DECOLONISING AND INDIGENISING THE PSYCHOLOGY CURRICULUM: REFLECTIONS AND KEY LESSONS FROM THE 2017 PAN-AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY UNION (PAPU 2017) CONFERENCE

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Abstract

This paper presents reflections and key lessons from the Inaugural Pan-African Psychology Union (PAPU) Congress which was hosted in Durban, South Africa by PAPU and the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA). At the congress, topics and discussions on 'indigenisation' and 'decolonisation' of the psychology curriculum' dominated. Various thought leaders from across the world suggested the following approaches towards indigenising and decolonising the psychology curriculums: 1) introducing indigenisation and decolonisation related topics within existing courses, 2) revising existing programmes to introduce cross cultural and indigenous psychology courses, 3) changing academic programmes to make them fully indigenised and/or decolonised. This paper reflects on the congress deliberations and the extant literature on the topic and suggests opportunities for stakeholders to work collaboratively to initiate debates, establish the need for indigenisation and decolonisation, come-up with strategies and frameworks by which indigenising and decolonisation of the psychology curriculum could be initiated and achieved.

Keywords: Psychology in Botswana, decolonising psychology, indigenising psychology, curriculum reviews

Introduction

In 2017, I attended the 1st Pan-African Psychology Union (PAPU) Psychology Congress which was hosted by PAPU in collaboration with the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA). The congress attracted more than a thousand delegates from across the world including global leaders in psychology, practitioners of psychology and allied professions, as well as academics and students of psychology. The four days deliberations (i.e., the technical programme, presentations, invited speeches, as well as post workshops discussions) were dominated by discussions on 'indigenising the psychology curriculum' and 'decolonising the psychology curriculum.'

Proponents of decolonisation and indigenisation vehemently raised many issues against the Euro Western forms of psychology. One of the arguments was that Euro Western practices of psychology are not practical and beneficial to the African clients – raising questions about both the psychological practices and its associated educational systems and approaches. They also proposed that African academies ought to challenge academic imperialism, denounce Euro Western forms of inquiry and approaches to education, and radically resist the thinking and practices that legitimise society's hierarchical organisation. Even more, they promoted the emphasis and inclusion of African traditions, practices, ideas and perspectives in academic practices and its different forms of inquiry.

Interestingly, although I have taught psychology in an African institution (i.e., the University of Botswana: UB) since 2006, these debates were somewhat foreign to me. My initial response was to view the ideas and associated proposals as reactionary, controversial, political and unnecessarily radical. Since the congress, I have spent several weeks reflecting on the congress deliberations as well

as reflecting on the two programmes offered by the University of Botswana's Department of Psychology, and the programmes' associated teaching practices. I have since concluded that my initial resistance to the concepts of 'decolonised psychology' and 'indigenised psychology' could be explained by the fact that the Department of Psychology at the University of Botswana has been silent on these global and regional issues and discourses. Further, I noticed that my acceptance and comfort with the so-called Eurocentric psychology and general worldview on psychology may be influenced by my formative years in psychology which were mostly in the United States, and the fact that the psychology curriculum at the University of Botswana can be described as "American in orientation" – fitting closely with my established worldviews about psychology. Having noted my personal biases, I wish to express that the UB's Department of Psychology's silence concerning indigenising and decolonisation of the psychology curriculum' is somewhat worrisome especially since the department does not have a graduate programme. Accordingly, because psychology students cannot practice without a graduate degree, they have to go for psychology graduate studies at regional and international universities; calling for our undergraduate programmes and courses to have international and/or regional appeal – if the programmes and our students are to remain relevant and attractive to graduate schools.

Discourses and proposals to decolonise the curriculum

Searching through the literature, it is difficult to establish a clear conceptual distinction between decolonisation and indigenisation of the curriculum. From the context of universities, decolonisation has been described as a process of transforming education through identifying and removing colonial forms of knowledge, pedagogical strategies and research methodologies – as well as their associated challenges, limitations and weaknesses (McLaughlin and Whatman 2011). Indigenisation has been similarly defined as transformation to include indigenous epistemologies and ontologies by accommodating indigenous knowledges, voices, critiques, scholars, students and materials to facilitate the ethical stewardship of a plurality of indigenous knowledges and practices (Sasakamoose and Pete 2015; Pete 2016). Having studied the definitions of the two concepts, I have noted that some of writers use the terms interchangeably, while some seem to position indigenisation as a decolonisation tool. I have thus resolved that the two concepts could be definitionally and conceptually different, but the conceptual and definitional differences are not critical for the current paper.

