



Chapter 17

African perspectives

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1 Outcomes

After participating in this chapter the reader should be able to:

- **understand the importance of an African perspective** for personology and the need for an indigenous psychology.
- describe the various **cosmic orders** underlying the African view of the person and worldview.
- explain the unique characteristics of **cognitive functioning** of Africans and the traditional African **conception of time**.
- distinguish between **optimal functioning** in an African and in a Western context.
- understand the role of the underlying cosmic orders in the African view of **pathological behaviour** and **physical illness**.
- distinguish between Western-style **psychotherapy** and African **healing practices**.

2 Introduction and background

Question: What is the view on psychology in Africa and why did an indigenous African psychology not develop?

Mainstream psychology is predominantly a Euro-Americocentric science that was exported to Africa and the East. This resulted in the lack of development of a specific personality theory from a purely African perspective. Jung was the only psychologist who tried, albeit superficially, to study the psyche of the African person. Apart from a few cross-cultural investigations, which focused mainly on cognitive functioning, our knowledge of the functioning and personality of Africans is mainly confined to anthropological studies. Personologists therefore have to obtain knowledge of the general psychological functioning of people in Africa from the work of anthropologists, philosophers and theologians who have studied the life and worldviews, values, norms and customs of Africans.

There are, however, only a few fragmented psychological investigations involving Afro-American or African subjects. Curry (1980) and Jones (1991) provide an overview of psychological investigations undertaken with Africans. They deal with specific topics, such as intelligence, self-concept, certain personality attributes and attitudes, but all these studies are done from a purely Western-oriented framework. In reaction to the dominance of “Eurocentric Psychology”, and mainly instigated as a protest against “white supremacy, Arab supremacy and all forms of African (Black) oppression”, *The Association of Black Psychologists (ABP)* was established in America in 1968. ABP’s aim was to promote an Africentric psychology (Azibo, 1996), which was embedded in the slogan of the time “Black is Beautiful”. The main focus of this

association was to establish the roots of African psychological thinking, as well as an African cosmology that would serve as a basis for an “Africentric paradigm” and a vindication of their opposition to, and critique of “Eurocentric Psychology”.

In his pioneering work, Nobles (1972), laid the philosophical foundations for an African perspective in psychology, which led to a number of predominantly Afro-American psychologists (Nian Akbar; Daudi Ajani ya Azibo; Joseph A Baldwin also known as Kobi KK Kamon; RL Jones; WW Nobles; JL White - see Azibo's, *African Psychology in historical perspective and related commentary*, 1996, for references) starting to publish work based on these foundations. The problem with most of this work is the lack of an indigenous African flavour concentrating on the indigenous African psyche. It concentrates instead on the Afro-American psyche seeking its African heritage and cosmological roots. Although they trace the cosmological roots back to about 3200 BC in ancient Kemet (the African's Nile Valley civilization in what is now “Arab conquered Egypt”) the work mainly misses the indigenous African spirit, lifestyle and rhythm; it largely remains “Black and liberatory Psychology” in America.

A lot of work taking an indigenous African perspective into account has been done on pathological behaviour with the pioneering work of Vera Bührmann (1977, 1979, 1984 & 1987). She did extensive studies on traditional healing methods among the Xhosa, and on pathological behaviour among Africans. The anthropologist Hammond-Tooke's (1975 & 1989) studies of various African tribes also contributed to the awareness that Western diagnostic categories are not always applicable to African patients. Holdstock (2000) critically examines mainstream psychology's view, and provides, up to date, the most comprehensive overview of an African perspective on psychology. He accuses mainstream psychologists of neglecting the possibility that Africa may have psychological dimensions that are singularly “unique and valid”. He is of the opinion that “relevant and applicable methodologies are required to unravel and understand the African psyche” (2000:2). Holdstock (2000:14) also stresses the contribution that the indigenous psychologies of Africa can make to the attainment of a “universal psychology”.

