A postcolonial theory of African Psychology: A reply to Kopano Ratele

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Abstract
This article explores Kopano Ratele’s paper entitled “Four (African) Psychologies” published in Theory & Psychology, and written largely as a response to my recent article entitled “What is African Psychology the Psychology of?” A postcolonial theory of African Psychology is offered to serve as a background for this exploration. The paper concludes by suggesting that Ratele’s article, although a thoughtful contribution to the debate provoked by my article, is opposed to the current awareness by many African psychologists of the need to build African Psychology as a specialized postcolonial study within the discipline of Psychology in African universities. In opposition to this perspective, Ratele proposes implication that African Psychology should not aspire to the status of centralized academic discipline but should operate from “segregated parishes,” particularly as an African adaptation of Western Psychology. This article suggests why Ratele’s vision is against the spirit of the times and therefore unacceptable.

Keywords
African Psychology, Eurocentrism, Psychology in Africa, postcolonial, postcolonial theory

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to comment on the important article by Professor Kopano Ratele (2017), “Four (African) Psychologies,” published in Theory & Psychology, and written largely as a response to my recent article (Nwoye, 2015) entitled “What is African Psychology the Psychology of?” In offering this comment I wish to begin by first of all commending Professor Ratele for seeing the need to contribute to this debate and for the brilliant attempt he has made in doing so. I offer a postcolonial theory of African Psychology as a background to my overall critical comment on Ratele’s
articulating such a postcolonial theory of African Psychology is deemed essential in a discussion such as this. It will help to show that African Psychology, in my perspective and in the view of many scholars of African Psychology in continental Africa, should be understood as a postcolonial fledgling academic discipline that emerged as a product of our attempt to respond adequately to the deplorable colonialist origin of our present condition. Highlighting such a theory is considered useful in helping to situate my comments on the adequacy or not, of the vision that supports the notion of the “four (African) psychologies” proposed and ably clarified by Ratele (2017).

Postcolonial theory of African Psychology

In this article I use the expression postcolonial theory (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989) of African Psychology to refer to the discursive attempt by scholars of African Psychology to call into question, among other things, the assumption that Western Psychology imported to Africa is a universal Psychology that should centre the academic study of Psychology in Africa. Specifically, I use the expression to highlight the processes through which African scholars in Psychology emerging from the formerly colonized African societies endeavour to have a voice (Fanon, 1967; Nandy, 2010) in the refashioning of a relevant Psychology curriculum for use in Africa. Hence, the ultimate vision of postcolonial theory of African Psychology is to provide a basis for our current effort to engineer a rejection of any tendency toward a wholesale adoption of a mainstream Western approach to Psychology as African Psychology; and, secondly, to promote a combating of the residual negative effects of colonialism and neo-colonialism on African tradition and culture and human subjectivity (Bhabha, 2004; Fanon, 1967; Kirschner, 2015; Nandy, 2010).

In my (Nwoye, 2015) article that generated Ratele’s (2017) contribution, I indicated that the emergence of the need for the establishment of the (postcolonial) discipline of African Psychology, designed to partner with the progressive arm of Western Psychology, (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman (2015), is a product of our critical response to the noted inadequacies and evidence-based irrelevance of much of the mechanistic and one-person Psychology (Teo, 2009) propagated in mainstream perspectives to Psychology currently dominating space in Psychology programmes in African universities. Highlighted below is a brief account of the four action-processes that had marked the evolution of such a postcolonial academic discipline in some forward-looking African universities. These processes include: Immersion, Protest, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction.

Immersion

Here the point to be developed is the view that for several years following Africa’s political independence from her erstwhile colonial masters, the study of Psychology in universities across various African countries, including South Africa, had involved the immersion of Psychology students into the mainstream Eurocentric Psychology imported to Africa. In that way, the term “Psychology in Africa” came to be taken as a synonym for the term Western Psychology. This was because then, and even up until today, in some African countries going through a university Psychology degree programme in an African university was equivalent to going through a Psychology degree programme in any university in
Europe or North America, since there was no significant difference in the course content and perspective offered in both contexts; in each case the operative paradigm was Eurocentrism. Through such immersion, Psychology students in Africa became thoroughly acquainted with Western-derived psychologies and epistemologies, at the expense of their systematic exposure to other psychologies from Africa and other cultures.

