



Beyond the Modernist Project: A Decolonial Turn in the History of Psychology

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Abstract

In this article, the authors argue for a decolonial history of psychology that will assist in the creation of psychologies (and their histories) that are true to place and time. We briefly place contemporary history of psychology as being of service to hegemonic psychology, which has continued to enforce a coloniality of being, knowing, and doing. We outline some of its limitations in regard to individualism, neoliberalism, and the ideologies of the market. In contrast, we articulate a way to begin to reconceptualize a psychology and its history that may serve to honor and respect multiple ways of knowing and being. We offer examples of emergent approaches that are being created that are non-dualistic, non-WEIRD, and focused on lived experiences in particular places and settings. The authors are mindful of the limitations of offering superabundant examples of each point due to the length constraints that accompanied the invitation to submit this manuscript. We encourage interested readers to explore the references for additional nuances and examples of the main points.

Keywords Decoloniality · History of psychology · Critical pedagogy · Decolonial turn · Hegemonic psychology

This article is based on a talk given by the first author at the First Salerno Forum on the History of Psychology, September 19, 2022. The work of the second author was highly instrumental in sharpening its focus and shaping its current form and content.

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Introduction

Our current academic disciplines are of relatively recent origins, with most having drawn their boundaries and established their criteria of discovery, articulation, and truth since the mid-19th century. Disciplines emerged from the nexus of colonialism and capitalism and have often served as instruments of coloniality of being and knowledge. African philosopher, Lewis Gordon, has argued that colonization of knowledge accompanied the rise of the imperial impulse in early modern European states as Portugal, Spain, and Great Britain created colonies around the globe where they imposed their ways of life and ways of knowing and being on those colonized (Gordon, 2011)¹.

During the mid to late 19th century, modern academic disciplines began to enclose knowledge and arrogate to those who are accredited discipline members the right of intellectual authority over what counts as truth regarding events, people, and ideas of the past (Abbott, 2008; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Smith, 1999)². History, including history of psychology, has developed its authority and gained its voice within the terms and rules set by the colonial powers (Bhatia, 2002; Goody, 2006). Indeed, history in the modernist project claims the authority to judge which practices and which societies are modern. Europe, which emerged rather late as a geopolitical entity, has come to serve as the measure of modernity, even to the extent of asserting the right to determine geographic directions (Goody, 2006; Mignolo, 2011, 2014).

Psychology and its history may be particularly problematic. The foundations of all psychologies are the stories and myths told in every culture, every society, for as long as humans have had language. Language, as pointed out by Baldwin (1930), “develops *pari passu* with generalization, and gives to all the cognitive and emotional processes the adequate instrument of expression and of personal intercourse” (p.13). In this sense, culture can be considered the realm of such generalization where people draw their lives according to the singularities present in their cultures (Chaudhary & Sriram, 2020). Based on this statement, what counts for psychology’s history and its knowledge can be revisited through a critical viewpoint.

This paper looks at psychology’s history from a decolonial viewpoint. Considering the role of recent knowledge apprehension forms from the Global South and along with the critical discussions that occurred at the First Salerno Forum on the History of Psychology, we assume that history should be examined from a critical lens due to the hegemonic project of modern society. To do this, we organized the paper as follows: in the first section, we demonstrate the emergence of psychological science as a neoliberal project based on the historical context of its creation. We state that human phenomena, as the major concern of psychology, should overcome

¹ Interested readers may also consult such works as Mignolo’s *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011). For the intellectual underpinnings of colonization, coloniality, and modernity, see the various chapters in Mignolo and Escobar (2010).

² The historical scholarship on this process is vast and generally well-known. For excellent expositions on psychology and other human and social sciences, we refer the reader to Roger Smith’s *Norton History of the Human Sciences* (1997) and the more recent edited volume of nearly 2000 pages, *Palgrave Handbook of the History of the Human Sciences* (McCallum, 2022).

the WEIRD³ “sample” and its WEIRD scientific assumptions. To achieve this goal, we argue in the second section that multiple histories in psychology would bring us to divergent forms of life to oppose the concept of the individual in a neoliberal society. A relational ontology focuses on the subjective character of human beings as individuals in relation to others, including more-than-human beings and creates an exciting place to construct a new form of apprehension of human phenomena from a decolonial gaze. Such a decolonial turn in psychology is the discussion presented in the third section, *The History of Psychology in a New Key: Beyond Modernist Science*. The variety of psychological realities becomes interesting to address complex forms of investigation in psychological science that feed-forward a Psychology Otherwise/Earthwise based on the living experience of subjects. Finally, we give some examples of psychological scientists and historical works from fields other than psychology. These examples create liminal spaces to challenge our epistemological and methodological tools, for diversity-universal, local-global, heterogeneity-hegemony should be a place of creativity and not a problem to solve, as modernity advocates.