A universal psychology, if it comes about, will be characterised by unravelling what various indigenous psychologies have in common and what sets them apart. Thus, besides investigating the nature of the general laws that underlie the behaviour of people, it will also concentrate on the idiosyncratic laws that constitute the psychological uniqueness of each culture. The emphasis will be on ‘different but equal’.

However, an overarching perspective based on indigenous concepts capturing the essence of an African psyche does not exist. Nsamenang (1995:730) suggests the following explanation why psychological theory and research from an African perspective lag behind the psychology in Europe and America:

Scientific psychology arrived in Africa during colonisation in the context of anthropological research ... Its theories and method are still eurocentric and its primary focus is on topics that reflect this externalised orientation, thereby neglecting or excluding folk knowledge and local issues.

Nsamenang (1995:731) also believes that most Africans have neither heard nor know the meaning of the term ‘psychology’. He gives examples of the current status of psychology at different African universities as well as the rudimentary fragmented nature of psychological services in various African countries. He states that:

The historical development of psychology clearly reveals its nascent state in Sub-Saharan Africa. Except for universities in South Africa, no university in *Afrique Noire* had a department of psychology in 1962 ... Even by the mid-1980s not more than 20 African universities had a psychology department, and less than 10 had a history of research that extended beyond 10 years.

Question: What are the main obstacles to developing an African perspective in personology?

Round about the turn of the century the question of the applicability of ‘Western’ psychology in Africa, and the relevance of this knowledge for people of African origin has become a prominent topic of debate. On the one hand, there were those against acknowledging the importance of indigenous psychologies, even accusing such a notion as supporting “apartheid” (Nell, 1990; Seedat and Nell, 1990); on the other hand, there emerged a strong call for the Africanisation of psychology based on the argument that an understanding of the complexities of traditional indigenous African epistemologies is necessary for the development of psychological knowledge appropriate for Africans (Viljoen, 1995; Dawes, 1998; Holdstock, 2000; Eagle, 2004). The impetus for the quest for the Africanisation of psychology can, according to Dawes (1998:7), be ascribed to three factors:

- the fact that psychology “collaborated in the oppression of American blacks and in the African colonial project through the invidious comparison of the ‘primitive’ (African) with the ‘modern’ (Western) mind”; this applies especially to the development of the “Africentric paradigm” and “Black Psychology” in the USA.
- the fact that psychology in the USA and South Africa “has had little relevance to the problems facing the black and the poor”. When it did pay attention to these populations, the discipline used models which were unsuited to understanding the local conditions of life, with the result that the effectiveness of psychology in resolving the problems of these populations could be questioned;
- the claim “that psychologies imported to the continent do not accurately portray African life and mentality.” Thus, questioning the appropriateness and applicability of mainstream theoretical and empirical knowledge for Africa.

Dawes (1998:4) and Eagle (2004:2) argue that if an African psychology and psychotherapy were to materialise, it should draw on both local (indigenous) and external (westernised) knowledge systems, because both these cosmologies exist side by side in contemporary Africa. Considering the possibility of developing an African perspective in personology, Viljoen (1998) cautions that the various sources of information, both Euro-American models and traditional indigenous knowledge,

will have to be carefully considered before any final conclusions about the functioning of Africans can be drawn. This is mainly due to Africans being in a transitional phase of development that makes it almost impossible to talk of a comprehensive overriding African perspective.

When studying African behaviour it is extremely important to note that Africans are currently in a **transitional phase** in which a shift is taking place from a traditional to a more modern, Western-oriented way of life. Sogolo (1993) warns that the process of change and acculturation that is taking place with regard to these two ways of life does not necessarily imply a development from a lower to a higher level, or that a modern way of life is, by definition, more progressive and qualitatively better than a traditional way of life. However, most Africans find themselves somewhere between these two ways of life. It would therefore be difficult (and reductionist) to situate the functioning of Africans within a single way of life. Personologists would have to take cognisance of the views on how traditional Africans function and also take cognisance of the personality theories that are anchored in a Western framework to gain an understanding of how Africans function.

