

THE PSYCHOLOGIST IN BLACKER AFRICA: EXPLORER, DOCTOR, OR MISSIONARY

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IT SHOULD NOT be necessary to remind an academic audience that the root of the word 'psychology' is the Greek word 'psyche', which can mean either the soul, or the mind. Yet in this fact lies concealed a point which is too often forgotten these days (especially by psychologists themselves); namely, that although psychologists see themselves as technicians of the mind, able to carry out a number of processes which are based on scientific and empirical findings about human behaviour and thought, their role is in many ways similar to that of the minister or priest. Often, what the psychologist has to say about what is good or right (in other words, what is 'mentally healthy'), he does not say to people directly but by proxy through medical practitioners who, by sheer weight of numbers, play a more important part in the day-to-day interaction with people. Nevertheless, the advice of the physician is often based on what psychologists have said (or what they are thought to have said).

On a wider front, another role which the psychologist has is that of explorer. In this context, the exploration is of human behaviour through scientific investigation or research. For the psychologist in Africa it has become exploration of a new culture and involves sharing yet another role, that of the anthropologist. Now, any anthropological survey of behaviour involves a contact of cultures, an exchange of ways of thinking about things, a communication process involving transactions between the two cultures involved, that of the anthropologist and that of the subject. The impact of the psychologist's way of thinking about behaviour, personality and intellect is clearly evident in our everyday language in the Western world. One can see in the literature of each generation the way in which people think about human behaviour, and we have seen in the last hundred years, which is the life span of psychology as a recognized discipline, a change from a moral way of interpreting human behaviour to one which could be said to be based on psychological considerations. The terminology and the models of mind which the psychologist has produced have permeated our way of thinking. It is to be expected, then, that the same process will occur across cultural boundaries

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when the psychologist moves into his role of anthropological explorer in different cultures such as those of Africa. In this regard, I want to raise two questions. First, to what extent and in what way will this process occur in Africa? Secondly, is it proper that the psychologist should be making an impact of this kind on African culture?

One of the facts which the student psychologist has drawn to his attention is that psychology has 'a long past but a short history'. This paraphrases the point that, although psychology as a separate discipline has only existed, or been recognized, for a century or so, its roots are deep in the Western intellectual tradition. Its parents in the nineteenth century were philosophy, with elements traceable back at least to the ancient Greeks, and physiology or medicine with its pragmatic, functionalist approach, especially in the post-Darwin era. Most of the concepts of modern psychology are developments of concepts which have existed in Western philosophy for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years. But even more important is the fact that psychology was seen at an early stage to fit in with the new approach to life which was characteristic of the era after Darwin, and was particularly amenable to the pragmatic and optimistic American attitude to the possibility of solving all human problems. It is thus no mere economic artifact that the American Psychological Association is by far the largest in the world, not only in terms of actual numbers (39 000 members in 1977), but also in terms of the ratio of psychologists to the general population, and that nearly every organized activity in North America has the advice of psychologists in some way. Nor has the influence been entirely one way, as is evidenced by the fact that psychology has adapted to every sector in the spectrum of attitudes, from tough-minded scientific empiricism with its intolerance for anything which cannot be observed and measured, to the subjective and mystical approach characteristic of Oriental religions and cosmologies.

Now, we must ask the question: To what extent will this robust plant transplant to the different soils of Africa? Will it survive only in isolated spots, where carefully tended, or will it flourish and dominate other plants and change the ecology of the region as it does so? Will it hybridize, or will it retain its essentially Western nature?

The psychologist as explorer has been in Africa for a comparatively long time, but in very small numbers, and scattered widely over the continent. Much of the early work in the area of personality study was done in the Francophone countries and seems to have had comparatively little effect on the way that Africans think about themselves. In the English-speaking parts of Africa the approach was (characteristically) more pragmatic, and involved the application of mental ability testing to attempts to find solutions to educational and industrial problems. A further reason for the interest in ability testing was the possibility of solving the 'nature versus nurture' problem which has remained with psychology since its beginnings; an obvious if naive question was, 'to what extent do Africans have the same kind and degree of intelligence as those from "sophisticated" Western culture?'