The “Only-one” History of Psychology

Psychology does not have only one expression, perhaps because its emergence and success in North America and Europe depended upon its need to establish itself as both science and profession. And both science and profession are historically linked to the already existing everyday psychology that grew from cosmovisions shaped by religion, spirituality, myth, and multiple other bodies of knowledge and practice common in everyday experiences. However, over time the dominant expression of psychology in both academia and professional practice has become the modes that have adhered most closely to what is now often referred to as the WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrial, Rich, [supposedly] Democratic) template in terms of subject matter and emphasis. Frequently used terms for this psychology are hegemonic or modernist.

As with other academic disciplines, especially in the social, behavioral, economic, and cognitive sciences, psychology established itself as a science capable of addressing problems of life in industrializing, urbanizing societies whose frameworks are based in individualism and capitalism⁴. The psychology that arose in Western societies has, since the mid 20th century, been a facilitator of neoliberalism, which is an intensive articulation of both individualism and capitalism. As one of us (Pickren) wrote elsewhere, “One could make the case that the ascendance of USA psychology

³ For a brief articulation of the WEIRD acronym in regard to the history of psychology, see Pickren (2022).

⁴ The critical history of these processes has been well documented. For a general overview, see the textbook, *A History of Modern Psychology in Context*, by Pickren & Rutherford, 2010. For a few specific examples, see the work on education and psychology (Wooldridge, 1994); the creation of subjectivity to serve urban life (Thomson, 2006), the role of intelligence tests (e.g., Fancher, 1985; Hearnshaw, 1981), and responsabilizing of the modern self for personal health (Pickren, 2020; Pickren & Degni, 2011). The recently published Oxford Encyclopedia of the History of Modern Psychology edited by the first author has many examples of these processes (Pickren, 2022).

since World War II facilitated neoliberal thinking, but even more that it prepared individuals to think and act neoliberally” (Pickren, 2018, p. 576).

Likewise, the historiography of psychology in North America has until recently been dominated by its focus on modernist or hegemonic psychological scientific and professional practices. To be fair, in recent years, there has been some change towards engagement with justice, with equity, with White privilege, with history as a colonizer’s right and the recognition that White epistemologies underpin much of psychological practice and science (Teo, 2022). Still, the underlying assumption is often that the White Euro-US, especially Anglo-US, approaches grounded in European enlightenment rationality form the acceptable foundation for “real” historical scholarship.

The decolonial turn in contemporary scholarship and practice has brought new understanding and insights. Now, it is possible to meliorate the enduring impacts of coloniality of being and knowledge on human thought and practice through our scholarly and activist practices. As Maori educator and scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith has noted regarding histories of indigenous peoples, such histories hold that indigenous peoples are not the “final arbiters of what counts as the truth” about their own histories (Smith, 1999, p. 34). History, she argues, was made into a modernist project in the Western Enlightenment. The result has been that it is those who are modern, traditionally White, male, and of a certain social class, who deserve the right to name lands, make official maps, set compass directions, determine what is history and what is tradition or myth (see also, Chakrabarty, 2008; Mignolo, 2011). Still, Smith argues, histories are critical to decolonization. “The pedagogical implication of this acknowledgment is that they can form the basis of different ways of doing things” (Smith, 1999, p. 34). Different forms of doing things and building knowledge seem to be a necessary turn in the history of psychology regarding its implication to how knowledge production should be addressed. The pedagogical claim about what counts as “science” in the history of psychology will be discussed in the next section.

