

Psychology in society (PINS) and traditions: Back towards a critical African psychology

Abstract

Tradition is an ubiquitous yet in the main veiled question in the annals of Psychology in Society (PINS) and critical psychology. The traditions I have in mind are what might be provisionally be referred to as “African traditions”. Critical psychology seems to be comfortable with neglecting doing some self-examination on its African traditions or absence thereof. In this article I thus reflect on PINS’s and critical psychology’s knowledge traditions, including our intellectual ancestry, and their dis/connections to Africa. I suggest that we might want to ask ourselves questions such as what, for whom is, and why a critical psychology, in a recently liberated society, on this continent, today, if it is not simply and mainly opposed to mainstream psychology. I contend that it is important within the context of imperial and colonial knowledge that marginalises thought from the global South for critical psychologists to account for their own traditions, not only others’ traditions, and link to critical African thought from beyond our borders.

Introduction

Tradition, that discursive space where subjects are self-consciously located in their encounters with the past, is an ubiquitous yet in the main veiled question in the annals of **Psychology in Society (PINS)** and critical psychology. The traditions I have in mind are what might be provisionally referred to as “African traditions”, cognisant of the nausea and belligerence the term elicit in parts of society. Critical psychology seems to be comfortable with neglecting doing some self-examination on its African traditions or absence thereof. The contradiction is that PINS and critical scholars who publish in the journal have been aware of foundational questions (Ivey, 1986; Foster, 2004), as well as the fact that mainstream South African psychology has been rather unforthcoming about writing its autobiography. What of autobiographies of critical psychology though? Indeed, **PINS** has called for such writing from psychology (Hayes, 2011), while **PINS’s** and critical psychology’s own traditions appear to be in need of writing.

One can imagine why many a psychologists might not be keen, with some qualifications, to dwell on the issue of *cultural* traditions. The apparent discomposure around cultural

Kopano Ratele

Institute for Social and Health Sciences,
University of South Africa

& Medical Research Council,
University of South Africa,
Violence, Injury and Peace
Research Unit
kopano.ratele@mrc.ac.za

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traditions seems to be that even for those who claim critical traditions the tendency has been to interpret it to imply only divisiveness, conservatism, besides lack of critical thought. Under colonialism and apartheid the notion of tradition was, needless to say, appropriated as one among several apparatuses “to rationalise domination by a minority over the rest of the population and thereby to justify social control through a variety of political and directly coercive institutions” (Spiegel, 1989: 49). As such, for critical scholars tradition may be associated with white oppression and black tribalism. Because they came to be entangled with histories of segregated lives, cultural traditions can also provoke racial queasiness.

Examining tradition in the sense of our normative life together (or apart) is, however, less of an issue in this reflection. Certainly in relation to issues of language and location of enunciation (Mignolo, 2009), cultural traditions are no doubt always enmeshed with intellectual traditions (being what is of concern here). However, I thought it might be of some benefit in reflecting on the last thirty years of **PINS** to make some observations on particularly critical psychology’s knowledge traditions, including our intellectual ancestry, and their dis/connections to Africa. Though often largely a neglected issue in all but a few disciplines, intellectual traditions are rarely if ever not a foundational problematic since all fields of knowledge are always concerned with the transmission of cultures (Phillips and Schochet, 2004). An intellectual tradition comes into view whenever we, as teachers, authors, editors, managers, or other kinds of actor, self-consciously act with an attitude of accountability to a more or less common past and future (Soares, 1997). Halpin and associates state that tradition refers to the selective interpretive work through which authority is conferred upon the continuity of experience (Halpin, Moore, Edwards, George & Jones, 2000). Osborne (2008: 284) contends that “tradition is embraced by actors as a frame within which they may choose to act or against which they react”. Analysing traditions therefore raises questions about the histories of our locations as well as how authority to interpret, invent, or practice is conferred (Phillips, 2004).

In reading the traditions of critical psychology as conveyed in **PINS** something that struck me was that, save for a few noteworthy occasions a while ago, critical psychology has forsook the pursuit of links to histories of African critical thought outside of South Africa. I failed to find ample ties to continental African critical traditions by critical psychologists. Since it might be argued that there is no such thing as critical African psychological traditions, I wondered if it is not high time to conjure up some links to African thought. I also consider how we might go about making a convincing claim for South African critical psychology to be thought of as an African psychology too, just as much African psychology proponents claim that label (Painter, Kiguwa, and Böhmke, 2013).

