Essence or experience?
A new direction for African psychology

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Abstract
This article examines the attempts of psychologists in South Africa to “Africanize” the discipline. Beginning with a brief history of psychology on the continent, it contextualizes the call for an African psychology by outlining the state of the broader discipline in post-apartheid South Africa as well as the emergence of Afrocentric psychology in the United States. The article interrogates further the notion of an “African worldview” and suggests that Afrocentric psychologists remain beholden to Eurocentric audiences—the result of their continued marginalization by a Eurocentric discipline. Drawing on Fanon’s image of a Manichean psychology, the paper argues that African psychology—instead of organizing itself around cultural questions—must commit itself to a psychological analysis of the violence that exemplifies life in South Africa.

Keywords
African psychology, decolonization, South Africa, structural violence, whiteness

A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces. (Wole Soyinka)

Psychology in South Africa is at a crossroads. The patient–practitioner dyad remains riddled with contradictions along lines of race, class, language, and culture, fueling fierce debates over “relevance.” Multiple attempts at “relevantizing” the discipline have followed, one of which has formed around cultural considerations that have culminated in calls to “Africanize” the discipline. This paper, which assesses the claims of African psychology by examining its historical antecedents, psychological aspirations, and political allegiances, insists that African psychology understood as cultural undertaking is an unworkable project. It argues instead that an authentic African psychology must address

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the inequality and violence that pervades the lives of ordinary South Africans, a task for which the principles of Fanonian psychology are well suited.

Psychology in Africa

Critical observers of psychology in Africa proclaim that it has not covered itself in glory. From its arrival as an ethnoscience in the late 19th century (Nell, 1990) to its complicity with repressive politics in the 1960s (Bulhan, 1985), it served as the exclusive preserve of ex-colonists, expatriates, visiting scholars, and, in the South African instance, white psychologists (Abdi, 1975). Not much changed at the fall of colonialism, with foreign researchers in cross-cultural psychology more interested in theoretical questions than the social issues dominating the agendas of developing countries (Jahoda, 1973). The lack of African involvement in the discipline persisted to the point that, in the early 1990s, it was conceded that “the average black African is likely to declare that he has never heard of the term ‘Psychology’ in his life, or if he has heard of it, he is most likely to swear that he does not understand what it means” (Eze, 1991, p. 28).

Until the late 1960s, then, psychological research in Africa was occupied primarily with the resolution of Euro-American disciplinary impasses—with the subtext of “mak[ing] more effective the African’s exploitation [and] advancing a ‘science’ of dubious relevance to African reality” (Bulhan, 1981, p. 27). Employed usually by industrialists and inspired for decades by Lévy-Bruhl’s (1923) *Primitive Mentality*, colonial era psychologists tended to endorse an economic outlook that coincided with worker exploitation (Long, 2014). In South Africa, “for the most part, psychological practice [was] a matter of treating individuals as objects of political or management decisions not made by themselves” (J. Louw & Danziger, 2000, p. 59), while elsewhere—in Nigeria, the Cameroons, South West Africa, and Ghana—it was surmised, for example, that Africans preferred the overcrowded living conditions that obtained in worker compounds (Wober, 1975).

Despite improvements in the post-independence years, neocolonial designs remained. In the 1980s—there were now 20 psychology departments in Africa (Serpell, 1984, as cited in Nsamenang, 1992)—black psychologists trained in the Euro-American tradition continued to conduct the kind of research that had “long served as a bulwark of rationalisation for oppression” (Bulhan, 1981, p. 25). In the mid-1990s, a survey of 12 Eastern and Southern African countries revealed that the orientation of their psychological services was still more Western than African (Mpofu, Zindi, Oakland, & Peresuh, 1997, as cited in Mpofu, 2002), with psychological theories failing to capture the purported socio-centrism of African societies (Mpofu, 2002). And at its inaugural meeting in July 2000, the Working Group on the Development of the African Psychological Society noted the lack of African participation at the International Congress of Psychology, concluding that “[e]ither we are marginalized, or not taken seriously at all” (Mpofu, 2002, p. 180).

Irrelevance

Although psychology in South Africa has flourished among the country’s white minority, a persistent charge of “irrelevance” has dogged the discipline since the late 1970s. At a time when the apartheid state was unraveling in the face of mounting local and
international censure, a section of psychologists criticized the discipline’s response to the lived realities of most South Africans, referring variously to its theoretical barrenness, cultural imperialism, economic elitism, and political apathy (Long, 2013).

Understandably, much was expected of psychology when the country embraced democratic rule. But a generation later, ordinary South Africans believe that a socially responsive discipline has yet to materialize (Ruane, 2010). With the debate about “relevance” raging, it is the demographic profile of the country’s psychologists that represents, perhaps, the source of greatest discontent. Although the proportion of black students in professional programs has increased dramatically, only one quarter of registered psychologists are black (Cooper, 2014). According to one explanation for the imbalance, psychology’s indifference to black working-class problems has alienated black students from the discipline (Mama, 1995; Pillay & Kramers, 2003). For example, the non-issue of poverty in clinical psychology literature—despite its links with two of the biggest psycho social problems facing the country, namely, violence and the HIV/AIDS pandemic—is understood to be consistent with the profession’s penchant for aligning itself with the well-resourced (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004).

Racial categories, moreover, overlap considerably with language proficiency, with dire implications for a profession built on the mantra of a “talking cure.” In a context where 40% of the population speaks either isiXhosa or isiZulu as a home language and 80% of psychologists are able to speak only English and/or Afrikaans, some have gone as far as to cast the mismatch as a human rights issue (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004), asking whether the apparent sense of outrage is mere “rhetoric” (Freeman, 1991, p. 141) and “political correctness” (Pillay & Siyothula, 2008, p. 734).

