



## Unit 1 - The history of psychology in Africa

Introduction to Psychology (University of South Africa)



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## Introduction

- The history of psychology in Africa is not linear
- Historical events informed the way in which psychology was conceptualised and delivered in Africa and how this resulted in power shifts in society.
- The history of psychology is important since it not only provides background but also highlights the shortcomings of the discipline of psychology in the African context.

## The origin of psychology in Africa

- Psychology as a discipline has a long history but, as an academic subject, it is relatively new.
- The context and orientation of psychology as a professional discipline are Euro-American imports (Oppong et al., 2014).
- According to Nsamenang (2007), Euro-American psychology was introduced to Africa during the colonial period partly through Christian missionaries, visiting Western psychologists and Africans who were returning from universities abroad after being trained in conventional Western psychology.
- According to Nsamenang, Christian missionaries introduced the teaching of mainstream Western psychology in the philosophy training curriculum that was intended for the education of African candidates for theology and priesthood.
- From this world view, *psychology is defined as the study of thought, emotions, and observed behaviour (APA, 2015), emphasising the “scientific” aspect of psychology.*
- Psychology’s connotation of being scientific gives the discipline power and authority over the human experience (Bohmke & Tlali, 2008) since it claims to have the power to declare what behaviours are considered normal and adaptive.
- Nwoye (2015a, p. 104) defines psychology as the “*systematic and informed study of the complexities of human mental life, culture and experience in the pre- and post-colonial African world*”.
- This type of psychology considers local world views to be important in understanding local realities.
- Universities in Africa were established following Africa’s colonial contact with Europe.
- Most started in 1960’s and 1970s after colonised countries gained political independence from their former colonisers – Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and Portugal.

- Some universities, like the University of Ibadan (Nigeria), University of Ghana, University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Makerere University (Uganda) and University of Nairobi (Kenya), started as offshore colleges of the University of London, initially flying the flag of their “mother university” and offering various courses (including psychology) that were developed abroad and imported to Africa.
  - Creating departments of psychology was one thing; filling them up with relevant and local experts was quite another.
  - That was where the major problem of Western hegemonic domination and the attempt to speak for Africans on the nature of the life of the mind in Africa had its origins
  - In the 1940s, 1960s and 1970s, and indeed up until today, most nations of Africa, like other non-Western countries, such as China, India, Iran and the Philippines, did not have a fully articulated, scientific psychology of their own (Nwoye, 2022).
  - There was an inability to recognise and admit that there was something worthwhile, psychologically, out there in other regions, beyond the traditional location of the European cultural and psychological tradition (Danziger, 2006).
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- To fill the vacant psychology positions at African universities, the authorities had no other option but to rely on recruitment drives abroad.
  - These universities functioned as clones:
    - They modelled the European systems, including curricular provisions and traditions, after the already existing and well-regarded Western universities in countries such as Britain, France, Germany, and the USA (Nwoye, 2015b)
  - This generated the need for persistent importation and transplantation of Euro-American psychologies (Danziger, 2006).
  - The formal study of psychology in African universities emerged as a subordinated, dependent and Westernised psychology.
  - African psychologists in continental Africa, overdetermined by the Eurocentric story of what psychology is about, have ended up in disappointment and traumatic bewilderment regarding how to break away from the restricted boundaries this tradition set for the study of psychology in Africa
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- Dominance of the Western world view has defined what constitutes the study of psychology, and the way in which its sub-disciplines are divided is inextricably linked to how Western countries have historically oppressed people from Africa.
  - This oppression finds expression through colonisation and imperialism

- The way in which psychology is defined, as well as the emphasis on its scientific quality, is not necessarily divorced from history and politics of oppression

The implications of conceptualising psychology from a specific geographical location, specifically the implications for African people:

➤ **Psychology and location**

- The word “*psychology*” is derived from the Greek.
- The first part of the word comes from the Greek *psyche* – which refers to the soul
- The second part comes from the Greek *logos* which refers to studying a particular subject
- Based on the etymology (word origin) of the word, it could be concluded that psychology is the study of the soul.

Given that some people are in Africa, and Greece is in Europe, a few critical points need to be raised.

