

# What is African Psychology the psychology of?

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## Abstract

Throughout the past half-century, the formal study of psychology in African universities has been colonized by mainstream Western psychology. This situation was inimical to any early efforts to entrench African Psychology as an academic discipline in African universities. However, this negative state of affairs did not last indefinitely. But with the recent emergence of African Psychology it soon became necessary to trace the history of its emergence and evolution, formulate its definitive core of reference, engage the question about its relationship to Euro-American psychology, foreground its claims to Africanness, determine the topics it embraces as an academic subject field, and discuss the epistemological and ontological foundations on which it is grounded. This article is an attempt to contribute to this need.

## Keywords

African psychology, Africanness, epistemology, Eurocentrism, invisible loyalty, ontology

For the past half-century, the formal study of psychology in African universities has been usurped and overdetermined by mainstream Western psychology. This situation severely frustrated any early efforts to entrench African Psychology as an academic discipline in African universities. However, through the creative and critical writings of some Africanist writers and scholars this unacceptable state of affairs faced a strong challenge with time. The result is the recent emergence of African Psychology in the curricular provision of some forward-looking African universities. However, with this occurrence it soon became necessary to: trace the history of its emergence and evolution in African academies; analyse the factors behind its delayed arrival; formulate its definitive core of reference; map out its scope, goals, and range of application; engage the question about its relationship to Euro-American psychology; foreground its claims to Africanness;

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determine the topics it embraces and teaches as an academic subject field; and discuss the epistemological and ontological foundations on which it is grounded. This article is a modified version of an earlier attempt by the present author, under the platform of an Inaugural Lecture, to contribute to this need. The article is expected to lead to an improved understanding, image, and advancement of African Psychology in African universities and to modify any prevailing limited conceptions of its meaning and promise in the minds of colleagues within and outside Africa.

To organize the discussion in some manner, the following questions have been formulated:

1. What foundational influences precipitated the emergence of African psychology as an academic subject field?
2. How can the delayed arrival of African psychology in African universities be explained?
3. What constitutes the major phases in the evolution of African psychology?
4. In what ways can African psychology be defined and conceptualized?
5. What are the principal goals of African psychology?
6. In what ways can African psychology be distinguished from Western psychology?
7. What constitutes the epistemological foundations of African psychology?
8. What key topics does African psychology teach? Or, put another way, what constitutes the subject-matter of African psychology?
9. On what ontological foundations and cosmivision is African psychology grounded?
10. What is African in African psychology?
11. Does African psychology have a future? If so, in which directions?

In exploring these themes, the term African Psychology has been used in the singular. In taking this early claim I am quite aware that many people will criticize me on this. That is, for presuming that African Psychology can truly be designated in the singular rather than in the plural, given the diversity of peoples and regions (North and South, East and West) constituting the continent. But I request the indulgence of such prospective critics to note that I have taken this decision not rashly but with a profound responsibility. I did so influenced by the understanding that behind and beyond the observable and obvious diversities and pluralisms of historical experience in Africa and the impressive attempts by social and cultural anthropologists to codify it, there is a metaphysical unity, a hidden common ground, a mainstream, indeed a central worldview undergirding them all, namely the belief in the principle of complementarity of contraries or “the dance of the opposites” in African thought (Ngwaba, 1996; Nwoye, 2006a; Webb, 2012a, 2012b). It is this same assumption that is behind the current practice of making reference to African literature, African art, African history, African medicine, African anthropology, African culture, and African worldview, all in the singular. For each, including the newcomer, African Psychology, is grounded on the assumptions of a common African worldview and the Africentric paradigm. I believe that it is a similar logic (or the belief in the applicability of a common Eurocentric orientation and framework in the Western world) that is responsible for the imagined unity of the Western European traditions that

support the current use in the literature of the term Western psychology in the singular. And with this said, the ground now feels set for introducing and addressing the fundamental question of the foundational influences in the emergence of African Psychology as a university discipline.

## Foundational influences in the emergence of African Psychology

Under this heading, the theme to be developed is that the new field of African psychology came into being as a byproduct of a confluence of historical circumstances within the African continent. Among such influences is the deeply felt need for a corrective counter-discourse aimed at interrogating the highly partial, and self-serving negative images of Africa found scattered in Western scholarship. Some of such images and stereotypes were formulated and advanced by some of the supposedly “respected” thinkers in Europe and North America such as G. W. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, David Hume, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Joseph Conrad, and John C. Carothers, the latter being a former staff at the Mathari Psychiatric Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, and a Consultant on the *African Mind* for the World Health Organization. One fundamental bias which these individuals held in common is the assumption that the *humanity of the African is, to say the least, questionable. Hence it is argued that one of the greatest contributions of African Psychology, and indeed one of the reasons for its emergence, is to serve as a protest psychology aimed at engaging in African image reconstructions;* and, in that way, to add to and advance the incomprehensible determination of the African to recover from disturbance.

The second influence is the recognition that the imported Western approaches for the study of psychology in Africa are partial, largely Euro-American in content and emphasis, and not geared at promoting any meaningful theoretical engagement with the psychological significance of important African cultural traditions such as emphasis on kinship care, invisible loyalty to the guardianship of ancestral spirits, spirituality and the inter-connections between the mundane and the profane in the universe; all anchored on the theory of complementary dualism that underpins the cosmology of the various peoples of Africa (Mkhize, 2004; Mpofu, 2002; Nsamenang, 2001; Nwoye, 2006a; Webb, 2012a, 2012b). It is argued that part of the reason for the emergence of African Psychology is to interrogate and challenge the meaningful relevance of American and European theories and practices for African contexts. In this way African psychology is said to have emerged to open up the field with the aim of enlarging the space of researchable reality in the study of psychology in Africa.