African psychology

Service delivery aside, the allegation of “Eurocentrism” is a recurring trope in the South African debate about “relevance.” Cultural arguments are advanced continually in which the selfish “individuocentrism” of the United States and Western Europe—the producers of mainstream psychological theories and practices—is juxtaposed with such generalities as Africans’ harmonious co-existence with nature, their esteem for “being” rather than doing, and their “sociocentric” definitions of selfhood (Mkhize, 2004). One is led eventually to the conclusion that psychology has lost its soul—its psyche—having been reduced to something approaching a cult of numbers.

Yet the search for “African psychology” that began in earnest in the 1970s has lost its way (Long, 2013). Efforts at Africanizing psychological theory have been sporadic (e.g., Holdstock, 2000; Mkhize, 2004; Nwoye, 2015), while the taunt that psychologists in South Africa do not have a psychology of their own, lingers (Ratele, 2004). Despite the recent decision of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) to grant its Forum of African Psychology (FAP) divisional status, not to mention the establishment of the Pan-African Psychology Union (PAPU) in 2014 (Cooper, 2014), the indigenization of psychology in South Africa remains a marginal pursuit.

Standard explanations for the impasse include assertions that psychology is incompatible with the “African worldview,” that indigenous healers are the designated “psychologists” in African society, and that rural Africans prefer visiting said healers
anyway (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Pillay & Kramers, 2003). The resonance of such analyses with apartheid-era justifications for the racial segregation of mental health services informs the reluctance in many quarters to pursue a project that appears premised on the very discourse of difference that sustained apartheid rationality. But if black African users of psychological services in South Africa are to be believed, it can no longer be denied that psychologists “do not know our culture. They cannot understand” (Ruane, 2010, p. 219).

To be sure, the clamor for “African psychology” is not peculiar to the continent. In fact, when appeals for the Africanization of the discipline were made in the late 1970s and early 1980s at a time of heightened opposition to apartheid rule, an analogous sentiment had already taken hold in the United States, roused by the Nation of Islam’s sermons on the “mental slavery” of African Americans (Schiele, 2003). The rise of Afrocentrism, that is, was mostly an African American phenomenon dating back to the civil unrest of the 1960s and related demands within the academy for relevant research in African studies (Howe, 1998).

Inevitably, American psychology came under pressure amid calls for reform. In 1970, in an article published in Ebony magazine, Joseph White noted that “[i]t is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the life styles of black people using traditional theories developed by white psychologists to explain white people” (1970, p. 45). White, however, made it clear that,

rather than argue that black people are totally psychologically unique, it would seem that our experience with—and management of—key psychological concepts as it pertains to handling of contradictions, role of the hero, language systems, the meaning of work and a healthy sense of suspiciousness differs profoundly as we compare the black experience with the white Anglo experience. (1970, p. 48)

The publication—which introduced for the first time the notion of a “black psychology”—followed the 1968 founding, in San Francisco, of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi). Frustrated with the sidelining of African American concerns by the white-dominated American Psychological Association (APA), black psychologists broke ranks with the APA whose handling of these concerns they deemed “insensitive, ineffectual, and insincere” (Williams, 1974, as cited in Guthrie, 1998, p. 148).

With the focus, then, on black experience, a new psychological vocabulary took hold among African American psychologists, with the 1970s witnessing the emergence of such neologisms as nadinolization, negromachy, nigrescence, and weusi anxiety (Guthrie, 1998, p. 150). But as African American psychologists continued to distinguish themselves from the mainstream, ABPsi’s emphasis drifted ever closer towards continental African themes. Conference delegates started wearing West African attire, Egyptology became a source of much interest, and leading figures in the movement began adopting traditional African names (Guthrie, 1998). Despite Paulin Hountondji’s (1996a) searing critique of African ethnophilosophy, by the 1980s an Afrocentric outlook had assumed center stage, claiming the existence of a more-or-less unitary African Weltanschaung (e.g., Baldwin, 1986). In the attempt to reclaim an inferiorized heritage by celebrating all things African, essence had become the handmaiden of experience.
It is probable that the intellectual partnering of ABPsi and FAP at the International Congress of Psychology in 2012 will have significant effects on the trajectory of African psychology in South Africa. The synergism of the relationship is also to be admitted, since ABPsi’s Afrocentrism intersects gainfully with former president Thabo Mbeki’s dream of an “African Renaissance.” When he presented his case for the renewal of the continent, Mbeki emphasized the erosion of African dignity through “centuries of … contempt for the colour black” (1999, p. xx). This, he believed, necessitated “recall[ing] everything that is good and inspiring in our past” (emphasis added) (p. xxi)—an Africanist-Bikoist standpoint that infuses contemporary efforts at Africanizing psychology. Of course, the allure of continental myth-making and—as far as psychology is concerned—the demand for cultural “relevance” undermines to some extent the ideal of a non-racial society, perpetuating for some the same false consciousness produced by apartheid ideologues who attempted to sanitize the violence that permeated their theory of so-called “separate development.” But one is reminded equally of “the distance from the classroom to the streets” (Gates, 1992, p. 19); the political inclinations of a Eurocentric—i.e., white, middle-class—academy cannot constitute grounds for dismissing the African psychology movement as, potentially, a serious intellectual project.