Peltzer (2005) constructed an African socialisation model based on three different levels of acculturation, namely: *traditional*, i.e. persons who are little affected by modernisation and who function within an established and constant framework of their traditional culture; *transitional*, i.e. persons living and shuttling between two cultures in the course of their daily lives (e.g. between their work in a town representing a modern lifestyle and values, and the ancestral traditional village where their extended family lives according to traditional norms and values); *modern*, i.e. individuals who engage fully in the activities of contemporary industrial and post-industrial society, with little or no contact with a traditional society. This category could actually be sub-divided into those individuals who have, and desire, no contact with the traditional society of their ancestors and those modern individuals who have no direct contact with their traditional background, but desire and take pride in upholding certain of the traditional values and practices; they lead modern lives but revert back to their roots (e.g. the use of indigenous traditional names, rituals at burials, etc.). Peltzer warns that these important distinctions have not, as yet, been taken into account in most studies of personality in Africa and that their disregard may have contributed to error variance and distorted findings.

Enrichment

The Zulus' stratification of society

Peltzer's (2005) African socialisation model corresponds to a certain extent with the way the Zulu people stratify the African society into three distinct groups (Boon, 2007:47), namely:

- *Amabhinca*: Traditionalists who remain very close to the tribal way of life
- *Amakholwa*: Those who follow Western ideologies and are mostly Christian. They are people who are strongly opposed to traditionalism, viewing it as pagan and

primitive. Religion provides them with the discipline and integrity that are easily lost in the breakdown of tribal groupings.

- *Amagxagxa*: Those who borrow from 'First World' and 'Third World'. These neo-traditionalists find themselves in a "crossover cultural zone", and they constitute by far the largest group.

Boon (2007:48), however, adds a fourth group, the '*Third World Takers*' which he describes as follows:

"...there is a dark and utterly destructive cloud to the Third World: a massive movement of individuals turning their backs on their traditions and discipline and, in so doing, also on the closeness of community and *ubuntu*.* They replace it, not with the best of the First World, but often with the worst. They are self-serving and care nothing for the community other than what it can deliver to them personally. They seek to take, not to share... They know how to manipulate Westerners and how to use, to their own ends, their once-upon-a-time tribe... We shall call them the 'Takers'. Takers have neither integrity nor discipline"

(*The role of *ubuntu* and the closeness of the community as part of the African ethos will be discussed under the view of the person and underlying worldview).

A second aspect, which should be taken into consideration when studying African behaviour, is the question: **'What is meant by an African perspective?'** Just as there are different views and theories within the Western perspective, there are different views within a traditional African perspective. The term 'African', which is used in this context, refers to a polymorphous grouping of the indigenous peoples of the sub-Saharan region of Africa. This includes not only geographical diversity in terms of topography and climate, but also the human diversity of different population groups (for example Sudanese, Guinean, Congolese, South and East Africans, Khoisan and Ethiopians), linguistic diversity and religious diversity (for example traditional religions as well as Christian and Islamic religions), together with the diversity that comes with ways of life that fall somewhere between traditional and modern. Appiah (1998:115) also maintains that many African societies have as much in common with traditional societies that are not African as they do with one another.

Despite these underlying differences, several authors (Sow, 1980; Buhrmann, 1984; Gyekye, 1987; Shutte, 1994; Airhihenbuwa, 1995; Holdstock, 2000; van Dyk, 2001) are of the opinion that it is possible to talk of an overarching African perspective that can be distinguished from a Western and an Eastern perspective. Sow (1980:125) describes the unity among the diversity of various African cultures as follows:

... a unity that is evident in the realm of spirituality as well as in that of representation and expression, from works of art to behaviours manifested in everyday life ... There is no doubt that, with a few variations, African thought has a distinctive character, deriving its principles from symbols and myths (merging into one the universe and the society in which the

African person/personality is formed) as well as from a collective ritual (permitting precise location of the individual in relation to his environment and the course of his development).

