Article: # The Notion of Relevant Psychology with Particular Reference to Africanist Pragmatic Initiatives

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a fair amount of discussion regarding the degree to which psychology can be described as relevant to the problems posed by its existence in apartheid capitalist South Africa. Elsewhere I have considered some of these issues in relation to clinical psychology (Dawes 1985). The purpose of the present piece is twofold. First it extends discussion to a broader consideration of what the term "relevant" may be said to have implied for both theoretical and applied psychology locally, in greater Africa and abroad. In so doing I note certain differences in its usage. In the second instance I attempt to examine some notions of relevance which have grown out of the colonial and post-independence periods in Africa as they pertain to the practice of psychology

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and more generally to the place and function of psychology in tertiary education. It is hoped that this will provide a space for debate concerning how psychology should develop in South Africa, in its university context. It seems crucial at this time for South African psychology departments to reflect on their role in becoming more responsive in terms of curricula and research to their African context and to the needs of the majority of the citizens. At the same time they need to reflect on the degree to which their endeavours act directly or otherwise in the interests of the apartheid state and industrial capital. It is with these thoughts in mind that the notion of relevant psychology is explored.

RELEVANCE AND PSYCHOLOGY - A SKETCH OF ALTERNATIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

In the first instance relevance may be seen as embodying the idea of service to society in the sense of working to solve problems of national or regional priority. Used thus the discipline is employed by statutory or community agencies and in such situations questions as to the ideological elements of the project do not necessarily emerge. Others may raise such questions, but to those involved, a practical problem needs solution. Burt's work (Kamin 1974) on the restructuring of British educational policy with the aid of psychological tests would be an example of such relevance. On the local front, the work of the National Institute of Personnel Research (N.I.P.R.) in developing various test batteries for industrial use would be another. A final example is the Human Sciences Research Council (H.S.R.C.) project on intergroup relations (H.S.R.C. 1985) which its managers see as highly relevant to the resolution of certain problems facing South Africa.

While not all such projects are necessarily mandated by government, they are often conducted by agencies which have the task of researching social and psychological issues seen as relevant to the society at the time. These might include projects geared towards more efficient human resource management in a given social formation, or may, as in the case of the H.S.R.C. report noted above, propose changes to the formation on the basis of their findings. This then is largely applied uncritical (in the Marxian sense) relevant research.

A further applied example of what might be termed a relevant and contextual psychology is similar to that alluded to in referring to the N.I.P.R. This is work carried out by that organisation and others within industry such as the Human Resources Laboratory of the Chamber of Mines, directly in the service of the industrial complex. Bulhan (1981) has produced a critique of this area of work from a socialist perspective. What he does not remark on however, is the manner in which such organisations incorporate the notion of relevance into their work.

Much of the current work in such organisations and in psychiatry (Swartz and Foster 1984) has latched on to the notions of culture and ethnicity. If white social scientists and industrialists can understand the "cultures" and folk ways of persons of colour in South Africa, then they can promote intergroup harmony, better working relationships and different managerial strategies (Moerdyk 1984). Surely this is relevant work? It is easy to reply "yes" to this question. It may lead to improved relationships, to improved productivity, and to a greater respect for those of different backgrounds. What it tends to obscure however is that such relevance is primarily in the service of current industrial formations (Nzimande 1984). By this I do not imply that persons of colour in certain instances (viz. black advancement programs)

do not benefit materially and even psychologically. No doubt this is the case. However relevance in the industrial application of research on cultural differences may be seen as primarily oriented to making the wheels of the white controlled industrial sector turn more smoothly, with black advancement as a spin-off reducing friction further. This is relevance in the service of captains of industry and not in the first instance for the development of the work force. A different sort of relevance would ask questions as to what would be of benefit to them. Strümpfer and Kellerman (1986) have begun to suggest this to their industrial psychologist colleagues, although they do not suggest a questioning of the industrial formation as it stands. Further suggestions of this type have been offered by Fullagar (1984).