It is true that it is particularly in relation to another set of ideas – those that coalesce around the term Africa – that traditions remain largely unexplored in the archives of South African critical psychology. It seems important within the context of imperial and colonial knowledge that marginalises thought from the global South for critical psychologists to account for their own traditions, not only others’ traditions, and link to critical African thought from beyond our borders.

Let me reiterate: whilst I do call for a critical psychology of traditions of our embodied and shared (or insular) ways of living as South African men and women (see Ratele, 2013a), the primary focus here is on the scholarly traditions. Admittedly, tradition in the sense of “handing over” to the next generation through *writing or teaching* tools to remake themselves and society has received a little more thought usually passing attention in **PINS**. There has been some mention of the concept in the journal (eg see Cloete, Muller & Orkin, 1986; Foster, 1986; Ivey, 1986; Townsend, 1987). For instance, signalling to intellectual traditions of social scientists at the National Institute of Personnel Research

(NIPR) under apartheid, Cloete, Muller & Orkin, (1986: 34) stated: “The English at the NIPR, following the British and American positivist *traditions* ...” Closer to our concerns, Ivey (1986: 4) wrote: “Although critical social theory is an established *tradition*, critical psychology, although adopting the goals and philosophy of the latter, does not yet exist as a substantive alternative psychological paradigm”. In noting traditions, the point of both articles was that methodological, philosophical and paradigmatic traditions are vital in directing the work of social scientists and shaping understanding. But even in such cases where intellectual traditions are explicitly noted, authors who publish in **PINS** have not been as informative as one would like around the biography of critical psychology in South Africa. Certainly, they have not made links with critical Africa-wide traditions. Perhaps, then, we might want to ask ourselves questions as to what kinds of critical understandings we transmit to students. What, for whom, and why a critical psychology, in a recently liberated society, on this continent, today, if it is not simply and mainly opposed to mainstream psychology? And is there a danger that in referencing European and North American critical theories to the near exclusion of African critical thinkers some of the critical tools we hand over to our students act as part of the forces that further marginalise black or African radical interventions?

Missing links to critical African traditions

That critical psychology has been largely silent on tradition is curious as well as being uniquely disappointing. We demand more from ourselves. Besides, critical psychology may have passed up openings to do precisely one of the things **PINS** aspired to: contribute toward “the critical searching of the South African psychology student (and hence, significantly, the South African psychologist)” (**PINS** Editorial Group, 1983: 1). Search for what? For that which they cannot find in a historically unjust and still deeply unequal society, and a discipline of psychology that acts as though that is a major problem. Critical psychology (in some ways not unlike the quest for a relevant psychology, or an African psychology, or other alternative frameworks outside the United States- and Western Europe-focussed mainstream) is a response to the search for answers to the usually unformulated questions that bring students to psychology in the first place, but also to questions of what Illich (1973) might have called *conviviality*, which can be attached not only to creative and meaningful community life but also voice (“I want to make a difference”) and belonging (“psychology is Euro-centric”).

A few years after the birth of **PINS**, there seemed to have been an opening – in relation to idea of Africa and its cultural and intellectual traditions – a potential for (re-)establishing alternative links with critical thought from Africa beyond the borders that have gone missing (see Hayes & Nzimande, 1985; Hountondji, 1985). In hindsight this now appears to have been one of the rare moments – that we need to return to – that could have been used to spur us on to contribute from our historical locatedness in apartheid racism-saturated society critiques that transcend and radically transform the coloniality of power and knowledge. The links in mind are those with critical African thought that sought to disturb coloniality of knowledge and mythologisation of African life.