- **The first critical issue is that people’s location often determines their world view**
  - World view is a set of presumptions that particular people have about the world – their ideas can be about the world, God, life, death, love, how to heal sickness, their relationship with nature, etc.
  - How people located in Greece think about and see the world will most likely differ from how people from Africa and other continents see and think about the world.
  - This concept is referred to as epistemic location
  - People generate their world views from particular geopolitical context and qualify truths based on their positioning
  - Psychology is not value free, but is informed by a cultural reference
  - Grosfoguel (2013) questions why disciplines such as psychology are based on ideas and theories only from Western nations, thus questioning the contextual relevance and applicability of such theories in non-Western contexts
- **The second critical point is the idea of science informing the study of psychology**
  - The notion of science has historical and political connotations
  - Science in psychology implies a couple of things about the human psyche.
  - it implies that human behaviour, emotions and thought can be studied objectively.
  - This viewpoint not only privileges the supposed objective study of the human psyche, but may also lead to a distortion of the ways of life of people who exist outside of Western societies

- It can lead people to think about human beings in a mechanical way as though no other factors contribute to human behaviour and may not reflect the complexities of society in informing human behaviour.
- The third issue relates to the following questions:
  - Who decides what human processes are within the scope of psychology?
  - Why do they get to make this determination?
  - On whose behalf do they make decisions?
  - What are the consequences of developing a limited scope of psychology?
- These are the kind of questions that are important to ask in order to understand what psychology is and what the implications are of this understanding.
- Demarcating psychology in this manner has affected how other racial groups have been treated throughout history.
- Focusing on mental health processes or internal states, psychology has perpetuated reason, intelligence and behaviour as the ideal measures of human functioning, mental health and civilisation.

#### ➤ Psychology in Egypt

- Three significant events occurred in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that influenced the rise of psychology in Egypt:
  1. Al-Abssia Mental Health Hospital was opened in Cairo in 1880 – the first mental hospital for Africa and the Arab world.
  2. Newspapers and magazines distributed to the public paved the way for psychology in Egypt – these newspapers and magazines were established in Cairo and Alexandria, primarily by a group of immigrant Lebanese and Syrian journalists.
  3. Egypt started expanding its schooling system by establishing schools all over the country, including teachers' schools, whose curriculum included some basic psychology books in 1985.
    - The book *Insanity*, by Egyptian physician Mohammed Nagaty was published in 1891.
- In Cairo, the term “psychology” first appeared in a curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education in 1906
- Since 190, the Philosophy Department at Cairo University has included psychology courses in its curriculum
- After the establishment of the Higher Institute for Education in Cairo in 1929, psychology became known as a distinguished scientific discipline.

### ➤ Psychology in South Africa

- Psychology has a noble purpose, but in South Africa it became perverted to fulfil a political purpose.
  - It was believed that the Bantu were not simply less developed than Europeans; rather the belief was that their culture differed fundamentally from European culture and was incompatible with it (Marx, 2013)
  - Mixing cultures would be as fatal for indigenous Africans as it would be for whites
  - The only possible solution was total separation in the form of apartheid.
  - Prominent South African Government figures were at the forefront of aiding the colonial and apartheid state directly and indirectly.
  - They needed to have government-sanctioned research agencies and organisations that complemented the agenda of the colonial and apartheid government, thus suppressing local knowledge and cultural systems.
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- The South African College (University of Cape Town) was established in 1829
  - This college prepared students for matriculation and examinations at the University of London
  - The University of Good Hope was established in 1873 as an examining body for degrees conferred in South Africa.
  - The University Act of South Africa launched the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 1916 as well as the University of Stellenbosch and the South African Native College (University of Fort Hare)
  - Dutch and German philosophical traditions of rationalism and idealism influenced Afrikaans universities
  - British empiricism and liberalism influenced English universities
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- Psychology was taught in philosophy departments until 1917
  - RW Wilcocks (1892 – 1967) was appointed as Professor of Logic and Psychology at the University of Stellenbosch after he received his doctorate in the analysis of productive thought at the University of Berlin in 1917.
  - He established the first experimental psychology laboratory modelled on Wundt's laboratory at the University of Stellenbosch.
  - Psychology in South Africa was used to perpetuate racism and oppression of the black majority.

- White psychologist – EG Malherbe, JC Smuts, RW Wilcocks, HF Verwoerd and S Biesheuvel – played a significant role in the creation of apartheid and its politics
- Other psychologists protested against the unjust ways in which psychology perpetuated racism.
- Chabani N Manganyi became the first black psychologist in 1965 and established the Department of Psychology at the University of Transkei (Walter Sisulu University) in 1976
- Josephine Naidoo was the first black person to apply for South African Psychological Association membership
- Sathasivan Cooper frequently met with political activists, such as Steve Biko, Harry Nengwekhulu and Strini Moodley. He also helped to establish the Black Consciousness philosophy and was instrumental in the formation of the Student's Representative Council (SRC) at the University College.
- His political ideologies led to his suspension from university in 1969
- He steered the merger with the University of Natal to form what is now known as the University of KwaZulu Natal.

