

Psychology's Crisis of Place

[BOOK REVIEW]

Dlamini, S. (2024). **Beyond the pretty white affair: Training Africa-centring psychologists for the future.** Unisa Press. 121 pages. ISBN: 978-1-77615-204-9

It is unusual to think of psychology in relation to area studies. The study of how we feel tends to be cut off from where we stand. This, of course, is part of the problem. Dominant political, ideological, and cultural forces in Europe and North America continue to shape mainstream psychology's normative epistemological assumptions. The grip that these forces hold over psychology is all the more powerful precisely because it goes unannounced, with so much of psychology inclining towards a façade of clinical neutrality, seemingly factual rhetoric, and bogus claims of universality.

For many of us committed to a “new humanism” (see Fanon, 1967, p. 7) rooted in the pluriversal spectrum of human-ecological living, psychology represents a lost cause. Some have opted to walk away from psychology altogether (see ka Canham, 2024), while others have elected to take up psychoanalysis as an arguably more radical alternative to psychology (see Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017). Others have turned to imaginative kinds of literature, anthropology, art, politics, philosophy, cultural studies, sociology, or theology which seem able to pronounce on the psychological without suffering the epistemic limits and disciplinary hubris that stain dominant iterations of psychology.

There are also those who refuse to cede psychology to the dominant ideological dictates of Europe and

Nick Malherbe

Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa and Violence, Injury and Social Asymmetries Research Unit, University of South Africa and South African Medical Research Council
malhenr@unisa.ac.za
[0000-0002-4968-4058](https://doi.org/10.1000-0002-4968-4058)

Attribution CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

North America; those who refuse to accept that coloniality should have the final word on psychology. It is in this tradition of refusal that we find Siphso Dlamini's wonderfully insightful book, *Beyond the pretty white affair: Training Africa-centring psychologists for the future*. Based on interviews with eight psychology course conveners and 15 intern psychologists working in South Africa, Dlamini probes into the whiteness and the Eurocentrism that mark psychology, while also offering a clear-sighted way out of what we might think of as psychology's crisis of place.

Dlamini's book endeavours to reject and move away from psychology's Eurocentrism by enunciating Africa as its locus of enunciation (see Mignolo, 1999). Dlamini is clear that such a project cannot be achieved within the broad ambit of African psychology, which encompasses "all psychological work taught, published, practised, and studied in Africa" (Ratele, 2017, p. 317). Though African psychology might take root in the different cosmologies, material conditions, knowledge traditions, and visions of emancipation within Africa, this is not prerequisite. African psychology can also assume extractive formations, carrying out mainstream psychology's imperial agenda within African contexts so that "bodies remain in Africa, whilst the minds are firmly located in Europe and the US" (Dlamini, 2024, p. 99). As such, Dlamini advocates instead for an Africa-centring psychology, one that locates its epistemic foundations in African realities. He insists that this is a psychology that is not only in and/or about Africa, but one that is necessarily *for* Africa and Africans.

It is because Africa-centring psychology is more concerned with Africa than it is with psychology that Dlamini's project rejects disciplinary foreclosure. Although he demonstrates that apartheid is part and parcel of psychology's history in South Africa, he is also careful not to neglect the part that some psychologists played in the anti-apartheid struggle. Africa-centring psychology thus emerges as an attempt to transform psychology from without – to move the discipline away from itself in order to create something better attuned to what Dlamini, in a Habermasian vein, calls African lifeworlds.

Dlamini's interviewees are clear that the cultural standards of whiteness – and the colonial capitalist order against which these standards are set – remain undisturbed in much psychological training in South Africa. Black students training in psychology are compelled to tacitly accept the whiteness that guides most psychology and that, in turn, psychology has played no small part in consolidating. In this, Black psychologists are encouraged to disidentify with those parts of themselves that are made undesirable within psychology's white, Eurocentric schemas. Here, Dlamini takes seriously what he calls "discourses of race versus merit" (Dlamini, 2024, p. 43), where Black students are made to feel that their entry into psychological programmes is because of their race, while white students are there because of merit. As one of Dlamini's interviewees puts it: psychology is "a pretty white affair" (Dlamini, 2024, p. 29).