The discourse and proposals to decolonise the curriculum are not unique to African contexts and a number of academic literatures have been published on the two subjects. In countries like Canada and Australia, commitments to indigenise the curriculum have a long history such that in some universities, indigenisation of curriculum is seen as the responsibility of the whole university (cf:, Butler and Young 2009; Gunstone 2008; Pete 2016; Wotherspoon and Schissel 1998). Indigenous education in Australia and Canada have similar histories and have been subjected to a wide varieties of different forms of interrogations – which have in turn – inspired debates between and amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators (McLaughlin and Whatman 2011; Nakata 2006; 2007; Wotherspoon and Schissel 1998). In South Africa, it has been reported that the student protests of 2015 triggered discussions regarding decolonisation of universities (Kessi 2016; Le Grange 2016) and by extension, the decolonisation of the university curriculums (Le Grange 2016). Looking at Australia, Canada and South Africa, the three countries have dark histories and social pains associated with apartheid and racial discrimination of indigenous people. Therefore, decolonisation and indigenisation processes require non-indigenous people to acknowledge historical oppressions as well as the continued suppression of indigenous peoples.

As I went through the congress discussions, I found myself thinking that for countries like Canada, Australia and South Africa, decolonisation and indigenisation are painful but obvious necessities.

But, could the same be said about Botswana? Yes, Botswana has her own indigenisation issues; such that indigenisation calls have been made elsewhere – for example – proposals for recognition of minority languages. But, is psychology specific decolonisation and indigenisation relevant for the Botswana context, I wondered? I have since concluded that whether decolonisation or indigenisation of psychology is, or is not, relevant for Botswana, Botswana institutions of learning and practitioners of psychology in Botswana ought to have the discussion. This thought lead to yet another question: in Botswana, what ought to be the springboard that kicks-start the conversations about indigenisation and decolonisation of psychology?

Psychology in Botswana

Similar to other African countries, psychological services infrastructure in Botswana is somewhat inadequate and underdeveloped. As of 2015, there were 87 registered psychologists in Botswana, including both natives and foreigners (M. Kote, President of Botswana Association of Psychologists, personal communication, January 3, 2015). Similar to other African contexts, psychological services in Botswana were possibly introduced during colonisation (cf., Nsamenang 2007; Peltzer and Bless 1989), and packaged together with related sectors such as health, education and evangelism (cf., Nsamenang 2007). Therefore, psychological practices in Botswana generally mimic that of the Western world. Despite insufficient information about the profession, there is some evidence suggesting that psychological services have been minimally provided directly and through other allied professions – giving some context for the professional practice of psychology in the country.

Psychology education in Botswana

Psychology education provided by institutions of learning such as the University of Botswana could also be used as a critical yardstick for assessing the maturity of the psychology profession. Although some African countries introduced departments of psychology at their respective universities in the 1960s (cf., Eze 1991; Peltzer and Bless 1989) and some introduced psychology laboratories in the 1980s (Peltzer and Bless 1989); in Botswana, the Department of Psychology at the most prominent university in the country; the University of Botswana, was only established in 2004. The department currently offers two undergraduate psychology degree programmes (cf., University of Botswana Undergraduate Academic Calendar 2017) – with no postgraduate degree programme and no psychology laboratory.

As per the University of Botswana Undergraduate Academic Calendar (2017), the following courses are offered under the Bachelor of Psychology (B.Psych.) Degree and the Bachelors degree with psychology as combined major programmes:

1. Introduction to Psychology
2. Biological Basis of Human Behaviour
3. Research in Psychology: Methods and Designs
4. Theories of Personality
5. Social Psychology
6. Developmental Psychology of Childhood and Adolescence
7. History and Philosophy of Psychology
8. Statistics for Psychology
9. Developmental Psychology of Adulthood and Old Age
10. Psychology of Work and Labour Relations
11. Abnormal Psychology
12. Psychological Testing and Psychometrics
13. Cognition and Learning
14. Health Psychology
15. Organisational and Personnel Psychology
16. Counselling
17. Psychological Assessment
18. Research Proposal in Psychology
19. Human Factors in the Work Environment
20. Consumer Psychology
21. Psychological Challenges of HIV/AIDS
22. ***Special Topics in Psychology**
23. Sensation and Perception
24. Applied Psychology
25. Psychopathology
26. Research Project
27. Abnormal Psychology II
28. Counselling II
29. Psychotherapy
30. Training and Human Resource Development
31. Internship
32. Abnormal Psychology II

Scanning through the above programme structure; proponents of a decolonised curriculum would quickly notice that there are relatively no courses accommodating discourses on indigenous psychology or decolonised psychology. Some have labelled such exclusions of 'local voices' academic imperialism. Generally, academic imperialism has been described as characterised by the European/Western thought which builds a collection of theories, concepts, methods, techniques, and rules designed to promote only the knowledge that advance and profit Eurocentrism at the expense of African perspectives in disciplinary inquiry (cf., Chilisa 2012; 2017).

