reorient ourselves towards a more Africa(n)-centred psychology in this particular area, all areas of universalised psychology as taught and researched in South Africa are still mainly extravertedly-oriented towards the US or Western Europe. A conscientisation, de-alienation, decolonisation or reorientation is necessitated.

South Africa is a central vector here simply because this is where I received my training and work. More importantly, South Africa is key in comprehending some psychologists’ search for a situated African psychology because this is a society where white psychologists, like white colonialists and apartheid fathers, for a long time refused to admit the simple idea of South Africa as an African country. Deemed a white country, South Africa did not recognise Africans as fully human and barred black people from being psychologists (Nicholas & Cooper, 1990; Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Cooper, 2013). For better or worse, then, South Africa is implicated in what gets taught in psychology, about the meanings of personal and group identities, including African and European identities, about the meanings of community and society, about South Africa in Africa, and about the world. Being a psychologist in South Africa at this moment of transition offers a unique vantage point of thinking about the meanings of global and local psychology as well as the changing realities of men and women because of the racial, sexual, economic, cultural, and gender apartheid and colonial histories of the society. The fact that South Africa experienced settler colonialism, endured a long period of legalised oppression, and compared to fellow former African colonies, achieved its independence quite late, makes for an absorbing context for a search of the nature of African psychology of men. Understanding the relationship of a body of knowledge to the society within which that knowledge is created and applied is actually difficult without understanding the economy, cultures, politics and histories of that society.

Although it is sometimes inescapable to speak of an African psychology, it is vital to caution against always and carelessly using the term (that is to say, to place African

before psychology) for the conceptual project presented here. As such, even though it may be inescapable to speak of African psychology in order clearly distinguish the endeavour from (Euro-American) psychology in Africa, it is obvious that the name can as easily enable the further marginalisation of our endeavours, provincialisation our sphere of operation, and essentialisation our thought. Therefore, it should be underlined that an *African psychology is a psychology of everything – from an African location*. Hence, to speak of the psychology argued for here as African ought to be taken as primarily a strategic choice as such a psychology is aimed at being at home in world even though it has African origins.

Bearing in mind the potential risks of speaking of African psychology (instead of simply psychology), it is hoped that the need to distinguish between psychology in Africa and African psychology *strictu sensu* will become clearer. Suffice for now that what I seek to underscore is not a mere dissimilarity but a call to concede the agonistic relation between two orientations to psychology *and* Africa. The one kind of psychology studies Africa, if at all, as it were from outside. The other approaches Africa from the street level up. The former is what we can refer to as extraverted psychology, while the latter is a situated, centred or introverted psychology (see Hountondji, 1990, 1995). An extraverted model of psychology flows from the effective enervation of the discourse on Africa by Africans (and allies) for African itself. Introverted models of psychology are situated practices. These situated psychologies aim to understand Africans in their fullness as engaged in meaningful practices. In the former, the term Africa tends to be nominally employed, optimistically speaking. In the latter, Africa itself is a subject of inquiry and a position in the world that reshapes received psychology. One view of psychology characteristically does not examine the social, moral, religious, political and economic implications of its own research, theories, and practices (see Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009). The other view is not afraid to lose itself, if you will, in the forests, cities, villages, shantytowns, townships, small towns, and farms of Africa.

Following Cooper, Nicholas, Seedat & Statman (1990), there is therefore one question that continues to haunt the discipline of psychology in the light of African realities, and specifically South Africa: where does it stand concerning the personal, political, social and economic realities, experiences and relationships of Africa? However, in this article this question is related to the study of boys, men and masculinities. Trying to understand the lives of and amongst African of boys and men raises another question for the psychology teacher, researcher and therapist: how might an African-situated psychology of boys, men and masculinity grasp the relation between being Africa and the world at large in which the continent is marginal? Stated differently, what potential contribution might an African-situated psychology of boys, men and masculinities make

with respect to African in the world, given that we, in South Africa, have a psychology with which are already content?