Question: Why is an African perspective on indigenous psychology necessary?

Nobles (1991) accuses personologists who do not take the traditional perspective into account of **scientific colonialism** because they lay down Western formulations and conceptualisations as standards against which the behaviour of all the people of the world should be understood and explained. In his view, too many people look at Africa through a Euro-American lens and do not allow the underlying African life and worldviews to speak for themselves. This then creates a problem when psychologists gather data on the behaviour of Africans, using only principles that feature in a Western perspective and without insight into African life and worldviews.

Nobles even goes a step further and argues for insight that is uncoupled from a Western perspective and generated from a uniquely African perspective, thus pleading for an **indigenous psychology**. He maintains (1976:171, 173) that:

... the total effect of these different worldviews on the nature of science has yet to be understood ... As long as black researchers ask the same questions and theorise the same theory as their white counterparts, black researchers will continue to be part and parcel to a system which perpetuates the misunderstanding of black reality and consequently contributes to our degradation.

Nsamenang (1995:735) also pleads for an indigenous understanding of the behaviour of Africans in order to avoid the problem of misunderstanding 'African reality' and degradation of the 'African'. He notes that:

African social thought and folk psychology are structured by ethnotheories and epistemologies that differ in remarkable ways from those that drive Western thought and psychology. As a result, when scholars apply Western concepts and categories to African systems, they discover that they do not fit.

Nsamenang (1995) is of the opinion that a lot could be learned from the wisdom embedded in African folklore, idioms and spatial use of cues, but that a Western-based epistemology and methodology might not be the best way, or not be sensitive enough, to extract the essence of African wisdom. Although psychologists have rarely asked what Africa contributed to the universal body of psychological knowledge, as if Africa had nothing to offer, Nsamenang maintains that progress in psychology in Africa will only be made with the emergence and development of an indigenous body of psychological knowledge.

This indigenous approach, however, should not try to reinvent the wheel by duplicating the existing body of psychological knowledge. Nsamenang (1995:737) pleads for a contextualisation of the universal body of psychological knowledge within the different African cultures and states that:

Given the peculiar nature of African social thought and modes of survival and life, a contextualist approach to psychological research in African societies is likely to provide data to fill gaps or complement knowledge of psychological functioning. Such approaches can furnish insights that can induce reconsideration of theories that assume Euro-American ways of life ... Not only will indigenous psychology enhance understanding of local phenomena, but it will also expand our vision of what forms psychological functioning may take in diverse cultures. This may call to question models derived primarily from studies of Western populations.

Self-evaluation questions

- Why does a uniform African perspective not exist, and is such a view necessary in personology?
- Discuss the main obstacles in studying an African perspective.

3 The view of the person and the worldview underlying the perspective

The African view of the person and worldview are founded on a **holistic** and **anthropocentric** ontology (Akbar, 1996; Kambon, 1996; Biko, 1998; Teffo and Roux, 1998; Holdstock, 2000; Eagle, 2004) This implies that humans form an indivisible whole with the cosmos (and therefore a unity with God, other human beings and nature), and they form the point of departure and the centre of the universe - “a man-centred society” - from which everything is understood and explained. Holdstock (2000:162) describes holism in Africa as follows:

In Africa, holism is a lived experience. The belief that everything belongs together is directly translated into actualities of daily living. There is infinite respect for the invisible thread that binds all things together.

Within this indivisible cosmic whole, Sow (1980) maintains that three cosmic orders or realities can, theoretically, be distinguished, namely the macro-, meso- and micro-cosmos. These do, however, blend together in practical, everyday life.

Question: What are the meanings and practical implications of the three cosmic orders for African behaviour?

3.1 The macro-cosmos

The macro-cosmos is the **domain in which God is encountered**. This is the order in which the religious existence that enfolds the full humaneness of traditional Africans is grounded.