Defining Africa

What, then, is Africa, this “teeming landmass” that continues to inspire romance and revulsion in equal measure? To begin with, there is uncertainty about its etymology. If the word is of Berber origin (that is, *ifri*, meaning “cave dweller”), then “Africa” is an indigenous designation; if, on the other hand, it derives from the Latin *Aprica* (meaning “sunny”) or the Greek *Aphrike* (meaning “without cold”), then it is the product of “a historic dialogue between the northernmost part of the continent and its European neighbors” (Mazrui, 2005, p. 69). “Africa,” strictly speaking, referred initially to the area spanning eastern Algeria and present-day Tunisia—once a colonial province of the Romans—while the rest of the unknown continent fell foul of Orientalist imaginings. For example, when one proceeds south on the earliest known map of Africa as an entire continent, castles disappear to be replaced with a motley collection of four birds, an elephant, and a one-eyed giant. Whereas it cannot be assumed that “Africa” is a Greco-Roman coinage, it can be claimed that European cartographers continentalized it (Mazrui, 2005).

What of the “African worldview,” resurrected by Afrocentric psychologists despite its dismantlement by literary theorists some 50 years ago (H. L. Gates, Jr., personal communication, March 24, 2015)? According to a leading protagonist, Wade Nobles, “the African worldview … is comprised, at minimum, of beliefs akin to (a) autogeny, (b) the primacy of the person, (c) the consubstantiality of primordial substance, (d) perpetual evolution, (e) vitalism, and (f) living forever” (2013, p. 253). In turn, Mariette contends that, “[i]n the African worldview, it is the eternal cycle of life that offers the possibility of transcendence, of harmonious interrelationship, of wholeness, integration, and authentic organicity” (2013, p. 263), while Augustine Nwoye—an eloquent theorist of African psychology—claims that, in the final analysis, it is “the principle of complementarity of contraries” that underpins the African “worldview” (2015, p. 97). Despite acknowledging the present lack of an evidence base as well as the general skepticism that
accompanies talk of a monolithic African *Utamawazo*—a Kiswahili term denotative of a cultural outlook that is supposedly “determined by the primordial essence of a people” (Obasi & Smith, 2009, p. 49)—Afrocentrists remain convinced that the points of convergence among African cultures have been identified by sufficient numbers of social scientists and philosophers as to preclude their dismissal as mere coincidence.

Since the existence of an “African worldview” is the *sine qua non* of African psychology, it is understandable that both Nobles (1972) and Nhlanhla Mkhize (2004)—perhaps the field’s pre-eminent figures in the United States and South Africa respectively—assert that African philosophy is foundational to the construction of African psychology. It comes as a surprise, then, that neither of them pays homage to the text that provided “the starting point of a huge debate about culture and philosophy in Africa” (Connell, 2007, p. 97), namely, Placide Tempels’ (1959) *Bantu Philosophy*. Whereas Mkhize (2004, p. 42) mentions Tempels in passing in an otherwise comprehensive account of the field, Nobles (1972, p. 32) does not cite him other than in the bibliography. Elsewhere, despite a section devoted to “Foundational influences in the emergence of African psychology,” Nwoye (2015, p. 98) does not refer to Tempels at all, nor does the latter crack the nod in an author index spanning some 2500 names in the *Handbook of African American Psychology* (Neville, Tynes, & Utsey, 2009). In effect, Tempels has been written out of the history of African psychology while others—John Mbiti, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Molefi Kete Asante foremost among them—“have been cited countless times in African psychology literature” (Coleman & Johnson, 2009, p. 26).

The reason for the omission becomes apparent upon reading *Bantu Philosophy*. One learns that Tempels is in search of “a better understanding of the realm of Bantu thought [that] concerns all colonials … who wish to civilize, educate and raise the Bantu. But if it concerns all colonizers with good will, it concerns most particularly missionaries” (p. 17). Observing that the Bantu “are growing ever more and more unstable politically,” Tempels concludes that “it is intellectuals with good will, giving guidance to native society—especially missionaries—who alone can achieve useful work which will contribute to the civilizing of the Bantu” (pp. 18–20).

Tempels departs from Lévy-Bruhl in identifying a greater measure of humanity in the Bantu—“Every day we are able to note that primitive people are by no means just children afflicted with a bizarre imagination. It is as Men that we have learned to know them in their homes” (1959, p. 16)—although he obfuscates the political struggles of the Belgian Congo with his abstract musings on Bantu “ontology” (Hountondji, 1996a). Of course, since the Bantu cannot be expected to articulate that “ontology” for themselves, Tempels takes it upon himself and fellow colonizers with good will to put Bantu thoughts in order: “It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is” (1959, p. 25). Wittingly or not, Tempels’ contribution to African philosophy—or, rather, ethnology (Hountondji, 1996a, p. 34)—makes him as effective an apologist for colonialism as Lévy-Bruhl ever was. Notwithstanding the enduring influence of *Bantu Philosophy*, Tempels seldom features in the annals of African psychology because he is too much of an intellectual liability—in short, a source of embarrassment—for African psychologists.
Hountondji was neither the first nor the last to observe how Tempels’ brand of African philosophy “diverts attention from the fundamental political problems of the Bantu peoples by fixing it on the level of fantasy, remote from the burning reality of colonial exploitation” (1996a, p. 37). Similar arguments have been made by Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and, more recently, South African critics who suggest that Africanization is, at best, “a triumphalist syndrome that afflicts newly liberated African countries” (M. Mbeki, 2000, p. 79) and, at worst, evidence of the state’s co-option by a global neoliberal orthodoxy (P. E. Louw, 2004; Terreblanche, 2002). Unable to deliver the economic prosperity that black South Africans were promised, Thabo Mbeki dispensed with the reconciliatory gestures of Nelson Mandela’s “public relations presidency” (P. E. Louw, 2004, p. 177), replacing them with an aggressive Africanist-Bikoist formulation that culminated in his call for an African Renaissance. In punting black solidarity, Mbeki was attempting to gloss over the economic disparities that prevailed within black South Africa. The African Renaissance provided the ideological substance for the insertion of Africa into the globalizing world economy—which Mbeki achieved by exporting free-market economics all over the continent in the shape of his New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). Africa’s rebirth, that is, was never about Africa in the first place—it was, instead, “the best thing that … ever happened to South Africa’s (still mostly white) corporate sector” (P. E. Louw, 2004, p. 186).

