

# Using history to understand psychology in non-Western countries<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Psychology has experienced strong growth in many countries in the twentieth century. This growth has been the strongest in industrialised, urbanised democracies, and as a result, the discipline has come under criticism for its Western bias. While not denying the possibility of such bias, this paper argues that a historical analysis provides a more thoroughgoing explanation than this “cultural critique” for what has happened in the relationship between psychology and these societies. It is argued that there is a special affinity between psychology and the type of subjects, and their self-understandings, found in liberal democracies. As a result, the subject matter of the discipline itself is historically variable, and psychology is reflexively involved in this process. How the interplay between government, psychology, and its subject matter constructs and re-constructs human subjectivity in these societies remains unpredictable.*

**Zusammenfassung:** *Die Psychologie erfuhr im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert in vielen Ländern eine starke Entwicklung. Dieses Wachstum war am stärksten in industrialisierten, urbanisierten, westlichen Demokratien, was zur Folge hatte, dass die Disziplin wegen ihrer westlichen Beschränkung in die Kritik geriet. Obwohl diese Beschränkung nicht verneint werden soll, wird im Folgenden dargelegt, dass die historische Analyse zu einer tiefer gehenden Erklärung der Beziehung zwischen der Psychologie und diesen Gesellschaften führt, als es die ‘kulturalistische’ Kritik vermag. Es gibt eine besondere Affinität zwischen Psychologie und der Art von Subjekten, wie sie in liberalen Demokratien leben, sowie deren Selbstverständnissen. Daraus ergibt sich, dass der Gegenstand der Disziplin selbst historisch variabel und dass die Psychologie reflexiv in diesen Prozess eingebunden ist. Wie die menschliche Subjektivität im Wechselspiel zwischen den herrschenden politischen Verhältnissen, der Psychologie und deren Gegenstand in diesen Gesellschaften konstruiert wird, bleibt unvorhersehbar.*

Since its early beginnings, psychology as a discipline has had a particular affinity for countries in the Western world. Indeed, it was in Britain, Western Europe, and North America that psychology experienced an exponential growth after the Second World War, and this continued until the present. Psychology also moved quite quickly to other countries, outside this heartland of psychology. Frequently this movement or export to other countries occurred hand-in-hand with colonial expansion (in

countries like South Africa, India and the Phillipines, for example), but frequently also outside the colonial context (in Japan, for example, psychology was taught in the early part of the twentieth century). The export of American psychology accelerated after the Second World War, not only to the non-Western countries that were referred to as the Third World, but also to countries like the Netherlands (Van Strien, 1993). Indeed, when the discipline is institutionalised in other countries, at a later stage than in the USA, there is evidence that in some countries it grows at an even faster pace (see Sexton & Hogan, 1992).

How do we then understand the attraction that psychology had as a discipline in countries from North America and Western Europe, to countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa? One way to try answer this question would be to review critiques of psychology in the last twenty years or so. One of the criticisms often raised is that psychology shows a singular lack of responsiveness to different cultures, or for its cultural one-sidedness. These critiques are often phrased in terms of "Eurocentric" (e.g. Bulhan, 1985; Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994); "Westocentric" (Holdstock, 2000); "individuocentrism" (Holdstock, 2000); "irrelevance" (Joshi, 1992), and "ethnocentrism" (e.g. Marsella, 1998). This cultural critique of psychology has become very influential in the debate involving psychology, its knowledge and its position in different societies. The debate is of course a little wider than this, and has been extended to include the notion of indigenous psychology (Heelas & Lock, 1981) or even cross-cultural psychology (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998), albeit in a less critical mode.

My concern in this paper is with South Africa, where psychology has been a presence since the early 1920s. The recent democratic transformation of this society has made it a particularly interesting model case to examine in the debate about psychology and society. In Africa, South Africa dominates as far as psychology is concerned. As an area of university study, it is immensely popular. Louw (1992) estimated that approximately one in five university students take a course in psychology. In the book by Sexton and Hogan (1992), only three African countries appear: South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Egypt. Abou-Hatab (1992, p. 125) said of psychology in Egypt that it had "low status", although it was probably the country that had the greatest number of qualified psychologists in North Africa and among the Middle Eastern countries that belong to the Arab League. Akin-Ogundeji (1991) estimated that there were about 150 psychologists in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria combined. He laments that psychology in Nigeria "is still largely a classroom-research enter-

prise" with little practical relevance "to the problems of living in contemporary Nigerian society" (p. 3).