#### ➤ Psychology in Zambia

- Psychology emerged in Zambia during colonialism within the context of anthropological research to serve colonial British interests.
- History of anthropology goes back to the mid-thirties with the establishment of the Rhodes Livingstone Institute in 1937
- The appointment of British psychologist, Prof A Heron, as director of the institute in 1963 was a major development of psychology.
  - he founded the Human Development Research Unit at the Institute for Social Research to study perceptual development in African children and young adults.
- These studies were carried out in the laboratory, in family settings and schools.
- Institute for Social Research also worked on educational and occupational selection – established permanently as the Education and Occupational Assessment Service under the Ministry of Labour and Social Services
- Later the mining industry and Ministry of Higher Education established psychological (assessments) services.
- The first laboratory for research in experimental psychology was established in Zambia in 1965.
- One of the first psychology departments in East and Southern Africa was founded at the University of Zambia in 1968

- Following the introduction of psychology in a few African countries, basic research was required because Western techniques were not always appropriate for the African context.
- Psychology and its methodological applications had to be redefined to fit the context.

The study of psychology becomes an extension of oppressive political systems like colonisation, apartheid and imperialism. When psychology is used to justify the oppression of one race by another, it becomes a tool that aids oppressive regimes and maintains the status quo. How the study of psychology is conceptualised, how it creates knowledge and from what location it does so have consequences for African people.

#### The different areas in the development of psychology in Africa

- Psychology as a discipline is concerned with the mind and behaviour

The mind refers to internal processes such as cognition or emotional states

Behaviour refers to the outward manner in which these inward

- Psychology is the study of the different factors that shape an individual's personality, learning, cognition etc
- Basic psychology includes abnormal psychology, behaviourism, biological psychology, cognitive psychology, comparative psychology, cross-cultural psychology, developmental psychology, evolutionary psychology, experimental psychology, neuropsychology, personality psychology, positive psychology, psychodynamic psychology, quantitative psychology and social psychology.
- Abnormal psychology is a branch of psychology that studies unusual patterns of behaviour, emotion and thought considered to be maladaptive and disruptive to an individual's life.
- Psychopathology (similar to abnormal psychology) refers to the study of mental illness, mainly by psychologists and psychiatrists to reach a medical understanding of the disease process.
- There are 3 historical phases of development:
  1. Demonology – i.e. caused by evil forces



## 2. Somatogenesis – i.e. bodily causes

## 3. Psychogenesis – i.e. psychological or mental causes

- Demonology is the theory that the devil or another evil entity can reside inside a person and exert a mental influence over that person.
- There was a belief that abnormal behaviour was caused by evil spirits, which led to be cast out through ritualistic chanting or torture, also known as exorcism.
- Hippocrates (460-3770) believed that illnesses were caused naturally.
  - He is considered a pioneer of somatogenesis, which states that something wrong with the soma, or physical body, disturbs thoughts and actions.
  - He classified mental disorders into mania, melancholia and phrenitis, or brain fever.
  - He believed normal brain functioning (mental health) depended on a delicate balance of four main fluids in the body: blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm.
  - Phlegm imbalance resulted in a person feeling sluggish and dull
  - Black bile resulted in melancholia
  - Yellow bile resulted in irritability and anxiousness
  - His documented work led to information that is used to identify symptoms of epilepsy, alcoholic delusion, stroke and paranoia.
- In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, lunacy trials were held in England to determine individuals' sanity.
- However, the individual's strange behaviour was due to injury, physical illness or emotional shock and was not necessarily caused by demonic possession
- In the 15<sup>th</sup> century there were a few mental hospitals – most hospitals were used to treat leprosy.
- These facilities were converted to asylums around 1547 in England
- Patients who were admitted to these hospitals were seen as burdens to society and locked away in desolate circumstances.
- In 1883, Emil Kraepelin (1856 – 1926) published a classification system that could be used to establish the biological nature of mental illness
  - He discerned among mental disorders a tendency for certain groups of symptoms, or syndromes, to appear together which could be regarded as underlying physical causes of particular medical diseases
  - He regarded each mental illness as distinct from others, having its own origins, symptoms, course and outcome.
- The somatogenic explanation for mental illness dominated the field well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century

- other researchers, especially in France and Austria, attributed mental disorders to psychological malfunction.
  - Franz Anton Mesmer (1734 – 1815) – an Austrian physician practising in Vienna who was one of the earliest practitioners of modern-day hypnosis
  - The word “mesmerise” is an older term for “hypnotise”
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- History of behaviourism in Africa can be traced to Kenya
  - In 1934, HL Gordon (most senior physician in the colony and author of many papers presented to the Kenyan branch of British Medical Association in Nairobi), reported on the African mind in the *Journal of Mental Science* while studying patients admitted at the Mathari Mental Hospital, Kenya.
  - According to Gordon, “the African had no regard for the sanctity of life, no sense of decency; and by European standards, was simply abnormal”
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