The article is structured as follows. In the next section I mount an argument why a consciousness needs to be cultivated and strong choice made between ways of situating oneself (for instance as a researcher, teacher, psychotherapist, or activist) and the subjects and clients with whom one would work. Thereafter I draw an outline of the different ways in which psychologists have situated themselves in relation to Africa, psychology as well as boys, men and masculinities. But where there is scarce work, I indicate how one could situate oneself in the field of masculinities as a psychologist located in an African country. There are four orientations that are outlined, referred to as a universalised, western or Euro-American psychology of African boys, men and masculinities; psychological African studies of boys, men and masculinities; a more cultural African psychology of boys, men and masculinities; and a more critical African psychology of boys, men and masculinities.

### **Between a psychology of men in Africa and an African psychology of men**

A consciousness needs to develop between doing a psychology (of men) in Africa and an African psychology (of men). Like all South African teachers and researchers interested in Africa *and* psychology, South African psychologists stirred by questions about men's practices and questions of imperial white power in Africa's colonial and post-colonial history can and do get caught in the horns of a disorienting dilemma. It is a dilemma that is foundational, having troubled psychology in this part of the world for long. Like some of these psychologists with an interest in psychology *and* African, I have contributed to the first sort of psychology of boys and men (e.g., Kaminer & Dixon, 1995; Luyt & Foster, 2001; Ratele, Shefer & Clowes, 2012).

It may be necessary to indicate that just as many researchers and teachers of psychology moved to understand Africa *and* psychology, I have had to accommodate myself to doing what I referred to as a psychology of African men instead of an African psychology of men. I did so because that is what exists in abundance. I may be wrong, and shall have to test it from now on, but it seems teaching, researching and publishing mainly from the first perspective felt relatively easier. When it is said that from the mid-1990s South African psychology, witnessed a turn to men and boys this is the kind of psychology to which it is being referred (Shefer et al, 2007). By "the turn to men and boys" it is meant the shift to consider men and boys as explicitly gendered and masculinities as constructed (e.g., Ratele, 2006b; Dewing & Foster, 2007; Cooper, 2009; Langa, 2014). However, the psychology of boys and men still has to fully turn to African boys and men as African boys and men, rather merely as boys and men in Africa. Whilst there is a diverse psychological

literature in Africa, and a welcome turn to masculinities, an African-centred psychology of boys, men and masculinities does not actually exist. One reason for this lack of this form of psychology is the persisting relative absence or as often a rather curious presence of Africa in psychology (and critical men's studies). As such, even though there is a large psychological (and gender) literature published in South Africa and outside the country that considers African men and boys as their samples, much of it is characterised by an offshore psychological perspective of African boys and men.

According to Levant (1996: 259-260) "a psychology of men, views gender roles not as biological or even social givens, but rather as psychologically and socially constructed entities that bring certain advantages and disadvantages and, most importantly, can change. This perspective acknowledges the biological differences between men and women but argues that it is not the biological differences of sex that make for masculinity and femininity. These notions are socially constructed from bits and pieces of biological, psychological, and social experience to serve particular purposes."

Not only was this psychology of men apparently heavily disposed to quantitative measures of masculinity, it was also limited in its preoccupations – these being, gender role strain paradigm, masculinity ideology, male gender role strain (Levant, 1996). Evidence of a disposition to measure masculinity can be found in South African psychology (e.g., Luyt & Foster, 2001). While quantitative studies are necessary for any topic, and there are elements of these preoccupations which may very well coincide with an African psychology of men, such as the notion of gender as construction, it is obvious in the contribution by Levant that the concerns that led to the then new psychology approach arose from US economic, social and cultural conditions. It has nothing to say about Africa.