Predictably, the results for Black and White people were found to be not the same; even more predictably, the reaction of many to this finding was that it was merely a confirmation of their expectations or prejudices, a demonstration of, for example, the need for separate education provisions and separate ways of life and places of residence. It is one of the unsung accomplishments of psychology in southern Africa that one of the first critics of such an acceptance of inferior mental ability on the basis of test results was Simon Biesheuvel, whose classic little book, *African Intelligence*, published in the early 1940s, argued the case against the use of these results for educational separation.

Biesheuvel and others have continued up to the present time to caution against the interpretation of psychological findings out of the context of the cultural setting in which they have been obtained. These caveats are often ignored, however, sometimes because of elementary misunderstandings about concepts like intelligence and the pitfalls in measuring it, and sometimes because of political and social biases.

However, despite continuing differences of opinion about the implications of test results in Africa, mental testing for selection to jobs and to educational institutions has continued to make a marked impact, at least at the southern end of the continent. More sophisticated instruments and techniques of analysis continue to make a contribution to fair practices, and particularly to the acceptance of the notion that the best man should get the job. Thus psychologists have had an unrecognized but nevertheless pervasive influence on economic, social and cultural change.

Since the Second World War, in addition to the developments in testing techniques mentioned above, there has also been a shift in the perspective on testing and evaluation of abilities and personality across cultures. From the early 1960s this has been reflected in the emergence of a cross-cultural or transcultural psychological movement, which is acutely conscious of the issues of cultural relativism and of the need to provide techniques of analysis and interpretation of data which are less ethnocentric. The term 'cross-cultural psychology' is properly applicable only to direct comparisons between cultures, although it is usually taken to include any attempt to apply or test Western findings in non-Western cultures. Its objectives can be said to be to test the limits of applicability of laws and generalizations which have emerged from work on Western populations and, further, to gain insight into universal human psychology. The main thrusts have been into the areas of cognition, notably intellectual development and perceptual abilities; studies of motivation, personality and social interaction have remained far behind in terms of numbers of studies and of sophistication.

The first phase of this cross-cultural exploration effort was the collection of what could be described as 'drawing-room curiosities' from the anthropological literature and from safaris by psychologists themselves. The second phase could perhaps be described as more serious psychological map work. It would be fascinating to retell some of the many traveller's tales from the

early phase, but we shall satisfy ourselves with one or two. The study of perception has given rise to some of the more interesting examples of differences between people. One topic that has been intensely studied is visual illusion; illusions are the curious phenomena generated by certain combinations of lines drawn on paper (the perusal of any elementary text-book in psychology will illustrate what is meant). The importance of studying illusions is that they may give a clue as to how perceptual processes operate on normal objects and situations, or how perception can become distorted. Cross-cultural work has shown us that the effects may not be inherent in the perceptual system entirely, but may be largely generated by the kind of environmental experience which the individual is subject to, without any awareness. It has been found, for example, that different patterns of susceptibility to illusions are created by living in flat treeless country, forest areas where the line of vision is restricted to a short distance, or so-called 'carpentered environments' containing many straight lines and right angles. Thus, Kalahari Bushmen, pigmy forest dwellers, and students from urban townships, see the world in noticeably different ways; this probably affects their behaviour and intellect in subtle ways. The most dramatic example is given by the anthropologist, Turnbull, who reported, in 1961, on taking a pigmy guide out of dense rain forest, where he had lived all his life, on to the open plain. The pigmy gazed around him and then asked, 'What insects are these?' The puzzled anthropologist at last realized that what was being referred to were some buffalo grazing some miles away. The pigmy, never having had to allow for differences in size occasioned by distance, because his line of vision had always been restricted to 100 metres or so, was unable to take into account that a large animal would look a different size when seen far away. A lesson that is learned from this is that, just as the pigmy's perceptual analysis system was dominated by the assumption that objects remain the same size and do not vary in size according to distance, so also those of us who have grown up in a right-angled environment are dominated by the notion that the world is full of straight lines and right angles — and feel disturbed by situations where this is not so.

