

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING?: THEORETICAL DIVERSITY AND THE DRIVE TOWARD SAMENESS

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The numerous efforts at restructuring legislative policy, and the implication of these efforts, have placed the South African psychological profession at a divergent juncture. In so far as can be ascertained, current and anticipated political changes have resulted in many professions being forced to question whether they have something to offer post-apartheid South Africa. Most pressing is whether certain services are useful and, if need be, how their application may be enhanced. Psychology has not remained outside of this process of introspection. In fact, many would argue that psychology has for too long remained stuck in a position of contemplative inquiry that has not sufficiently translated into action or real change. Perhaps a different sort of contemplation is now required. The present situation may provide this opportunity, yet it may also result in the possible degeneration of psychology. As such it represents a double-edged sword.

Specifically, this re-evaluation offers the profession a chance for growth in that psychological services can assume a higher profile in the mental health arena. This may translate into the creation of state-funded posts and wider job opportunities. In order to realise this, psychology is urged to define itself and in doing so is required to justify its existence. In and of itself this is not an unreasonable request. After all psychology, like all service endeavours, needs to be seen as worthwhile if it is to receive state funding and the sanction necessary for propagating the discipline. Therefore, this process of definition is crucial if psychology is to survive into a post-apartheid era. However, the very process by which we try to ensure the continuity of psychology may be one which results in its demise.

Briefly, this commentary is based on the premise that the process of defining psychology is based (in part) on an illusion. The illusion being that psychology (in the South African context) is a unitary construct for which only one definition exists. In our attempts to secure a future in the new dispensation we may unwittingly feed this

illusion, ultimately leading to a narrow, exclusionary definition that sows the seeds of our own destruction.

At the outset, let me clarify what this commentary does not aim to do. It does not aim to cast a shadow over the progress that has been made in dissolving the previous psychological association and replacing it with an organisation which (hopefully) embodies reconciliation and progressive thinking. This watershed provides a chance for psychologists to construct a representative organisation that can more adequately represent the diverse needs of the population it hopes to serve, and also promote psychology as a valid discipline. However, this article does aim to express some concern about what may unfold in our evolution toward these goals. After all psychology's track record of survival in other (post-colonial) African countries might well dampen some of the enthusiasm which presently abounds.

The current buzzword in psychology is that of "relevance". It seems that finding the pot of gold at the end of the mental health rainbow hinges upon psychology becoming more relevant. A more relevant psychology supposedly will be one which ensures that individuals previously excluded from the benefits of psychological services now be included. This assertion is based on the assumption that psychological services have broad based applicability. Even if they do, whether these services need to be harnessed within an "elitist" profession which requires lengthy training and rigorous (often restrictive) professional codes remains debatable. As a result, there exists a strong drive to divest psychology of its Eurocentric roots. This approach is underpinned by the assumption that ideas generated from within a European (or American) context are inherently not applicable to our socio-political context.

While the attempt at increasing psychology's relevance may not ostensibly seem intolerant of diversity, the search for a more appropriate psychology has serious consequences especially if it entails debunking certain ways of thinking and sanctioning others. There is no doubt that psychology has been complicit in maintaining the political status quo in this country. Nor is there any doubt that the distribution of psychologists and psychological services have lent heavily in the direction of serving white, middle-class needs. However, this should not be brandished as evidence that psychology, as presently taught and practised, should be entirely discarded. There exist many individual psychologists who have attempted to use psychological understandings and methods to assist people who have been most victimised and oppressed by an apartheid regime.

In defence of relinquishing ties with Eurocentric traditions it is often argued that the limitation of economic resources available to the mental health sector prevent psychology from pursuing diverse avenues of theory, practice and training. Consequently, research efforts are carefully scrutinised to assess their broader applicability. For example, research directed at uncovering the relationship between unconscious processes and X may very likely not receive sanction in favour of research which examines the relationship between violence and sense of well-being. Similarly, the modes of psychotherapeutic intervention are evaluated in terms of duration and cost-effectiveness. This has direct implications regarding medical aid benefits which in turn affect the viability of certain therapies over others. Regarding training, there exists some pressure to remodel the present training format in favour of a four year Bachelor of Psychology degree. While this may provide more flexibility in terms of entry and exit

points, problems could be created by introducing too many psychologically trained service providers into a climate in which few state-funded posts exist.