Multiple Histories in the Form of Grasping Human Phenomena: From the Individual to the Subject

The pedagogical implications of such counter-histories show how knowledge construction is context-dependent and also may serve as powerful weapons to combat epistemicide (Santos, 2014). Likewise, considering diversity in knowledge production is taking away diversity in knowledge from the realm of “alternative” focusing on cultural differences favoring inequities, injustices, and the grip of the colonizer/oppressor on the psyche and selfways of the oppressed (Fellner, 2018). They form counter-stories or counternarratives that serve not only to empower themselves but also serve as tools to undermine colonialist settler histories and decolonize dominant canons of knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Beyond the primacy of their work to counter the coloniality of being and knowledge of the oppressed, they may also serve, as Tuhiwai Smith argued, as pedagogical tools for those historians and psychologists who aspire to develop decolonial strategies regarding psychology and its history.

The pedagogical role of decolonial tools departs from revisiting history but considers pedagogy with its own colonial history in the modernist project. From our viewpoint, pedagogical tools should be understood as a counter-pedagogy since pedagogy, on its “cruel side”, aims at transforming the subject and persons’ vitality into things (Segato, 2018). In this sense, the loss of humanity is a modernist project related to the idea of an isolated individual in the name of a kind of hegemony pursued by psychological and pedagogical sciences.

The idea of the individual as an abstraction is the primary concern of psychology allied to the modernist project. As a conceptual construction, the individual cannot be considered a scientific or philosophical truth but a cultural construction in a historical moment. Therefore, the “abstract individual” concerns Western sovereignty about what is considered the individual. This idea of the sovereign individual will pervade the fields of philosophy and science and its accompanying concepts, such as self and identity. What decolonial strategies do is re-visit, re-think and allow new forms of grasping human phenomena. In this way, the individual concept is displaced from the idea of an isolated individual to the consideration of a subject with a relational web that emerges from the historical, cultural, and social context.

Decolonial strategies make it possible to de-link from the frame of hegemonic psychology dominated by Eurocentric notions of rationality, ontology, and epistemology that enforce the coloniality of knowledge in ways both subtle and violent (epistemological, geophysical, interpersonal, intercultural violence). The decolonial turn holds out a possibility that histories of psychology can be developed that are not constrained by Global North sensibilities of modernity regarding historical praxes. Developing and using such strategies would bring new ontological, epistemological, and methodological options to the historiography of psychology.

The first step in revisiting psychology’s history from a decolonial framework is to identify when the person (as a human being) was substituted for the individual (as a sample). The individual concept has its own social and historical construction used by psychology to create universalism, as shown, for instance, by the idea of personological traits and all the fixed concepts treated as concrete entities. In doing so, psychology was displaced from the science of human beings to an entrepreneurial market, looking to create data that fits into the idea of the universal individual. Allied with that, objectivity pursued by psychology in its attempt to be considered as a real science leads to an aperspectival objectivity (Daston, 1992). According to Daston (1992), a supposed absence of aspects that demarcate singularities of a person or group is taken as “objective knowledge” favoring the construction of a universality of individuals and their contexts.

A decolonial history of psychology seeks to overcome the modernist Holy Trinity in the words of Viveiros de Castro (2015): State, Market, and Science, “respectively, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (p, 24). This is what makes psychology a dehumanizing project throughout its history, because psychologists created a science of psychology which is not suitable. Avoiding the attempts to de-humanize psychology would create new reals, psychologies otherwise as part of the pluriverse; a world where many worlds are possible (Escobar, 2020; Pickren, 2021) through the consideration of peoples’ reality of living in diversity. Practically, the de-linking brought by decolonial strategies would make it possible to create psychologies, and their

histories, that are true to their place, to the people whose psychology it is, and most importantly, a way to live that does not depend on neoliberal strategies of domination, self-promotion, or destructive exploitation of the earth and its beings, human and non-human (Chaudhary & Sriram, 2020). It expresses our capacity to create and also imagine another future. For this purpose, the entrepreneurial market of psychology is no longer suitable.

The History of Psychology in a New Key: Beyond Modernist Science

We argue that deconstruction and reconstruction on a decolonial basis are necessary because, as Kurt Danziger pointed out some years ago, psychological science was constructed on a “narrow social basis. That entailed a very considerable narrowing of epistemic access to the variety of psychological realities” (Danziger, 1990, p. 197). It is the variety of psychological realities that then becomes interesting. The complexity of human existence requires complexity in epistemological forms. It implies rethinking ontological and epistemological bases in psychology’s history in order to achieve a divergent psychological phenomenon. In other words, going beyond the narrow basis of psychology would help overcome the universalism, hegemony, and sameness in the human phenomenon, which is related to a modernist project of convergent knowledge without ambiguity, diversity, and contradiction. The hyphenated space between university-diversity, global-local, and hegemony-heterogeneity then becomes the place of constructing new epistemological tools that allow a decolonial gaze.

