

## CHAPTER 17

### AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

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### Background

- Psychology is predominantly Euro-Americancentric – it was ‘exported’ to Africa
- The broader psychological functioning of Africans has largely been neglected by mainstream psychology - no specific personality theory from a purely African perspective
- Personality psychologists interested in understanding the psychological functioning of Africans rely largely on information from anthropologists, philosophers and theologians who have studied the life, worldviews, values, norms and customs of Africans
- Most of the work done on ‘Africans’ was undertaken in America amongst Afro-Americans

### Background

- Why the need for developing an African perspective in Personality Psychology?
  - Mainstream psychology has played a big role in the oppression of Africans (depicting them as primitive in comparison to Westerners) – **scientific colonialism**
  - Mainstream psychology has had very little relevance to understanding and addressing the problems faced by Africans and the poor
  - Mainstream psychology is arguably ill equipped to accurately portray African (way of) life and mentality
  - A lot more can be learnt about human behaviour if one includes the insights offered by traditional systems

### Background

- An ‘African psychology’ would (arguably) need to draw upon both local (indigenous) and western knowledge systems – it faces two challenges:
  - Africans are in a **transitional phase** – shifting from a traditional way of life to a more Western-oriented way of life
    - ❖ **Traditional** – individuals who constantly function within the framework of their traditional culture (not very affected by modernisation)
    - ❖ **Transitional** – individuals who regularly (perhaps even daily) move between traditional and modern ways of living
    - ❖ **Modern** – individuals who engage almost exclusively in a post-modern, industrial lifestyle, with no contact with a traditional society

### Background

- Difficult to know exactly what an **African perspective** on psychological functioning would look like
  - ❖ Great diversity of indigenous cultures included in the umbrella term of 'African' in Sub-Saharan Africa

### The View of the Person

- African view of the person is grounded within a **holistic** worldview based on a 'man-centered' (**anthropocentric**) society
  - Humans form an indivisible part of the cosmos (in unity with God, other human beings and nature)
  - Humans (the lived experience) is the departure point for understanding and explaining life

### The View of the Person

- Cosmos comprises three theoretical cosmic orders (realities) that blend together in everyday life
  - **Macro-cosmos**
    - ❖ The cosmic order where religious existence unfolds (where God is encountered)
    - ❖ The ancestors intercede between humans and God
      - Religious functioning plays a central role in the daily functioning of traditional Africans
      - Traditional religion focuses on the community (as opposed to the individual) – linked to **collective functioning** on the micro-cosmic level

### The View of the Person

- **Meso-cosmos**
  - ❖ **A no-man's-land** where the ancestors, evil spirits, and sorcerers influence human behaviour
  - ❖ Meso-cosmos is situated both within **individual reality** and **collective imagination**
  - ❖ Conflict, sickness, death are all explained with reference to this level
  - ❖ It is the level from which an African perspective would explain human dynamics
    - Behaviour is attributed to **external agents** (as opposed to intrapsychic or interpersonal dynamics)
    - Repression of personal initiative for solving problems

### The View of the Person

#### ▪ Micro-cosmos

- ❖ **Individual person** in his/her everyday life as part of a **collective existence**
- ❖ Typified by ubuntu (a person is only a person because of other people)
  - Not a theoretical construct, but rather a code of behaviour (ethics) that manifests itself through interaction with others (the community) with strength and compassion
  - Collective ethos ('we') differs greatly with the Western, individualistic ethos ('I') – **collective versus individual survival**
  - Difficult to translate the Western idea of a self-concept, self-actualization, or ego into an equivalent African perspective

### The View of the Person

#### Western View of the Person

Individuality  
Uniqueness  
Differences

#### Psychobehavioural Modalities

#### African View of the Person

Groupness  
Sameness  
Commonality

Competition  
Individual Rights

#### Values and Customs

Co-operation  
Collective Responsibility

Separateness/Independence

Co-operation and Interdependence

Survival of the fittest  
Control over nature

#### Ethos

Survival of the tribe  
One with nature

### The View of the Person

- Western perspective: "I think, therefore I am"
- African perspective: "We are, therefore I am"
- Western concept of the personality and Western explanations for behaviour that focus on individual functioning might not be suitable for understanding and explaining the behaviour and functioning of the traditional African

