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Social Psychology and Social Change: Beyond Western Perspectives

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Social psychology is typically described as the branch of psychology most concerned with understanding social problems and facilitating social change. It is also viewed as an international social scientific discipline: a 'bridge-science' that integrates 'psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology into an instrument for studying group life' (Lewin, 1945 cited in Moscovici & Markova, 2006).

The 19th and early 20th century origins of the sub-discipline were shaped by concerns about the psychologies of both western and non-western societies through the work of Wundt, Bartlett, and others. The inter-wars and post Second World War periods ushered in new developments driven by the work of refugee European psychologists who settled in North America and the European-based Transnational Committee on Social Psychology which sought

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to integrate research activities and theoretical insights from North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. These global beginnings and related comparative studies shaped the development of major concepts in social psychology.

However, these global beginnings were also grounded in ontological and philosophical perspectives based on Eurocentric or western understandings of human life and informed by the political motives of European colonial expansion. Psychological theories and methods have espoused ideas and concepts emerging from race-science and tainted with classist and gendered biases. Among often cited examples are the early 20th century psychological projects that involved intelligence testing (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994). Through intelligence testing and other forms of psychometric testing, people's minds and abilities were placed on a hierarchy most often determined by race, class, and gender. These theorizations have led to the pathologisation of women, of black people, of poor people, of the sick, or any person who doesn't fit into the norm of a white, male, middle-class, able-bodied and heterosexual figure. The mind, and more recently the brain, in psychological research are still used as an index of difference (O'Connor, Rees, & Joffe, 2012). The focus on neurological differences between men and women or understanding the brain types of those *who do not fit the norm* is problematic when it translates into research findings that link women with irrationality, young people with deviance, the poor with lack of empathy, and so on. When such findings from our research projects come into the public sphere, they can reproduce forms of stigma, discrimination and oppression.

Mainstream psychology has contributed to a body of research that offers so-called scientific proof about a hierarchy of differences between people. As a result, it becomes possible to justify various forms of domination that rely on stigmatizing representations of those on the margins of contemporary societies and to legitimize policies and practices that maintain this status quo. The dynamics and politics of representation are thus at the root of the epistemic violence of psychological knowledge (Macleod & Bhatia, 2008). Doing psychological work in this way also makes the assumption that the individual is the central unit of analysis and overlooks the social, economic, and political contexts that individuals find themselves in. Western and non-western social psychologists have highlighted the need to break from a Eurocentric approach to varying degrees. In his presidential address to the British Psychological society in 1995, Geoff Lindsay said:

> "The challenge is to take account of the gains that we have made in contextualizing human behavior, for example the need to beware of the dangers of generalizing from a Euro-American, white, male experience and perspective, while retaining the scientific rigour which has set psychology apart from many other disciplines (Lindsay, 1995, p.495).

Whilst acknowledging the shortcomings of Eurocentric theorizing, this statement also introduces doubt into the idea that alternative frameworks can provide a rigorous scientific approach. The importance of science as the dominant and most legitimate form of knowledge in contemporary society and its relationship to whiteness and masculinity cannot be overestimated both as a political project that serves the interests of privileged groups but also as one that locates the discipline of psychology as a natural science with more legitimate claims than other human sciences.

Since the 1970s, more politicised forms of psychology have emerged in the global south and diasporan communities to challenge the fundamental assumptions of the field, such as feminist psychologies, postcolonial psychology, indigenous psychologies, and liberation psychology (Teo, 2015). These strands of the discipline have a more social and critical focus. They investigate relations of power between groups in society; they treat people's identities as diverse, fluid, and intersecting. They view people as historical beings whose minds have been constructed by and through their social, economic, and political environment. They also propose new methods that question traditional relationships between researchers and the participants in research projects. These perspectives provide a critique of the discipline and a critique of power. In these as well as western social psychologies, the relationship between the individual and the social has become a central contestation. Mainstream forms of social psychology are largely based on cognitive approaches that presume rational thought and mechanistic forms of interpreting human life, and fall short of explaining the contradictions and complexities of modern life.

Within the current climate and renewed focus on the *decolonizing* of knowledge in academia in the global south (Kessi, 2015; Mbembe, 2015; Pillay, 2015) - triggered by the student-led movements in South African universities (http://rhodesmustfall.co.za) which have inspired similar activities in some western contexts (Rhoden-Paul, 2015) - this special issue of

Papers on Social Representations on *social psychology and social change: beyond western perspectives* constitutes an important contribution to the debate. A decolonization project for psychology means that we have to school ourselves and other psychologists in how broader relations of domination and subjugation play themselves out in the macro-social, political, economic and historical context. It involves questioning the power effects of psychology and the power dynamics in society. It involves questioning the motivation underlying psychological research and practice: Who does it benefit and in what ways? Who does it marginalise and in what ways? Who has the power to assign meaning to people's experiences? Who has the power to represent the lives and the minds of others? What behaviours are considered acceptable and normal and which ones are not?