Language has long been central to Dlamini’s analysis of psychology in South Africa (see Dlamini, 2020). In this book, he gives particular focus to the “linguistic power” that language holds in linking race, gender, and class (Dlamini, 2024, p. 3). For Dlamini, language is not merely a medium of communication. It serves as part of psychology’s unspoken alliance with coloniality. In South Africa, English remains the driving linguistic force shaping psychology’s curricula, selection panels, and training. And yet English is not the home language of most South Africans. Dlamini highlights that for Black psychology students, learning English is a necessity for entering into training, whereas for white students, learning languages indigenous to Africa is “an option rather than an imperative” (Dlamini, 2024, p. 62).

Dlamini does not assert that language *is* race. Rather, he argues that the dominance of English in psychology signals which knowledges and lifeworlds are valued and which are de facto exiled from the discipline’s sphere of consideration. This is a problem that goes beyond diversity which, although a necessary step, Dlamini demonstrates can serve to other Blackness while further invisibilising – and thus entrenching – whiteness in psychology’s institutions. Accordingly, an Africa-centring psychology need not only concern itself with translating psychological terms into different languages. Such a psychology must also be transformed *through* language – its epistemological foundations decolonised via the very languages and lifeworlds that it has neglected.

Each of Dlamini’s arguments is complemented by the style in which he renders them. It is with a consistently patient register that readers are guided through different terms, histories, and debates that encircle psychology and that must be engaged critically if we are to emerge from the discipline’s crisis of place. I noted with a degree of envy how the considered patience and philosophical tenor of Dlamini’s voice contrasts with the scattered verbosity of my own. Although few would dispute that race and racialisation serve as the book’s central interpretive prisms, Dlamini takes care to embed race in classed, gendered, and sexual systems. His is an analysis that seems always to be moving, rarely settling on static formulations to illuminate its subject matter.

In a refreshingly pragmatic closing section, the book offers several concrete ways by which to develop an Africa-centring psychology. Dlamini insists that psychology training programmes must couple multilingualism with a focus on specific psycho-political problems as they exist in different African contexts. This, he argues, will begin the work of moving psychology away from its white, Eurocentric disciplinary hubris, and towards the African lifeworlds to which an Africa-centring psychology must be made accountable.

One might ask whether we risk parochialising psychology by insisting that it be Africa-centred. Eagleton (2022, p. 15) writes “That the local and regional take priority over the national and the international is a familiar article of conservative faith.” Fortunately, this

is not the argument that Dlamini makes. African-centring psychology – a psychology for Africa – is, to use Ratele’s (2019) phrase, an attempt at seeing what the world looks like from here. Dlamini (2024, p. 92) adds that we must do so “without imposing a set of rules about what the world *should* look like”. Although we can give body to this insight in different ways, I would like to insist that we do so politically. Africa-centring psychology can be used to foreground different visions of psycho-material liberation not through an impositional mode of universality, but through networks of place-based articulations. A psychology of this sort is attuned to how liberation struggles in Africa form part of a global struggle against a colonial capitalist order, an order premised on genocide, resource extraction, excessive waste, expansionism, creeping fascism, climate coloniality, authoritarianism, and the ongoing oppression of indigenous peoples, among many other kinds of murderous injustice. An Africa-centring psychology is, in this manner, attuned to what Africa can offer to those invested in abolishing colonial structures that depend on such tremendous scales of psychic and material devastation. It is because Africa-centring psychology is for Africa that it is always also a psychology for the world.

References

- Dlamini, S. (2020). Language in professional psychology training: Towards just justice. *Psychology in Society*, 59, 86-106.
- Eagleton, T. (2022). *Critical revolutionaries: Five critics who changed the way we read*. Yale University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. Grove Press.
- ka Canham, H. (2024). The black failure of psychology – an errant walking away. *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 18, 1298-1311.
- Mignolo, W. D. (1999). I am where I think: Epistemology and the colonial difference. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 8(2), 235–245.
- Pavón-Cuéllar, D. (2017). *Marxism and psychoanalysis: In or against psychology?* Routledge.
- Ratele, K. (2017). Four (African) psychologies. *Theory & Psychology*, 27(3), 313-327.
- Ratele, K. (2019). *The world looks like this from here: Thoughts on African psychology*. Wits University Press.