

# Unit 2

## African psychology

### Learning outcomes

After you have studied this unit, you should

- understand the meaning of African psychology
- be able to identify the African perspectives underlying psychology and their role in society
- understand the goals and importance of African psychology
- understand the major phases in the development of African psychology
- be able to distinguish between Western and African thinking in psychology

### 2.1 Introduction

An understanding of African psychology provides learners with an opportunity to relate psychology to African roots, identities and uniqueness. The aim of cultivating such an understanding is to produce a more comprehensive African psychology characterised by indigenous knowledge and practices. African psychology is described as “the systematic and informed study of the complexities of human mental life, culture and experience in the pre- and post-colonial African world” (Nwoye, 2014, p. 57). The pre-colonial period refers to the period before the introduction of European colonialism in areas across the world. Post-colonialism refers to the period after colonisation that was characterised by relations between nations and areas they colonised and ruled (Fischer-Tine, 2010). Post-colonialism comprises theories found in philosophy, film, political science, human geography, sociology, feminism, religious and theological studies, and literature.

Psychology refers to the study of the cognitive, affective and behavioural lifespan of humans, guided by a mixture of Western and modern practices. Since its formation, the discipline has expanded into various branches characterised by varying philosophical

schools of thought. African psychology is one of the branches of psychology that emerged from traditional psychology. The focus of this unit is to ensure that you understand the meaning of African psychology; that you can identify different African perspectives underlying psychology and their role in society; that you understand the goals and importance of African psychology; that you understand the major phases in the development of African psychology; and that you can distinguish between Western and African thinking in psychology.

## **2.2 The meaning of African psychology**

African psychology can be divided into old psychological learning and practices in indigenous societies and modern psychological learning and practices infused with Western approaches. Most scholars of African psychology strive to define the concept objectively. They believe that there should be limited interference of Western psychology in the definition of African psychology. By limiting the influence of Western psychology, the meaning of African psychology will reflect the uniqueness and the complexities of African realities. This section explores four definitions of African psychology in search of a precise meaning of the concept. The four definitions are as follows:

1. African psychology is a unified understanding of the multicultural realities of African people, their being and identity, as well as their unique traditions and cultures, which constitute their experience of everyday realities. This is a type of psychology that views a way of life through an African lens and recognises indigenous knowledge to be valuable in understanding African people, their well-being and their problem-solving strategies. African psychology is “preoccupied with creating psychological knowledge that is situated in culture, history and material concerns of contemporary ways of living in Africa” (Oppong, 2022, p. 3).

Understanding this definition entails highlighting certain key ideas, such as viewing African psychology as a movement for preventing and solving problems of the African diaspora and as a social construct resulting from an analysis of the historical conditions of African people and the acquisition of rudimentary skills in African problem-solving by Africans. Moreover, the definition is important because of the recognition that the African diaspora sought to connect with their roots and unique ways of nurturing human cognitive, affective and behaviour at all levels to prevent or deal with problems.

2. African psychology, according to Obasi and Smith (2009, pp. 47–48), is a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values and traditions; it is the self-conscious centring of psychological analyses and applications in African reality,

culture and epistemology. Obasi and Smith (2009, p. 48) explain that African psychology has a social mission and “rejects the Western doctrine of materialism and embraces the possibilities associated with a spirit-based ontological system”.

This definition implies that African psychology is derived from an African way of life, including African principles of knowledge production and application. The basic information guiding the components of African psychology was formed from knowledge produced through research on African realities and experiences. The key element of this definition is that African psychology entails the dissemination of indigenous knowledge, with a key focus on spiritual values, and that significant consideration should be given to the African context, which is characterised by principles such as caring for and supporting one another.

3. African psychology is a field of study interested in investigating and understanding the key psychological costs of being African and black in America (Jamison, 2008, p. 96).

What we can infer from this definition is that African psychology is regarded as the study of Africans and blacks in America. This definition focuses on the experience of African Americans and does not have the explanatory power to account for the continental experiences of African people (Maynard, 2013). Viewing African psychology from this perspective is somewhat limited because African psychology is a way of life; it is a means of nurturing and protecting the existence of humans, nature and animals. African psychology is more than just studying or understanding blacks in America – it cuts across all Africans because an understanding of the psychology of Africans in Africa and the African diaspora will provide more knowledge in the pursuit of understanding and reshaping the definition of African psychology.

4. African psychology “consists of the past and present people and cultures and experiences of life in Africa, with priority given to their individual and collective experiences; joys and losses; hopes and impediments; frustrations and challenges; needs and preferences; and attitudes to place, life, and land, death and the after-life, marriage and family, war and peace, spirituality and the supernatural order, morality and ethics, and African cultural institutions and practices” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 108).