A rather different area in which relevance may be considered is exemplified in the rise of the theoretical and applied schools of humanistic psychology during the 1960s and 1970s. While there are varieties of this tradition, they all tend to reflect a common concern born in the idealistic turmoil of the period of their emergence. It stresses the need for academic psychology to be relevant to the personal qualities of the person in opposition to the mechanistic qualities of behaviouristic approaches. Various spokespersons in this vogue such as Maslow (1970) and Bugental (1967) pointed to the alienation (in the existential sense) of modern humanity and called for a re-affirmation of and recognition of such things as self-actualisation and respect for the individual. They generated theories of personal functioning in the spirit of liberal humanism and a range of therapies to go with them. The key notions as Jacoby (1977) points out, stressed the development of psychologies and practices which were relevant to enabling the modern (albeit middle class) Westerner to discover hidden potentials and through a process of inner development,

transcend the limitations of their hum-drum existence. A new order could be founded on principles of mutual respect and sharing, but, and here lies the rub, individual advancement. This movement then could be seen as being of relevance primarily to individuals as is reflected in the constructs embodied in its psychology (Holland 1977).

For reasons of this sort it is not difficult to understand its embrace by a largely affluent community. It merely reinforced the ideological assumption of "benign" liberal capitalism, and its pragmatic initiatives in various forms of growth therapies add credence to this view. The adoption of various forms of this position as dominant in certain South African universities despite their less than liberal frameworks is in itself of interest in this regard.

It is probably fair to say that the development of community psychology in the United States carries with it a similar humanistic imperative and this movement also seems largely uncritical in any radical sense of the structural determinants of many of the problems which it attempts to address. This applied community oriented humanistic form does not necessarily borrow theoretical material directly from the humanistic psychology movement per se, and is content to employ strategies derived from a variety of psychologies - even behaviourism (Lazarus 1986). Nonetheless it may be seen as an exemplar of relevant practice within a liberal humanist framework. While it certainly gives rise to political pressuring and calls for a "better deal" for disadvantaged sections of the citizenry, it does this within an unchanged liberal capitalist framework.

The model of the person employed by both humanistic psychology and community psychology, remains the individual human subject set over an external world. The central thread which flows through both is a clearly

individualistic philosophy which prevents the problematisation of their pragmatic initiatives as potentially conservative. This is so despite their no doubt valid contributions to the upliftment of the communities they serve.

Having touched on relevance at a theoretical level in the brief consideration of humanistic psychology, it is necessary to follow this up with some comments on two historically parallel but very different movements which have arisen mainly on the continent of Europe and Britain. The first movement is exemplified in the work of philosopher Rom Harré (1976), who in questioning the adequacy of epistemological and methodological frameworks of positivist psychology, has stimulated work by the likes of Gould and Shotter (1977) and other psychologists of similar persuasion. The work of these authors in rejecting positivism as providing an adequate framework for the development of a psychology truly reflective of human capacities, has suggested shifts in theory and method in the direction of hermeneutical models of inquiry. This form of psychology attempts to address the person as an active rule-following agent and a knowing subject. This view rejects the naturalised conception of the person embodied in the predominantly positivist heritage of twentieth century psychology. Again while this framework may be criticised as being an overly rationalist view of the person, it attempts to provide a psychological framework more relevant to observed human capacities, and is reinforced by a deep critique of positivist epistemology as applicable to this subject.

The second movement is informed by work outside the more traditional forms of philosophy of science and social science which provide the background for the previous position. It is based on a range of largely Marxian studies developed in Europe as exemplified by Foucault (1970),

Sevé (1978), Althusser (1971) and others. While not a coherent group, psychologists of this persuasion are concerned to question the very basic assumptions of the discipline and how its knowledge and practices have developed. Ingleby (1981) and Henriques et al (1984) for example might be said to be doing relevant psychology in their deconstruction of the subject of psychological investigations. In so doing they expose this (unitary) subject as a product of deeply embedded ideological notions regarding the nature of "man" inherent in natural science and capitalist social formations. In this way, they show the manner in which the theory and practice of psychology unwittingly perpetuate a set of dominant and submissive social relations. The discipline does this through its uncritical acceptance of notions central to capitalist ideology, namely individuality, rationality, naturality and freedom within the bounds of biological and psychological limits. To be relevant for this group is to expose the interests which are served by uncritical psychological theory and practice, and to call for a reconceptualisation of the subject of psychology which takes account of the social/ideological discourses which structure the individual person, the psychologist as theorist, researcher and practitioner, and the knowledge which they produce.