Sow (1980) points out that according to various African myths, there was originally no distinction between God and humans, and that they lived with one another. However, God withdrew from day-to-day human existence, and as a result people had

to become self-reliant. This then gave rise to humans' first religious experiences. This withdrawal of God should not be taken to refer to the Judaeo-Christian conception of the 'Fall of Man'. It is rather the transcendence of God, with the *ancestors* serving as the all-important intervening medium and contact with God. For everyday existence, the ancestors are therefore more important than God, and they form an inherent part of daily African functioning. Sow (1980:184) explains this as follows:

God has withdrawn and does not concern himself directly with the affairs of men; on earth, men alone are responsible for both the good and the evil that may befall them.

The daily functioning of the traditional African is fundamentally a **religious functioning**. (Mbiti, 1989; Biko, 1998; Holdstock, 2000). Africans are 'notoriously religious', not necessarily in the sense of church-going or being devoted to a specific religious dogma, but in the sense that all levels of life are imbued with religion. Mbiti (1989:2) describes the inherent nature of religion as follows:

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament.

Accordingly, there is no distinction between sacred and worldly, between religion and non-religion, or between a spiritual and a physical, material facet of life.

In addition, traditional religion does not focus primarily on the individual, but on the community the individual belongs to. This is thus interlinked with the African's **collective functioning** on the micro-cosmic level. Mbiti (1990:2) points out that:

... in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of the community.

With the exception of Jung's psychodynamic view of religion, few Western personality theories recognise the religious basis of human functioning to account for the 'inherent religiousness' of Africans. Jung (1938:5–8) perceives religion as one of the earliest and most universal expressions of the human mind. To him it is quite obvious that any psychology that touches on the structure of human personality, cannot fail to take note of the fact that religion is not only a sociological, theological or historical phenomenon, but also a psychological phenomenon located in the psyche of human beings.

3.2 The meso-cosmos

The meso-cosmos is **a kind of no man's land**, where coincidence and the forces of the ancestors, malignant spirits and sorcerers hold sway. This meso-cosmos is situated in the world of individual and collective imagination, and it involves the *ancestors*, the *living reality* (animals and humans) as well as the *natural physical reality* (forests, bushes, trees, rivers, etc.).

This meso-cosmos is especially important in understanding the behaviour of Africans since they are inclined to explain all conflict, as well as events such as sickness and death, with reference to this level, which is the domain of the ancestors, malignant spirits, sorcerers and Shamans (healers, priests and rainmakers) who influence and determine human behaviour (Straker, 1994; Holdstock, 2000; Lebakeng, Sedumedi, & Eagle in Hook & Eagle 2002; Eagle, 2004). Throughout Africa, the most important of these intermediary forces are the ancestors, who mediate between the living and the “living dead” (i.e. the remembered dead or ancestors) and influence the lives of the living. Holdstock (2000) notes that the ancestors, contrary to Western belief, are not experienced as deities or spirits, but as persons with whom a speaking relationship can be attained. (The aspect of the intermediary forces will also be discussed under pathological behaviour.)

Sow (1980:6) offers the following description of the meso-cosmos:

... the meso-cosmos has become the place that gives rise to all good and bad fortune, the site of dramatic events as well as the source of worldly success. That is why it can be called the ‘structured collective imaginary’, for it is the space that gives form to the desires, fears, anxieties and hopes for success ... the day-to-day psychological fate of individual human beings is modulated by a subtle dialectic of complex (often ambiguous) relations between humans and the creatures of the meso-cosmos (African genies and spirits): invisible but powerful, good or bad, gratifying or persecutory.