South African psychologists, when they criticise the discipline and its local manifestations, have used terms similar to the critiques based on culture, mentioned earlier. I want to suggest that while "culture" may be a useful framework for a critique of psychology, it is less useful as a framework for analysis. Instead, I should like to argue that history provides a more powerful starting point for an analysis of the position and functioning of psychology in "contemporary societies", wherever those societies might be geographically.

What is the subject matter of psychology? How is this subject matter linked to a social reality beyond the discipline? Clearly, these are questions that can be answered both in cultural as well as historical terms. From a cultural critique perspective, it could be argued that the human categories that psychologists study are culturally embedded, particularly in "Western cultures". In this the critics are correct – psychological categories exist in a social-cultural context, and represent ways in which members of a particular culture make sense of human life. But a historical analysis approaches the linkage between psychology and society via slightly different questions, such as: How have these categories been defined, and how have they come to be included in the subject matter of psychology? How were they constituted in certain ways (and not in others)? Historians have pointed out that, what we will find, is that "...all psychological categories have been historically variable constructions. To gain an understanding of the categories in common use at the moment, we need to see them in historical perspective" (Danziger, 1999, p. 82). Otherwise, we work on the implicit assumption that psychology studies a fixed and timeless human nature, which is studied in its "psychological" aspects, such as intelligence, motivation, emotions, learning, etc. Without an historical understanding, we would regard these psychological categories, not surprisingly, "historically invariant phenomena of nature" (Danziger, 1999, p. 79).

In addition, the categories psychologists are interested in do not exist independently of the discipline itself – psychology has contributed to the definition of these categories. Contrary to the view that psychology studies trans-historical "human nature", historians would submit that psychology's subject matter is at least co-created by the discipline itself. "More specifically, we are looking at Psychology's role in the dynamic psychological process by which human nature constantly recreates, re-forms and regenerates itself, primarily in Western cultures" (Richards, 1996, p. 5).

Without the psychologist's intervention there would be no category of people like "research subjects" or "clients" or "multiple personality disordered"; these are shaped by the discipline's own professional activity. There are no "natural" categories of people like these that exist independently of psychology's investigation or professional practice. For Hacking (1986, p. 229) "the category and the people in it emerged hand in hand", as psychology creates or shapes phenomena of interest through their investigative practices and procedures.

The history of psychology therefore is not independent from the history of its subject matter, human subjectivity (Danziger, 1999; Richards, 1996).

Without a historical dimension, a cultural analysis is vulnerable to the same pitfalls of a timeless conception of human nature, only now outside the Euro-American axes of psychology. When Holdstock (2000), for example, refers in numerous places in his book to sub-Saharan Africa in terms such as "the holistic dimension of the way of being", the spiritual dimension, extended interrelatedness, and other-centredness, as characteristics of human nature in Africa, he comes close to a position that makes these categories of human nature appear self-evident, "natural" and trans-historical.

The properties of psychology's subject matter change over time and space, or, at least, we don't know which ones are invariable and which ones are not (Richards, 1987). It means that the very objects of psychology have been constituted as part of human history, and first and foremost need to be analysed historically. Such an approach makes an historical analysis central to our understanding of psychology and its subject matter in all societies, and is why an historical analysis is given priority. A historical analysis allows us to address the question: Why is psychology so "Eurocentric", and "Westocentric"?, to produce an answer that is simultaneously similar and different to the answers given by the cultural critics. The answer is because the very object of psychology, its subject matter, its vocabulary and its frameworks have been constituted historically in the Western world. The classification of human individuals according to certain psychological categories, and the kinds of persons consequently created, have to do with culture, but to identify them we need history.

How then can we understand this discipline, with its connection to its subject matter, and its rise to prominence in particular societies? If we again take the cultural critiques of psychology in Africa as a starting point, it is clear that many of them base their critique on the ideological nature of knowledge claims in psychology. The discipline, according to them, participates in the domination of individuals or groups, or legitimises this

domination. If one asks how this happens, the answer typically lies in the nature of power and how power relations are exercised. No matter how profitable it might be, this line of critique still assumes (and takes as its starting point) human subjectivity as an unproblematic, immutable given. Generally I prefer the historical analysis suggested by Nikolas Rose, who in turn follows a Foucauldian interpretation. In the rest of the paper, I want to concentrate on one aspect of this analysis: the importance of the creation of a certain kind of subjectivity to understand the connection between psychology and society.