Finally, the notion of relevance in the South African context has been construed by some as the need for psychologists to provide critiques of the dehumanising consequences of apartheid in the variety of ways in which they manifest themselves (Dawes 1985, Holdstock 1981, van der Spuy 1978, Lambley 1980, Foster and Sandler 1985). This work does not address itself in any developed sense to class issues and is founded on more of a liberal human rights perspective.

Clearly there is a need to develop a South African psychology which addresses working class issues. Generally it is easier to speak of such relevance at the level of practice and research such that the tools of the discipline may be employed in the service of working class organisations, which does not necessarily involve a newly theorised psychology. Relevance in these terms could take all sorts of forms from assessments of malnourished children through to assisting in the planning of political strategy. At the far left end of that spectrum it could involve guerilla activities in support of armed struggle based on the sort of theorisation offered by Fannon (1967). In South Africa, relevance to class issues may also become connected to Africanist issues as has been the case in post-independence Africa (Abdi 1975).

I have attempted to point to a range of notions of "relevance" and related terms as they apply to different conceptions of psychological theory and practice. It is important to recognise that these terms can refer to the conservative and radical ends of the spectrum. It is also important to note that to do psychology within a workerist or Africanist perspective requires as much care and theoretical sophistication as that which has accompanied the development of the discipline in the service of industrial capitalism. The tendency may be to reject out of hand the established psychologies of the twentieth century without a careful analysis of their contributions and methods. If we take the view seriously that the models of the person created in 20th century psychology are infused with the dominant socio-economic and scientific ideologies of the time (Henriques et al 1984, Danziger in Buss 1979), then we can perhaps agree that such theories have at least partly described the (largely American) middle class person. In other words our theories have described the person as he or she is at this point in history - a largely socially constructed being who reflects the ideological underpinnings of the social milieu in his or her psychological make-up. This implies a rejection of "homo-psychologicus" as a natural phenomenon for all time as a mystified

notion and substitutes a homo "psychologicus capitalensis".

Given the fact that most of the data are Euro-American based, the point is that these psychological "facts" describe the sort of person who inhabits many modern capitalist states, and the sort of (theoretically embedded) psychological mechanisms which guide their behaviour. A rejection of positivism and an ideological critique of the pitfalls of recent psychologies stands on its own as a necessary exercise. Nevertheless if one accepts the position outlined above (which is implied by ideological critique), I would argue that modern psychology has gone a long way towards describing the state of the (albeit mystified) contemporary capitalist individual which cannot be ignored by psychologists who wish to serve the pragmatic imperatives of the working community. This is because these forms of mentation are likely to exist deeply embedded in such communities, and as such may be likely to resist change. Certain areas of psychological and psychoanalytic theory may be brought to bear in understanding this process and it would thus be unwise to reject the entire edifice as reactionary in some simplistic manner.

Similarly certain methods of research that have been developed in the service of a more positivist conception of human nature need not be seen as irrevocably tied to such a project. They may be utilised both in the task of developing more progressive forms of theory, and in the service of research and pragmatic questions raised by democratic organisations. A rejection of the claims of positivist psychologies does not therefore necessitate a rejection of data gathering, statistical analysis and so forth. Such a move would lead to a considerable degree of impotence as a result of misguided thinking.

Relevance and its related terms must thus be understood from the point of view of research, practice, theory and politics and may take a

variety of forms. It is important to reflect on where one stands as a psychologist with respect to this complex kaleidoscope which has some bearing on doing psychology in Africa or anywhere else.

