

## Emerging Trends for Psychology in Africa

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Over the past few years, universities in South Africa have been grappling with the call to decolonise the university. This is a reoccurring trend for universities in South Africa and across the continent but one that has taken on a particular significance in the context of a free and democratic South Africa in which academic institutions remain predominantly Western in terms of their institutional cultures. Various

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forms of activism have been driving the call for decolonisation with students playing a central role through the Fees Must Fall (FMF) and Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) movements. These movements are advocating free education and

changes in the cultures of our institutions putting into question what type of knowledges and skills are valued, taught and investigated. In doing so, the question of decolonisation highlights the link between the knowledge that emerges from institutions of higher learning and the imperative to transform the contexts in which we live; in other words, how does what we research and write about in university spaces inform the development trajectory of our societies?

Historically, universities have been key sites for the production of intellectuals and knowledge projects that served to institutionalise and legitimise colonial policies and practices (Mazrui 2005). Not much has changed in the post-colonial era. Following nationalist struggles for independence, African states embarked on a developmentalist strategy to re-build their nations dented by the impact of colonialism. The two models that dominated the field of development post-independence were modernisation and dependency/welfarism (Ake 1996; Jomo and Fine 2006; Campbell and Jovchelovitch, 2000). These models present underlying assumptions that arguably contradict our project of decolonisation. First of all, the assumption that less developed contexts are catching up with more developed ones with the state being representative and benevolent (of pluralistic or class interest) (Ake 1996; Jomo and Fine 2006; Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000; Mkandawire 2004). Secondly, the assumption that macro-economic indicators determine the level of development with associated 'trickle-down' benefits to lower income groups (Jomo and Fine 2000, p. 22). Both these assumptions have created conditions in which people in lower income groups become peripheral to the development project, which is imposed on them by 'more knowledgeable' development experts and institutions, often from the outside and whereby expertise is symbolised by levels of economic wealth (Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000; Jovchelovitch 2007; Kothari 2006a, 2006b; Escobar 1995; Baaz 2005). The effect of this is to exacerbate social exclusion by undermining the knowledge and capabilities of social groups who are viewed as passive recipients of development interventions.

The discipline of psychology is an important player in this conundrum. Given its dubious past associated with scientific racism, in particular IQ and other psychometric studies that produced ideas about Africans as the least intelligent race (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 1994), much can be said about the role of psychology in legitimising colonial and apartheid practices across the continent and beyond. Psychologists have also been involved in the pathologisation of women and the pathologisation of LGBT people,

or any person who does not fit into the norm of a white, male, middle-class and heterosexual figure (Shefer, Boonzaier and Kiguwa 2006).

These types of studies have produced knowledge that has far-reaching impacts in people's minds and global perspectives. Ideas about Africans as helpless, passive victims of disease, destitution, violence and corruption are widespread (Dogra 2012) and are coupled with the notion that knowledge and intellectual expertise to solve these problems must come from the West (Jovchelovitch 2007). This has largely been the case in mainstream media and in the discourses of international aid, charitable organisations and many academic projects that trivialise and sanitise complex issues that affect the African continent (Dogra 2012, 2007). We are often told that the problem is money and food rather than structural and cultural oppression and exploitation.

In contemporary psychological work, the brain is still used as an index of difference. The focus on neurological differences between men and women or understanding the mental health or brain types of substance abusers, criminals, homosexuals, obese people, HIV positive people, etc. is problematic when it translates into research findings that link obesity with low intelligence, women with irrationality, young people with deviance, the poor with lack of empathy and so on. When such findings from our research projects come into the public sphere, they can reproduce forms of discrimination and oppression that are most often racialised, classed and gendered. Such research also reproduces ideas about who is considered 'normal' and therefore who requires 'intervention' as well as the type of intervention.

Doing psychological work in this way also makes the assumption that the individual is the central unit of analysis and overlooks the social, economic and political contexts that individuals find themselves in. Such approaches often fall into the trap of simply pathologising individuals and therefore further marginalising certain groups of people who find themselves in particular contexts. A decolonisation project for psychology in Africa means that we have to school ourselves and other psychologists in how broader relations of domination and subjugation

play themselves out in the macro-social, political, economic and historical context. It involves questioning the power effects of psychology and the power dynamics in society. It involves questioning the motivation underlying psychological research and practice: who does it benefit and in what ways? Who does it marginalise and in what ways? Who has the power to assign meaning to people's experiences? Who has the power to represent the lives and the minds of others? What behaviours are considered acceptable and normal and which ones are not?

In a recent article about ethical practices in academia, the author questions how academics use poverty, oppression and pain for their academic pursuits and 'claim to have expertise on the topic of social activism but have never experienced any form of intervention' (Rodriguez 2017). These questions are central to the more recent debates on the role of academia in the decolonisation process and the emergence of African scholarship. How do we make research relevant and ethical in spaces that are inherently saturated by colonial relations of power?

If we are to speak of emerging trends for psychological research in Africa, we must locate ourselves in a national and regional context that centres the African and African knowledges and practices as vital to human relationships and growth. For psychology to have an important role in social change and social justice, in particular in improving the lives of the most oppressed in society, it requires a 'deideologisation' (Freire 1970) or indigenisation (Owusu-Bempah and Howitt 2000; Smith 1999; Long 2014) of the discipline – meaning an acknowledgement that psychologists, like all scientists, work within a political perspective and ideological agenda (Montero and Sonn 2009); and a recognition that what, in contemporary times, has come to be seen as 'the psychological' has been shaped historically, politically and ideologically (Hook et al. 2004).

For psychologists in South Africa, the debate about relevance began in the 1980s. Since then, more politicised forms of psychology have emerged in South Africa and elsewhere, to challenge the fundamental assumptions of the field, such as feminist psychologies,

postcolonial psychology and liberation psychology. These strands of the discipline have a more social and critical focus. They investigate relations of power between groups in society; they treat people's identities as diverse, fluid and intersecting. They view people as historical beings whose minds have been constructed by and through their social, economic and political environment. They also propose new methods that question traditional relationships between researchers and the participants in research projects.

Psychologists cannot deliver solutions to the developmental challenges facing the African continent, but we can point to the manifestations of these problems and assist people in seeking the changes that they wish to achieve. The psychologist should act as a facilitator of social change (Jimenez-Domingue, 1999). This means, for example, making the linkages between people's daily realities and the broader and globalised institutional precepts and ideologies that perpetuate developmental challenges. Psychological research then becomes a dialogical process of consciousness and action in which people participate in imagining and creating solutions to improve their lives, and psychologists use their knowledge to encourage, assist and support that process. It is the daily lives, experiences and activities of people which are contextual that inform researchers on what action can be effective in disrupting oppressive power relations and building healthier futures. New trends in psychology must emerge as an evolving practice of knowledge production that cannot be separated from everyday life and that constantly grow through the contribution

that people make based on their lived experiences.

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