Of course, during the early years of modern university education in Africa, this anomaly was not peculiar to African Psychology students. The same was the fate of their colleagues in sister disciplines such as philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics. In each of these disciplines the Western canons of the curriculum were assumed to be carriers of universal civilization, exportable to members of the colonized societies (Danziger, 2006; Nwoye, 2015). Corroborating the above assessment, Dr. Kofi Busia commenting on the negative impact of this experience powerfully explains:

Over the years, I felt increasingly that the education I received taught me more and more about Europe and less and less about my own society. At the end of my secondary school… I went home… and on that visit, I became painfully aware of my isolation. As I went through college and university I understood our community far less than the boys of my own age who had never been to school (as cited in Rodney, 1981, p. 246)

However, it might be of interest to note that the state of affairs within these other disciplines has since changed for the better. This is because within them, there has emerged postcolonial disciplines of African philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics. In contrast, with the discipline of Psychology the situation has stagnated. It has, to say the least, remained the same. The hegemonic dominance of the received Psychology curricula emanating from the West has continued to ascend in many African universities.

Protest

In response, galvanized by the incessant clamour by university students for the Africanization and decolonization of the curriculum in higher education in Africa, we (scholars in African Psychology) quickly seized the initiative to register some decisive protests against the alienating forces of the Eurocentric hegemonic presence in our university Psychology programmes. In this regard, our key argument has simply been that the mainstream Psychology curriculum dominant in university Psychology programmes in Africa is no longer acceptable, as it had tended to make Africa an appendage of Europe and North America. To correct the anomaly, the vision that emerged was the need to place Africa at the centre of whatever Psychology African students study. The result is the current effort by some scholars in African Psychology to engage in some revolutionary appraisal of our present Psychology curriculum with a view to introducing a balance of traditions (African and Western) within it.

Deconstruction

In pursuit of this effort, African Psychology as envisioned by many scholars in Africa, however, was conceived as more than a protest Psychology. It also came to be viewed as
a critical Psychology directed at challenging not only the negative images about Africa and its peoples propagated in Western Psychology (Nwoye, 2015) but also a self-critical interrogation of troublesome aspects of some African indigenous cultural practices. In the main, this particular angle in our vision impelled the need to deconstruct much of mainstream Psychology dominating our Psychology curriculum. In this context, the relevant image of the task of deconstruction that had influenced our practice was aptly captured by Barbara Johnson’s (1981) notion of the term, according to which, “deconstruction” is not meant to be understood as a synonym of “destruction.” Accordingly, for Johnson, as for many scholars of African Psychology, if anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading (as in our own case, of the mainstream Western Psychology curriculum we have inherited), it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination and universal relevance of that curriculum in the African context. Operating from this perspective, the 1980s and 1990s emerged as that period in which we came to see “the need for selective accommodation of ‘the best that is thought and said’ in both African and Western psychological traditions” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 103). As explained in my article, this conclusion “came as a product of that realization that not all aspects of Eurocentric worldview, Psychology, and epistemology are relevant for meeting the challenges of our current African world” (Nwoye, 2015, p. 103).

**Reconstruction**

Inspired by the above conviction, our orienting assumption came to be that for Africa to forge ahead in her attempt to reclaim and promote her cultural identity, a new perspective is needed. And, in my view, that perspective is hybridity (Bhabha, 2004), which refers to achievement of a harmonious co-existence of the best of the two psychological traditions (African and Western) we have inherited, in which neither should oppress the other. This understanding implies that the anticipated impact of the deconstructive effort in our search for a postcolonial discipline of African Psychology was not meant to result in a total rejection of all of Western Psychology (both traditional and progressive). But it generated a recognition in many African psychologists, of the importance of adopting the both–and philosophy of appropriation in our approach to our dual (African and Western) heritage in the study of Psychology in Africa (Nwoye, 2015).

Consequently, with the proposed flattening of the colonial hierarchy in our Psychology curriculum, which had favoured the centring of the Eurocentric content and perspective, we saw the need to reconstruct and rewrite the said curriculum in such a way that the long dismissive disregard and protracted absence of the African perspective in that curriculum is firmly corrected. This measure is in accord with the current vision of the CHE (Council on Higher Education, 2016), which expects any attempt at reviewing existing professional Psychology degree programmes in South African universities to ensure that curriculum reflects the living or existential realities of black African students. This means that at this stage in our postcolonial response to the two psychological traditions (African and Western) we have inherited, we aim to see ourselves as people with a voice to reorder the curriculum in the study of Psychology in Africa. And we engage in this in such a way that we would be able to serve “as makers of culture and formulators of theories and values of psychological civilization” (Obiechina, 1992, p. 19), to fit the new
people of Africa (Nwoye, 2015). Following this understanding, we (scholars in African Psychology) struggle to place ourselves in an agentic position to reassess and appropriate relevant epistemologies and methodologies, wherever they are found (whether foreign or local) for effective study of the discipline of African Psychology (understood) as a human science.