The third influence is the discovery that some Western psychologists and psychiatrists have conducted and published research that is disrespectful, misrepresentative, and highly judgmental of the culture and peoples of Africa, past and present. For instance, during his period of service at the Mathari mental (psychiatric) hospital in Nairobi, Kenya, H. L. Gordon (1936), as cited by McCulloch (1995), conducted a study of the inmates, in which he concluded along with F. W. Vint’s (1934) study of the cranial capacity and brain weight of materials selected from autopsies of dead bodies from Nairobi hospital mortuary, that in terms of cortical development “the brain of the adult African corresponded to that of a European child of seven or eight years of age” (p. 48). Against

the above, what is argued is that African psychology came into being to give a more constructive direction to the theme and pattern of psychological research in continental Africa. In this way African psychology can be understood as a *psychology of rehabilitation* of the culture and orientation of research in African universities, the type that will derive anchor, not in comparing Africans and Europeans, but rather in people's everyday needs, epistemologies, and worldview.

The fourth derives from the recognition that previous efforts by some Western-educated African academics in psychology were largely imitative of, or essentially patterned after the contributions of Western psychological theorists and practitioners. What such scholars were accused of lacking was that of originality and perspective. Their works, it was argued, were never genuinely focused on the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of the African people. In this context, their error of commission was that of standing too far away from their African cultural perspective through over-deference to the Euro-American, white-centred frame of reference. This made much of their output lack conviction and pertinence, and to sound almost like mere echoes of Western scholarship and intellectualism limited in their potency and relevance for addressing the needs and problems of people in rural and urban Africa. The harmful effect of this state of affairs emanated from the fact that with such an approach the study of psychology in Africa came to be tied to the apron strings of Western psychological theories and developments (Dawes, 1998), and did not, until recently, show any sign of maturing beyond the attempt by some students and scholars (operating in the spirit of cross-cultural psychologists) to determine the extent to which some of the leading psychological theories (e.g., Piaget's, Rawls', Festinger's, Vygotsky's, Eysenck's, Lewin's, Tajfel's, Sternberg's, and Gardner's) developed in Europe and North America could find expression and application in the African context. With this, most studies in psychology undertaken in most universities in Africa for many years became unrelated to the larger daily psychosocial needs and existential perturbations of the contemporary African world. Supporting this observation, Akin-Ogundeji (1991) commented that Psychology in Nigeria "is still largely a classroom-research enterprise" with little practical relevance "to the problems of living in contemporary Nigerian society" (p. 3). Based on the above, it is argued that entrenchment of African Psychology in the curriculum of African universities will help in the amelioration of this negative state of affairs in the coming years.

Fifth, the present African hybrid culture into which most of our children are born and bred has been noted to have introduced a complexity that does not tally well with most of the reductionistic models and principles of human behaviour and experience advanced in much of Western perspectives to psychology. Commenting in this regard, Teo (2009) notes that psychology's mainstream operates with a *mechanistic*, and hence an *atomistic* and *reductionistic*, model of human mental life. Yet contemporary life is lived in a globalized, not atomistic or fragmented world of culture and technology. Consequently, by its tendency to divide psychological life into stimulus and response (behaviourism) or into independent and dependent variables (experimental psychology), mainstream psychology is said to be problematic because it neglects the reality of culture and intersubjectivity, and the contribution of spirituality and the impact of "other" forces in people's lives (Holdstock, 2000). Hence one principal reason for the emergence of African Psychology is the search for a psychology which, unlike mainstream (Western)

psychology, would work from the insightful view credited to Clifford Geertz that “no human being lives in the world in general,” since each lives in particular historical and cultural contexts. This understanding demands that a relevant psychology for use in Africa be found; the type that will explore people’s needs and lives in context, rather than in isolation of their culture and circumstances of existence. In this way, African Psychology enters into the picture with the aim of making this kind of culture/context-sensitive psychology possible in African universities.

Sixth, Africa’s many years of marginality in the field of scientific study of psychology in African universities has been regretted, and classified as undeserved and a kind of continuation of colonialism through entrenchment of Eurocentrism in university psychology curriculum in Africa. This trend is believed to give rise to the African intellectual’s self-alienation that results from being educated in Western schools and inducted into the intellectual system of other people’s ancestors while being left in the dark about the knowledge system created by their own ancestors. Hence, according to Obiechina (1992), “in adverse cases, this process alienates the intellectual from the indigenous tradition and to a consequent ignorance of that tradition” (p. 2). Yet the African student of psychology cannot be ignorant of such a tradition and still seriously claim to be African. In Obiechina’s (1992) view, such alienation ultimately “creates problems of vocalization, definition, and discourses when the African intellectual [read psychologist] assumes the role of interpreter of the African way of life or relates African realities to the non-African world” (pp. 2–3). The opposite is the African student of psychology who is adequately formed in the African tradition before or while becoming educated in the Western intellectual system and enjoys a double advantage, becoming the best interpreter of the African experience, culture and literature, religion and ethics, and philosophy and psychology, while also being well-versed in the core contributions of Euro-American psychology. It is argued that inclusion of African psychology in our university curriculum holds enormous potential for enriching and extending the contributions of the discipline of psychology and a means of breaking away from the spells of colonialism and white-centredness in the study of psychology in Africa. In this way the introduction of African Psychology as an academic discipline in African universities is perceived by many African students and scholars as a *process of decolonization* as well as reflecting one aspect of the ongoing process of entrenchment of Africa-centredness in our university programmes. Hence, its emergence asserts the need to analyse and resist continuing colonial attitudes.