Psychology's intersection with politics remains a core entry point for engaging a decolonisation project for a more relevant discipline. For example, within a post-apartheid context, the work of critical psychologists in the Apartheid Archive Project attests not only to the value of engaging intersections of the personal and the political, but also the interface of structural and personal forms of violence (Stevens, Duncan and Hook, 2013). This critical work has highlighted the interrelationships of oppression and implications for personal and social agency in the broader project of social transformation. Traditional modes of enquiry that fail to fully engage these intersections and interface can only produce static ways of knowing and intervening that invariably fail to address subjectivity's entanglements with broader social and material fields. This requires a less individualistic focus on the effects of current social milieus towards a more politically-focused analysis of subjectivity, representation, practice and intervention.

Located in a social representations framework, the contributions in this special issue allow us to see that western science is not the only knowledge system on which people shape their understandings of social realities. The cultures, beliefs and values that shape the everyday experiences of people in the global south emerge from alternative knowledge systems and form a large part of how individuals and communities interpret their existence and determine their behaviour. All the papers in this special issue present the decolonising project in different ways through resistances to a dominant western framework for interpreting the lived experiences of Africans on the continent and in the diaspora. They demonstrate the politicised nature of knowledge production be it through the politics of health promotion, race and gender relations,

and affective experiences of belonging and exclusion in postcolonial contexts and associated violent manifestations. Furthermore, they highlight the need to develop conceptual frameworks that engage the emotional and affective dimensions of lived experiences. The interrelationships of material, structural and lived realities of persons call for a social psychology that acknowledges and interrogates the domain of the affective. Psycho-social approaches have been put forward as critical ways of exploring subjectivities in society today (Frosh and Baraitser, 2015; Parker, 2015) and attest to the nuances and entanglements of everyday struggles, sociopolitical and relational contexts. The insights generated from psycho-social studies demonstrate the workings of the psyche in the realm of the social. But more importantly, the value of such analytic approaches for understanding the recalcitrance of modes of oppression, including internalised oppression, and the possibilities for resistance and agency, requires much more exploration. Other pertinent questions arise from such reflections: what benefits can be gained from more pluralist interdisciplinary methodologies that address the multifaceted dimensions of subjectivities and lived experiences interfaced with the sociopolitical contexts we find ourselves in? How do we avoid the determinism that can arise from traditional approaches, including qualitative social psychological research? How do we conceptualise the intersections of affective and social dimensions of lived experiences that take seriously the entanglements of power in society and our personal lives?

Critical race and feminist scholars have increasingly pointed out the importance of intersectionality in engaging subjectivity and practice within the discipline (Crenshaw, 1991). This, we would imagine, must encompass an awareness of and grappling with the socio-historical rootedness of current social practice and formations in society. For example, the analysis of xenophobia in a post-apartheid context must extend beyond the two-group paradigm and other simplistic conceptualizations of social groups that fail to account for the colonial and post-colonial influences of racial formations and psycho-social after-effects of dominance and oppression. Postcolonial theorists, such as Mbembe (2011) and Ratele (2015) amongst others have argued that reading xenophobic violence outside of its predominantly racialised manifestation, via afrophobia discourse, as well as the refusal to engage xenophobia as one aspect of the broader structural violence against majority black bodies more generally in post-apartheid South Africa today, is indeed problematic. In this perspective, we must challenge all forms of structural violence that intersect at both personal and group levels such as gender based violence

and its psychological manifestations. The works of Fanon, Cesaire, and Biko amongst others remain important reminders of the ongoing project of decolonization and psycho-social liberation and the value of engaging interdisciplinary critiques within social psychology that broaden and strengthen our analysis as researchers of the social. These theorists trouble our simplistic understandings of agency – particularly in postcolonial contexts characterised by increasing exploitation, marginalisation and dispossession. And what place for African Psychology? Ratele (2014) urgently reminds us of the forgotten project of engaging the "idea of Africa" (p. 56) in its limitations, possibilities and challenges.

But we cannot become complacent in these different strategies of critical engagement. For example, we would argue that reflectively engaging the potential *depoliticisation of intersectionality* remains a significant aspect of the decolonization project. Bilge (2013) has argued eloquently for a more reflective understanding of intersectionality as a critical tool for interrogating the interface of oppression. Such an interrogation requires that we are attentive to the disciplinary co-option of intersectionality as a tool used to erase some practices of oppression and marginalised subjectivities (Bilge, 2013). And yet, how do we engage the increasing hybridisation of subjectivities? These are some of the issues the special issue opens up and which some of the papers begin to explore.