THE RELEVANCE OF PSYCHOLOGY IN AFRICA

Jahoda (1973) noted that by far the greatest involvement of Euro-American psychologists in Africa north of South Africa, was in cross-cultural research of one kind or another. Investigations included aspects of cognition and intellect as well as personality. He observed also that African people had come to observe this "invasion" of psychologists with appropriate suspicion. Here was yet another group of colonial exploiters of a population of curious souls on whom data could be collected to test hypotheses regarding cultural universals and specificities. While this might have been of benefit to psychological science, Jahoda agrees that its relevance to the people concerned was minimal.

In a more clearly materialist critique of this enterprise, Bulhan (1981) commented on the use of such work developed in South African industrial research organisations in Ghana, Zambia and Nigeria for purposes of worker selection in the European dominated industries of those countries. Bulhan's paper is a scathing critique of the lack of relevance of much of this work to the colonial subjects. He points also to the studies of Mannoni on the Malagasy people (Mannoni 1968) as an example of the utilisation of psychoanalytic theory as a justification for colonial control. Buhlan notes further that after independence the tone of psychological research began to shift to a more "sympathetic" neo-colonial position, such that some of the more outdated cross-cultural psychological myths began to be replaced. Nevertheless, in newly independent states such as Ghana and Nigeria sophisticated industrial test batteries have been

developed which function as in the colonial era, to maximise productivity in the mining and oil industries. What this indicates clearly is that independence does not necessarily imply the shift of applied psychological research towards its employment in working class interests. Indeed in the struggle to develop stable post-colonial economies the position of the working person may well be as oppressed with the assistance of psychological technology as it was in the colonial era.

Bulhan concludes his article by encouraging black African psychologists to be wary of their role as potential instruments of oppression. He does not however problematise the potentially conflicting interests of the individual African worker and the pragmatic initiatives of the developing state which requires industrial and other forms of development. If psychology can provide selection technologies for industry which improve the status of African economics, do they not then have a valid role, particularly if this process reduces poverty and so on for the mass of the populous? The democratic answer would seem to lie in the degree to which the working people have a high degree of control over the means of production and its design. While such a notion might seem overly idealistic it should remain a goal whose even partial realisation would place psychological technology more clearly in a position to be accepted or rejected by those who would be subject to its utilisation and design. Such a notion of course does not only apply in the African context.

I might be taken to task at this point for focussing overmuch on the applied arena where it might be easier to point self-righteous fingers. What about the "pure" cross-cultural research with which we began this section? Jahoda (1982) while recognising the exploitive history of much of this work, nevertheless sees it as an important and necessary branch

of psychology particularly in alliance with anthropology. Indeed a total rejection of comparison across cultures would imply a rejection of comparative endeavours within cultures, where the focus might be on sub-cultural variants of, for example, religious, class or ideological persuasion. Such an extreme seems absurd and appears to rule out the comparative study of any collectivity.

However such questions need to be considered by a cross cultural psychology that claims to be relevant not only to the advancement of science (without its mystified neutrality) but also to the community which directly or indirectly supports it. In coping with this dilemma a beginning can be made by asking a series of questions. Why is the research question framed the way it is? It is not sufficient answer - "to test hypothesis A or B". One needs to ask why A or B arise in the first place, for as indicated in the earlier section of this paper such questions are deeply socially structured even if they don't appear so. Why has the researcher chosen the categories he or she has as representative of "cultures"? As Sharp (1980) has shown this is a bedevilled term which apart from being subject to the production of misleading "knowledge", may be used to reinforce certain political positions. Who benefits from the research? Is it the researcher who adds another cross-cultural research scalp to an upwardly mobile curriculum vita? Is it the research population? In this latter regard proponents of pure science are clear that it does not have to benefit anyone directly,as it is "science" which benefits and therefore ultimately humanity which stands to gain.