### Cognitive Functioning and the Concept of Time

#### • Cognitive Functioning

- Western conceptualization of cognitive functioning gives rationality a central role ("I think, therefore I am")
- Cognitive functioning of traditional Africans is arguably based more on **intuitive rationality** (relying more on intuition and emotion, as opposed to strict rationality)

#### • Concept of Time

- African and Western concepts of time are vastly different and influence approaches and attitudes towards life, work and business
- Contributes towards the difficulties traditional Africans and Westerners face in understanding each other's behaviour and motivation

### Cognitive Functioning and the Concept of Time

- Traditional African view of time is **two dimensional** (an infinite past, a present, but no future) – as opposed to the Western view that includes an infinite past, a present, and an infinite future
- **Actual time**: events are happening or have already happened
- **Potential time**: something that will definitely happen in the immediate future (associated with natural rhythms – e.g., the sun setting and rising)
- Time is associated with the natural rhythm of the universe
- Activities or events are more important than the time at which they have to take place (more important to be 'in time' than 'on time')
- Concept of time could be linked to the perceived locus of control (Westerners – internal / Africans – external)

### Optimal Development and Mental Health

- Pasteur and Toldson (1982) – traditional Africans are better equipped to reach and sustain optimal development and psychological health than Westerners
  - Connectedness with their physical and spiritual environments
  - Balanced use of the left and right hemispheres of the brain
  - Collective existence offers a security that can counteract anxiety and tension (whereas for Westerners the strive towards individuality and individual success can lead to stress and tension)
- **Music, dancing, and rhythm** play an important part in the daily lives of traditional Africans – including the expression of feelings

### Views on Psychopathology

- Psychopathology is strongly linked to the holistic worldview and the role played by the ancestors, evil spirits, and sorcerers in determining behaviour
- **Health** reflects a **state of wholeness** and **integration**
- **Ill-health** reflects a **state of fragmentation** and **disintegration**
- Mental illness has physical symptoms – therefore all mental disorders should be viewed as psychosomatic

### Views on Psychopathology

- Psychopathology or illness could be caused by a disharmony between the person and his/her **ancestors**
  - Ancestors represent a 'archetype' of the collective unconscious
  - They communicate during altered states of consciousness
  - They are experienced as real persons
  - They are benevolent, but if their demands are ignored they send disorder and misfortune as punishment
- Psychopathology could be caused by evil spirits and sorcerers
  - Izithunzela and the thikoloshe are creatures employed by evil spirits and sorcerers to inflict misfortune
- Western psychologists: misdiagnose these experiences as schizophrenic

## Psychotherapy

African	Western
Practical Relationship	Idealized (Rogerian) relationship
Open (community) relationship	Confiding (private) relationship
Directive approach	Mostly indirective approach
Deals with supernatural and natural world	Deals mostly with the natural world
Focus: "Who caused this?"	Focus: "What is happening?"
Aimed at social cohesion	Aimed at individual empowerment
Healer tells the client why he has come	Client tells the therapist why they have come
Mostly incorporates pharmacology	Sometimes resorts to pharmacology

## Psychotherapy

African	Western
Generally prescribes a ritual	Rarely prescribes a ritual
Boundaries often wide (e.g., client lives with healer)	Boundaries mostly restricted (e.g., non-contact weekly visit)
Client motivation generally seen as conscious	Client motivation generally seen as unconscious
Dreams are direct communications from ancestors	Dreams are intrapsychic and symbolic
Healer's personal values intrinsic to the process	Therapist's personal values are subjugated
Main tools are materials such as bones or equivalent	Main tools are verbal