In essence the thrust of this commentary is to implore psychologists of all persuasions not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This often evokes familiar strains of "prove-yourself-or-die" thinking. Such an argument is circular as it is predicated on the belief that there are clearly defined ways of establishing definitive truths. This is underpinned essentially by positivistic types of philosophy affecting conceptions of ontology and epistemology. The former results in the strict delimitation of what "objects" are open to investigation, the latter what methods of inquiry are valid in acquiring knowledge about the world. At this point it should be stressed that this does not mean that psychologists should continue providing services that are shrouded in a veil of mystery. This only serves to mystify psychological services and, in my view, leads to further alienation so detrimental to the aim of locating ourselves as a discipline which has something valuable to offer.

While one may not easily pinpoint the harm which may arise from cautiously re-evaluating psychology, the effects of too rapid a discarding may be plainly visible. For one, the possibility of psychology becoming too similar-minded may result in the creation of an arid, barren desert in which thought and creativity ceases to flourish. Rather a vacuum would be created in which tensions are obliterated and ideas lose the opportunity to be defined in relation to opposing viewpoints. This would impede the creation of a dialogic atmosphere in which the opportunity for richness evolving from mutual exchange would be lost. We should not fear the expression of ideas which may appear as anathema to our own perspectives, but welcome them as necessary to the development of a prosperous, richly woven discipline which tolerates subtlety, contradiction and diversity. The consequence of failing to provide the ingredients for this dialogue may not be easily predicted. However, the risk of the psychological climate resembling an autocracy of thought, a theoretical hierarchy may all too easily appear. Thus, approximating the oppression that we are so eagerly trying to rid ourselves of.

The argument, or rather appeal, underpinning this short commentary may be construed as conservative, not allowing itself to bow to the ever increasing drive to radicalise and reform the basic tenets of psychology. Not long ago, the appeal to tolerate various, often opposing, perspectives was construed as liberalistic; after all is it not the liberal democrat who seeks to provide a forum which accommodates plurality and diversity of opinion?! The impetus to be heard may ironically lead us to silence the many divergent strains of thought within psychology. This may lead to a situation in which one voice, that of a relevant psychology, resounds in a deafening silence.

The drive to make psychology more relevant is long overdue and is to be welcomed. Although psychology needs to engage in the process of evolution that is being initiated, this process should not be seen as synonymous with purging psychology of its Eurocentric contents. To illustrate, an article appeared recently in the **Weekly Mail & Guardian** (11-17 February, 1994) highlighting the Cape Symphony Orchestra's difficulty in remaining an on-going, viable concern; due to its Eurocentric foundation and hence limited appeal. In a subsequent edition a letter was sent to the editor in which the writer stated that "... symphony orchestras are Eurocentric and hence antagonistic to Africans. They must certainly go in a new, democratic and non-racial

South Africa". The writer continued this attack criticising the paper's "obsession" with cricket, which was of "no interest to Africans" (**Weekly Mail & Guardian**, 25 February-3 March).

Gross biases have existed and been perpetuated under an apartheid regime which require redressing. However, it would seem that we have lived far too long in the shadow of despotic rule in which the true meaning of words like "democratic" and "non-racial" is lost to us. It was once stated that desperate times require desperate measures, however, we should do our utmost to avert a backlash which may seem facilitative in the short term, but detrimental in the longer term. Theories and ideas generated in other contexts should not be treated as gospel or stony edifices that may not be challenged or moulded. Nonetheless, they should be encouraged in the interests of creating a climate in which diversity and exchange thrive.

While psychologists should be held accountable for their endeavours and develop social responsibility, we need to ensure that the profession does not continue to be overly prescriptive. Failing this, we may be faced with a tyranny guised in socially correct trappings - a veritable wolf in sheep's clothing.