More broadly, once upon a time critical psychologists seemed alive to their own practice as challenging and creating (African) traditions. The impression that there may have been an awareness of Africa is not only due to the map of the continent that was on the covers of the early issues – the first issue in September 1983 had a cover featuring the journal’s name inside the map of Africa which in turn was inside a silhouette of a human head. I read the image as allusive of the fact that the founding critical psychologists wanted to fashion a field that stretched from one end of the continent to the other even while keeping South Africa as a special focus from which critical psychology would be contextualised, historicised and analysed. In the foundation edition of

PINS, the Editorial Group (1983: 17) would posit that, given that the theory and practice around that network of disciplined ideas labelled psychology cannot be divorced from the world in which they are produced and which they contribute to making, "*Psychology in Society* should not be viewed as a specifically parochial psychology journal, but rather as an engagement with the psychological realm". The collective said the kinds of subjects they imagined being covered in the journal included: "The historical development of psychology, especially in South Africa. We would like to see substantive, specific historical analyses, rather than the global 'histories' which dominate the teaching of psychology" (Editorial Group, 1983: 17).

Rather immodestly, this is the kind of journal I would want to be associated with. For critical psychology is, in my interpretation, one that questions the very basis of psychology, asks what for and for whom is the discipline, engages the notion of the psyche from as many locations as possible, seeks to pry open disciplinary power with as many tools as available, and opens as many doors for emancipatory learning.

Four issues on (the cover still had the image of Africa inside the silhouette of the head though the image had shrunk), Ivey troubled what he saw as "neglected foundational issues" for critical psychology:

"A critical psychology would thus have to trace the hierarchy of mediations between oppressive social structures and disturbed subjective meanings without lapsing into reductionism or a functionalist social determinism. The task of critical psychology is to 'trace the conduct of the soul in fetters', guided by the telos of emancipatory self-reflection. But unlike individual psychotherapy which typically locates the source of psychopathology in the individual's disturbed life history, critical psychology locates the source of the problem in the history of the society and the solution in public self-reflection and enlightened socio-political praxis" (Ivey, 1986: 23).

In response to the question of what might be thought to count as critical psychology, Hayes in his editorial to the Special Issue of **PINS** on critical psychology offers this answer: "A cursory glance at critical psychology shows that what it includes under the rubric 'critical' is very broad, and often lacking in definitional and political clarity. The challenge arising out of this state of affairs is that a critical psychology is still in the process of being formed" (2001: 2).

On **PINS** as project "committed to promoting certain ideas and practices, while at the same time advancing critiques of mainstream orthodoxy", Hayes (2001: 1-2) argued:

"It is *not* **PINS**'s intention to prescribe what the broad project of critical theory *in* psychology, and a critical theory of psychology, might look like. **PINS**'s commitment is more open than this, and would like to situate itself as a vehicle and forum to promote the development of ideas that offer a socio-historical analysis of psychology in South Africa, while at the same time being bold enough to suggest how things might be changed *for the better*. As psychology is part of society (**psychology in society**), so there is a dual responsibility of providing objective analyses, *and* offering constructive critiques."

Said Hook (2001: 3) in the same Issue:

"Critical psychology *should* assert whenever possible, psychology is always, even at its most everyday and mundane forms – *political*." And a few years on, in the

broader context of the field, he asserts in his edited collection **Critical psychology** that “critical psychology is more an *approach*, a *kind of orientation* towards psychological knowledge and practice – and to relations of power in general – than any one kind of theory, any one set of concepts” (Hook, 2004: 11).

More recently, in an insightful critique on the failures of critical psychology Painter, Kiguwa, and Böhme (2013), have raised among several others key issues which I have underlined already, including whether critical psychology subjects itself enough to cross-examination instead of being satisfied with playing moralistic one-upmanship with mainstream psychology. In a rather despairing tone about the state of critical psychology they pose the question “whether ‘critical’ still signals anything in South African psychology besides a marketable academic niche or a handy strategy for academic distinction (from ‘the mainstream’)” (Painter et al, 2013: 850). Their conclusion is that critical psychology is a small, well-established and vibrant “*academic commodity*” (Painter et al, 2013: 850). They call for a critical psychology grounded “in ongoing theoretical labour (however diversely articulated) about the nature of subjectivity and society, including a theoretical grasp of the role psychology (mainstream *and* critical psychologies) itself fulfils in that society – its role, for example, in the psychologisation of subjectivities and social relations” (ibid: 851).

Finally, it is to **PINS** to which we return once more for that curious and unique disappointment. The contention that there has been a present but neglected sense among critical psychologists of their work as contesting and making traditions, while too often blind to Africa, is evident in the journal’s aim: “to foster a socio-historical and critical theory perspective, by focusing on the theory and practice of psychology in the southern African context” (eg, see **PINS 32**, inside front cover).