Clearly then, this level is of utmost importance for the personologist because it is the level from which an African perspective explains human dynamics. Viljoen (1998) points out that in contrast to some Western-oriented theories that explain behaviour as the outcome of *intrapsychic dynamics* (such as Freud, Jung and Erikson) or *interpersonal dynamics* (such as Adler, Horney and Rogers), the African perspective attributes behaviour wholly to **external agents** outside the person. Drawing on the work of Shutte (1994), Eagle, (2004:5), states that the self is seen as “outside” (referring to the natural world and social relations) and not “inside” as “a self that controls and changes the world”. In this regard, the African view corresponds more with behaviourism, which also attributes behaviour to an external agent. Therefore, individuals cannot hold themselves responsible or accountable for their own behaviour because the causes of all behaviour and events are ascribed to external, supernatural beings or powers.

This view has grave implications for people who do not take responsibility for their own actions and behaviour, and are not being held accountable for their behaviour. According to Malan (1989), this also implies that personal initiative in searching for solutions is repressed since people are at the mercy of supernatural beings and powers. Van Niekerk (1992) highlights the further implication that behaviour and events cannot always be explained on empirical and rational grounds in the traditional context, and that one has to look for invisible powers and beings behind the empirical rational reality.

One of the problems of modernisation is the destruction of the **historical rootedness** found in the macro- and meso-cosmic orders of traditional Africans. Without their solid religious base, people are left to struggle with the conflict of losing this historical rootedness provided by the ancestors while confronting the demands of technological society whose foundations for many Africans seem flimsy indeed. It thus seems as if Africans had lost some of their rootedness that is located in the macro- and meso-cosmic orders and serves as guideline for their daily lives in the micro-cosmic order. But even among modernised Africans, the influence of the ancestors does not seem to be completely lost. In the words of the well-known writer, Es'kia Mphahlele (1972:122)

I was brought up on European history and literature and religion and made to identify with European heroes while African heroes were being discredited ... I later rejected Christianity. And yet I could not return to ancestral worship in any overt way. But this does not invalidate my ancestors for me. Deep down there inside my agnostic self, I feel reverence for them.

According to Mphahlele (1959:54) this is a common experience amongst educated Africans, stating:

What I do know is that about eight out of every ten educated Africans, most of whom are also professed Christians, still believe firmly in the spirits of their ancestors. We don't speak to one another about it among the educated. But when we seek moral guidance and inspiration and hope, somewhere in the recesses of our being, we grope around for some link with those spirits.

3.3 The micro-cosmos

The micro-cosmos is the domain of the individual person in his or her everyday, **collective existence**, which is wholly influenced by the macro-cosmos and the meso-cosmos. According to Boon (2007:26) this collective existence amongst Africans is typified by the philosophy of *ubuntu* (Zulu) or *batho* (Sotho) that implies "that a person is only a person because of other people". Ubuntu is thus a code of ethics which governs one's interaction with others, and Boon typifies it as "... morality, humaneness, compassion, care, understanding and empathy. It is one of sharing and hospitality, of honesty and humility." Although it is difficult to translate *ubuntu* into English, Holdstock (2000:175) maintains that,

"the concept refers to that which ultimately distinguishes us from the animals - the quality of being human and ultimately of being humane.

Ubuntu conveys the idea of strength based on the qualities of compassion, care, gentleness, respect, and empathy.

Ubuntu is not a theoretical construction, but it manifests itself through the interaction of people and through the "truly good things that people unthinkingly do for each other and for the community". (Boon, 2007:26). People with *ubuntu* do not take advantage of others, but use their strength in a compassionate and gentle way to care

and help others, notably the weak, children and older people (e.g., in the traditional society orphans and problem children are drawn into the local community and absorbed into other families; in this way everyone becomes the mother, father, brother or sister of these children - this is in total contrast to the Western way where these children are mostly isolated in orphanages and homes under professional guidance).

Holdstock (2000:202) links the concept of *ubuntu* to certain aspects of Rogers' person-centred approach. He points out that Rogers emphasises empathy, positive regard, and congruence as essential elements to establish sound human relationships, and as necessary and sufficient conditions for psychotherapy. According to him, these three conditions embody "the way the concept of *ubuntu* comes to life in Africa". This is also the way in which he himself understood and experienced *ubuntu* when he did practical work as 'witch-doctor professor' in close association with African healers.