Other stories come from the studies of intellectual development which have been done over the last ten years or so on this continent. One of the more amusing of these is that told by Cole and Scribner, regarding a small West African boy who was told by his teacher that all insects have six legs. The well-meaning psychologists showed him one which had more than six and suggested that he might show this to the teacher. The unfortunate boy was soundly beaten for his trouble and sternly reassured that all insects do have six legs. The serious point in this story, besides its implications for educational and teacher training, is that the teacher, and of course parents and well-meaning psychologists, are part of the ecology of the intellect.

Within the wider field of psychology one of the major developments over the past generation has been the demise of the notion of fixed intelligence, which was popular at an earlier stage and which still dominates the

layman's approach, and even the approach of certain other scientists, such as geneticists. The work of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget has been particularly important in creating this shift of perspective, and one of the more interesting aspects of the work that has been generated by his approach is the attempt to discover whether his model of the growth of intellect is valid across cultures. In general, the answer has been in the affirmative; that is, it is clear that the way our brains process information is common to all human beings, at least in certain respects. Differences in rates of intellectual development created by differences in educational opportunities and emphases, plus intercultural variations in the qualitative content of intellect, are of course not ruled out by this finding. Here again, the lesson has been that the psychologist must penetrate into the mental development of the child and the mental processes of the adult, to understand them from within in terms of what they accomplish for the individual. Thus, we see within cross-cultural psychology a movement for the development of cultural relativism, which is an approach to the problems of psychology from the perspective of each culture in turn (Serpell, 1976). This can be seen as merely an extension of the approach of understanding the individual as a way to an understanding of the universal, but the movement has important things to say about the dangers of judging the abilities and life styles of people in Africa merely in relation to Western norms.

So much for exploration for the moment. To what use has this accumulating knowledge and understanding been channelled? Unfortunately, it has to be admitted that the explorers often stop when they have finished their explorations and go home, leaving little behind. Lecturing about the results of cross-cultural research to students means too often presenting a litany of the perceptual and intellectual deficits of people brought up in non-Western cultures. Interesting or even challenging though these differences may be to the theorist or to the dispassionate observer of the human scene, to the student from a disadvantaged culture or to anyone who is involved in the consequential problems of the deficits, identifying and quantifying them is a frustrating and humiliating half-loaf to accept. We must take the further step of solving the problems which have emerged. Western psychologists have made contributions in this area as, of course, have educationalists and industrialists, but it is my conviction that for a real impact to be made in this area, psychology must be handed over to Black students and Black people themselves. The methods and skills which have been derived by psychologists working in a Western environment and from a Western point of view must be put to use in helping people to solve problems as they are perceived by African people from their perspective. The next generation of psychologists in Africa must be Black psychologists, with a foot in two camps. On the one hand, they must have the skills and training which make possible the analysis and solution of human problems with the level of

success experienced in Western societies. On the other hand, they must have an intimate familiarity with African language and culture such as is virtually impossible for the White Westerner to obtain without very considerable effort and opportunity. And they must be capable of bringing the two together; that is, psychology must be made meaningful in the lives of those who need to make use of it for solving practical problems.

The main thrust here must be the provision of proper training. A mistake which is widely made throughout the world, in all fields, is to concentrate on the production of partly trained people who have some acquaintance with the methods of the professional but who lack the depth of training to make a noteworthy and creative contribution to solving problems in practice. It will not be enough to merely repeat all that has been done in the West in a different cultural setting; the problems are different and the solutions must be different because the ways of looking at the problems are different. If the new solutions are inadequate, we will find that both the methods and their practitioners will fall into disrepute and disuse. Human problems are the last unconquered area of science. Human problems are extremely difficult to solve. We cannot afford to let amateurs and charlatans merely do their best (or their worst).

