

African solutions for African problems? Some thoughts from an Africa(n)-centred positive psychology perspective

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In a forthcoming chapter, Wilson Fadiji et al. (forthcoming) ask the question of what ought to be the nature of an Africa(n)-centred positive psychology. Wilson Fadiji and colleagues pose an even more important question – if African psychology is “situated knowledge and practice” (Ratele, 2019, p.151), what ought the positive psychology lens from here allow us to see and explore in the African condition? My contribution as far as the so-called ‘African solutions for African problems’ in this piece is concerned with precisely this question. In it, I offer some thoughts for consideration. I begin by interrogating the nomenclature of labelling things as ‘African’, then I visit the idea of what ought to happen when psychology centres (the) Africa(n). After painting the picture of the current problems and illuminating their structural violence and oppression impact, I turn to the mechanisms through which peacebuilding and self-realisation Ubuntu can offer solutions.

Those who have concerned their scholarship with African psychology (e.g., Nwoye, 2015; Mkhize, 2004) have sought to demarcate it as a field of study. Subsequently, some of them have asked the question: What is African psychology? Accordingly, there should be a psychology, perhaps as a field/discipline/profession, which deserves the adjective of ‘African’. In my view, not only does this practice need to be challenged, but it begs the question about its own distinction when compared with others across the world. For example, Wong (2009) proposed Chinese positive psychology anchored in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; and Joshanloo (2019) also spoke about Islamic conceptions of well-being. In the same vein, I could argue that all psychology is indigenous to its own context, therefore rendering all psychology culture-bound (see Wong, 2013). Of course, this also challenges the

reality of the universal acceptance and global application of what is essentially Euro-American psychology. Poignantly, the Euro-American and other scholars in the Global North have not had the need to prefix their type of psychology with an adjective 'American' or 'European' to give effect to geographical location and cultural identification.

With this introduction, not only do I want to problematise this tendency for ethnocentrism and essentialism of human behaviour of the African peoples, but I also wish to highlight the importance of an empowered context-informed lens. The opposite would otherwise render us, as Africans, somewhat of a seemingly exotic entity and destination, which needs perpetual qualifiers and disclaimers about our being in the world. However, the question of whether and how this universal 'American' psychology sees and presents the African peoples, needs to be interrogated. To this effect, Ratele (2016, 2019) proposed an Africa(n)-centred psychology that does at least two things. First, it centres the African experience in its inquiry, and second, it views the world through a lens from here in Africa. The significance of a psychology that has an Africa-informed lens, which centres Africa and her peoples, lies in its ability to respond adequately to the so-called African problems, yet remain interconnected with the rest of the globalising world. This orientation also affords us a lens through which we can view ourselves not through the eyes of outsiders.

In this piece, I therefore give some insight, informed by an Africa(n)-centred positive psychology perspective, on what may be a response to the now common political slogan of 'African solutions to African problems'. Many would find themselves in agreement about the observed list of what these problems could be. Notwithstanding others not on this list, the following problems would be mentioned by any interested observer: entrenched poverty; corruption; underdevelopment and retarded economic growth; inadequate road and other infrastructure; pitiful education, resulting in high illiteracy; inefficient healthcare systems, resulting in high disease burden; intra-/continental migration, often with people displacement;

as well as civil unrest, and regional conflicts. However, clearly there seems to be greater disparity as far as the consensus regarding the solutions is concerned.

The set of problems, while simultaneously occurring, cumulatively amounts to structural violence, which is defined by Christie et al. (2008, p.543) as a “chronic affront to human well-being, harming or killing people slowly through relatively permanent social arrangements that are normalised and deprive some people of basic need satisfaction”. The blame for the painful reality of structural violence, which is experienced by many peoples of Africa, can and should be placed at the doorstep of the ruling elites who are the leaders of the 54 nation states of the continent. Thus, our reality seems to be one of a series of eras characterised by violence and oppression. After what had been a persistent period of colonisation, the oppression of the people continues to be perpetrated by the governments of the new class of the ruling elite. These leaders are a bunch who, according to Andrews (2018), have merely continued in the footsteps of the previous imperialist oppressors. This picture is a stark contrast and irony of what ought to be African.

We, in fact, know from many centuries of tradition and the unbroken chain of intergenerational connectedness that being African is anchored in relational ontology, which does not diminish the self, but embeds it **in nature**: “People have connections with the land, with the earth, with animals and with other beings.” (Chilisa et al., 2017) Now I turn to the Africa(n)-centred positive psychology thesis to help us respond to the call of ‘African solutions to African problems’. In this regard, I foreground peace, mental health, quality of life, and social justice as the pillars that should hold the prosperity of the continent. The greatest of these four pillars is peace. We cannot begin to claim the celebration of the unity of Africa and the prosperity of her children when we do not have peace. Our strive for positive social change and development must be contextualised against the background of a

demographic profile of the simultaneous co-existence of both a bulging youth population and an ageing cohort of older adults.

The implications and consequences of peace translate directly into the eradication of displacement of people, illiteracy, burden of disease, and the murderous conflict. An elevated state of being would thus be shown in the other pillars, namely mental health, quality of life, and social justice. This we must achieve through deliberate peacebuilding efforts, distinguished from the status-quo peacekeeping, which will be driven by (mental) health-care provision. I therefore suggest that through peacebuilding and sustained peace, an ecologically embedded state of well-being that is multidimensional, dynamic, person-specific, and promoting personhood, can and must be achieved. This is the kind of well-being that White (2010) situates in a social process, recognising its material, relational, and subjective dimensions.

Last, I turn to the eternally fashionable political, moral theory of Ubuntu. Genuine peace, against the backdrop of current and past injustices, violence, and oppression, can be achieved through a mass-based form of what Molefe and Magan (2019) refer to as a self-realisation approach to Ubuntu. This interpretation of Ubuntu brings individuals to realise their own true humanity as the ultimate goal of morality. In so doing, personhood is achieved. Embedded in this aspirational personhood, which is not an event but a long process of moral practice, is virtuous character.

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