Seventh, and finally, Western (Eurocentric) psychology to which we have invested a lot of our resources and scholarship in the past has been considered largely insensitive to the stark realities and perplexities confronting urban and rural populations of Africa presently. In this way, on account of its mechanistic or machine-model of human mental life, mainstream (Euro-American) psychology in Africa has been criticized as being grossly inadequate and misguided in its continuing to conceptualize the person as individualistic and society as an external variable; with such a model seeing the individual and society as separate (Teo, 2009; see also Parker & Spears, 1996). Yet in a culture like that of Africa where there is a belief in the principle of complementary duality in all that there is (Ngwaba, 1996), and where the individual and the community are seen in synergistic terms and considered as mutually interdependent (Nwoye, 2006a), it was deemed desirable that another psychology

should emerge to call to question and blunt the individual-centric emphasis of the mainstream (Western) psychology paradigm. African psychology, it is argued, came into being as one such psychology interested in studying the benefits of the recognized interdependent nature of the individual and society in Africa. And this observation is made without prejudice to the important and valued contributions of social and community psychologists in contemporary Africa who operate against the norm of the *one-person* and the *intra-psychic* paradigm valorized in mainstream (Euro-American) psychology (Mkhize, 2004).

The above observations are intended to demonstrate that the emergence of the study of African psychology in African universities is a product of the deeply felt inadequacy of our reliance on mainstream, Euro-American psychology, as the sole means of achieving effective understanding of the psychological properties of African peoples and their cultures.

## **History of delayed arrival of African Psychology in African universities**

The greatest irony is that despite the constitutive and cumulative influences of the above-named factors, African psychology did not emerge into the limelight until quite recently. The reasons for this delay are summarized below, all of them perceived from the context of the larger history of University Education in Africa. Such effort at contextualizing the problem within a larger frame is considered necessary because, as indicated elsewhere (Nwoye, 2012; Obiechina, 1992), following the impact of colonialism in Africa, universities in Africa arose as a product of Africa's colonial contact with Europe. And most of them started in the 1960s and 1970s after each of the countries gained political independence from their erstwhile colonial masters, such as Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, and Portugal. In this way, some of them, like the Universities of Ibadan (Nigeria), Ghana (Ghana), Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), Makerere (Uganda), and Nairobi (Kenya) originally started as offshore Colleges of the University of London, with each initially flying the flag of their "mother university" in London, and offering courses, such as psychology, that were developed abroad and imported to Africa.

Thus, with roots that were firmly planted in Europe rather than in Africa, most universities in sub-Saharan Africa, largely operated as clones that were forced to model their systems, including their curricular provisions and traditions, along the lines of the already existing and well-acclaimed Western universities: for example, London, Oxford, and Cambridge in Britain; Paris, Ecole Normale, and Sorbonne in France; Cologne, Bonn, and Leipzig in Germany; and Harvard, California, and Stanford in the USA, to mention but a few (Nwoye, 2012). And these foreign universities, while believing in the superiority of their systems and Western worldview generally, fully entertained a paternalistic, proprietorial attitude towards African universities (Nwoye, 2012).

The situation, at that time, especially in the 1950s and 60s, was, in particular, not helped by the paralysing influence of a "colonial mentality" and the accompanying inferiority complex that engulfed the whole of the peoples of black Africa in the aftermath of their European colonial contact; who, on account of the crisis of cultural denigration that Chinua Achebe had made reference to in one of his writings (1964, 1973), started to look down upon and doubted themselves and their cultures, affirming the superiority of Western knowledge systems, worldview, and way of life (Nwoye, 2001).

What the above observations mean to show is that African universities, with the exception of a few in South Africa, came into being already intimidated by the painful and humiliating colonial experience that caused the whole continent and its peoples to lose belief in its cultures and traditions, philosophy and religion, psychology and medicine, names and stories, and rituals and ceremonies. And our European colleagues that came into the scene thereafter were overcome by bias, and lost confidence in African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, themes, and possibilities. In this way, the idea of African psychology at that time was unthinkable as many Western commentators merely saw the prospects of such an area of study in negative, disparaging terms, viewing it as a venture that entails nothing but a study of the so-called primitive practices of the indigenous African peoples; none of which, in their view, could sensibly be considered as proper subjects for academic scholarship like that engaged in Eurocentric psychology. This scenario was inimical to any early efforts to entrench African Psychology as an academic discipline in African universities.

### **Major phases in the evolution of African Psychology**

However, this negative state of affairs was seriously called to question with time. And four major phases or stages can be identified in the evolution of African psychology as an academic discipline, the whole drama of which is related to the dialectics of African scholars' responses to the dominance of Western psychology in African universities. Among the four stages are the following:

#### *The stage of uncritical acceptance of Western approach to psychology*

The first (starting from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s) is the stage of our uncritical acceptance of the Western approach to psychology during which time *the people of Europe and America were doing all the talking and we here in Africa were doing all the listening* (Achebe, 1989–1990). In that way the pioneer Euro-American psychologists and theory builders such as James, McDougall, Wundt, Freud, Jung, Adler, Pavlov, Skinner, Bandura, Maslow, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Lewin, Tajfel, Eysenck, Allport, Rogers, and Beck, were the same historical figures in psychology that occupied the centre stage in our own psychological training back home in Africa.