This definition incorporates the ordinary and everyday experiences of African people. These experiences are informed by life before and after colonisation. In addition, the definition captures people’s resilience in making life meaningful beyond the struggles of the past, finding healing and well-being through interdependence, defining a future and finding meaning through ancient African traditions and customs, which include spirituality, the supernatural and the other gods of African people.

### **Task 1: African psychology**

- (a) In your own words, explain what African psychology is.
- (b) What key tenets do you think make African psychology different from traditional Western psychology?
- (c) African psychology can be defined as a discipline that involves researching and modelling native knowledge in respect of modern Africa. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.

#### **2.2.1 Indigenous African psychology**

Indigenous African psychology is viewed in this section as a field of study that is concerned with bringing liberty and fairness to ancestral knowledge and practices that ensure African people's cognitive, affective and behavioural well-being, thereby advancing clans towards sustainable survival and progress. An understanding of the term "indigenous", according to Gorjestani (2001), is a fundamental aspect of the histories and philosophies of native people that enrich their progress. Higgs (2006) maintains that the importance of indigenous knowledge is that it denotes all aspects of locally produced and applied knowledge. Indigenous knowledge will be defined for purposes of understanding the meaning of indigenous African psychology as conceptualised in this section.

#### **2.2.2 What is indigenous knowledge?**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8), a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN) aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture, defines indigenous knowledge as "the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. ... This knowledge is integral to a cultural complex that also encompasses language, systems of classification, resource use practices, social interactions, ritual and spirituality." Indigenisation is concerned with embracing perspectives and methodologies of knowing that are inherent in local cultures as valid ontology and epistemologies (Oppong, 2021).

Indigenous knowledge is constructed through consideration of local contexts, concepts and methodologies. To get a better understanding of this definition of indigenous knowledge, we can ask the following questions:

- What “understandings”? Clans’ cognitions, as well as their affects (emotions) and behaviours, are taken into account.
- What “skills”? Indigenous people’s skills to connect, communicate and interact with others in their contexts are taken into account.
- What “philosophies”? The guiding philosophies of African culture, such as ubuntu and humane living, are taken into account.
- What “cultural life systems”? Indigenous people’s cultural practices are not separated from their identity and selfhood.

Some of the components of indigenous communities are as follows:

- A clan is a group of people bounded by relatedness such as kinship. In indigenous communities, a clan is comprised of people, nature, the environment and animals. This is because indigenous communities believe that reciprocal interaction and the patterns of such interaction ensure the survival of the planet and people. The sustainable development of a clan is rooted in learning the emotions and the behaviours that are acceptable within the clan. Also, knowledge of what is acceptable within a clan is taught with passion. Knowledge of how to practice what is taught is assessed in rituals that mark clan members’ transition to adulthood.
- Cognitive development is guided by ways of reasoning and ways of connecting to people, nature and animals to prevent problems and to advance sustainable development. Cognitive learning focuses on the development and improvement of reasoning, often referred to as common sense or native intelligence, to ensure that clan members connect, communicate and interact effectively.
- Affective development is guided by ways of displaying emotions and empathy for humans, nature and the environment. Affective learning focuses on developing ways of emotional display and control in private and public spaces and learning about strategies for showing empathy towards people, nature and animals.
- A clan's behaviour is guided by a specific way of thinking, speaking and conduct towards humans, nature and animals. The behaviour focuses on developing thoughts, words and actions to ensure respect in the patterns of connection, communication and interaction with people, nature and animals.

- Psychological learning in a clan includes teachings on the importance of nature, the environment and animals. Psychological learning focuses on skills such as how to protect and preserve the clan, that is, people, nature, the environment and animals. These skills include understanding the behaviour of people and the natural environment, and emotions. For example, when music is playing, what message is the rhythm and the drumming conveying to people? When the seasons change, what type of vegetation can people plant? These skills can be updated to ensure clan members' confidence to connect with people and nature.