A different approach to the study of men and masculinity, emerging as part of discursive psychology, is offered by Margaret Wetherell & Nigel Edley (2014: 355): "Discursive psychology treats masculinity not as an essence to be revealed, but as sets of variable practices that are actively developed and negotiated in relation to other forms of identity in particular cultural contexts." The work of some psychologists in South Africa has affinities to this approach (e.g., Kaminer & Dixon, 1995). While attractive as it allows for observing how masculinity is produced in the flow of "dailyness" and structurings, this approach does not fully grasp the densities of the reality of gendered life in many African contexts. Being discursive in one's approach does not readily mean African-centredness.

Similar to the agonistic relation between the two orientations to (Euro-American or western-centred) psychology *and* Africa found in the broad studies called psychology in Africa, all studies, therapies, and social mobilisation work into men and boys' lives



conducted by psychologists in Africa can be considered as part of the psychology of men in Africa. However, as indicated earlier, not all psychology in Africa can be referred to as African psychology of men in the strict sense. Both a psychology of men in Africa and an African-centred psychology of men fall under the larger umbrella of psychology of men in Africa. However, only one can be taken to be an African psychology of men in the sense reserved here. The divergence of an extraverted and introverted psychology of men in Africa turns around how psychology, men, and Africa as subjects of enquiry are approached, constructed, theorised, taught, researched, studied, and written on by psychologists and students of psychology.

### **Different psychological orientations to boys and men**

It has been indicated that there is more than one African psychology of boys and men, just as there are different African psychologies. African psychologies of masculinity are not bodies of knowledge that are necessarily independent of broader global psychology. They may draw from other disciplines interested in Africa. African psychology is interested in everything that all psychology studies. However, some of the topics of interest might be outside of the field of vision of traditional psychology.

African psychologies of boys and men are orientations, stances, or perspectives within psychology striving to persuade those within the discipline as well as the world outside of the legitimacy and fullness of African realities, African lived experiences, African meaning-making and ways of being in the world. There are four African psychologies of boys, men and masculinities (see Table 1). The first, to which we have already referred, is what is called a universalised, western or Euro-American-oriented psychology of African boys, men and masculinities (e.g., Favell, 1998; Luyt & Foster, 2001; Blackbeard & Lindegger, 2007). It unconsciously or consciously regards itself as part of what is perceived as a universal psychology of boys, men and masculinities. Therefore, South Africa, parts thereof, or other parts of Africa tend to be mainly treated as just other sites for studies.

The second orientation is what can be referred to as a cultural African psychology of masculinities. This orientation regards African cultures, worldviews, spirituality, religions, and cosmologies as key to better situating studies and therapies and engaging boys and men. A cultural African psychology of masculinities places African ways of living and understanding the world at the centre of the study, course, or advocacy programme. The orientation locates the boys, men and masculinities as subjects of interests in their cultural worlds. So too is the researcher, teacher, activist or policymaker taken as bringing their culturally nurtured worldviews to their work. A psychologist who has consciously embraced an African perspective in thinking about men, specifically fatherhood, is Mkhize (2006).

The third orientation is what can be called a critical African psychology of masculinities. A number of promising articles on boys and men have been published in local psychology journals which have brought into being this orientation which regards South Africa less as merely a research site but as location of meaning and lived experience of masculinities (e.g., Macleod, 2007; Langa, 2008; Mfecane, 2008; Cooper, 2009). It is in considering the social, political and economic power and dynamics that ought to be work through in studying and engaging that this works begins to move in the direction of an African-centred psychology of boys, men and masculinities. However, in failing to connect to the historical strivings in local psychology to develop a situated perspective that recognises being in Africa, and in a reticence to embrace African-centredness much work still to be done.

The fourth orientation is what we might call psychological African Studies of boys, men and masculinities. This means a psychology of boys, men and masculinities that situates itself as part of African Studies. There are not many South African psychologists interested in masculinities who seek to make space for psychology in African Studies (Ratele, 2008). African Studies has tended to be dominated by anthropological, historical, political, economic, cultural, literary and sociological perspectives, and might be viewed as inhospitable to psychology. Yet there are many topics under discussion in African Studies fora which would certainly benefit from psychological and psychoanalytic analyses, and South African psychology would also benefit from opening up to the kinds of macro-structural analyses common in African Studies.