#### *The stage of our selective appreciation of both African and Western approaches to psychology*

This was followed (in the 1970s and 1980s) by the second stage. Our critical attitude and vision at this stage benefited immensely from the inspiring thoughts and works of Africanist scholars including Fanon, Cheik anta Diop, Cabral, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Thurstan Shaw, Senghor, Césaire, Achebe, Soyinka, wa Thiong'o, Mphahlele, Okot pitek, Lambo, Holdstock, Biko, Toni Morrison, Dangarembga, and Mariama Ba.

Through the inspirational thoughts and writings of these luminaries, we came to acquire new eyes for seeing and interrogating our inherited African traditions as well as the prevailing Western psychological knowledge and Eurocentric worldview and

assumptions that dominated our university programmes. And we came out of this transformation with the conviction that while some of the mainstream, Eurocentric psychology theories are useful in our context, there are many old and new problems of living within the post-apartheid South Africa and other African contexts, in which their potency and value are completely irrelevant. This dialectical recognition opened our eyes to the *partiality* and *relativity* of much of human knowledge (African and Western) and to the limitations that each is prone to when approached as the sole methodology for doing meaningful psychology in Africa.

### *The stage of selective accommodation of African and Western psychological traditions*

The third stage emerged from the 1980s and 1990s. It was the period in which we came to see the need for selective accommodation of “*the best that is thought and said*” in both African and Western psychological traditions. And it came as a product of that realization that *not all* aspects of Eurocentric worldview, psychology, and epistemology are relevant for meeting the challenges of our current African world. **The basic limitation of the Eurocentric worldview stems from its individual-centric bias or the *one-person* paradigm to psychology, which ignores the influence of the political, the cultural, the community, and the contextual in the life of the individual that is highly palpable to us with the influence of wars and other man-made disasters plaguing the continent** (Nwoye, 2014). This recognition was instrumental to the evolution and advancement, by many African psychologists, of the importance of adopting the *both-and* philosophy of appropriation in our approach to our dual (African and Western) heritage in the study of psychology in Africa.

### *The fourth and current stage entailing the need for “writing beyond the ending” of our two inherited psychological traditions*

This was followed (from the year 2000 to date) by the fourth and current stage. **Our critical effort at this stage is to work towards going beyond our inherited traditions** (African and Euro-American) to develop and formulate new theories and strategies, and new concepts and writings for **confronting the current challenges of the modern African environment**. This was the thinking behind my synoptic theory of the African self (Nwoye, 2006a) and my recent publication on the “embodied gates of stress” in ordinary life (Nwoye, 2013a; as well as most of my other contributions that came before it, such as Nwoye, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007–2008, 2009, 2010). Thus, at this present stage in our response to the two psychological traditions (African and Western) we have inherited, we aim to see ourselves “as makers of culture and formulators of theories and values of psychological civilization” (Obiechina, 1992, p. 2) for the new people of Africa.

### **And so, what is African Psychology?**

In response to this question, a careful review of the literature shows that two important definitional streams now exist in the conceptualization of the term African Psychology. **The first is from North America; in particular, from Black scholars in the United States.**

Thus, commenting in the Foreword to *Handbook of African American Psychology*, Cross (2009) asserts that:

African Psychology, ... is an invention, a social construction hammered out by Black intellectuals in the Americas ... a formulation derived from the *imagination* of Blacks living outside Africa – descendants of slaves lacking direct contact with Africa for over 100 years – who are looking “back” to Africa for solutions to predicaments, problems, and dilemmas enveloping Blacks throughout the Diaspora and especially United States. ... African Psychology is critical to a comprehensive analysis of the Black condition in the United States. (p. xi)

Contributing to the debate, Obasi and Smith (2009) draw attention to the fact that the African Psychology Institute of the Association of Black Psychologists in the United States sees African Psychology as synonymous with “African-Centred Psychology” which is defined as: “dynamic manifestation of the unifying African principles, values and tradition. ... the self-conscious centering of psychological analysis and applications in African reality, culture, and epistemology” (pp. 47–48).

A similar definition to the above also emanating from North America is the one credited to Jamison (2008, p. 96; Nwoye, 2014). According to Jamison, African Psychology can be taken to refer to a field of study interested in investigating and understanding the key psychological costs of being an African and Black in America. Jamison also suggests that African Psychology encompasses the study and understanding of the positive qualities of the African American people and the powerful influences in their daily struggles and triumphs.

The above definitions, although largely descriptive in content, can be seen to represent a radical redefinition of psychology (as understood in mainstream psychology) that makes reference to and takes into account the African worldview and Black experience, and the “metaphysical humanity of African people.” Taken together, they suggest that African Psychology has a social mission and “... rejects the Western doctrine of materialism and embraces the possibilities associated with a spirit-based ontological system” (Obasi & Smith, 2009, p. 48).

The other source of a definition for the term African Psychology is the one that emanates from continental Africa. I refer to the definition of that term which I proposed in my entry on *African Psychology* recently published in the *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* edited by Teo (Nwoye, 2014). As indicated in that definition, African Psychology “can be taken to refer to the systematic and informed study of the complexities of human mental life, culture and experience in the pre- and post-colonial African world” (p. 57). My rationale for conceiving the field in this way, was to show that African Psychology is much more inclusive and complicated than the term African Indigenous Psychology with which it is most often confused; since, unlike the latter, it has both a pre- and a post-colonial reference and goes beyond attention to the study of human subjectivity, under a *one-person* paradigm. Hence, when reference is made only to its pre-colonial emphasis, attention is directed merely to its indigenous psychology component which entails “the systematic and holistic study of the human being and the human condition in pre-European Africa” (Nwoye, 2014, p. 57).