Enrichment

Is ubuntu too good to be true?

Dooms (1989) as cited by Holdstock (2000:106) questions the ultra humaneness embedded in *ubuntu* as a dominant ethos that guides all human interaction in Africa. He also questions the exclusively positive interpretation of *ubuntu*, in which there is no place for any anti-social behaviour, maintaining that such a view does not take reality into account (e.g. present strife and conflict which prevails everywhere in Africa), rather it equates reality with the biblical 'Garden of Eden'. The essence of Patrick Dooms' questioning highlights, according to Holdstock, the absence of the concepts of evil and of hell in the African world view as the opposites of the concepts of good and of heaven; and it begs for recognition of the darker, shadow side of human functioning, in Jungian terms, to account for human suffering afflicted by one person onto another. Based on Dooms' experience of growing up as a young Black during the apartheid years encountering a great deal of the horrors that humankind is capable of, Holdstock attests to Dooms' viewpoint.

It is in the domain of collective existence where the difference in ethos and values between the Westerner and the African creates important differences in behavioural modalities, particularly in respect to the relationships between **individual** and **community**.

According to Nobles (1991) and Kambon (1996), the European ethos rests on the **principle of individual survival** enshrined in the theory of evolution, which is based on the survival of the fittest, and on the divine commandment of Judaeo-Christian origin to control and rule nature. These two principles have given rise to values such as 'competition', 'individual rights' and 'autonomy', and to the importance of 'individuality', 'uniqueness', 'responsibility for oneself' and 'individual differences' as concepts for understanding and explaining the psychological modalities of behaviour of Western people. In personality theories, these principles

are expressed in concepts such as *ego* or *I-identity*, *self-concept*, and *self-realisation* or *self-actualisation*, which are catered for in almost all psychoanalytical theories (Freud, Jung, Adler, Erikson, Horney and Fromm) as well as the person-oriented theories (Maslow and Rogers).

The traditional African ethos rests on other, equally important principles, such as **the survival of the community** (tribe) and union with nature. These principles give rise to values that centre around ‘co-operation’, ‘interdependence’ and ‘collective responsibility’. In correspondence with these values, the psychological modalities of behaviour of ‘individuality’, ‘uniqueness’ and ‘differences’ are replaced with modalities such as ‘communality’, ‘group orientation’ and ‘agreement’.