Historians have begun to critically examine the colonialist/modernist origins of hegemonic psychological science; the beginnings of such a history can be found in James and Lorenz (2021), Adams et al. (2018), Pickren (2021), and Bhatia (2018, 2019), among others. These studies, and now others (e.g., Guimarães, 2020), are revealing that what hegemonic psychology portrays as the optimal human psychological characteristics actually have their origins in the same matrix as neoliberal capitalism, racism, sexism, and the full span of inequities. This matrix created the “conditions of possibility for modern individualism” (Adams, Estrada-Villata, & Gómez Ordóñez, 2018, pp. 13–14) and all the ills that have accompanied it. In psychology’s history, the way the field was divided into so many specialties (Developmental Psychology, Cognitive Psychology, Educational Psychology, Social Psychology, and so on) points to the need for, even with increasing individualism, the role played by groups in conforming to the science. The kind of division brought by psychological specialties has nothing to do with the diversity argued above. Instead, it is linked to the conditions of individualism that create the competition of opposing groups fighting for the field, even though they are treating the same “object”: human beings. These conditions are precisely those related to the entrepreneurial model of psychology.

We may ask, what are other ways to imagine, create, and write histories, including histories of psychology, that could serve a decolonial function? Scholars of the history of psychology, such as Alexandra Rutherford, suggest new historical methodologies developed by racialized women who focus on everyday objects and critically examine the archival record to question modes of dominance and the silence that

comes from excluding from the archive those who are not of the dominant group (Fuentes, 2016; Hartmann, 2019; Miles, 2021). These are striking examples of decolonial historiographical tools.

Still, is there a need to expand our histories in ways that encompass the local, the sense of place, and the psychologies created there? Bhatia articulated the crux of the matter. Though he was writing about indigenous psychologies, his argument has resonance for the historiography of psychology:

One reason why we do not have detailed intellectual and social histories of indigenous psychology is because it has often been considered as deeply rooted in local practices and relegated to the realm of the mythological, collective, religious, traditional, philosophical, irrational, primitive, imaginative, and cultural. Against this narrative of marginalization, the Euro American narrative of psychology is seen as having a teleological arc that goes from the cultural, to the scientific, to the universal, and the unit of analysis simultaneously moves from the community to the individual and eventually to psychological processes as localized in the brain. The latter narrative of psychology has become our stock story, from which we have extracted our canonical stories of identity, personhood, emotions, cognition, and methods about how psychological knowledge ought to be created (Bhatia, 2019, pp. 111–112).

We bring attention to his word, primitive. This is what modernity says is not acceptable, that primitive is the very thing that is counter to the project of modernity. A decolonial strategy for history of psychology is to embrace what modernity calls the sign of the primitive, that which is “deeply rooted in local practices and relegated to the realm of the mythological, collective, religious, traditional, philosophical, irrational, primitive, imaginative, and cultural” (Bhatia, 2019, p. 111). Such an embrace challenges hegemonic psychological science and its histories because it grounds the psychological in the local, makes it place-based, and thus resonant with how people live. It also points to the generalization problem in scientific psychology and its methods. The problem of generalization is precisely the topic regarding cultures (plural) and not universalism (as one individual). What can be generalized from a decolonial perspective is the colonial power with which all people and societies live. We all somehow, and at some moments, identify ourselves with the colonizers.