However, when attention is focused on its post-colonial and contemporary emphases, African Psychology embraces not only our need to take into account “the gaps and

absences created by the mainstream psychology's limited understanding of the human condition and the life of the mind in Africa" (Nwoye, 2014, p. 58), but also the task of helping the post-apartheid and contemporary African people to recognize and appreciate the triumphs and the threats, and the opportunities and dilemmas of inhabiting present-day African environments.

Now when a comparison is made between the definitions of African Psychology propagated in North America, and my own above-mentioned formulation, some areas of difference can be seen to stand out. One such difference is the noticeable tendency by our North American colleagues to equiparate the notion of African Psychology with that of Black Psychology. As I hope to demonstrate, the validity of such a perspective appears totally difficult to prove. Indeed, another area of difference between the two approaches to defining the term also derives from the tendency of Black psychologists in North America to lean in their definitions more towards seeing African Psychology as synonymous with African Indigenous Psychology. This view, although important, is, as I plan to demonstrate, something like mistaking the part for the whole.

For, although I am quite aware that there is currently a contestation in the literature (Allwood, & Berry, 2006; Kim & Berry, 1993) that all psychologies should indeed be understood as indigenous psychologies, that contestation may not totally be accurate when applied to post-colonial societies like we have in Africa where, due to the impact of colonialism and African contact with Europe, African experience has become more complicated than in our pre-European past. Hence African Psychology, in my view, should be understood as a *both-and* psychology; that is to say, as an inclusive psychology encompassing not only the study of African indigenous psychology but also the study of the human condition and culture and the life of the mind in contemporary Africa, as well as the exploration and adoption, where necessary, of aspects of Western psychology that appear relevant for enabling us to confront the challenges of our present African predicament.

## **African Psychology: Goals and distinctions**

Like every serious academic discipline, African Psychology is a field with a four-way concern: (a) Theory development, (b) Research and Documentation, (c) Critical engagement, and (d) Clinical and professional practice.

An attempt is made below to clarify what is involved in each of these dimensions, as follows.

### *The goal of theory development*

Now, when I say that African Psychology is interested in the task of theory building and development, I mean two things: first, that it aims to generate vital vocabularies or "the tools to think with" and the conceptual frameworks for explaining and summarizing the nature of the human condition in contemporary Africa and in the Diaspora. And, second, that through its theories and conceptual formulations, African Psychology proposes to uplift the literature in the field from the level of mere description, to that of scientific conceptualization of the phenomena of interest to the scholars in the field.

Considered from these perspectives, African Psychology is still a very young field of study, with few theories available in its “savings” account. Fortunately, some efforts are being made by some illustrious African psychologists to correct this shortfall.

### *Research and documentation goals*

In its research emphasis, African Psychology is interested in engaging in field studies with the potential to generate relevant data for addressing the psychosocial needs and problems of the people of Africa, particularly those intended to help to bring to the fore the African Indigenous Knowledges deemed vital for attending to the peculiar challenges of living in the contemporary African world. In some cases, African psychologists engage in the exercise of *restudying* some of the themes and problems earlier studied but wrongly understood and coded or conceptualized by foreign researchers, due to lack of expertise in the language of the people they studied. Through such a language barrier, such researchers were unable to penetrate to the details and discover accurate meanings and significance of some of the issues studied, such as the psychological significance of the mortuary practices and naming rituals of the people of Africa.

Given the above, one can then say that African Psychology has come into being to move beyond the boundaries and the paradigm of psychological research and practice erected by Western psychology.

### *The critical engagement goal*

In its critical practice, the key emphasis is, among other things, to investigate and re-evaluate some contested African cultural beliefs and practices that appear to have outlived much of their usefulness and relevance in contemporary times, and to **fashion out new roles for women in Africa as well as to protect modern African women from the trammels of tradition** (Nwoye, 2010). Indeed it is believed that much African psychological scholarship is needed if we are to lose the blinders of our past. And our critical aim is to help the young in the modern African context to grow up without the prejudices of their forefathers.

### *The clinical and professional practice goal*

African Psychology is not only a theoretical discipline. It is also a clinical discipline. Thus, through its clinical component African Psychology works towards bringing healing to the distressed in society, investing such clients with important ideas and perspectives for returning order and meaning to their lives (Nwoye, 2010). But over and above this reactive aim of its clinical practice, African Psychology is also interested in improving our understanding of the conditions for successful living in contemporary Africa.

## **Sources of differences between African and Western psychologies**

Following Jamison’s (2008) classification, there are about 10 areas of differences between African and Western psychologies, but only four of them can be summarized here as follows:

1. Western psychology lays emphasis on the use of objective, quantitative measuring or data gathering instruments in its study of the psychology of human beings. African Psychology rejects this emphasis on quantification and measurement as a limiting methodology in the holistic study of human beings and their existential contexts that encompass more than visible, tangible realities.
2. Western psychology defines humans only in material, measurable, or observable terms, ignoring attention to human religiosity and spirituality, which belong to the invisible realm and which in African Psychology are an important source of influence in human beings.
3. Western psychology believes that human behaviour is what it is with no significant meaning beyond what is actually observed; an assumption considered unacceptable in African Psychology, since human beings in Africa live most of their lives according to what things (such as people's words or actions) mean to them. Thus, the African universe, unlike the Aristotelian (Eurocentric) universe, is an interpreted universe (Nwoye, 2002, 2006a).
4. Western psychology "characterizes the death of the body as entailing the death of the mind" as well (Jamison, 2008, p. 101); which in an African perspective is considered unacceptable, since in Africa there is a belief and conviction that our ancestors, though dead, are still living (Mbiti, 1969); which implies that they are believed to be dead only in body, and not in mind and memory.