In “the West”, human beings are understood as being equipped with an interiority, with an inner domain, that in the nineteenth century became the subject matter of psychology. Of course, the contours of this inner domain are already visible in Western Europe prior to the mid-nineteenth century, under the influence of Romanticism (see Ellenberger, 1970, for some of the Romantic influences on psychoanalysis). But once psychology emerged in the second half of the 19th century and flourished in the 20th century, it increasingly articulated the inward turn in Western culture. “The essence of the modern is psychologism, the experience and interpretation of the world according to the reactions of our inner selves, as if in an inner world; it is the dissolving of all stability in subjectivity” (Simmel, cited by Le Rider, 1993, p. 29). In this rich inner life some form of truth may be discerned (Taylor, 1989), and individuals pursue knowledge of their inner lives, via introspective self-examination of some kind or another.

New subjectivities are being manufactured every day, in a myriad of ways at many different sites. When we participate in the various activities required of us in modern institutions, we in fact are invited into different arenas of identity formation. These arenas include such disparate expressive areas as family, gender, the relations between the generations, working life, going to a hospital, media, diet, health, aesthetics, and much more. We have to learn to examine aspects of ourselves and make the results of that examination intelligible to others. For example: when we think about our successes or failures; when we think about how to lose weight on a diet; when we complete a survey asking about our personal opinions and attributes; and so on.

In modern societies, or what Rose (1990) would refer to as liberal democracies, these subjectivities are presupposed in the way we live in the institutions that characterise them. Without going into any detail of Rose’s work, suffice it to say that in liberal democracies individuals are recognised as having certain rights and freedoms, and to “govern” in these

societies, the freedom and autonomy of individuals have to be acknowledged. Indeed, the discourse of individuality and freedom hails autonomous individuals into existence, who “accept” the norms of greater rationality, independence, and self-knowledge. Rose (1990; 1996) has argued convincingly that in these societies “government” is accomplished via the self-regulation or self-government done by individuals who see themselves as certain kinds of subjects. In these societies psychology is an attractive discipline, as a result of its promise to achieve socially desirable objectives through the self-regulation of individuals.

Although psychology has not created the cultural interest in the inner world of the unique individual, the discipline’s expansion in the 20th century had powerful effects. Psychologists are central characters in modernity, as they shape and re-shape subjectivity. They exhort individuals to know themselves, and to be true to those selves. Psychology provides the guidelines on the road to self-discovery, and bestows upon us the techniques for examining and evaluating the self. It provides vocabularies that we use to make our lives meaningful to ourselves, to disclose to friends and lovers who we are, and to express whom we want to be. We utilise psychological knowledge to live our lives in psychological terms, as we work out how to conduct ourselves in sexual relations, in bringing up children, in work, etc. It is an essential resource as we work upon ourselves as free, autonomous subjects in democratic societies, governing ourselves through the psychological techniques of self-scrutiny.

Most countries outside the historical heartland of psychology did not share in the cultural and historical process through which human individuals in “the West” interpret themselves and others as “subjects” with a unique inner life. When psychology is imported into these countries, it introduces a lack of fit between the discipline and its socio-historical context.

Psychology in South Africa allows some scope for examining this lack of fit, and the relationship between psychology and a modernising, democratising society. Many would argue that a Foucauldian type analysis has little bearing on the position of psychology in South Africa, given the country’s history. But that would be a premature conclusion. Present-day South Africa is a democratic country, under a constitution that is almost a model of a liberal democracy. Like others of its kind, the South African constitution frames the regulation of conduct of its citizens in terms of the notions of personal responsibility in law, and individual rights and individual freedoms in politics. (For examples of non-liberal governmentalities, see Geuter, 1992; Louw & Danziger, 2000; and Rose, 1996, pp. 13-17).

Chapter 1 of the South African Constitution declares that "Everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law." Chapter 2 contains a Bill of Rights, which states: "This Bill of Rights is a cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. It enshrines the rights of all people in our country and affirms the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom" (quotes are from the 1996 South African Constitution, to be found at <http://www.gov.za/constitution/1996>).

The citizens of South Africa thus are governed under a Constitution framed in the language of rights, and of individuals. The Constitution establishes and hails all citizens to be free and autonomous individuals within a legal and constitutional framework that protects and nurtures such individuals. It therefore forms the bedrock for constituting citizens of the state as autonomous, self-regulating agents endowed with rights. Many of the micro-techniques to do this have been in place for a long time, but not applied equally to all citizens (Louw & Danziger, 2000). For example, only recently was education made compulsory for all children under a certain age in South Africa.