One might argue that social representations theory is an appropriate approach for building the potential of social psychology as a bridge-science. Rooted in a social constructionist perspective, it offers not only the possibility for a critique of science as the only legitimate knowledge system but also a critique of power relations in society. The study of social representations recognises that all knowledge is constructed and that representations are productions and not reflections of reality (Macleod & Bhatia, 2008). It involves "creating points of departure" and "asking questions about the processes and mechanisms through which the Other is constructed rather than invoking the authenticity of the Other" (ibid). Moscovici himself described social psychology as the study of social change through which the social representations of different groups in society converge or clash in attempts to establish power and legitimacy (Moscovici, 1990). In this special issue, we invited contributions that focus on the relationship between social psychology and social change and that critique this relationship from perspectives that move beyond the dominant western approach. All papers in this special issue are located in African or African diasporan

communities. They offer insights into the connections between African and western knowledges, power and representation.

The first two papers refer to specific health programmes in African contexts and the value of a social representations lens in highlighting the competing knowledge frameworks that may impede on the success of interventions that promote wellbeing.

John Baptist Ngobi foregrounds the limitations of a socio-cognitive approach to health promotion and behavioural change in the context of HIV prevention programmes in Uganda. Ngobi highlights the value of a social representations framework for investigating the socio-cultural contexts that can lead to risky sexual practices. He advocates the role of SRT in overcoming some of the shortcomings of the rational-choice paradigm that underlies much bio-medical approaches to HIV prevention.

The second paper by Falade explores the circumstances surrounding the ban of the oral polio vaccine in some states in northern Nigeria. Through an analysis of media representations, Falade looks at how the polio vaccine was constructed as contaminated and part of a western and anti-Islamic conspiracy against the developing world. His analysis highlights how the often ambiguous process through which scientific knowledge becomes common sense knowledge is infused with alternative rationalities and affected by broader political contexts, in this case, global north-south political relations.

The next two contributions explore gender relations in two distinct contexts. Sakki and Salmien investigate representations of women politicians by university students in Buea, Cameroon. They highlight how understandings of gender construct separate roles for men and women, framing politics as a man's domain and reinforcing the domestic sphere as a woman's domain. An analysis of the historical, cultural, and socio-political frameworks on which these representations are anchored reveals the politics of north-south relations and the global development rhetoric in which women are depicted as passive rather than active contributors to social change.

Van Niekerk and Boonzaier's paper on social representations of intimate partner violence (IPV) towards women in heterosexual relationships, further shows how people construct gender appropriate performances for men and women. Their findings, drawn from a community in Cape Town, South Africa, demonstrate how violence is accepted and respected amongst community

members as a form of power and control exerted over women. Representations associated with IPV are linked to the legacies of apartheid and colonisation, further highlighting the global and historical context in which local realities take shape. Both articles suggest that gendered experiences occur at the intersection of representations of male and female roles and that social change requires a reconceptualisation of these gender binaries.

The final contribution by Adelowo deconstructs the legitimisation and reification of western psychological knowledge in contrast to African indigenous psychologies. Through the stories of African women migrants in New Zealand, the author reflects on the role and representation of western and African principles and concepts in psychological work. She argues that by incorporating alternative concepts into the discipline to interpret the psychological wellbeing of African women in the diaspora holds the potential of depathologising their experiences. In doing so, the paper provides not only a critique of western approaches to knowledge production but also proposes a different framework for conducting research rooted in the lifeworlds of her participants.

All of these contributions highlight the global interconnectedness of contemporary societies and the need for social psychological research to be more inclusive in its approach to understanding social change. Despite its global multicultural past and present, contemporary social psychology – in both mainstream and critical forms – is presented in influential publications and meetings as predominantly western. The exclusion of non-western perspectives from dominant and influential texts and spaces presents a problematic diversion from the multicultural roots and vision of the sub-discipline. It raises questions about its validity and utility in addressing the complex and interconnected socio-psychological issues and problems of a globalised world. Contemporary issues such as urbanisation, migration, racism, gender-based violence, poverty, global inequality and the health transition are often simultaneously local and global. Associated rapid social changes are transforming the structure and functions of social knowledge, social relations and social practices in many countries, whether western or non-western, rich or poor. As development theorists observe of the challenge of global poverty, the histories and dynamics of the mutual links between rich and poor countries impinge on the development of solutions for poverty and inequality in both contexts. These contemporary global issues throw up critical conceptual, methodological and practical challenges for an international bridge-science such as social

psychology.

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