Clearly this last notion is deeply embedded in the liberal academic tradition of the West including South Africa. Without debating the possibilities of purity in science here, it seems appropriate to question whether the African community can afford the luxury of research which does

not have as a clear intent the solution of problems particular to its community. I would suggest that we cannot afford such a luxury and furthermore that a democratically based scientific endeavour, should serve the interests of the broad mass of the population and this applies as well to cross-cultural work as to any other in psychology. In this suggestion I refer back to an earlier point in which I stressed the role of a critical academic focus as central to such projects.

The pure vs. applied science debate has been central in the emergence of post independence African tertiary institutions (Wandira in Van der Merwe and Welsh 1977, Yesefu 1973). Most African writers on this topic agree in their adoption of a policy of pragmatic Africanisation as the context for university research and teaching, while stressing the need for excellence in this endeavour (UNESCO 1962, Murphee in Van der Merwe and Welsh 1977). The central concerns of African research (usually state determined) are geared towards upliftment of the populous and national development. Such a policy would question, for example, cross-cultural work which does not have a clearly directed spin-off for the populous. Whether the state necessarily reflects such interests is always a moot point, and again suggests the importance of the critical academic as Yesefu (1973) agrees. The loss of the critical edge would lead to reduced effectiveness of the pragmatic Africanist imperative, and while such a critical stance may prove unpopular in terms of the perceived projects of popular movements, we should be wary of its suppression.

The policy of Africanisation may in itself present problems. It runs the risk of taking on board reified notions of culture (Sharp 1980) or negritude as it seeks to develop respect for African heritage. As in colonial times and currently in South Africa, social scientists, through their employment of particular categories of ethnicity or "race" run the

risk of their being unwittingly supportive of certain power constellations. Alexander (1984) makes this clear in his rejection of the notions of race and ethnicity as categories which do not serve working class interests. He argues that using such categories in social science research serves to split working class endeavours and thereby increases the hegemony of the ruling groups (e.g. the white apartheid state or the position of Inkatha). Just as white interest has been served by cultural reification through research, so might power struggles within the black community be similarly facilitated. A further instance of this problematic within psychiatry is highlighted by Swartz and Foster (1984) in their discussion of trans-cultural work which on occasion leads to the glorification of the "primitive" among other problems.

In short psychologists in Africa, as elsewhere, need to make choices as to the interests they serve noting as Alexander does that the liberal conception of academic purity, particularly in the social sciences, is a myth. This realisation need not however promote a return to the uncritical stance argued against earlier.

So what is the position of African psychology outside South Africa? This question can only be answered in a preliminary way at present as the data is not easy to come by. A future project aims to clarify the matter. Given the pragmatic initiative, it is not surprising that psychology has featured low on the list of priorities in the design of post independence universities. The sources consulted (UNESCO op.cit., Yesefu op.cit., Abdi 1975, Jahoda 1973, Wandira op.cit., Commonwealth Universities Yearbook 1985) provide an incomplete picture but one which shows considerable variation. All stress however the centrality of science and technology, education, public administration, medicine, and agriculture, to the pragmatic Africanisation program. All stress in addition the Africanisation

of curricula which can be seen as an appropriate reaction to the former British and Continental control of African tertiary education. An interesting example of this is the formal linkage of universities in former British territories to the universities of London, Edinburgh and Durham (amongst others) in the U.K. Central African counterparts were linked to institutions such as Lourdes. In both cases the syllabi and examinations were often identical to their parent universities (Yesefu op.cit.) Small wonder the moves toward relevance in the Africanised sense!

In terms of curricula, one should note finally that these appear influenced by the form of state within which the university exists. Thus Dar es Salaam in Tanzania has no psychology department (Gillette 1977) and the stress is on education for self-reliance which coincides with former President Nyerere's design for the state. It is interesting also that no student is admitted to the university until after a period of years in the world of work in which he or she has shown initiative in African socialism. Reactions to such a policy no doubt depend on one's political colours but are clearly reflective of the, in my view, laudable notion that university places should be reserved for those who have shown a clear commitment to the development of their country and not just those who can pay.