The very conditions that made Psychology such a pervasive force in modern societies thus are already present in a fairly advanced state in South Africa. In numerous practical sites the capacities for individuals are resources for governing authorities, and for individuals themselves. Exactly how human subjectivities will be constructed in these sites, given the numerous and different cultural resources individuals will draw on in South Africa, is almost impossible to predict. Part of the reason for such unpredictability is the plurality of sites where these constructions will take place. Take education for example. It is a powerful individualizing force in society – school performance is always recorded as individual performance, and determines a child's individual progress through a system of grades. It is therefore of little surprise that education is such an important practical field for the expertise of psychology, as Binet's work in France demonstrated. The reality of educating a child in a graded, mass education system is almost inevitably done according to the vocabulary and techniques of psychology. For a parent simply to ask whether the child is "school ready", is to invite the experts of individualised subjectivity permanently into their lives.

Crowd psychology provides another example. Durrheim and Foster (1999) used a Foucauldian framework to analyse the South African Regulation of Gatherings Act of 1993 as a form of social control through self-regulation. They argue that the Act is in line with theories of crowd control that achieve their effects through the production of discourses that

can be translated into workable technologies. The crowd must be managed by regulating itself, though regulatory technologies such as prior negotiations with the authorities to institute “joint responsibility”, working with organisers of marches, establishing peace monitors, etc. What the authors call the “new crowd psychology” incorporates “a system of surveillance which institutionalises crowd self-regulation” (p. 72).

Or consider also the decision to have only one child (or to have none). In many places in the world it is choice rather than tradition or habit that determines how many children a family would have. Such choice is often made in unexpected communities: the decline of fertility among women in countries like Canada, Japan, Germany and Italy is well-known, but places like Mauritius, Guadeloupe and Sri Lanka also have fertility rates below replacement levels (Hacker, 2000). “Culture” here is an inadequate explanation. The choice about number of children presupposes a woman who sees herself as an independent, autonomous human being, who can enter into and prevail in the complex inter- and intra-personal negotiations that such a choice requires.

## **Conclusion**

The task of analysing the position of psychology in different societies is much more difficult than the cultural critiques suggest. For a start, the role of psychology is more fundamental and consequential than they propose. In Butchart’s words, “...the psychological sciences, for all their characterization by some of the sentries of sovereignty as irrelevant and ineffectual in an African context, are, as a mode of discipline, omnipresent and inescapable” (1998, p. 127). To understand the relevance of psychology for these non-Western societies, we will have to do much more than talk about African worldview, ideology, and cultural imperialism. The fact is that all psychologists hail citizens as subjects of psychology, to think in different ways about others, and about themselves. The question for the future development of psychology in South Africa, and in other similar societies, would then be re-phrased to the following: How would South Africans construct themselves as subjects in a dynamic matrix formed by modernising forces, cultural meanings, a democratic state, and the technologies and vocabulary of psychology?

To live as psychologised human beings is to live in a paradox. Psychology and its practitioners speak the language of benevolence and beneficence: it promotes mental health; it guides individuals toward self-realisation and – fulfilment; it contributes to the creation of contented workers while increasing productivity; and it counsels those who are grieving or



have been traumatised. Very few people will deny that psychological practices have the potential to deliver on at least some of these objectives, and to contribute to increased freedom and autonomy of human beings. It may free individuals from internal or external constraints, while it extends and pluralises their responses to the difficulties of everyday life.

But psychology simultaneously ties human beings just as surely into a new set of constraints, as it installs its own language and expertise as the media through which we will “discover” our inner selves. While it may enhance our ability to free ourselves from imposed constraints, it conceals how it binds us into a network of disciplinary micro-powers with its own peculiar demands on us. It makes it look as if the interiority we need to explore and get to know is a natural given, revealed to us in ever richer detail as we embark on the voyage of internal discovery. At the same time it draws a veil about its own role in making up that subjectivity that it takes as its own subject matter. The very people who promise us this freedom, this escape from external power, are the ones who tie us into this new micro-network of disciplinary power – often being unaware of it themselves. We are drawn into new lines of obedience, and “Once inside the discursive world of enterprise, therefore, one cannot hand one’s autonomy back. Instead, one is forced, in effect, to exercise it continuously in order to guarantee one’s own survival” (du Gay, 1997, p.308).

How do we get free of psychology, when abandoning it is not a possibility? Underlying the themes developed in this paper is a position that it requires a critical understanding of the ways in which psychology has contributed to the present, and to what is taken as the natural givens of life. We need to be constantly vigilant to understand its hold on us, and to what we take for granted of what psychological experts say about our selves.

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**Remarks**

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