From these assessments of what **PINS** is or wanted to be, and critical psychology is, or ought to be, three elements appear common. There is some consensus that a critical psychology is, or has to be, a social practice; characterised by a historical consciousness; and attentive to power. These elements provoke a number of questions about the form of critical psychology we have and a forum like **PINS**. It appears as if **PINS** and critical psychology more broadly might need to return to the foundational, theoretical and political issues that underpin our engagement with psychology and society. In spite of the aims and geopolitical locatedness that a critical forum like **PINS** advocates, and the sentiments espoused by many critical scholars, critical psychology might do well if it were to try to be more consciously African in its concerns than mainstream psychology (Painter, 2005). Perhaps critical psychology has to go back and find or form those alternatives, including Africa-wide links and networks that will contribute to decolonialise psychology and radicalise post-colonial societies (Foster, 2004). I now turn to consider potential links to African critical thought that seem to have been missed.

Critical psychology in Africa

One view of a critical psychology not delinked from Africa was evident early on in the life of **PINS**. Introducing the article by Paulin Hountondji from his book, **African Philosophy: Myth and reality**, which went on to get listed on Africa’s 100 Best Books of the 20th century, Hayes and Nzimande (1985: 5) contended:

“It is this critique of the complex and subtle ideological penetrations in the form of various ethnophilosophies which should be of particular interest to psychology students as they too should critically assess the history of psychology in South Africa as in large an ‘ethnopsychology’

(of Blacks). It is at this hidden level of theory that an ethnopsychology must be challenged, and not only in the superficial anti-racism of a liberal and reformist psychology. By simply saying, as social scientists, that we are anti-racist (in political life) does not necessarily and logically entail the absence of an ethnopsychology in our theoretical and empirical work ...”

Some of the Hountondji (1985) specific unfavourable appraisals of the Monsieur Jourdain’s type of African philosophy – the sort of philosophy of black men and women who “without knowing it” (14), shall we say, speak philosophy – is not only due to “its profoundly conservative nature” (15) but also because “it is an indeterminate discourse with no object” (22). This is a philosophy informed by “the myth of primitive unanimity with its suggestion that in ‘primitive societies – that is to say, non-Western societies – everybody always agrees with everybody else” (19). This critique applies both to church ethnophilosophers like Tempels, Antonie Mabona and John Mbiti, who desired “to find a psychological and cultural basis for rooting the Christian message in the African’s mind without betraying either” (Hountondji, 1985: 17); and to lay authors like Nkrumah, Senghor and the negritude movement, and others.

“Without being motivated quite so restrictively as the church ethnophilosophers, these authors were none the less intent on locating beneath the various manifestations of African civilizations, beneath the flood of history which has swept this civilization along willy-nilly, a solid bedrock which might provide a foundation of certitudes: in other words a system of beliefs. In this quest, we find the same preoccupation as in the negritude movement - a passionate search for the identity that was denied by the colonisers – but now there is the underlying idea that one of the elements of cultural identity is precisely ‘philosophy’ the idea that every culture rests on a specific, permanent, metaphysical substratum” (Hountondji, 1985: 18).

Whereas Hountondji’s focus was philosophy, his criticisms apply to how *not* to think of Africa, and specifically how *not* to think of African psychology. This is an appropriate place to insert brief observations on un/critical African psychology – and in that way remark on how we might find African ties for critical psychology. To be more specific, the critique of African philosophy’s search for identity by Hountondji (1985: 18) applies to a very good extent to some of the push for an African psychology wherein “the word automatically changes its meaning as soon as they cease to be applied to Europe or to America and is applied to Africa”. A problem with some of the arguments for African psychology is its apparent ambivalence as to its theoretical and political status. Is African psychology a psychology in Africa, does it belong under African Studies, is it the same as cultural psychology, or is it (a variety of) critical psychology? Any of these would be acceptable, actually. I am troubled, however, by the observation that African psychology, not very unlike critical psychology, has not done enough critical self-assessment and auto-biographical writing about its objects. There continues to be a preoccupation on the one hand with a sterile idea of culture, thus tradition, and metaphysics that Hountondji criticises already; and on the other with psychology from Europe and the US. Interestingly, Painter and colleagues argue that African psychology

“is clearly a form of critical psychology: it critiques and rejects (much of) the ontological assumptions and value systems it perceives to be at the core of ‘Western’ psychology, and seeks instead to found its psychology on a different, uniquely *African* metaphysics. As such African psychology is not only an ally, but a potential vantage point from where the ‘Eurocentric’ tendencies evident also in *critical* psychology – which includes not only an overreliance on Western (or Northern) theory, but also a tendency to engage African theorists

only once they had been endorsed by and re-imported from Northern universities – may be interrogated” (2013: 855).