**Response to Ratele**

I took the above background with me as I began my reading and assessment of Professor Ratele’s (2017) very thoughtful and well-formulated contribution. And as I understand it, Ratele’s proposal was basically targeted at understanding African Psychology as a decen-

tred field of study engaged in from “heterogeneous terrains.” This means that for Ratele, the best way to view African Psychology/ies is to assume that

they are ways Psychology teachers, researchers, clinicians, and counsellors orient themselves to Africa and African objects or subjects of knowledge; identify with Africa and Psychology; allocate meaning to Africa, or its absence, in Psychology; conceive of Psychology’s role in Africa, including the discipline’s place in relation to other disciplines that study Africa and Africans; apprehend their own identities as experts; and interpret the (received) discipline of Psychology’s effect on their research, teaching and practice. (2017, p. 318)

Informed by the above understanding, he outlined “four (African) psychologies” that appear to capture the element of heterogeneity implied in the above perspective. In that way, according to Ratele (2017), African Psychology should more appropriately be seen to refer to a multi-dimensional conceptualization encompassing the following: *African Psychology as Psychology in Africa* (which, in his view, is equivalent to universal Psychology); *Cultural African Psychology*; *Critical African Psychology*; and *Psychological African Studies*. This perspective implies that for Ratele, African Psychology should not aspire to the status of a full-fledged field of postcolonial studies located within the university discipline of Psychology but rather as an orientation or approach to the study of Psychology in the African context engaged in from “heterogeneous terrains.” Another core perspective within Ratele’s concept of “four (African) psychologies” that I also found problematic is his idea that

three of the four orientations … have to go outside of received [read Western] Psychology to find and situate themselves in Africa and Psychology, those who espouse Africa(n)-centred Psychology are, per definition, informed by other disciplines. (2017, p. 318)

He identified these other disciplines to “include African philosophy, religion, literature, history, and politics” (p. 319). Of course, one view of Ratele’s which I agree with is the notion that “Other sources of knowledge [for the study of African Psychology] are lived experiences and realities of existing in Africa” (p. 319).

However, my main worry with Ratele’s proposal is that it tends to ignore or disregard the ability of scholars of African Psychology to develop a postcolonial academic field of African Psychology within the university discipline of Psychology. Yet, colleagues in sister disciplines of philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics mentioned in his
article have accomplished a similar task. In this way he appears to assume the competence of African scholars in the “received” disciplines of philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics, to formulate and forge their various sub-disciplines from the “lived experiences and realities of existing in Africa” (2017, p. 319) but fails to concede the same capacity to African scholars in the received discipline of Psychology. This apparent inconsistency, to say the least, appears odd and perplexing. Those who are familiar with the history of the present status of those postcolonial disciplines of African philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics, are quite aware that these disciplines did not exist until quite recently. They were built in the manner in which I was proposing African Psychology in continental Africa should be built, from the bottom up.

For example, to confirm the recent origin of African literature, the following indication by Ernest Emenyonu, in the Preface to his edited book: Goatskin Bags and Wisdom: New Critical Perspectives on African Literature (2000), bears extended observation. According to Emenyonu,

Very little was known about African literature as a literary discipline prior to the publication of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart in 1958. Although Things Fall Apart was later to become a classic, not only in Africa but throughout the English-speaking world, initial reactions towards it from the Western world were in some places sceptical, in others bluntly negative. Some reviewers derided Achebe for attacking colonialism while wearing European clothes and enjoying other forms of Western civilization. Nevertheless, Things Fall Apart was an open threat to centuries of European fantasies and distortions of African reality symbolized by such “African classics” as Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Joyce Cary’s Mister Johnson. (p. ix)

Emenyonu further powerfully explains:

With the reluctant admission of African literature into the academy, the initiative of defining its essence and its canons and assessing the integrity of African writers was quickly seized by non-Africans. They began by questioning the independent existence of African literature as a separate and autonomous body of literature rather than an appendage to British or French literature since it was mostly written in English and French. They raised issues of identity, paternity, and direction. For over two decades after the publication of Things Fall Apart, African writing was routinely pounded and trashed by many Western critics as the illegitimate intruder on the ordered domain of literary art. … The result was that when a few African writers were invited to address audiences in some Western universities, they were denied platforms in literature departments and had to be satisfied with “half-brother” accommodations in departments of anthropology, sociology, history, and the like. (p. ix)

