

Psychology should generalize from—not just to— Africa

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When psychologists attend to Africa, they usually test whether theories and concepts developed in North America and Europe generalize to Africa. Psychology would be enriched by focusing on Africa on its own terms.

Africa comprises 17% of the global population, yet according to one audit less than 1% of first authors and participant samples in top psychology journal articles were from Africa.¹ When psychology researchers do focus on Africa, they often test whether a claim developed with one population— usually from North America (and to a lesser extent Europe)²— generalizes to Africa. Consider “big-team science”, highly collaborative and often international, these projects pool resources to accomplish together what they could not alone.³ These projects often aim to understand cultural variation in psychological processes, yet almost universally investigate whether effects discovered in North America or Europe generalize to other populations, with lead investigators usually based in North America or Europe.

Research that tests whether psychological processes discovered in North America and Europe generalize to other countries can legitimately advance science. However, this approach of generalizing almost exclusively from North America and Europe risks creating “unknown unknowns”, gaps that American and European psychologists inadvertently ignore because they do not consider the phenomena and processes that are outside their personal experience. In the case of Africa, this approach also risks recreating a harmful neocolonial dynamic, in which African labor goes toward generating knowledge that is mostly relevant to rich white people.

Benefit from African insights

All people deserve dignity and respect. Focusing on the African experience is therefore the moral and ethical thing for research psychologists to do. However, it is also strategic, as this focus can uncover psychological processes that would not arise from non-African minds.

Take Ubuntu, a South African concept that reflects a moral and communal obligation to others, based on the belief that a universal bond of sharing connects all humanity. Ubuntu reflects a concept of self that is more permeable and dynamic than in North America and Europe because it is dependent on relations with others.⁴ Explaining Ubuntu

might require a different concept of moral value than the one assumed by North American and European theories of morality. This different sense of moral value could enrich these theories, and make them more relevant and useful to people in Africa and people in North America and Europe who typically neglect this more permeable and dynamic sense of self. As another example, the Yoruba personhood concept of Omoluabi⁵ describes a person who respects honor, works hard, and gives to the community. Omoluabi can be contrasted with the way honor is approached in the US literature, where it is often studied in relation to aggression.⁶

Both Ubuntu and Omoluabi might have equivalents in North America and Europe, but without proper study, we do not know. This lack of knowledge inhibits understanding of the rich forms of moral value that occur across cultures, locations, and times. Unlike some current research questions that dominate cross-cultural big-team science, Ubuntu and Omoluabi are directly relevant to the African experience. Had African researchers selected topics relevant to 'morality' to examine on a global scale, they might not have selected trolley dilemmas that have questionable relevance to African moral reasoning.⁷

Understand African psychology

To nurture African psychology and reap the resulting benefits, we must first understand African psychology. Africa is faced with many practical problems. African psychology therefore focuses on applied topics, such as poverty, marriage and family, gender-based violence, work behavior, substance abuse, masculinity, disability and inclusion, and road safety. This emphasis on applied topics means that clinical, counseling, and occupational psychology are more prominent in Africa than cognitive, biological, and experimental psychology.

In some African countries, psychology barely exists as a discipline, or is not called psychology. For example, research in East Africa covers topics like corruption, land-use conflicts, and the role of psychological processes in the spread of infectious disease. This research aims to deepen understanding of human thought and use that understanding to impact communities, but is not always branded as 'psychology'. Instead, it sometimes falls under behavioral science, development economics, or public health. Strengthening the connections between these disciplines could enrich understanding of psychological

processes and make psychological research more useful and relevant to the many people globally who suffer from poverty, land-use conflict, corruption, and communicable disease.

Understanding African psychology also requires recognizing how material realities, such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of access to research literature, intermittent internet, and limited external funding⁸, constrain what is possible in African research institutes. Material realities also constrain what is possible for studies with African participants. For example, Africa has incredible language diversity, which limits who can participate in research studies that are not conducted in multiple languages, or might require trained personnel to translate or contextualize instructions. These problems are especially difficult at institutes that do not provide dedicated lab space to most faculty – all research must happen in the field or in people's homes.

Nurture African psychology

A major first step toward nurturing African psychology is to find and read it. This could involve looking in journals that are not branded as 'psychology', consulting lists of African journals maintained by the [International African Journal](#) and the [African Journals Online](#), and looking to working papers published by places like the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, the African Development Bank Group, and J-PAL Africa that focus on driving policy rather than achieving academic recognition.

The resource gaps that constrain African psychology must also be addressed. Currently, no African country contributes more than 1% of their GDP to research and development.⁹ In some African countries, PhD programs barely exist due to a lack of resources. Growing African psychology therefore requires that non-African universities actively recruit African scholars and assist them with visa processes; without admission into non-African institutions, many African scholars will not be able to obtain PhDs. Giving educational opportunities to African scholars recognizes that the scientific talent within the African continent can only be unleashed by providing access to the infrastructure and resources available at rich European and North American universities.

African scholars located at African universities can also be supported through invitations to virtual talks, events, and conferences; the online format allows African scholars to share their insights and learn from their peers without paying exorbitant travel costs. The scientific societies that organize conferences could provide Internet grants so that

African researchers have reliable internet to participate in international collaborations, actively promote African-themed events, and organize Africa-focused grant programs. Resources could be provided to create new questionnaires or at the very least translate and contextualize existing measures to make them relevant to Africans and usable by African scientists, as most current questionnaires were developed with US college students in mind. Finally, non-regional scientific organizations that aim to generalize across the entire globe should impose quotas on leadership positions, while big-team science projects in psychology should reserve at least a percentage of their research projects for African researchers, so that for both, their ideas and actions better match their aims.

Replicate African-origin effects

Investing in and nurturing Africa's growing talent will take time. However, one step can be taken immediately to foreground African psychology: researchers could select effects supporting important African research claims and test their replicability outside Africa.

We are beginning this process in our work. In an in-development multi-site study, ManyLabs Africa, we asked African researchers to nominate studies that originated in African countries. From these studies, we will select effects to serve as replication targets in Africa, North America, and Europe. Our nomination survey revealed that our African colleagues are interested in issues that feature prominently in North American and European psychology, such as gender, criminality, and family. However, they are also interested in issues that do not feature prominently, such as hatred and disharmony, land-use conflicts, polygamy, corruption, poverty, and spirituality. This nomination process reveals important topics that affect the lives of many, yet are neglected by psychological science that originates from a small part of the world.

Our approach attests to the importance of engaging African researchers to better represent their research interests. By implementing a large-scale replication research process, we hope to diversify psychological science research and build more generalisable theories. Our long-term vision for African psychology—and for global psychological science—is to introduce practices that improve sampling concepts from Africa and other countries and give a more permanent voice to African researchers on the world stage. Realizing this vision will transform psychology and make it better, stronger, and more relevant to the population of the entire globe.

Competing interest

P.S.F is a research lead for the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics. All authors are part of the Psychological Science Accelerator.

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