Indigenous knowledge is important because it not only defines the ways of living of indigenous communities but also informs indigenous psychology. According to Oppong (2017), indigenous psychology involves developing African-centred theories and concepts; reconstructing black people in the history of psychology; choosing context-relevant topics of inquiry; reforming research methodologies; and revising curricula to include African-centred knowledge. Four definitions of indigenous psychology are as follows:

- 1) According to Sinha (1997), indigenous psychology refers to the process of making psychology reflect the knowledge, philosophies and culture of people based on their region and roots. The “proponents of indigenous psychology underscore the centrality of culture in understanding and defining human functioning” (Matoane, 2012, p. 107). This means that indigenous psychology is shaped by the culture from which it is derived.
- 2) Indigenous psychology also refers to any values, attitudes and beliefs of native people that have the capacity to influence human behaviour (Kim & Berry, 1993; Kim et al., 2006).
- 3) Adair (1999, p. 405) describes indigenous psychology as “a growing acknowledgement of the limitations of Western models, an increasing acceptance of calls for problem-oriented research on national concerns, and a deepening sensitivity to the rich potential that exists in local customs and behaviours peculiarly driven by indigenous traditions”.
- 4) Allwood (2018, p. 1) regards indigenous psychology as “an approach to research in psychology which stresses the importance of research being grounded in the conditions of the researcher’s own society and culture”.

The understandings deduced from the above definitions of indigenous psychology can be summarised as follows:

- Indigenous psychology is guided by local philosophies and cultural practices.
- Indigenous psychology is conscious of people's realities and their functioning in specific contexts.
- Indigenous psychology is developed from research on concepts and models obtained by exploring people's lived experiences.
- Indigenous psychology is responsive and context-relevant psychology.
- Indigenous psychology relies on cultural concepts and theories to understand human behaviour.

### **2.2.3 Understanding indigenous African psychology**

Indigenous African psychology manifests in a cultural context in which psychological techniques are applied to help promote people's well-being through dealing with problems or challenges in a culturally relevant manner and using alternative ways of knowing that are different from Western ways of knowing (Odora Hoppers, 2008). In essence, indigenous African psychology is based on the notion that there are culturally derived psychological methods that indigenous African people have used to systematically understand their world, to solve social ills and to promote people's well-being. This view challenges Western or traditional psychology, which represents the hegemonic approach to psychology, in that it acknowledges multiple ways of understanding human behaviour, as informed by the environment in which behaviour manifests. It also confirms that indigenous Africans have been practising psychology in Africa for centuries. Some of the practices continue to define indigenous African psychology since they are embedded and entrenched in various modern-day cultural practices.

Indigenous African psychology encompasses diverse kinds of psychological knowledge that one acquires in different phases or stages of life. This knowledge serves to protect, promote and advance the well-being of the families and clans in traditional African communities. Psychological knowledge is passed from one generation to another in a clan. Often, elders are responsible for sharing and imparting this knowledge to the younger generation because elders have advanced in the clan and have knowledge and experiences that may benefit the younger generation to enable continuity and the survival of the community. For example, folktales play an important role because they help impart educational, traditional, cultural, religious and social ideologies of a community to growing children (Amali, 2014). Folktales may also help instil discipline, moral uprightness, a work ethic and courage in children (Amali, 2014).

Indigenous African psychological knowledge systems continue to have relevance in modern-day African realities. For instance, these knowledge systems can be applied in

every aspect of daily life, such as health, spirituality, adulthood, work and recreational activities. Additionally, the knowledge systems can be used to guide behaviour, cognition, affect and so on. Indigenous African psychology is a long-standing and deep-rooted educational practice in Afrocentric communities because African people had ways of understanding themselves that predate scientific psychology as understood in the Anglo-American or Western orientation (Oppong, 2017). Fafunwa (1974, p. 13) notes that “the aim of traditional African education is multilateral and the end objective is to produce an individual who is honest, respectful, skilled, co-operative and conforms to the social order of the day”. Indigenous African knowledge systems, together, contribute towards building a responsive psychology that is centred on ubuntu. Edwards (2004) highlights that ubuntu is a fundamental psychological method of promoting health that is concerned with the very essence of being human, without which our human species would not survive in its present form. This is because, in ubuntu, there is an element of human care, support, companionship, help and healing (Edwards, 2004). All these elements constitute the essence of indigenous African psychology. This implies that African knowledge systems must be utilised and relied upon to guide the profession when working with African communities. The knowledge systems can be applicable across various contexts and communities. We will discuss the scope in which indigenous African psychology was practised in the next section. Some of the aspects discussed are still relevant to African communities to date and may be adapted by psychology professionals in Africa to define psychology in relation to the African continent.

#### **2.2.4 The scope of indigenous African psychology**

The scope in which indigenous African psychology was practised can be summarised as follows:

- *Health.* Health psychology focuses on preventive and curative learning to promote healthy living and a positive ageing process. Herbs were tested and affirmed before usage. Motherhood, antenatal care and birth, as well as childcare, were managed by traditional birth attendants who educated new mothers on caring for themselves and their babies. Today, traditional herbs are still used by African people to treat psychological and physical illnesses. In South Africa, some tribes still use traditional herbs. Makgahlela and Sodi (2017) point out that, in some cultures, herbs are used to ease the psychological pain of grief and to help individuals forget painful memories associated with the deceased.
- *Spirituality.* Secret cults taught African philosophy, religion, science and secrets about their powers. Religious leaders imparted wisdom through parables, riddles, oral



narratives, folklore, songs and dances. Some of these practices continue to be important in defining the modern-day spiritual practices of many African communities.