Suggestions for decolonising and indigenising the psychology education in Botswana

Similar to the delegates at PAPU 2017, the extant literature suggests that decolonising knowledge in universities should comprise: 1) recognition of colonial hegemony and forms of domination within academic institutions (Ka'ia 2005); 2) a deep sense of recognition of and challenge to colonial forms of knowledge, pedagogical strategies and research methodologies (McLaughlin and Whatman 2007); 3) rigorous debates about what counts as indigenous knowledge, indigenous perspectives or indigenous studies (Nakata 2007; Smith 1999;2005); and 4) recognising the biases towards maintaining the status quo. Hart (2003) warns that the academy may want to recognise and reward what it knows making the task of embedding Indigenous knowledge into the university teaching and learning highly problematic and deeply personal. Delegates at PAPU 2017 also noted the above general concerns and principles and suggested practical strategies for introducing indigenous psychology within the existing curriculum – I think these could be adopted in Botswana. The suggestions ranged from 1) introduction of topics within existing courses; through 2) revising existing programmes to introduce fully fledged cross cultural psychology courses and indigenous psychology courses; to 3) changing the entire programme structures to make it completely indigenised and/or decolonised. Looking at the current offering by the Department of Psychology at UB, I think opportunities or 'quick wins' lie in the first two recommendations.

1) Introduction of topics within existing courses

In Botswana, there exists a number of indigenous knowledge(s) – ranging from family traditions, community norms and practices, religious practices, performing arts, crafts, and national cultural values and beliefs that can be utilised to enhance the way psychology is taught, understood and practiced. Therefore, lecturers and professors of psychology can strive to indigenise and decolonise psychology by infusing the already existing indigenous knowledges in their courses. At PAPU 2017 congress, some shared that they achieve this objective by having instructors and students share narratives about their own cultural experiences and establishing their relevance for the psychology field. In Botswana, many students migrate from small rural villages and towns to the larger urban centres to attend universities (Pheko, Monteiro, Tlhabano and Mphele 2014). Auerbach (2017) sees these students as a resource and calls for curricula that recognises that students come to the university with remarkable insights and experiences which can be tapped into when they are allowed to create, iterate, work with feedback, apply that feedback, and critically appraise it. Therefore, lecturers and professors can be encouraged to introduce topics on Cross-Cultural and Indigenous Psychology within the existing course offerings and use students as teaching and learning resources.

2) Revising existing programmes to introduce fully fledged cross cultural psychology courses and indigenous psychology courses

The Department of Psychology could offer a fully fledged course on Cross-Cultural and Indigenous Psychology through the ***Special Topics in Psychology** course (*refer to the Department of Psychology programme structure presented above*). The Department can also benchmark with other universities across the world and introduce various courses that provide students with a foundation in

paradigms and contemporary approaches to understanding the relationship between societies, communities, cultures, and human behaviour. These may include:

1. Psychology of diversity as offered at Harvard University, United States of America
2. Self and Identity Psychology as offered at Harvard University, United States of America
3. Social and Cultural Psychology as offered at The London School of Economic and Political Science, United Kingdom
4. Cultural-Clinical Psychology laboratory, as offered at the University of Toronto, Canada
5. African American Psychology, as offered at the University of California, Santa Cruz, United States of America
6. Intercultural and Indigenous 'Psychologies', as offered at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia
7. Cross-Cultural and Indigenous Psychology, as offered at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia
8. Intercultural Diversity and Indigenous Psychology, as offered at the Australian College of Applied Psychology, Australia
9. Introduction to Cultural Psychology, as offered at the Stanford University, United States of America
10. Current Issues in Cross-Cultural Psychology, as offered at the Victoria University of Wellington, in New Zealand
11. Indigenous Healing and Spirituality, as offered at the University of Victoria, Canada
12. Seminar in Cross-Cultural Psychology, as offered at the Western Washington University, United States of America; or even
13. Centre for Indigenous and Cultural Psychology, as offered at the Inha University, South Korea

Conclusions

Now, with the benefit of hindsight and insights from several academic inquiries on these thought provoking subject matters; I have concluded that the discussions at PAPU 2017 gave proponents of indigenised and decolonised curriculum a platform to submit thoughts, proposals, approaches and frameworks for a decolonised and indigenised curriculum. The congress also offered me and other congress delegates unique opportunities and insights to think about decolonisation and indigenisation as well as insights to critically interrogate our respective existing psychology curricula. I am now convinced that decolonisation and indigenisation has implications for relevance of, and employability of graduates (cf:, Pheko and Molefhe 2016), as well as for inclusion of students who migrate from diverse backgrounds to attend universities in urban centres (cf:, Pheko et al., 2014). I also agree that the success of decolonised and indigenised education will depend upon the efforts of everyone re-examining their roles, positions and the control they exert over curriculum decision-making and educational reforms (McLaughlin and Whatman 2011). Conversations about decolonisation and indigenisation are relevant, and stakeholders ought to work collaboratively to initiate debates, establish the needs, define concepts, come up with strategies, and decide on frameworks by which indigenising and decolonisation could be achieved. This will empower the relevant stakeholders (especially non-indigenous stakeholders) on indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing – including ways to infuse these understandings with contemporary curriculum and pedagogical knowledge (Elliott and Keenan 2008).

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