**African psychology and its audience**

When Europeans invented African studies, they had in mind a European audience, but when African scholars engage in, for example, ethnophilosophy, they “continue to address the Western public primarily” (Hountondji, 1996a, p. xviii). To be fair, African philosophers can hardly be expected to do otherwise when themes such as “Luba ontology, Dogon metaphysics, the conception of old age among the Fulbe, etc. … do not interest their fellow countrymen [being] aimed formerly at satisfying the Western craving for exoticism” (p. 54).

The same holds true for the African psychology canon, which is awash with instances of African psychologists—that is, proponents of African psychology—seeking the acknowledgment of a Eurocentric public “inasmuch as the assertion of one’s difference goes hand in hand with a passionate urge to have it recognized by the Other” (Hountondji, 1996a, p. 44). Because the field emerged as a response to the racism of mainstream psychology, it has tended to engage in apologetics as a matter of course, justifying itself endlessly to a foreign audience that, actually, “didn’t mind a bit” (p. 44). This “scandalous extraversion” (p. 45) has encouraged, in turn, a habit of talking “about Africa” rather than “among Africans” (p. 54).

Mkhize, for example, writes as follows:

Traditional African societies believe that there should be harmony and interdependence between elements in the cosmos. Disconnection between parts comprising the whole is undesirable and immoral or unethical. Thus, awareness of this framework is indispensable if one were wanting to understand a people’s conception of moral reasoning. (2004, pp. 36–37)
Another doyen of African psychology remarks how,

in Africa, holism is a lived experience. The belief that everything belongs together is directly translated into the actualities of daily living. There is infinite respect for the invisible thread that binds all things together. The African world is a coherent world where the different aspects of the divine interact, for the dynamics of African ontology is expressed in relationships. (Holdstock, 2000, p. 162)

The pattern is clear enough, namely, alienating third-person narratives about Africans. It is not that a first-person narrative would have sounded less patronizing—the form of the authorial voice hardly matters when one is writing about black, African, or Afrocentric psychology. The discursive effects are immediate, involving first, a reproduction of the colonialis gaze; second, the development of a psychology “in the third person, consisting of sentences like this: ‘They think so and so,’ ‘They say so and so,’ etc.” (Hountondji, 1996b, p. 83); and third, a predilection for “speak[ing] in the name of [one’s] whole people although they have never asked [one] to do so and are usually unaware that such a dialogue is taking place” (Hountondji, 1996a, p. 67). Not even universalist talk of “a unifying Pan-African psychology that has the capacity to heal the world” (Nobles & Cooper, 2013, p. 210) can mitigate the paternalism of African psychology as it is currently articulated.

But what is it that African psychologists are hoping to have affirmed, and by whom? One reads of an African psychology that is “worthy of closer examination” (Cooper, 2013, p. 221), of a call for the restoration of “the humanity of the African” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 98). Yet it would be disingenuous to claim that the humanity of Africans-in-the-third-person is in need of confirmation when, in fact, it is African psychologists who are seeking the endorsement of an indifferent, Eurocentric discipline. In a passage of rare candor, a South African psychologist admits how personal African psychology is for her, sensing “something deeply experiential about Nobles’ paper. During and after the presentation of his paper, I felt an overwhelming sense of confusion and self-doubt about my identity, a feeling that I have denied the most important aspect of my being” (Magwaza, 2013, p. 302). Nietzsche’s comment on the nature of philosophical knowledge is instructive—“No matter how far a man [sic] may extend himself with his knowledge, no matter how objectively he may come to view himself, in the end it can yield to him nothing but his own biography” (1879/1996, p. 182)—while Ellenberger’s (1970) assessment of the autobiographical character of the psychological sciences resonates just as powerfully. Above all, African psychology is for African psychologists rather than an African public.

Hountondji is adamant that a colonized intellectual addressing a colonizing audience cannot expect to be affirmed in the desired manner. All that happens, is “the victim mak[ing] itself the executioner’s secret accomplice, in order to commune with him in an artificial world of falsehood” (1996a, p. 45)—while whatever validation is forthcoming, is dispensed with that special brand of what Spivak calls “benevolent imperialism” (1990, pp. 59–60) and Malcolm X, “kindly condescension” (1965, p. 27). Scions of slain cultures, African psychologists have interpolated themselves into an unforgiving dialectic as they attempt “to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs”
Long (Fanon, 1967, p. 34)—as though the triumph of such a venture would succeed in rehumanizing them, too. The trouble is that in “asking to be considered” (1967, p. 218)—in seeking “a transformation of subjective certainty into objective truth” (p. 218)—African psychologists are requesting something that the keepers of a white, middle-class discipline are in no position to confer on them. Just as Hero waited in vain for the Colonel to emancipate him in Suzan-Lori Parks’ Father Comes Home From the Wars (2015), the redemption of African psychologists—saddled with a double consciousness that has forced on them an impossible choice between “the foreign values of the discipline and the familiar ones of their communities of origin” (Long, 2013, p. 28)—is not something that can be bestowed from on high. Like the unfortunate John Jones—who was forced to concede to his fretful sister that it makes people “unhappy when they study and learn lots of things” (Du Bois, 1994, p. 149)—African psychologists have descended into a Manichean world that neither recognizes them nor allows them a return to their former selves.