- *Adulthood.* Clan members were psychologically prepared for the transition into manhood and womanhood through the use of ritual rites and the teaching of adult duties and responsibilities. The older generation was tasked with preparing the younger generation for a life of service to the clan. Honesty in the performance of duties, both in clan and family life, respect for people, nature and animals, moderation in eating and drinking, chastity, commitment, self-confidence, self-sacrifice and humility were all greatly emphasised.
- *Occupation/job orientation.* Idleness was a great enemy to the clan, so functionalism (not a school of thought) was endorsed, making unemployment insignificant (Osokoya 1989). Psychological preparation for employment encouraged clan responsibilities, such as participation in the protection of the clan's economic and political activities, and spiritual and moral values. Plants and trees required for carving, cooking, knitting, pottery, tying and dyeing (for example, dyeing of trees and roots with natural dye), and weaving and fishing were part of practical occupational psychological learning.
- *Agriculture.* Psychological teaching and learning regarding practical farming focused on understanding the weather and the soil and assessing seeds to ensure preservation for the next farm seasoning. Farm management was also taught to clan members from a very young age. Older adults taught the younger ones when to take the livestock (cows, sheep and goats) out for feeding and when to bring them back to avoid adversities of harsh weather. Psychological learning was important to the clan and the family because it was the mainstay of the economy.
- *Recreational activities.* Psychological learning promoted dancing, drumming, wrestling and racing. These activities had a psychological value because they brought clans together and increased socialisation among individuals.
- *Cognition.* Cognitive (thinking), communication (spoken words) and behavioural (action) psychology was developed through the study of indigenous history, geography, nature, legends, poetry, reasoning, riddles, proverbs and storytelling. Clans' ways of thinking, speaking and acting were guided by cultural rituals, practices and philosophies. These rituals, practices and philosophies were passed on from generation to generation through oral history. Cultural remains, relics and documents were used to guide cognitive, affective and behavioural activities. In the family and the clan, communication, interaction and relationship patterns were taught. Children

were taught the value and the consequences of thoughts, words and actions by the older members of the family. Cognitive processes (i.e., thoughts and spoken words) were encouraged through teachings in critical thinking, the analysis of thoughts and the consequences of words before speaking.

The cognition of children and young adults was developed, strengthened and improved through storytelling. Storytelling psychology is an attempt to use stories to shape the thoughts, words and actions of children and young adults in both private and public life. The storytelling psychology curriculum was developed based on first-hand knowledge of clan legends, animals and the natural environment. The power of reasoning was instilled in children and young adults by narrating stories of pleasant and unpleasant circumstances, ensuring that they were intellectually mature, emotionally strong and behaviourally sound.

Psychological learning was practical and rooted in self-respect and respect for others. To ensure anger management, self-control and respect for oneself and others, children and young adults were taught to speak only when spoken to and to respond only when they were allowed to. As a result, the concept of “do not speak until you are spoken to” was developed, and greatly misused and misunderstood in modern African society where it is interpreted as oppression and denial of freedom of speech. However, in indigenous communities controlled by older people (who are the custodians of cultural values and norms), the concept is regarded as a psychological process of teaching children and young adults the art of active listening and reasoning in order to defend oneself and to gain self-respect while respecting others. Another point of view was that this concept was part of a process of making children and young adults aware of their surroundings and teaching them to think critically, analytically and objectively before speaking to bring forth wisdom.

- *Affective learning.* Clan members and families were taught how to prioritise people through the provision of social work services for orphans and widows. The clan-centred system taught people that the clan and the family came before the individual, meaning that destitution was insignificant in indigenous communities. Again, music was used to guide emotional learning; the sound and the volume of musical instruments were intended to incite or calm emotional behaviour. Emotions were described, explained and depicted using crafts and arts.

Each of the above aspects of indigenous African psychology has a specific teaching and learning process that develops, enhances and improves human daily living. The teaching process promotes and advances behaviour in an illustrative or practical manner. In addition, the skills learnt through the different kinds of indigenous African psychology can

be transferred to other dimensions, such as educational, professional and social contexts. Further, the skills learnt may help guide appropriate behaviour, social conduct and order and may help individuals to be responsible in their lives and social engagements.