While Tanzania has no psychology, most Central African countries appear similar. Former British colonies in West, East and Southern Africa have such departments, staffed increasingly by native citizens rather than expatriots. However an examination of the degrees of senior staff reflects the fact that most have collected graduate qualifications in Britain or the U.S.A. This would suggest the strong influence of Euro-American psychology in their teaching and research. While I do

not have definitive African data on this matter as yet, an examination of the curricula and textbooks used in Zimbabwe and Zambia indicates no difference from any similar contemporary British or American institution. Thus we find the usual supermarket of personality theory, abnormal, personal, psychological testing, motivation and so on. The degree to which this material is contextualised for Africa I do not know. At least at the superordinate level of course labels and texts, it does not exist which may of course obscure what occurs within the courses.

So Jahoda's (1973) questions regarding the relevance of psychology for developing Africa remain alive. The degree to which African universities have addressed them remains to be assessed. What is clear however is that in poor post colonial countries the discipline seems to have low to non-existent priority. As Abdi (1979) writing from Ethiopia suggests, Africans have in general not perceived the need for systematic applications of psychology. Colonial universities (and their South African counterparts), have not taught a psychology relevant to the masses. "The concepts of psychology, its theories and methods as understood by Westerners are alien to the thinking of the African." (Abdi 1975, p 230). While one might quarrel with a certain implicit paternalism here, it seems likely that his words have a strong ring of truth. If psychology does not make much sense to us and has little usefulness in our context, why bother with it? Abdi does not dismiss the discipline out of hand however and again returns to questions of relevance and modifications of accepted methods, clearly believing that a transformed delivery of psychology may have its (as yet unclear) role to play.

The Africanist pragmatic initiative then seems to connect most closely with only some of the considerations of relevance outlined in the first section of the paper. It would probably be fair to suggest

that a psychology constructed in this way would not be overly concerned to develop debates of the sort conducted by Ingleby (1981) and Henriques et al (1984), but rather to work towards the application of psychological knowledge in the interests of national development. How such projects would be carried out and what theoretical underpinnings they would have would seem to depend to some degree on whether a materialist radical social philosophy is upheld or not, and thus whose interests would be served by the employment of the discipline. As was clear from Bulhan's (op.cit.) article, even under programs of pragmatic Africanisation varieties of option are possible.

South Africa is clearly a state with its own peculiarities as to population (e.g. modern technicist/rural subsistence) resources and linkages with the rest of the world. What a relevant psychology and psychological education might look like here need not be identical to that in any other African state.

South African universities can either attempt to hold out for the liberal academic traditions which stress highly developed research as a priority (as Cape Town has done - Saunders 1985), or they can begin to shift their ground and question the validity of attempting to gain/retain a position as world class institutions in the Euro-American tradition. As Dutkewitz (1985) has suggested in relation to science and engineering, South African researchers should be less concerned with chasing Nobel Prizes and exploring the frontiers of the universe, than getting their hands dirty with the less fame-producing but more essential process of doing work relevant to the vast problems posed by our own needs as a third world community. This is where he believes funds and educational priorities need to be directed.

Does a democratic South Africa need the same form of psychology which it has produced thus far with few exceptions? My own view is that it is in need of a radical overhaul - a change which will reflect the needs of the majority of its citizens. As indicated earlier this does not imply throwing out the baby with the ideological bath-water. It suggests a discipline which, while apartheid remains, is critical at both the educational, research and applied levels, of that system. It must begin to ask democratic organisations whether it has any role to play in the problems which they face (it may not). It must educate its students in such a way as to develop a critical awareness to the ideological content of the discipline, and begin to grapple with the question of what psychology needs to be taught and how at all levels of instruction. This will mean the sacrifice of certain internationally accepted fields of study in preference to those of local relevance. It means a difficult and unfamiliar choice for psychologists - are you on the side of an elite liberal academic tradition, or are you prepared through your work to identify with pragmatic Africanist initiatives?

Leaving these questions in the air, presupposes two things. First that my own position is not entirely clear, which is correct, and second that we cannot simply pronounce on how things should look at this stage. I invite interested others to join me in working towards models of a future South African psychology and by implication models for the education of psychologists in this country which address some of the problems which I have raised.

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