Based on the above, one can then say that African Psychology has come into being *not to displace but to move beyond* the boundaries of psychological research and practice erected by Western, mainstream psychology that is clearly a late 19th century invention, but presently firmly Americanized as a discipline. In addition, African Psychology is both like and unlike the project of human self-reflection; a preoccupation that is found wherever human beings exist, but something that is different from the scientific project of a psychology created in the late 19th century. Hence, over and above the idea of African Psychology as entailing the project of human self-reflection is its further social-cultural mission to promote a systematic understanding of the human condition and culture in post-apartheid Africa.

## Multiple epistemologies in African Psychology

Now, understanding epistemology to refer to the study of methods and sources of acquiring useful human knowledge, one can say that African Psychology is grounded on pluriformic or inclusive epistemological traditions. This means that African Psychology draws from several sources of acquiring human knowledge.

These epistemologies include: the observationist, the narrativist, the proverbial, the sage, the generational, the hermeneutic, the Kamukunji, the Revelationist, the Dialogical, the Propositional, the Instrumentalist, the Dream-related, the Rationalist, and the Mythical/Metaphorical epistemologies.

Due to space constraints only the last of these could bear further clarification here. In this context, the term mythical or metaphorical epistemology is used to refer to knowledge gained through the avenue of myths and metaphors and in which the operating logic

of things is not the binary logic of Aristotle adopted in Western science and psychology, but rather what Adésinà (2002) refers to as the *Ti'bi-t'ire* logic of indigenous African traditions.

The *Ti'bi-t'ire* logic is in sharp contrast to Aristotle's *binary* or the *either/or* logic. For instance, under the Aristotlean binary *logic of the excluded middle*, one is either tall or short; and not tall AND short at the same time. In contrast, the *Ti'bi-t'ire* logic rests on the position that existential membership is a matter of degree; and indeed, that one can be two things at the same time depending on the context (Adésinà, 2002). Hence, through such an inclusive logic we can call somebody "mom" even-though she is not directly our mom, but is related to our mom or plays the role of mom in our lives.

This kind of looking at things encompasses the truth of *metaphorical logic of inclusion*, and reflects other ways of theorizing on human knowledge that is fundamental in the epistemological context of African Psychology. Thus, while African Psychology like Western psychology values and pursues scientific, research-based knowledge, it also recognizes other ways of knowing not fully recognized in mainstream psychology.

### **African Psychology: Debate about its subject matter**

Under this theme the point to be emphasized is that the subject matter of African Psychology consists of the past and present peoples and cultures and experiences of life in Africa, with priority given to their individual and collective experiences; joys and losses; hopes and impediments; frustrations and challenges; needs and preferences; and attitudes to place, life, and land, death and the after-life, marriage and family, war and peace, spirituality and the supernatural order, morality and ethics, and African cultural institutions and practices (including African healing traditions and psychotherapies).

This means that African Psychology is, among other things, concerned with the study and understanding of the psychological significance of the oral traditions and metaphors of the great peoples of Africa, which Obiechina (1975) has referred to as "the encyclopaedia of African values, attitudes, history, and ethical models" (p. 2, see also 1992), traditions, worldviews, and ways of knowing. African Psychology is also the psychology of the human significance or the psychological capital of African written literatures in which are embedded a variety of mind-shaping categories and from which can be sourced the truths of human and social behaviour that nurture individual and communal attitudes and values in Africa.

African Psychology is similarly the psychology of "limits and boundaries" invented in indigenous African communities for instituting behaviour management and control in adults and children (Obiechina, 1975) for purposes of enhancing people's mental health. African Psychology is equally the psychology of the disillusionment of the post-independent African world, and the traumas that result from the double-edged gaze of the Western media in contemporary Africa. African Psychology is also the psychology of African feminism and women's concerns, including the psychology of the sources of complexity and friction in contemporary African families. It is also concerned with the study and understanding of the psychological consequences of the African's love for having children and the associated stresses and strains of childlessness in an African marriage (Nwapa, 1966, 1970).

African Psychology also encompasses the study and understanding of the psychology of African immigrants in Europe and North America (Nwoye, 2009; Oguine, 2000), as well as the crisis of transcultural identity in African narratives of childhood (Priebe, 2006). It also encompasses the psychology of the “hard surfaces” of the human existence in contemporary Africa, such as the enduring problems of war and refugee conditions and the ironies and paradoxes, and the contradictions and humiliations of the complicated present African environment.

Of course, it is impossible to exhaust the list of themes that come under the legitimate object of the study of African Psychology. But those already mentioned are enough to show that African Psychology as an academic subject field is that emerging specialization within the discipline of psychology in African universities specifically designed to champion the proper and holistic understanding of ancient and present Africans as psychological subjects, with the aim to contribute its own perspective towards the promotion of improved human understanding.

## What is African in African Psychology?

In relation to this question my view is that African Psychology’s claim to Africanity derives from the African content of its worldview that is holistic in depth and range, and in which the African universe is understood as a live, circular, and dynamic universe, a universe of multiple realities (natural, abstract, and spiritual) in close proximity and complicated transactions with one another. In this way its *biopsychosocial-spiritualist* (BPS-S) model of explaining sources of psychopathology in human beings is deemed more inclusive and aims to advance the prevailing *biopsychosocial* model valorized in mainstream psychology which fails to factor in the impact of religiosity and the place of mystery in peoples’ mental health.