### **Task 2: Reflections on indigenous African psychology**

- (a) In your own words, explain what you understand about indigenous African psychology.
- (b) On the group site on myUnisa, explain how indigenous African psychology is relevant in modern-day communities.
- (c) Indigenous African psychology is holistic in scope. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.
- (d) Indigenous African psychology is taught, practised and assessed with a focus on all members of a clan, irrespective of their status. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.

## **2.3 African perspectives underlying psychology and their role in society**

This section deals with African perspectives underlying psychology.

### **2.3.1 Clan-centred and integrated-system perspective**

A clan is regarded as an organisation consisting of a network of individuals linked by immediate and distant kinship (Minbaeva & Muratbekova-Touron, 2013). A clan is the basic structure of an organised integrated system, ruled by leaders who are custodians of law and order. The laws are guided by cultural rituals and practices. Clans are knitted by blood and descent of families and extended family systems; thus, a clan is a progression of natural life from shared ancestors. Clanship is characterised by features such as lifestyle, rituals, traditions, customs and other distinguishing features that are unique to the clan.

In the indigenous Afrocentric world view, the lifestyle, rituals, traditions and customs of a clan were considered to be important because they gave a clan an identity. In addition, these aspects constituted indigenous African psychology because they helped with survival and enabled the functioning of a clan. Clan leaders believed that changing the thinking processes and behavioural patterns of the clan members would assure their existence. To achieve a clan-centred and integrated system, elder members of a clan taught their children and young adults methodologies that promoted a mindset of clan safety and unity to ensure the continuity of the clan. A mindset of participating in the protection of the clan, nature and animals was centrally emphasised in teachings on a unity of purpose and togetherness. This strategy promoted the values of interdependence and a sense of unity and a common purpose.

In many cases, the curriculum was derived from teachings on health, spirituality, adulthood, occupation/job orientation, agriculture and recreational activities to increase cognitive, affective and behavioural changes in order to ensure a clan's well-being and sustainable existence. Clan members were taught about the collective existence practices of the clan. That is, clan members were made aware that the extinction of one element would make other elements vulnerable. As an example, undermining animals, or nature, posed a threat to clan existence. Hence, clan members were willing to change their thinking and behaviour to protect and defend the clan. These teachings defined the psychology of indigenous people and continue to be practised in many African countries where clanships are found.

### **2.3.2 Cognitive-centred and wisdom-acquisition perspective**

All historical narratives, folklore and relics provided to clan members to enable mental and physical reasoning are included in the cognitive-centred and wisdom-acquisition perspective. According to McGee and Warms (1996), intellectual procedures are related to relics, symbols and philosophies. The cognitive-centred and wisdom-acquisition perspective involves two viewpoints: (i) reasoning and common-sense development and (ii) the advancement of clan well-being for inclusive development.

- *Reasoning and common-sense development*

Reasoning and common sense are developed through integrated experiences gained through intellectual and physical training. Birth, death, marriage, dances, festivals, games, music and songs, proverbs/riddles, sports like wrestling, stories about legends, folktales, myths, historical narratives, traditional poems and incantations are all examples of intellectual and physical training. Clan members' physical and intellectual development

was traditionally accomplished through physical training in practical activities, such as vocational instruction, birth, marriage, death, sickness and religion. Common sense and wisdom were also learnt and practised through clan judicial systems, clan politics and other human affairs. Furthermore, common sense was learnt and practised through mediation, counselling and social work involving clan affairs. Mediation also occurred between invisible guardians (e.g., ancestors) and the living. The values and the attitudes that govern humans, nature and animals were learnt through mediation.

- *Advancement of well-being for inclusive development*

This viewpoint entails caring for nature, animals and the environment, which are part of a clan. Well-being was highly valued, and the nutritional value of every meal was taken into consideration before the meal was prepared. In the African indigenous cultures in which clanships were found, food was highly organic. Food was not stored in a fridge, and clans barely had leftovers since they mostly cooked what they could consume. Fruit, herbs and vegetables were the staples of every meal.

Young adults and older people would reduce stress levels by socialising at clan gatherings or village meetings. The structure of well-being also included learning physical activities, such as dancing, farming and wrestling. Daily work activities were regulated to ensure clan members' physical well-being. Functional activities were accompanied by intermittent songs to increase motivation and to reduce stress for mental and emotional well-being. Sleeping and waking time was regulated to ensure family members were in good physical and psychological shape.

The advancement of clan members' well-being for inclusive development was guided by a healthy diet and exercise. Preventive and remedial measures were practical aspects of daily living. Stress prevention and response was embedded in bond formation between animals, nature and humans to increase stability and to reduce disintegration. Healing measures took the form of the recognition of ailments through consultation, diagnosis, treatment and consultation to confirm healing. Nurturing the sick was characterised by a high degree of empathy from clan members. Often, nurturing was designed according to age group, and caregiving was consistent to ensure that the sick were not lonely until they recovered. In difficult times, members of a clan displayed their empowerment, safeguarded the clan and cared for one another in unison.