In training African students to take on these responsibilities, one of the difficulties which occurs is in generating the kind of enthusiasm, motivation, or involvement in the subject which will carry students forward to becoming experts. I raised, at the beginning, the issue of how well psychology can be transplanted to an alien culture. It seems to me that in fact this has occurred in Africa with only moderate success, despite the notable achievements of African scholars in fields as diverse as theology and physics. Black Africa has produced few, if any, psychologists of real international note. Why should this be so? Leonard Bloom has recently devoted attention to the issue. In a journal article based on his experience in Zambia and in West Africa, he sees the problem broadly as a conflict between 'the positivist, empirical and materialistic approach of psychology' on the one hand, and the traditional African cosmology, which is religious in its base and humanistic in its orientation. Another way of putting this conflict is in terms of the way that the psychologist and the African philosopher look at the human being. The psychologist tends to reduce the human being to the level of a machine; even in the area of humanistic psychology, theories and models are based on analogies with the world of physics. The African, on the other hand, tends to do the exact opposite; that is, he sees a spirit in every machine, or at least sees human motives, wishes, and behaviour as relevant to explaining and controlling events in the physical world. Thus, he must feel (as many Westerners have) that a psychology based on hard 'scientific' determinism, without reference to spiritual or mystical experience except as delusions or epiphenomena, is a cold, remote and inhumane creed.

Another clash which Bloom sees is between the sceptical, questioning frame of mind of the psychologist, on the one hand, and the reverence for

authority and established ways of thinking about the world, which is characteristic of traditional African culture. While this reverence for authority may, in certain respects, be useful in passing on information to students and making them accept a new perspective on things, the trouble begins when the individual then applies this critical and evaluative technique to his own life, and, by implication, his culturally implanted belief system. The result may be a rejection of the belief system, a rejection of Western psychology and its system of beliefs and values, or confusion and ambivalence. These are the negative outcomes: the positive one is a process of creative re-evaluation and re-ordering resulting in a higher level of adaptation to the problems of life. But not every student is intellectually or emotionally capable of this adaptation. We need students, during the process of education, to be willing to question not only their own beliefs but the beliefs of the psychologist; only in this way will they develop in their own minds a satisfactory and satisfying meld of traditional belief and scientific psychological approach.

Another perspective of the problem has been given by Sidney Irvine, among others. He points to the disjunction between the thought processes which the child learns at home, and which are bound up closely with human and religious relationships, and on the other hand, the cold, hard, dehumanized rationality of the classroom. It has been pointed out by many people that linguistic differences also contribute to this particular kind of barrier. The language of the home, the mother tongue, is the language of our social reality, of emotional relationships, of 'real life'; the language of the classroom, the second language, is separated from social life, and things which are learned in terms of the second language tend to be seen as relevant only to the world of academic study and of work. Thus, there is a difficulty in applying scientific knowledge to one's own experience, and a later difficulty of applying this new model of thought to the worldly problems which the graduate encounters outside the university walls. What I am saying is that African students know and understand, at an intellectual level, the logic of psychology, but they often seem not to *believe* in it as relevant to human problems. Thus, at university and later in the world of work, they may 'role-play' the role of the psychologist but not really become involved in it, as Bloom has pointed out.

But there is an opposing proposition to which Bloom also refers. This is that Western science and African supernatural beliefs and practices are really both directed to the same universal problem — understanding and mastering the world — but they take different approaches to achieve this end. If this is the case, then psychology can be seen as an alternative way of looking at human relationships, and perhaps competitive rather than supplementary. If the psychological approach is to attract interest and enthusiasm, it must be shown to work in solving human problems, and, furthermore, it must be seen to work better than traditional psychologies. In Western culture psychology is seen as something which helps us to understand the behaviour of human

beings in everyday life. It has become a living force as part of the Western way of thought and, in particular, it has been taken home by people, taken into their own lives (albeit often in very distorted forms). The success of psychology in Africa will be demonstrated, as in the West, when students not only discuss psychological theories and techniques in the classroom, but use them to apply to their own problems of thought and behaviour, discuss the behaviour of their friends using the psychological model, and use the jargon of psychology (or devise a new one for local use). Thus, the teacher of psychology can be seen as a minister, converting students to his way of thought, not by force of authority but by demonstrating the success of psychology in action.