Even while African psychology tends to get entrapped by the idea of unique metaphysics, some of these remarks are well-thought-out, especially the point on African psychology’s critical views on both mainstream and critical psychology’s undying attraction to North American and European-centred traditions and fashions. However, they are also critical of certain tendencies of African psychology. “African psychology departs from critical psychology by not always questioning its status as – and desire to be – *psychology*”, they state (Painter et al, 2013: 856). They also warn that

“an uncritical valorisation of ‘culture’ may arguably function as a strategy of class distinction and mobility, which – if the notion of the ‘African’ itself is never interrogated critically – may not just mystify class interests, but bolster emerging discourses of an exclusionary African nationalism.... This form of African psychology would not be a critical psychology, but merely another psychology enlisted in the service of and subjected to identity politics” (Painter et al, 2013, 856).

A weakness of some arguments for an African psychology – an African psychology uncritical of itself – is in searching for such a psychology in mythological, deep, and invariable structures of a people, instead of examining particular and material realities that shape people’s lives. Conscious of the inequalities, despotism, and violence that characterise societies in Africa, on the whole, the people are oppressed by the entangled capitalist, white, hetero-patriarchal ideological systems. As such what is needed is a critical African psychology. This critical psychology would be one that works with progressive forces from all of Africa to challenge and overcome the domination arising from this reality. This in no way contradicts the arguments that significant parts of psychological research and theories continue to be handmaidens of anti-African capitalist patriarchy, supportive of white racist, sexist, violent ideologies that produce precisely the problems for which psychology purports to have solutions (Ratele, 2013c).

It appears that what we are left is a largely uncritical African psychology and a delinked critical psychology. The struggle to “provincialise” psychology and develop a body of research and theory that takes as its point of departure African economic, political and cultural realities therefore remains. At this point, it seems we might still need to do some more work – in the next thirty years? – to develop an African critical psychology/critical African psychology.

Conclusion

In conclusion I want to suggest that it is about time to consider questions of cultural and intellectual traditions, especially in relation to the idea of Africa, in and of **PINS** as well as critical psychology broadly. Critical psychologists seem best placed to venture onto the terrain of traditions while turning inward the gaze into their own traditions. I feel that opportunities have been missed, that some crucial questions tied to intellectual and cultural locatedness of critical psychology still need to be asked – such as critical psychology for whom, by whom, why? What is the relation of critical psychology to the coloniality of knowledge? What about the epistemic privileges and exclusions that come with language in the struggles against domination? What does critical psychology have to offer struggles against new and older local, regional, and global forms of domination (eg, see Biglia, 2003; Lao-Montes, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

One thing we learn from the national liberation struggle over apartheid is that a revolution can be dominated by an interpretation framework to the near exclusion of all key questions. At best other

questions such as capitalist exploitation and patriarchal power get read through and subsumed into the dominant framework. Critical psychology in South Africa might want to be more self-conscious of itself as challenging some received tradition but dominated by some questions to the marginalisation of others. More self-consciousness among other things implies admitting that critical psychology, like the rest of psychology, is as a maker of tradition, and, for better or worse, has shaped our experiences.

Last, as a sort of practical recommendation, I propose that we might want to renew that early, maybe now abandoned, search for, and strengthen links with, other sets of critical social thought from Africa north of Limpopo. CODESRIA, for instance, is a good place to start our renewed search for critical African links. I have also heard of critical African psychologists outside of South Africa, and certainly of leading critical social theorists from other fields and all sorts of queer, feminist, anti-capitalist and other activists whose contributions would enrich critiques of “engagements with the psychological realm” (PINS Editorial Group, 1983: 17).

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