### **2.3.3 Affective-centred perspective**

Emotion is an element of a clan's cultural ideology of daily living. The sound of the beating pattern of musical instruments developed, strengthened and improved emotional expression and control. Emotional control can be described as a manner of behaving in private and public spaces without displaying signs of weakness. Emotional expression featured in artefacts, drawings and dances. Emotional control was enforced with clan praises, calming songs and the beating pattern of traditional instruments. Anyone who failed to display emotional control in private and public life was excluded from society. Emotional expression was embedded in the ability to control one's emotions, which was an indication of one's strength of being in interactions and communication in any given context. Given the strictness attached to emotional control, emotional suppression was highly encouraged in traditional communities. The ability to suppress emotions symbolised emotional strength and resilience amid life's challenges.

### **Case study: Sifiso**

Sifiso is 12 years old. He is the second-born child in the family. Sifiso is responsible for taking food to family members on the farm. One day, he is on his way to the farm with a clay plate full of food when he sees his cousin trying to pick mangoes from a tree. Since he is the older one, he decides to help his cousin by climbing the tree. Sifiso shakes some of the tree's branches, causing several mangoes to fall. The falling mangoes break the clay plate, spilling the food. Sifiso runs home to tell his mother and grandmother about what happened. His grandmother comforts him, while his mother lectures him on the consequences of his behaviour and warns him about his father's reaction.

Sifiso's mother reports the incident to her husband to explain the delay in food delivery to the farm. Sifiso's father calls his behaviour irresponsible because he was supposed to take the food to the farm before helping his cousin with the mangoes. Sifiso is beaten in front of other family members that night but he does not cry. He endures the pain since his siblings encourage him not to cry. Crying would have caused him to be ridiculed and portrayed as a weakling incapable of facing the consequences of his actions. He is praised by his siblings and other family members for not crying and facing his punishment fearlessly.

**Implication:** Sifiso was prepared by his mother and grandmother to face the consequences of his behaviour. In traditional communities (i.e., communities based on maintaining values, morals and ethics), Sifiso's mother and grandmother would be considered important agents in observing his emotional development and management. This is an example of counselling that was helpful in preparing him to deal with the consequences of his actions and to manage his emotions.

### Task 3: Case study reflection questions

Reflect on your knowledge of indigenous African knowledge and answer the questions below.

- (a) The greatest disadvantage of this disciplinary process is beating the child. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.
- (b) The punishment inflicted will not yield the desired outcome because punishing children is bad. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.
- (c) There is a need to teach children the fundamental lessons of indigenous African knowledge in modern-day Africa. Is this statement true or false? Provide a reason for your answer.

The psychological analysis of emotional learning in indigenous African communities, as illustrated by Sifiso's emotional suppression, has been described negatively in Western psychology. However, to the custodians of cultural law and order in indigenous communities, the expression, suppression and control of emotions were strategic teachings that served as the basis for physical and psychological development. Thus, in traditional communities, emotional control could be achieved with any level of discipline. With reference to the above case study, the punishment given to Sifiso was believed not to harm him but to teach him fundamental lessons, such as

- staying focused on the goal, which was to deliver food to the family members on the farm, irrespective of any distractions
- having respect for those who labour for the family, that is, the family members working on the farm
- showing empathy at an appropriate time such as knowing that the family members working on the farm need food at a certain time of the day
- honing his negotiation skills, such as convincing the young cousin to go to the farm with him and delivering the food before picking mangoes
- taking responsibility for actions likely to cause others pain
- facing the consequences of one's actions with emotional resilience

**Important:** Please note that the purpose of this case study is not to promote any form of physical violence against children but to provide context and understanding of the

interpretation of punishment from a traditional African perspective. Any form of abuse or physical violence against children is strongly discouraged and condemned.

### **2.3.4 Behaviour-centred perspectives**

Behaviour refers to actions and responses that can be observed directly (Holt et al., 2019). The actions and responses manifest as a result of some form of interaction with the environment as individuals navigate the conditions of their environment. People's behaviour is determined by the conditions, the surroundings and the laws of the territory in which they find themselves. This means that behaviour is learnt and impressed on people's behavioural repertoire as guided by the expectations of the community. In the same way, indigenous African people valued behaviour because it guided their conduct. Behaviour also strengthened their culture in that younger generations learnt from elders how to conduct themselves and sustain their ways of living through behavioural modelling.