Apart from being grounded in African worldview, African Psychology is also typically African on account of its emphasis on the pragmatic theory of truth (or the notion of truth in action) as well as its belief in the identity of contraries in human existence.

Further elaborations on these themes can now be undertaken as summarized below:

### **African worldview as anchor**

African Psychology is African in that its principles are anchored on the African’s view of reality. **Fundamental to that view of reality is the idea that nothing in life is absolute.** This view goes hand in hand with an acknowledgement in African Psychology of the existence of the phenomenon of interdependence between the individual and the community, reflected in the **basic principle of Ubuntu** or the belief that a human is human through other humans.

### **The African roots of African psychological concepts**

Apart from being grounded in African worldview, **another thing that makes African Psychology typically African is that its important conceptual edifice is drawn from the African concept of nature/world; notion of the human being; life and the origins of death;**

view of knowledge, reality, and truth; the concept of perception and time; nature of consciousness; rationality/reason; as well as the notion of mystery. These concepts and their African perspectives are clarified below. The descriptions are adopted with some modifications from my earlier formulations of them as highlighted elsewhere (Nwoye, 2013b).

**Nature/world.** African Psychology conceptualizes nature and the world from the perspective of the African cosmovision in which there is a belief that the entire universe is composed of three interdependent planes: the physical (material), the metaphysical (abstract), and the spiritual (transcendental). In this perspective, humans are believed to live in the midst of obscure forces, to which they stand in a dynamic moral and spiritual relationship and with which their destiny is involved. This framework goes with the belief that when provoked, these invisible forces can visit them with anger and adversity, but when appeased or well-served and disposed can bring them good fortune and blessings. And this belief can be linked to the current upsurge of prosperity religions in many corners of the continent in which the attempt is made to use the resources and other rituals of religion to enhance their feeling of optimism and the assumption of being in firm, secure hands to the generality of the members (Nwoye, 2002).

**African concept of the human being.** Another crucial thing that reflects the Africanness of African Psychology is that in it, unlike in Western psychology, a human being is conceived of as a complicated organism, simultaneously physical and spiritual in nature, and constitutive of multiple and interdependent dimensions that encompass the biological (the bodily), the social, the psychological (the heart, the emotional), the spiritual (the religious), and the metaphysical (the liminality, hopes, and beliefs) aspects (Nwoye, 2006a; 2013b). Indeed, the common understanding in African perspective is that there is a dialectical interpenetration of the individual and the community in which neither has full primacy (Nwoye, 2006a). Based on this, the Western notion of the self as a self-contained, imperial, and value-free agency in control of its fate in the world (Cushman, 1990) appears foreign to African Psychology.

**Notion of life and the origins of death.** African psychologists, unlike their counterparts in Western psychology, recognize and work with the view that the average African holds a precarious view of the universe (Kalu, 1978). This means that they tend to attribute many forms of misfortune, illness, death, and failure to arise from the activities of ubiquitous malevolent spirits, vengeful ancestors, and forces of destiny operating through nature, and some evil human beings (Nwoye, 2013b). **This implies that in African Psychology, unlike in Western humanistic psychology, there is recognition of the fact that humans are contributory to, but yet are not in full control of their fate in the world.** In this way, the outcome of their urge for full self-actualization is not under their sole control (Nwoye, 2013b).

**Theory of reality.** Again the theory of reality that is recognized in African Psychology is one with an African root in which there is acknowledged the existence of two major levels of reality, visible and invisible or material and spiritual realms, both of which are interdependent in their relationship to one another. In this perspective there is a belief in

that scheme of reality which binds the everyday to the extra-ordinary in a lively reciprocity. Thus, as understood in the general African thought, and recognized in African Psychology, the perfect combination of the two levels of reality (material and spiritual) ensures the harmony and ordered progress of the members of the human world (Nwoye, 2013b).

**Theory of knowledge.** Another thing that is African in African Psychology is the recognition emphasized in African psychological research, theory, and practice that human knowledge is partial, historical, and evolutionary in nature and changes with time. For this reason African psychologists believe, as indicated earlier in this paper, that there are multiple sources of human knowledge. And they derive some of their working knowledge as in mainstream psychology from direct research on a given problem.

**Theory of truth.** African psychology is typically African in perspective in that it acknowledges and respects, as in the general African thought, the existence of multiple perspectives to truth, including the existence and significance of the phenomenon of complementary duality in human contexts (Nwoye, 2006a, 2007–2008). By this is meant that in human life, nothing exists in complete isolation and that when one thing stands, another stands beside it (Achebe, 1989–1990). In this perspective, the understanding is that there is no single road to truth, no royal road to success, or to the good life.

**Theory of perception.** This is another concept that is typically African in African Psychology. By this is meant that African psychologists recognize and work with the view that human behaviour is influenced by the way things seem or feel to the individual or the group concerned. Consequently, in African Psychology human perception is understood as phenomenological/perspectival or personal in nature and thus subject to human errors. In this way, African psychologists believe in the evolutionary nature of perceptual competence in human beings. That is, that it gets better with age due to the influence of experience in the evolution of people's cognition; hence, the saying in most parts of Africa, that what the elders may see while sitting down, the youth may not see even while standing up (Nwoye, 2013a, 2013b).