In any event, it must be stated that there can be no talk of “ontology” in a recolonized society such as South Africa, now the victim of an “Empire of Capital” (Saul, 2012). In a country where the median monthly income of black African working adults is eighty dollars—the same country in which a white university student claims to not “see anything wrong with urinating on the top of a black person” (Segar, 2014a, para. 1)—recondite renderings of the interconnectedness of “Being” tend to overlook the fact that “Bantu existence subsists on the level of nonbeing” (Fanon, 1967, p. 185). The ensuing disjuncture between academy and society is a stark reminder that African psychologists cannot be assumed to speak for working-class South Africans. If, as Fanon (1967) observed, being-black-in-the-world carries no existential significance for the latter, then there can be no question of an equivalence between intellectual and working-class pursuits.

But the fact that African psychologists—who “are often among the most Westernized themselves” (Mazrui, 2005, p. 77)—cannot reason with the prejudice of a persistently racist psychology should not doom them to reactive assertions of blackness and the unreason of Negritude (see Fanon, 1967). Contact with a white world is not cause for obsequious posturing in the utopian belief that “[t]he Other alone can give [one] worth” (Fanon, 1967, p. 154). And yet, despite the intellectual improbability of African psychology as cultural project, its advocates continue “setting their conceptual understanding on one side while drowning the language of science in a welter of desire” (Hountondji, 1996a, p. 48). Like Fanon (1967) who, initially, was psychologically incapable of relinquishing the Negritude he had just discovered, African psychologists are unwilling to disavow this chimerical paradise. The Negritude that underpins African psychology cannot serve as anything other than a preliminary for a raceless society: as the antithesis of white supremacy, Negritude is one stage in the synthesis of a society free from domination and must include, therefore, the ingredients of its own repudiation (Sartre, 1964).

It is worth recalling how Negritude scholars were accused, previously, of functioning as neocolonial agents who sought to mystify the class interests of the new African bourgeoisie. Others have insisted that, at the heart of Negritude—the self-conscious attempt to inscribe value onto something historically despised—lay a reaction formation against an unconscious admission that black was “the color of evil” (Fanon, 1967, p. 197). But it is also apparent that Negritude—pursued to its logical conclusion—enjoys a special affinity with Marxism (Sartre, 1964). Since the fact of blackness involves a crippling
neurosis, the black subject either expects that fact to be ignored or sets about inverting the associated “psychological minus-value” (Fanon, 1967, p. 58). The former, however, can never happen on account of being “[s]ealed into that crushing objecthood” (1967, p. 109), whereas the latter falls foul of the aforementioned reaction formation. The only escape is to transcend the terms of debate, for “consciousness has to lose itself in the night of the absolute, the only condition to attain to consciousness of self” (1967, pp. 133–134). In a world where white means capital and black means labor, the parochialism of Negritude is transcended by a universal corollary: proletariat (Sartre, 1964). For a country such as South Africa where revolutionaries reinvent themselves as captains of industry and there seems to be no such thing as a “human minimum” (Fanon, 1967, p. 184), here are the inklings of a manifesto that African psychologists can embrace with purpose.

**Over-inclusiveness and oversights in African psychology**

In his recent paper, Augustine Nwoye (2015) poses the question: “What is African Psychology the psychology of?” He answers in some detail that it

consists of the past and present peoples 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. (p. 108)

According to Nwoye, African psychology also includes the psychology of oral and written traditions; the psychology of behavior management in adults and children; the psychology of disillusionment in the post-independence era as well as “the traumas that result from the double-edged gaze of the western media in contemporary Africa” (p. 108); the psychology of African feminism; the psychology of African family disturbances; the psychology of child-making and childlessness; the psychology of African immigrants and other psychologies to boot.

Nwoye deems it “impossible to exhaust the list of themes that come under the legitimate object of the study of African Psychology” (2015, p. 109). Of course, this is not a problem peculiar to African psychology as much as it is a problem for psychology broadly conceived; the discipline has never managed to define its cognitive interest (Long, 2014). But the unfortunate consequence of Nwoye’s over-inclusiveness is to transform African psychology into a psychology of just about everything. Not only does that make of African psychology a psychology of nothing, the preponderance of jarring generalities locates it in the familiar tradition of universalizing psychologies that are so abstracted as to reveal almost nothing about the lives they purport to illuminate.

It is an irony of note that African psychology—because of its insistence on a unifying African Utamawazo—ends up as politically blinkered as most of the offerings Eurocentric psychology has produced until now. Large tracts of African psychological theory manifest the same failing found in much of metropolitan social theory—that is, an unwillingness to name the violence that inheres in all colonial situations (Bulhan, 1985; Connell,
2007). Instead, a set of circumstances arises, repeatedly, in which African theorists com-
mune with their metropolitan counterparts in staggering universals, converting African
civilizations into spectacles while talking “over the heads of [their] own people”
(Hountondji, 1996a, p. 52). Aside from the occasional joys that attend “pious ruminations
on the past” (p. 171), the privileging of essence over experience serves only to white-
wash what is an ongoing social catastrophe. Fanon’s chastisement is as relevant today as
it was more than 60 years ago: “The discovery of the existence of a Negro civilization in
the fifteenth century confers no patent of humanity on me. Like it or not, the past can in
no way guide me in the present moment” (1967, p. 225).