**Table 1: Four potential orientations within African psychology of boys, men and masculinities**

<b>Orientation</b>	<b>Key idea animating the orientation?</b>
Universalised (Euro-American) Psychology of African boys, men and masculinities	Africa is a site for studies for and everything done by psychologists in Africa is part of universalised Euro-American psychology of boys, men and masculinities
Psychological African studies of boys, men and masculinities	Psychology of boys, men and masculinities is to be part African studies
Cultural African psychology of boys, men and masculinities	African cultures and cosmologies are to be centralised in psychology of boys, men and masculinities
Critical African psychology of boys, men and masculinities	African power and political dynamics are to be centralised in psychology of boys, men and masculinities

The key point in this scheme, namely, how Africa is read into psychology, is what differentiates these orientations. These psychologies of masculinities are differentiated by the way the ideas of Africa and psychology are implicitly or explicitly understood and approached by different researchers, teachers, activists, and therapists. These psychologies are not stand-alone sub-disciplines but orientations or stances with psychology as done in South Africa, implying that the way clinicians, activists, researchers, counsellors and psychology teachers orient themselves not just to masculinities but also to the largely implicit meanings of Africa in psychology, to psychology's place in Africa, to their own personhood as experts. As I have indicated elsewhere, there is nothing prohibiting teachers and researchers in psychology, psychotherapists, and psycho-social activists from moving across these different orientations. But their radical differentiation will assist to strengthen the foundations upon which African psychology is built, to more precisely delineate the aims, definition and disciplinary coordinates of African psychology. The boundaries between the four psychologies are permeable. And it is more likely that individual psychologists will at different point in time orientate themselves in more than way with regard to African and masculinities.

## Conclusion

The main problematic that prompted this article is that while there is an African psychology in South Africa, there is, in this author's view, little within psychology about Africans and their realities, experiences and relationships, and certainly not from what can be referred to as situated frame of reference. Therefore, whilst it can be agreed that there is an African psychology in South Africa in the nominal sense, there is little of what was referred to as African psychology *sensu stricto*. Some of the questions consequent upon this are: where is psychology located with regards to the personal, political, social and economic realities, experiences and relationships of Africans?; what potential contribution might an African-centred psychology make with respect to the first question?; and what might situated psychologies conscious of their economic, political, social and intellectual locatedness in post-apartheid South Africa look like? The article argued that there is a need for, shall we say, consciousness raising to enable those of us working in or drawn to the area of boys, and men and masculinities to understand how we are situated or are situating ourselves with regard to Africa, to psychology, and to boys, men and masculinities. In the last section, the article presented the contours of four African psychological orientations to boys, men and masculinities.

It should be clear at this point that I have been addressing not only those therapist, researchers, teachers and students who have an interest in finding or situating African realities and experiences within the psychology of boys and men masculinities. Other psychologists, in whatever area of the field with which they are engaged, hopefully will discover the need to develop African-centred psychological perspectives. There is a great

deal of work to do to not only build African psychologies, not just African psychologies of boys, men and masculinities. This work would entail many empirical studies but also ongoing conceptual work to put Africa firmly into the centre of psychology, and not to be content with the model of (western) psychology in Africa. And there are still many others who may have come to comprehend the imperative to create and read less extraverted, African-oriented, knowledge. South Africa appears to be waking up at this historical moment to the need to discover and contribute towards the expansion of a flourishing African-centred knowledge in all disciplines. The project to develop world-centred African knowledge conscious of its situatedness, as opposed to an alienating, place-less, and extraverted models of knowledge, is one from which anybody desirous for de-alienated and authentic relationships, experiences, teaching, and research can contribute and benefit.

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