Behaviour from the perspective of clan development was guided by the cultural way of life and practices because a clan was sustainable when the practices were retained and protected. A clan was sustained through stories of strength about warriors, animals and nature to dispel fear, doubt and weakness among the different age groups. To ensure sustainable development, the learning of peaceful and harmonious behaviour was highly regarded. Proverbs and idioms were used to teach clan members how to speak and act in private or public places. The teaching of these behaviours began from birth and continued to adulthood according to a clan leader's specifications. Cultural rituals were used to prepare clan members to transition from one phase to another, for example, girls becoming women and boys becoming men.

## **2.4 The goals and importance of African psychology**

In this module, African psychology is defined as that aspect of indigenous learning that leads to the development of human cognition, affective learning and behaviour basic to families and clan development. Essentially, the goals of African psychology are

- to inculcate the understanding of a clan's cognition, affective learning and behaviour to maintain the development and protection of the clan's ideologies



- to promote and advance certain human cognitive processes (e.g., thinking or thought patterns), affective learning and behaviour that require different clan principles (e.g., addressing human needs and wants)
- to train clan members to promote the pursuit of clan knowledge through the dissemination of cultural rituals and practices (e.g., promoting cultural practices, philosophies, values and principles)
- to provide functional processes of construction, recording (clan knowledge) and conversion (knowledge production), thus providing better control and rules; the elders, who were the custodians of law and order, taught the clan members the cultural rituals, rites of passage and cultural practices, as rooted in clan historic knowledge derived from the spirituality of ancestral guidance

## **2.5 The major phases in the development of African psychology**

African psychology has transformed and continues to be redefined based on scholarly research and new developmental strides in African communities. We will discuss important factors that shaped and continue to shape African psychology.

### **2.5.1 Indigenous African psychology**

Indigenous psychology has been in existence since the beginning of human existence. Psychological learning in indigenous communities is about an individual's attempt to describe, explain and interpret human thoughts, words and actions for the survival of the clan or the community. The process of indigenous psychological learning entails learning ways of reasoning, empathising and behaving that will influence the community positively and bring about harmonious living among community members.

Indigenous communities maintained a social order characterised by giving attention to the psychological well-being of people. Learning was organised in a way that was aimed at increasing wisdom on how to connect humanity and nature and providing strategies by which to prevent or solve problems. The dynamic formation of knowledge was very strong, focused and constantly structured to fit communal life. The assessment of growth and readiness to take on new responsibilities was dependent on the passing of transitioning rituals to different phases of communal life, such as adulthood, womanhood and ownership of a title in the community. Rites of passage served as tests that enabled

one to transition into adulthood. The passing of tests in one phase psychologically prepared individuals for the next phase. This pattern of life continued to transform Africans until colonisers invaded Africa. Psychological learning was destroyed and replaced by a colonial psychological process.

### **2.5.2 Western psychology**

The colonisation of Africa introduced Western psychology, which brought scientific psychology as a yardstick for measuring quality in teaching and the provision of services. The era of scientific psychology brought massive changes to the content, assessment and service provision that characterised indigenous psychology. This new era marked the beginning of the undermining of indigenous psychology. Western psychology introduced Western content, theories and measurements, and different types of services that were foreign to African cultures. Western psychology taught new ideologies that challenged, trivialised and segregated indigenous psychology. According to Holdstock (2000), non-Western ideologies were rejected because of their assumed inability to provide scientific evidence.

### **2.5.3 African and Western psychology**

The growing agitation of Africans both at home and abroad made scholars of psychology call for a new concept of psychology. Some scholars advocated a revisiting of indigenous psychology with a focus on best practices. Some advocated a merging of the best of indigenous practices and Western practices. The indigenous and Western psychology perspective sees both forms of psychology as important in bringing about a better understanding of human behaviour and responding to challenges of humanity and everyday living. While the debate is going on, the call for the decolonisation of African psychology has increased.

## **2.6 Comparison between Western and African thinking in psychology**

The Western and African modes of thinking differ regarding a number of elements. These differences are highlighted in table 2.1.