Here, I assume, the reader may ask, what is the point of these quotes? It is to show that despite these initial setbacks the makers of the now-established discipline of African literature went about their business undeterred. And the result is the emergence of a field that has since matured to the extent of producing many African winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature (Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, in 1986; Naguib Mahfouz of Egypt, in 1988; Nadine Gordimer of South Africa, in 1991; John M. Coetzee of South Africa, in 2003; and Doris Lessing of Zimbabwe, in 2007).
Additionally, apart from the above instructive example of the dramatic triumph of African literature, the same challenge of initial sceptical reception reflected in Ratele’s dismissal of the need for a centralized discipline of African Psychology marked the story of African philosophy at the early part of its evolution as a postcolonial academic discipline in African universities. An illustrative instance is the famous book by Paulin J. Hountondji entitled *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (1976/1983) in which he was purported to have argued against the legitimacy of the then-emerging field of African philosophy. In the book, the author was understood as arguing that since philosophy as known in the West “is a literature in the sense of its discursive elements, and a history as opposed to a system” (Roberts, 1998, p. 655), there could be no African philosophy unless lodged only in the explicit discourse of writing. And since what most people have been calling African philosophy is found in oral rather than in written form, African philosophy cannot be said to exist. Of course, although Hountondji had to intervene in the second edition of his book in 1996 to answer to his critics’ misunderstanding of his position, in the mid-1970s when the book first appeared, it was received as a discouragement to any attempt to found African philosophy as a postcolonial academic discipline. Nevertheless, the field of African philosophy has since stabilized, and is presently taught in universities both within and outside of Africa.

These indications are mentioned to show that Ratele’s (2017) perspective on African Psychology can indeed be seen as reflective of the kind of negative history that had faced the aforementioned disciplines in the past when those disciplines were struggling, as African Psychology is doing now, to entrench themselves within the respective received disciplines in which they were associated.

Another important criticism that one can raise against Ratele’s proposal over and above those already mentioned is with regard to his view of taking Western Psychology that is taught in South African universities as constituting one category of his four (African) psychologies. Such a move is quite perplexing when considered against the pressure for Africanization of the curriculum raging among students and staff of our universities up to today. Another problem is his proposal to designate only one of his “four (African) psychologies” as Cultural African Psychology, and only one of them again as Critical African Psychology. In my view, these moves are mistaken. For there is no Psychology (either Western or African) that is free of a cultural background (Bhatia, & Stam, 2005; Danziger, 2006; Heine & Norenzayan, 2006; Holdstock, 1999; Mkhiize, 2004; Teo, 2009), and there is no postcolonial Psychology (whether centred or decen-tered), that is free of a critical engagement (Danziger, 2006; Gergen, Gulerce, Lock, & Misra, 1996; Norenzayan, & Heine, 2005).

**Conclusion**

Given the above, I wish to conclude by saying that Ratele’s “Four (African) Psychologies” (2017) is a very thoughtful proposal from one of the doyens in South African Psychology. Yet his proposal remains largely in support of the continuation of the status quo, which members of the Forum of African Psychology (FAP), itself a registered Division within the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), are struggling to transcend. This is evidenced in the theme of the 2014 International Conference of the *Forum of African*
Psychology held at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. The theme of that Conference was: From Psychology in Africa to African Psychology; a theme that suggests that in the perspective of the generality of members of FAP our goal as postcolonial scholars in Psychology must remain the unshakable aspiration to dismantle the continued hegemony of Western Psychology in our context. Consistent with this view, it is my conviction that given the recent massive ruptures in Western social and intellectual thought, with the rise of postmodernist discourse and reflexive critiques in the social sciences (Roberts, 1998), which has given birth to models of Western Psychology other than the traditional positivist approach to the study of Psychology in which we have heavily invested, it is expected that these sweeping changes will continue to inspire us to remain defiant in our need to reassert our positon that mainstream (Euro-American) Psychology based largely on the study of Euro-American undergraduates (Arnett, 2008) is a culturally situated enterprise and therefore an indigenous Psychology of the West masquerading as universal Psychology (Danziger, 2006; King, 2013; Teo, 2009). Consequently, even when studied under the theme of Psychology in Africa it cannot automatically be recognized as African Psychology as proposed by Ratele (2017). Accordingly, African Psychology must continue its struggle, drawing inspiration from sister academic disciplines like African philosophy, literature, religion, history, and politics, to attain the status of a substantive academic field within the discipline of Psychology.

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