Despite the studied avoidance of much social theory, the burgeoning work on decolo-
nization reminds us that the story of colonialism is essentially a story of collective loss
(Connell, 2007; see also Hook, 2012). A certain kind of South African is fond of citing
the so-called “miracle” of a bloodless revolution—as if, between 1652 and 1994, no
blood was let. And yet, nothing could be further from the truth: over the course of nearly
three-and-a-half centuries, not only did black South Africans lose their lives in the thou-
sands, they met their deaths in an assortment of ways, including depersonalization, deso-
cialization, and deracination (Bulhan, 1985). The myth of a bloodless revolution—or,
more precisely, “empire’s nasty little secret” (Crais, 2011, p. 151)—can only be sus-
tained, surely, in the minds of those for whom black lives—and deaths—do not count.

Some will rail against this perceived imposition of a “sociological guilt trip” (Connell,
2007, p. 215)—never mind the absurdity of the hypothetical “white burden” (Fanon,
1967, p. 228). At any rate, the defensiveness of metropolitan social-psychological theory
that discourses happily on the constitution and reproduction of “social structures” yet
cannot bring itself to speak of the dispossession, rupture, and brutality that marks the
world in which we live, is even more astounding (Connell, 2007). The master–slave
dialectic, for one, is a telling case in point, the reading of which varies significantly
across the works of Hegel, Mannoni, and Fanon. In particular, Hegel and Mannoni were
unable to articulate the experiences of those at the sharp end of the bayonet because “the
predatory history of Europe permeated their personal experience and background”
(Bulhan, 1985, p. 120). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu, despite being forced to leave Algeria
under threat of violence, could find no place for the voices of the colonized in his work,
The Logic of Practice (Connell, 2007). This does not mean, of course, that only the
wretched may speak for the wretched; that anyone on whose horizon of experience
oppression does not feature, must remain silent; that non-Africans have no business writ-
ing about African psychology. But it does mean that a reflexive act of empathy is required.

**Violence**

In the 2009 *Lancet* series on health in South Africa, violence emerges as something of a
commonplace in post-apartheid society, where the rate of violent deaths is five times the
worldwide average (see Coovadia, Jewkes, Barron, Sanders, & McIntyre, 2009; Seedat,
van Niekerk, Jewkes, Suffla, & Ratele, 2009). Homicides of women are six times the
global average, with a woman being murdered by her intimate partner every six hours.
While most homicide victims are black, the highest rates occur among coloured men and
women. Sexual violence, too, is a feature of life in South Africa, with an estimated
half-a-million rapes perpetrated against women and girls each year. Thirty-nine percent of girls are victims of sexual assault before they turn 18 and, in one population-based study, 27% of men admitted to having committed rape. Additional figures on death by driving, burning, drowning, falling, stabbing, shooting, and suicide are equally concerning.

Seedat and colleagues (2009)—the authors of one of the Lancet papers—proceed to explicate the “social dynamics of violence” (p. 1014), citing poverty, rising inequality, hegemonic masculinities, substance abuse, childhood trauma, the proliferation of firearms, and inadequate law enforcement as important contributory factors. Income inequality and male youth unemployment are presented as the strongest correlates of homicide and major assaults, and, since one-third of South Africans are unemployed—an alternative source states that 6 in 10 working-age South Africans “have no job of any kind” (Alexander, 2012, p. 151)—feelings of shame, humiliation, anger, frustration, and loss of self-respect are thought to preponderate. The implication is clear: among other things, violence in South Africa is fueled by the abject misery of an idle population.

Nevertheless, Seedat and colleagues claim in the opening sentence of their paper that South Africa is “a country not [emphasis added] at war” (2009, p. 1011). Indeed, South Africa is not a country at war—though it is at war with itself, its exceptional violence the hallmark of all colonized societies (Fanon, 1963). The refrain that South Africans are only dealing with the legacy of apartheid, while valid in one sense, serves to obfuscate the real-time violence of the present. South Africa’s Gini coefficient—a measure of income inequality—grew from 0.56 in 1995 to 0.65 in 2011 (World Bank, 2014), with one survey of 63 countries ranking South Africa as having both the worst income inequality and the highest homicide rate (Wood, 2006). And yet, in spite of the fact that income inequality is a strong predictor of non-state violence (Wood, 2006), economic policy in South Africa remains geared towards growth—not redistribution—as the ruling African National Congress (ANC) sticks to the so-called “Washington Consensus” of diplomats, the corporate sector, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank (P. E. Louw, 2004).

To be exact, it was in 1993 after participating in a series of forums, conferences, briefings, seminars, and think tanks that the ANC—in concert with a beleaguered National Party (NP) and corporate “super-salesmen”—signed a secret protocol endorsing “trickle-down” economics (Terreblanche, 2002). The party did unveil an interventionist Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as its 1994 election manifesto—but two years after winning the elections, the Ministry of Finance announced a new macroeconomic strategy called Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR), which, “decorated with all the trimmings of globalisation, … represent[ed] an almost desperate attempt to attract [foreign direct investment]” (Terreblanche, 2002, p. 114). Events at Marikana, when police shot dozens of protesting miners in the back, illustrated not only the state’s ironfisted defense of transnational capital (Satgar, 2012) but also Steve Biko’s admonition—that poor, black South Africans are ultimately on their own.

A psychology of violence

When psychologists in South Africa write about violence, they restrict themselves, usually, to discussions of its interpersonal and institutional manifestations. The “legacy of apartheid” is invoked almost as a matter of course, a trope that humanizes the violence
of perpetrators who typically—lest one forget—are poor and marginalized. On the other hand, the agents of structural violence are not as readily detected (see Galtung, 1969; also Farmer, 1996), partly because the hegemonic configurations of the present are diagnosed only with difficulty, and partly because mainstream understandings of violence tend to emphasize intent over consequence (Bulhan, 1985). The result is an analysis of violence concerned chiefly with the identification of aberrant individuals—killers, rapists, robbers, child abusers—rather than faceless, nameless, macro-level executioners.