**Table 2.1: Differences between Western and African thinking in psychology**

<b>African thinking</b>	<b>Western thinking</b>
Psychological learning is concerned with developing and promoting the basic principles of communal living and is characterised by reflection on ways to protect and maintain clan ideologies on matters such as love, unity and progress.	Psychology is concerned with how to provide services to individuals, families or communities with developmental, social, educational, cognitive, health or personality problems that have an impact on their mental health and well-being.
Psychological learning should prevent problems by targeting both families and the clan to ensure that spirituality-related services and empathy are maximised to improve oneness of the clan.	Psychological learning should focus on developing and improving psychometrics or other forms of measurement for clinical psychology, counselling, school psychology, industrial psychology, organisational psychology, forensic psychology and neuropsychology to help professional service providers cure humans who have psychological problems.
Psychological knowledge should be accumulated through indigenous knowledge.	Psychological knowledge should be accumulated through professionalisation and academic certification.
Psychological learning promotes a common understanding of problems and values a joint (a person, the environment and the gods) approach to problem-solving.	Psychological learning promotes expert knowledge through the identification of problems by means of assessment and diagnosis. Expert knowledge is key to problem-solving.
Psychological learning should focus on developing human behaviour, thoughts and actions to increase understanding and more sustainable interaction with the natural environment and animals for the benefit of continued human existence.	Psychological learning should focus on developing human cognition, affective learning and behaviour. The psychological sciences guide behaviour and do not consider non-Western perspectives.
Psychological learning values the well-being of a group and indigenous practices are intended to benefit the community.	Psychological learning values the well-being of the individual and therapeutic techniques are intended to benefit the individual.
The death of the body does not equate to the death of the mind and memory (Nwoye, 2015).	The human mind dies with the death of the body (Nyowe, 2015).
The study of humans and their relationships with their contexts expands to include invisible and intangible realities (Oppong, 2022).	Humans are defined only in material, measurable or observable terms (Nyowe, 2015).

## Summary

In this unit you learnt about African psychology and its development and implementation in African communities. The importance of African psychology and its role in the construction of African communities was elaborated on. Further, the unit explored the different types of psychology, with a particular emphasis on drawing distinctions between African psychology and Western psychology. From this unit, one gathers that psychology has been practised in Africa before the advent of colonisation and that indigenous African people relied on generational knowledge to define their psychologies. Given the growing call for decolonisation, African psychology will likely continue to take shape and define new and emerging realities of African communities.

## Glossary

**African:** a characterisation of African people or groups who subscribe to the values of interdependence, sameness, cooperation, collectivism and the sharing of common traditions, customs and rituals derived from a common ancestry and belief system

**culture:** an umbrella term used to describe people's way of life; the *Cambridge dictionary* defines “culture” as the lifestyle of a particular group of people at a particular time; this lifestyle consists of diverse beliefs, experiences, attitudes, roles, religions, values, customs and meanings that are peculiar to the specific group and that are passed on from generation to generation

**development:** a process of continuous growth in terms of positive change/advancement; it is also the addition of social, demographic, physical, environmental and economic components

**different:** not alike in character, nature or attributes

**distinguish:** to recognise the difference in features or characteristics of things or individuals

**goals:** proposed outcomes set by individuals with the sole purpose of achieving the planned objectives/desired outcomes in the future

**identify:** to pick out or recognise something or someone and to be able to tell who and what they are

**importance:** something of great value and significance; people or things that are too essential to be missed or overlooked and that should be considered

**indigenous:** things that originate from a place or people; such things are peculiar to that place or those people

**knowledge:** skills, information and facts that are acquired through observation, communication, education and experience; knowledge includes both practical and/or theoretical understanding of a subject

**meaning:** words, texts, actions and concepts that facilitate understanding, interpretation and perception of a phenomenon around and within the environment

**perspectives:** points of view or perceptions of a certain subject as opposed to the views of others; perspectives are largely influenced by diverse factors and are usually people specific

**phases:** phases can be conceptualised in different ways; in essence, a phase is a series of events that leads to a gradual progression towards a desired outcome

**philosophy:** the rational investigation of principles, truths of being, conduct or knowledge; it can also be defined as the study of causes, nature, knowledge, principles of reality and values based on logical reasoning

**psychology:** psychology is a multifaceted discipline; it is generally defined as the scientific study of the mind and the behaviour of individuals; in indigenous psychology, it can be defined as the study of people's existence in relation to their thoughts, actions and behaviour, which enable them to thrive in a given environment

**role:** the allocated or assumed part of a thing in a relationship, organisation or society towards ensuring the whole functions adequately

**skills:** diverse attributes that will enable the performance of actions within a given amount of energy or time, or both, with a determined result

**society:** a large group of people who reside together in an organised way and who decide how things are done and by whom

**thinking:** the processing of different thoughts for various reasons; to make rational judgements or decisions

**underlying:** a term used to indicate the presence of something important that frames the meaning of something else without being explicit

**understand:** to adequately grasp the actual meaning of something that is being communicated

**Western:** originating or living in the West, especially the United States or Europe

### **Recommended reading**

<https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/06/03/post-colonial-development-in-africa>

[Microsoft Word - What is Africa \(carleton.ca\)](#)

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