**Capacity for synoptic time consciousness.** Again, like in general African thought, African psychologists recognize that a special constituent of the African human being is its capacity for the abstract attitude, reflected in the individual's power to live and move in the shadow of the "thick present." This orientation refers to an African individual's capacity to hold in his or her present-time consciousness the three dimensions of time: the "past present," the "present present," and the "future present" synoptically (Nwoye, 2006a). In this way, the present state of the African individual keeps on reminding him or her not only of the present situation (good or bad) confronting him or her but also of a past that has gone before and the future that is yet to come. Many African psychologists work with the assumption that this capacity for the abstract attitude, which promotes the African's capacity for a synoptic time consciousness, is a foundation for good mental health. It enables many people in contemporary Africa to live beyond the decadence and tribulations of the contemporary African situation (Nwoye, 2006a).

**Concept of culture-bound rationality/reason.** African psychologists, like their counterparts from the West, fully recognize the place of rationality/reason in human life. But in African Psychology, the understanding is that the *African's universe is not an Aristotelian universe (that underpins mainstream psychology), but essentially an interpreted universe*, implying a world in which people come with meaning influenced by local knowledge into their personal experiences and in that way go beyond the direct event that confronts them. For this reason, African psychologists acknowledge that in the experience of practical human living, life can, at times, be larger than logic. And what things might look like and seem to foreign observers, the natives may see in a different light.

**Human condition and mystery.** Now, another thing that marks the African roots of African Psychology is that in African psychology, there is a belief in the existence of mystical causality (Nwoye, 2006a) in the human world. **In that way, reasons for failure or success are often blamed on the deliberate agency of inscrutable forces, which at times operate through the agency of evil-minded persons to cause disasters to targeted victims.** This aspect of the African understanding of the human condition is the one that is meant to suggest that in the African imagination, physical nature is not dead but alive, imbued with immanent vitality and spirit force which animates and infuses nature with mystical potency (Nwoye, 2006a).

**African spirituality.** One additional theme in African Psychology that illustrates its African roots is the recognition given to the influence of spirituality in the life of African clients. This notion coincides with the **important assumption in Africa that God is involved in the details of our human experience and that things do not happen unless God approves them.** The same attitude encourages the great principle, in Africa, of resignation to God's will when confronted with problems that one can neither handle nor alter (Nwoye, 2013b).

## What African Psychology is not?

Here, the point emphasized is that although African Psychology encompasses the content and emphasis of African indigenous psychology, it is *not* equivalent to the psychology of the ancient Africans and their worlds. African Psychology rather, is a much broader field, *janus* or *sankofa*-oriented in time perspective and orientation, concerned not only with studying and understanding the psychology of past Africans and their worlds, but also the psychology of contemporary Africans and the complicated multicultural and multi-racial identities under which they live and work.

Similarly, as intimated earlier, **African Psychology is not synonymous with Black psychology.** For, although the study and understanding of the psychology of Black Africans (in continental Africa and in the Diaspora) is implicated in the notion of African Psychology, African Psychology is also the psychology of the multi-racial Africans and their worlds. In this way, the full scope of subjects in the study of African Psychology encompasses not only members of the black African populations, but also those of the Indian and white Africans, respectively, for whom the land of Africa is their original place of birth and upbringing. Hence African Psychology equally embraces the psychology of white identity in contemporary Africa in terms of the

study of the legitimate worries, anxieties, ambiguities, fears, aspirations, beliefs, strengths, and concerns of the European and Indian Africans that are now and forever in the midst of, and co-heirs of the continent, with black African populations. In this way, African Psychology is not a psychology of polarization. Rather, its aim is to promote the achievement of human synthesis in a race-less society.

## Future directions and expectations

In commenting on the nature of the future or the prospects of African Psychology the first point to make is that the development of the field will continue and intensify in the future. The hope is that with time more universities in Africa and abroad will see the need to hold courses on African Psychology at both the undergraduate and the postgraduate levels. And it is expected that more research funding agencies (such as the NRF in South Africa) will come out in support of research chairs to promote the production of basic research and theories to enhance the study of African Psychology as an academic discipline. Finally it is envisaged that with time, the current *protest character* of the field will give way to other more positive themes that can uplift the field and make it more responsive to the needs and problems of contemporary African clients.

## Expanding the frontiers of African Psychology

Compared to Western or Euro-American psychology which possesses both interior (located in Western universities) and exterior frontiers (located in African universities), African Psychology has so far only an interior frontier (located in African universities) in the advancement of its contribution to psychology and improvement of human understanding. It has yet to establish an external frontier in foreign universities (in Europe and Asia, for example). In this way, only the first stage of its frontier formation has been accomplished. In this regard, its future prospects will, among other things, be along the lines of trying to establish external frontiers for the study of African Psychology (in its broad, inclusive, and transracial perspective) in the wider world.

## Overview and conclusion

With the discussion to this stage, one can then conclude by saying that African Psychology is the psychology of the pan-African peoples and their cultures and societies aimed at producing important and emic-based knowledge of the human psychological situation in continental Africa and in the Diaspora. In particular, African Psychology has emerged as a response to outgrow the scientific positivism of the 19th century. In its inclusive epistemological perspective, it recognizes with Philosophy and Art the notion of discontinuity and indeterminism that is found at the base of everything that exists in the world. Hence African Psychology represents a new way of approaching the professional study of psychology in Africa in which opportunity is created to explore and account for the *real* and the *miraculous* in people's lives. In this way African Psychology can be understood to embrace both a psychology of the ordinary and of the extraordinary; a psychology for something, rather than for its own sake.

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