When it comes to the question of violence in a colonized society, however, the prime motivator is a Manichean psychology that patrols the boundary between the human and subhuman realms (Bulhan, 1985). Cape Town, South Africa, is a fitting example of a divided city. Nestled at the foot of the Table Mountain range are the verdant Southern Suburbs, the home of well-tended lawns, tranquil oak-lined streets, morning teas, chic retail stores, sought-after schools, and some of the most prized real estate in the country. For the most part, it is the home of the white and well-to-do. But as one leaves behind the idyllic scenery, the sand begins to change color. The wind picks up, the greenery fades. Ten minutes later, you are in the Cape Flats, one-time hotbed of anti-apartheid activism, now the undisputed badlands of the Western Cape. Ramshackle houses line the streets, children beg at traffic lights, drug deals go down at the corner store, while a woman can be heard, screaming, two doors down. This is the home of the black and broke. At least one question suggests itself immediately: What will happen when the skollie (gangster) menace comes knocking on the doors of decent suburbanites?

On October 2, 2014, Cynthia Joni was on her way to work in the quaint suburb of Kenilworth. A middle-aged, single mother of two and grandmother of three, Cynthia lives far away in the impoverished township of Khayelitsha. On this particular morning, she arrives in Kenilworth and starts walking the rest of the way to her employer’s home. Suddenly, a car pulls up; the driver gets out and makes his way towards her. Tim Osrin, a swimming school instructor and a dedicated member of the local security committee, proceeds to assault Cynthia. Explaining himself afterwards, Tim says he thought Cynthia was “a prostitute” (Segar, 2014b, para. 33).

A few weeks later, 22-year-old Malawian national, Muhammed Makungwa, is running from Claremont to Rondebosch because he is late for work. A gardener by trade, Muhammed lives in distant Philippi, one of the larger townships on the Cape Flats. On this Sunday morning, a man driving a white BMW X5 tries to run him over. Jan van Tonder, a dentist employed by the South African National Defence Force, exits his SUV and starts beating Muhammed with a sjambok—a whip made from hippopotamus (or rhinoceros) hide that was used by nineteenth-century Voortrekkers for cattle driving. Jan’s explanation is that he thought Muhammed had tried to break into his car and that, when the suspected robber’s lunchbox fell to the ground, he realized his mistake (Petersen, 2014). Jan then drives Muhammed to work (by SUV).

In formal parlance, such incidents—and there are several that have scandalized Capetonians in recent months—reveal the complex intersections of race, class, and gender in post-apartheid South Africa. But, leaving aside the circumlocutions, these are plainly cases in which the wretch, in the seeming absence of legitimate employment, is ejected from the world of humans in a throwback to the days when black South Africans were jailed upon failing to produce their “passes” (Lemanski, 2004). Cries of “racial
profiling” do not begin to convey the full horror of these events. “The native,” Fanon explains, “is a being hemmed in … The first thing the native learns is to stay in his place, and not to go beyond certain limits” (1963, p. 52). The wretch responds to his oppression by avoiding confrontation, tolerating insults, feigning contentment, and smiling when necessary, all the while nursing a smoldering rage. At this stage, the repressed desire for violent retaliation “finds neither sublimated canalization nor conscious social praxis” (Bulhan, 1985, p. 143). Instead,

> the colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own [emphasis added] people. This is the period when the niggers [sic] beat each other [emphasis added] up, and the police and magistrates do not know which way to turn when faced with the astonishing waves of crime. (Fanon, 1963, p. 52)

The anticipated outcomes—according to Fanonian theory—are higher rates of homicide, mental illness, alcoholism, somatization, and hypertension (Bulhan, 1985).

Statistics confirm these predictions in telling respects. According to data released by the Mexican non-governmental organization, The Citizens’ Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice, Cape Town is one of the most violent cities in the world in terms of murder rate per capita: with a 2014 homicide rate of 60 per 100,000 people, the Mother City ranks 14th in the world and, by some distance, first in Africa. Results from the South African Stress and Health (SASH) study reveal that the lifetime prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorders in the Western Cape is significantly higher than in the rest of the country (Herman et al., 2009). In a study conducted in a primary health care setting in Khayelitsha, 94% of participants reported experiencing at least one traumatic event, with major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and somatization disorder emerging as the most common diagnoses (Carey, Stein, Zungu-Dirwayi, & Seedat, 2003). Current thinking about what is now termed “somatic symptom disorder” endorses its association with low educational attainment and low socioeconomic status (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). And finally, whereas national data from the late 1990s suggest that whites and Asians have higher rates of hypertension, there is also evidence that the rising urbanization of black Africans—thousands of whom relocate each year from the impoverished Eastern Cape to the townships of the highly urbanized Western Cape (Statistics South Africa, 2012)—is a predisposing factor for the development of the illness (Steyn, Gaziano, Bradshaw, Laubscher, & Fourie, 2001). While the foregoing analysis is not intended as definitive—the determination of causality is only one of the issues that warrant scrutiny—it does suggest that there is more to the violence of intent than meets the eye.