From a decolonial perspective, we can see local practices and the so-called irrationality of the mythological, the collective, and the primitive as the foundation of what creates the psychological (Pickren & Tasci, 2022). Ashis Nandy, the noted Indian psychologist and prominent intellectual, posited that many in Eurocentric modernity are afraid that giving any credence or place to local, traditional, indigenous knowledges would destabilize the bases of Eurocentric rationality and epistemology (cited in Rose, 2008, p. 166). For those psychologists whose fundamental commitment is to hegemonic psychology, the mythological, the local, the collective, etc., are unacceptable because they are Other than the sources of true psychological science/practice. As Other, they become a threat to the hegemony of so called “true” psychological science and practice. Perhaps it is the relocation of psychology to the local, to place, that is so threatening. But hegemonic/modernist psychology has based its histori-

cal claims to scientificity (scientism?) on the belief that psychology requires that its claims be universal and increasingly that the origin of human and animal behavior lies in the brain and its neural processes (Vidal & Ortega, 2017). Thus, it claims that its findings are factual of all people (and even animals), everywhere, at all times (Bhatia, 2019), despite its WEIRD evidentiary database (Henrich et al., 2010).

Perhaps the occlusion of hegemonic psychology's mythic/religious/commercial past is an example of what Santos calls a sociology of absences (2014). One consequence is that many of psychology's knowledge claims are divorced from the daily experiences of most human beings (Escobar, 2020; Santos, 2014). A decolonial strategy of drawing on the local, making psychology and its history place-based, and directly related to lived experience would create a psychology that belonged to the people it developed among and thus useful in daily life.

Final Considerations: Looking Forward without Forgetting the Past

To return, then, to the question of local, place-based histories and our need for them in psychology. First, an example outside psychology may help orient us.

The recent publication of a history of the Mi'gmaq community of the Gaspé Peninsula in Canada: *Nta'tugwaqanminene: Our Story, Evolution of the Gespe'gewa'gi Mi'gmaq* (Gespe'gewa'gi Mi'gmawei Mawiomi, 2016) serves as a beginning point. Members of the Mi'gmaq community decided to develop their own history based on their traditional stories, the contributions of tribal elders and leaders, and oral histories, archives, and genealogies. The community enlisted assistance, but not direction from non-Mi'gmaq scholars, lawyers, archivists, historians, and others. The resulting history is unique in that it is not grounded in the the colonizer's gaze and does not carry the blinders of the coloniality of knowledge. In a similar vein, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's, *An indigenous peoples' history of the United States* (2015) and Paul Ortiz's, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (Revisioning History) (2018), provide a big picture of non-hegemonic histories outside psychology. More recently, indigenous psychologist Art Blume has offered a psychology that is grounded in the local and attuned to traditional Native American cosmovisions. His book, *A New Psychology Based on Community, Equality, and Care of the Earth* (2020), moves toward a different basis for psychology. Indigenous Brazilian professor of the history and philosophy of psychology, Danilo Silva Guimarães (2020), has explicated ways of incorporating the epistemologies and perspectives of indigenous and other non-European peoples into a psychological framework that allows for the truth of the local bases of psychologies. In this way, he and his research group at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, are showing how non-dualistic, non-Western Enlightenment rationalities open new possibilities for histories of psychology.

What these examples bring to us as psychologists and historians of psychology is that we should learn from a different past to imagine a possible future. A past relegated in the history of humanity due to the modernist project, which chose only-one history about the illusion of social development and wealth. Undoubtedly, this challenges the epistemological and methodological tools at our disposal. In this sense, we may find liminal points to develop new tools to create new concepts that should

apprehend new psychological realities and also question what we mean by “science” in universal psychology. To attend to this demand, we, as scientists, “need to understand how indigenous perspectives participate in the process of knowledge construction, transforming psychological concepts and practices” (Guimarães, 2020, p. 11).

We still need histories of psychology that are committed to the ways of being, thinking, feeling that are grounded in the local and are true to a sense of place, which is to say, life as lived there. Such work can help historians of psychology make the decolonial turn and de-link from the dominant psychology of our time. But, making such a turn will require that scholars and activists develop a habit of ontological and epistemological disobedience that may come at a cost in respect of pushback from those invested in hegemonic psychology and the One World World (Law, 2011). Without the commitment and the disobedience, we will never have the psychologies otherwise that is needed.

Histories of psychology can become decolonized when we center the experiences and knowledges of the marginalized. This article arises from our project to help psychologists and historians of psychology now and into the future interrogate and interrupt the coloniality of being and knowledge in daily practice and in writing psychology’s histories. It is, perhaps, the only route to a psychology and a history of psychology that is liberatory. As Anand Paranjpe stated 20 plus years ago, “What is particularly needed is a psychology guided by emancipatory interests” (Paranjpe, 2002, p. 29).

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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