It goes without saying that if this work is to be successful, psychologists must become more aware of the needs and beliefs of their congregation. Psychology will have to adapt and change, by incorporating different though psychologically valid interpretations of human relationships; if, and only if, psychology grows thereby, will it have demonstrated its viability and validity as a way of looking at the world for people of different cultures. Psychology should not impose an alien viewpoint of human nature but generate a new and fresher one. Gustav Jahoda has shown in some of his studies in Ghana that traditional beliefs in magic and the supernatural can co-exist with Western scientific awareness and, furthermore, there is a suggestion that as people grow in the confidence born of running their own affairs, they actually increase their acceptance of traditional beliefs and integrate them intellectually with the Western scientific conceptions of reality.

Shifting to a more mundane level, I would like to turn now to a point introduced earlier and mentioned in my title — the psychologist as doctor. More precisely, what I would like to discuss is the relationship between the clinical psychologist on the one hand and the psychiatrist on the other. The distinction between these two roles puzzles the layman, and is also of concern to professionals in the fields concerned. In many parts of the world, an undue emphasis on the division has given rise to rather poor relationships between the two professions — and professional jealousies can be intense. This takes various forms, ranging from personal animosities to a tendency on the part of each profession to denigrate the value and contribution of the other. An example which comes to mind is an article which I recently received which purported to be a review of the latest developments in psychiatry. Very noticeably missing from this article was any mention whatever of behaviour therapy, which has been of great importance to both psychology and psychiatry and is, in fact, one of the few recent developments in either field which is worthy of note. But it is seen by many psychiatrists as outside the pale because it was the brainchild of psychologists.

However, it is pleasing to report that in this country this animosity to which I have referred does not prevail. Both at the personal and the pro-

professional levels relationships are good, and a spirit of co-operation prevails. It is as well, because, with the limited number of psychiatrists and psychologists, we could ill afford to reduce the impact we have on those who require mental health services. It is unfortunately a fact that only cases of the most pressing kind can be dealt with at all by a psychiatrist in this country, and on such an occasional basis that efforts are little more than custodial in nature. The consequence of this is that the psychiatrist's lengthy training is not being utilized properly and is largely wasted, simply because to have much impact, he must have opportunity for the development of a proper professional relationship on the basis of fairly frequent consultations with the patient.

Clinical psychologists, who are also very thin on the ground in the country, but who might be expected to make a viable contribution to a properly functioning mental health programme, remain on the periphery for want of any proper opportunity to participate fully. There is not a single clinical psychologist in the Government health service, and only two in other departments. Although it can be argued that in countries such as the United States the numbers of psychologists and psychiatrists are out of proportion to the real needs for their services, there is a lower limit below which mental health provision should not sink. This country is well behind most other semi-developed nations in its provision of mental health services; furthermore, the need is increasing, and there seems to be very little hope of providing the rapid training of conventional practitioners required to meet this situation.

If we are going to cope, it seems to me that what is required is even greater co-operation between the professions. One way in which this can be accomplished is by the team approach which has evolved in a number of other countries. In such a team one finds psychiatrists, psychologists, medical practitioners, psychiatric social workers and nurses working together, each using his own talents and specialisms towards a number of common goals. Given suitable leadership, this is a very effective and efficient use of manpower and is something we need to encourage in this country. And, in the field of African mental health, I would support the proposal of Professor Gelfand and others that we should also bring in other kinds of practitioners, who are normally outside the medical profession, but who, in a traditional culture, are very much more in touch with the patient than the Western-trained psychiatric worker can hope to be.