What of an analysis of violence that is focused on consequence? The conversation turns then to the question of structural violence where identities and intentions are somewhat indistinct and, in comparison with the devastating losses of colonized populations, relatively unimportant. Oppression announces itself by violating the space, time, energy, and mobility of its victim, with all of the associated psychological privations (Pierce, 1995). Like the slave that he is, the wretch has no space of his own; he lacks the time and energy to pursue his own interests; and he is deprived of the freedom and the means to go where he pleases.
Consider, for illustrative purposes, the lived reality of domestic workers and gardeners such as Cynthia and Muhammed. Cape Town’s “architecture of fear” has condemned the wretch and generations before him to life on the urban periphery—frequently on land owned by private landlords or the state. Reliant on public transport, the wretch—this time legitimately employed—rises each morning at the crack of dawn to spend an hour or two sitting or standing in buses, trains, and taxis. The ride to work—the wretch has prepared himself—comes at the cost of breakfast. Eventually, he reaches the urban center, vigilant on account of the paranoid, warlike locals. Arriving at the fortress on foot, the wretch expends his energy attending to the domestic affairs of his master—all bone china and rose bushes—to the neglect of his own. By day’s end, pittance in hand, he makes his way home, on guard in case of attack, hopeful of a seat on a perpetually crowded bus. Hours later, he is back in the township. The rubbish-strewn alleyways are poorly lit, but the walk home—to a corrugated iron shack—is at least a short one. Too exhausted to engage with the six other people in the house with one bedroom, the wretch rushes through the dregs of a meal, relieves himself in a bucket, distributes what money he has left and collapses into bed, a blanket on a dirt floor. The supreme consolation is now at hand, for “the native never stops achieving his freedom from nine in the evening until six in the morning” (Fanon, 1963, p. 52). Sello Duiker’s (2013) Azure—a 13-year-old boy living on the streets of Cape Town—would give anything for a day like that.

African psychology as the psychology of structural violence

Who is to blame and what is to be done? Anyone professing to know anything steps forward with a different answer: too much government, too little government, corporate greed, the wretch himself. At least some truths are more faithful in their constancy: Mandela is gone, hunger and desperation persist, the first remain first, and the last are still last. These are responsible questions for an African psychology—compared with the pursuit of “cultural questions at the very moment their erstwhile subjects [are], quite literally, vanishing from the face of the earth” (Crais, 2011, pp. 4–5).

Returning to Nwoye’s (2015) all-important question—“What is African Psychology the psychology of?”—it must involve a psychological yet unflinchingly visceral exploration of the unremitting enslavement of one by another. If it is to be more than a politically conservative technology of social management (Jansz & Van Drunen, 2004), African psychology must explore the workings of structural violence, not in the general context of a colonized society, but specifically in the African macro, meso, and micro worlds. In the South African instance, African psychology must articulate the lived realities of ordinary South Africans, realities that are embedded in a landscape soaked in ableism, classism, gender-based violence, and racial humiliation.

Practicing psychologists have to keep in mind that “[a] situation of oppression not only imposes rigid boundaries between people, it also corrupts those who profess to heal” (Bulhan, 1985, p. 207). For those requiring proof, they need look no further than Malcolm X’s (1965) account of his mother’s descent into madness and psychiatric non-personhood. When psychologists come to understand the hypocrisy of “a society that will crush people, and then penalize them for not being able to stand up under the weight” (X, 1965, p. 22), only then can they appreciate the importance of politicizing
madness, which, since the master is at least as damaged as the slave, cannot be considered the sole birthright of the one “who demands, who appeals, who begs” for mercy (Fanon, 1967, p. 142).

As for cultural presentations, there is no need to reinvent an already sensitized profession; these should be managed in accordance with accepted cultural competence models (e.g., Atkinson, Thompson, & Grant, 1993; Pedersen, 2002). At the same time, however, mindless appeals to “culture” when patients confound therapeutic processes are to be avoided; psychologists must resist the temptation to invoke “culture” as a fallback when faced with the typically confusing symptomatology of oppressed working-class patients. Psychotherapy has its place, even in a colonial order that undermines the psychological integrity of its subjects. Whether working with the oppressor or the oppressed, psychotherapists have an ethical duty to alleviate the mental suffering of patients, but also to make conscious its unconscious political determinants, while leaving the matter of social and political engagement to the discretion of patients themselves (Fanon, 1967).

African psychology must also examine what is, for a colonized people, the most concrete of concerns (Fanon, 1963): the question of landlessness. To own land is to own oneself, to live with dignity, to establish bonds of kinship and community, to develop a sense of cultural and historical continuity, to live in the world with less anxiety, and to act upon it with renewed intensity. To enjoy a physical space of one’s own allows for the cultivation of a psychological one in which questions of meaning—rather than survival—can be pursued. The restoration of stolen land—because it alleviates a crippling financial burden—makes possible the partial reversal of space, time, energy, and mobility cruelly denied, whereas the continued dispossession of millions is tantamount to the withholding of these life-affirming possibilities.

Crucially, African psychology must extend its analyses beyond the experience of wretchedness. It will not suffice, however, to merely name the Tim Osrins and Jan van Tonders of South Africa for they, too, must be analyzed. If the color of wealth is white, why is it that the lifetime prevalence of intermittent explosive disorder is higher among white South Africans than their fellow citizens (Stein et al., 2008)? If it is true that there is no essential African except by dint of experience—that the beaten “black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon, 1967, p. 14)—should the business of African psychology not include, also, the study of white phantasy? What, indeed, would a psychodynamics of white privilege look like in post-apartheid South Africa (see Straker, 2013; also Hook, 2011)? Doubtless, the fact that wealthy white South Africans are retreating from public spaces into illegally “fortified enclaves” (Lemanski, 2004, p. 108)—their gated communities with high walls, electrified fences, closed-circuit television, and private security guards—makes their study a challenge of the first order. Nonetheless, middle-class investigations of the poor must be matched by corresponding examinations of the rich; it is only by “studying up” (Connell, 2007, p. 216) as well as “down” that the mystified, mystifying agency of colonizers can be exposed. Only then can the oppressed be conscientized about the actual source of its discontent, only then can the project of decolonization proceed meaningfully, only then can one begin to speak of the first being last and the last, first. And that is an African psychology worth believing in.
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