One of the reasons why the team approach is particularly recommended is that both psychiatrists and clinical psychologists have their own advantages, but also their disadvantages. The psychiatrist, who specializes in abnormal aspects of psychology and in applying a medical or pharmacological model, is usually ignorant of the wide range of useful psychological findings and methods in such areas as learning processes in normal humans. Medical students are notoriously difficult to interest in general psychology. This is regrettable but understandable. It springs partly from lack of time and exposure; in order to properly understand and appreciate the value of what

the psychologist has to offer, one has to go into it in greater depth than the normal medical course can possibly allow. Also, a comprehension of the whole of psychology is required, and this is ruled out for the same reason; it takes the non-medical student doing a degree in psychology two to three years to grasp even the elements of the discipline, so it goes without saying that any attempt to provide an adequate coverage in a few months is bound to fail.

But there is another and more important reason why the medical practitioner finds himself impatient with psychology. Medicine has urgent, pressing problems to solve in large numbers, and also has relatively quick and effective ways of dealing with them. The psychiatrist's pharmacological and physical treatments promise, and often produce, dramatic changes in the mood and behaviour of patients. Against this, the psychologist's approach seems slow and ineffectual. It is easy to overlook the fact that these dramatic initial changes have to be backed up by contact with human beings. The brain is a complex biochemical system, but not merely that: its activity reflects the accumulated experience which the patient has had of the outside world. And for each patient the outside world is a different world, full of unique relationships between other people and events. There is no direct physical way (and I doubt whether there ever can be) of reorganizing this reflected world so that it remains integrated in a stable but creative personality. To change behaviour and thought patterns requires time, because the underlying learning process is a slow one, for biological reasons. If time is required so also is patience on the part of the therapist, and a hurried approach to therapy is rarely a successful one. Thus, the very pace at which the doctor is trained to work becomes an impediment to him when he is required to deal with intractable problems of mental ill-health.

The psychologist, on the other hand, while versed in a broad range of normal and abnormal processes, is not trained in physical medicine, and particularly in the administration of psychoactive drugs. In general, the psychologist regards drugs as aids or adjuncts to treatment and not as the prime method. His stock-in-trade is time — the time taken to unravel the past and knit it into the present and future in a more satisfactory pattern. His techniques are becoming more efficient in time-utilization as research progresses. And they are directed to a different goal — mental health in the longer run rather than dramatic short-run reductions in mental sickness.

What I would like to suggest as a solution to this problem in this part of the world (and perhaps other parts also) is a new kind of combination of the psychologist and psychiatrist, which might be called the 'Doctor of Psychology'. The training would combine the essential cores from both disciplines, without those peripheral aspects which make expensive generalists. Thus, there would be on the medical side a concentration on the nervous and endocrinal systems at the expense of others, and little attention would be paid to ailments of little psychiatric relevance. This would be combined with broad-ranging psychological training, with an emphasis on the

methodology and assumptions underlying behaviour-change interventions and their scientific evaluation. I believe this could produce, not merely a cross between psychologist and psychiatrist, but a hybrid more robust in both the medical and psychological areas than either professional is today. If such a professional could also span the Black and White cultures, we could hope for a real acceleration in the progress of mental health in Africa.

Whether such a training would be more appropriate at the post-graduate level or whether students should be admitted straight to the degree of Doctor of Psychology remains to be seen; my own view is that the latter would be a more suitable solution and that we should find little difficulty in recruiting suitable students to a course which is of reasonable length and leads to an interesting and satisfying career. The important thing is that we should be flexible enough to cope with the unique problems which we encounter in this part of the world because we have fewer resources. But we have the advantage that change can be brought about without the burdens of tradition and vested interest being brought to bear on our solutions.

To summarize what I have had to say: psychology has a varying set of roles to play in Africa. Some of them will be of a traditional kind, but the meeting of the various traditions of thought is almost certain to change the roles in future. Psychology can only gain from this; if it fails to gain, then it does not deserve to survive. It is, I think, a robust enough plant to survive, not only transplantation, but also new and often hostile environments. We must expect some varieties of it to die out, some to thrive in ways which are similarly unpredictable. It is also, I think, a useful plant and one which it is now difficult to envisage being without in any progressive society.

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