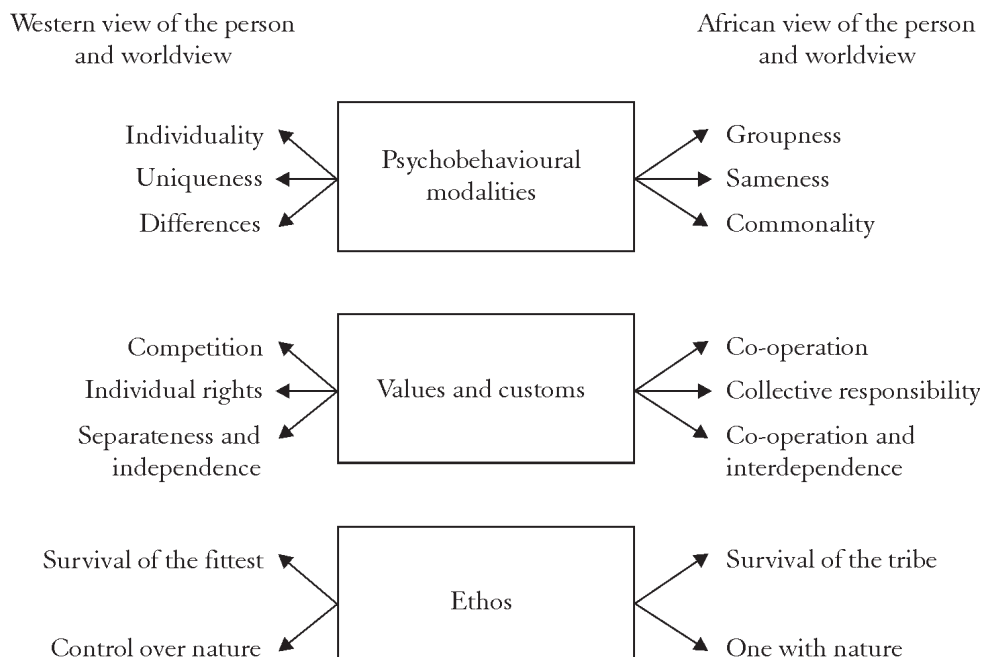


Figure 17.1 Adaptation of Nobles' (1991:299) schematic comparison of the Western and African views of the person and worldviews

If we were to apply African principles and values to a construct such as the **self concept**, it would mean defining this as an ‘**us/we**’ rather than as an ‘**I**’. According to Nobles (1995:177) this implies that “...one’s self-identity is therefore always a *people* identity, or what could be called an *extended identity* or *extended self*. Azibo (1996:50-52) conceptualises this self-extension principle as a “holistic interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities within the universe”, and he maintains that the extended self, “has to be understood as an unbroken circle encompassing an infinite past, an infinite future, and all contemporary Africans”. Graphically his view is represented as seen in Figure 17: 2

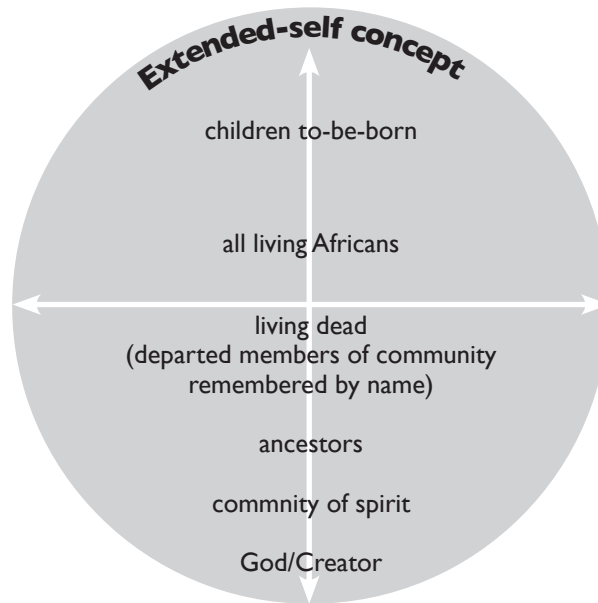


Figure 17. 2 *Adaptation of Azibo's (1996:51) graphical representation of the African's extended-self concept.*

According to Mbiti (1990:106), the personhood and identity of the traditional African is entirely embedded in his or her **collective existence**. He explains this as follows:

Only in terms of other people does the individual become conscious of his being, his duties, his privileges and responsibilities towards himself and towards other people. When he suffers, he does not suffer alone but with the corporate group; when he rejoices, he rejoices not alone but with his kinsmen, his neighbours and his relatives whether dead or living. When he gets married, he is not alone, neither does the wife 'belong' to him alone. So also the children belong to the corporate body of kinsmen, even if they bear only their father's or mother's name. Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: 'I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am'. This is the cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.

Africans' negation of a unique identity, which is partly shared by an Eastern perspective (in which the emphasis is on the transcendence of an ego or unique identity), and by the post-modern views (that eliminate or underplay the ego-identity), is also affirmed by various African writers and philosophers such as Nkrumah (1964), Senghor (1964), Nyerere (1968) and Kamalu (1990). In his reflections on the collective existence of the African, Senghor (1964:72–73) expresses the following opinion:

In contrast to the classic European, the Negro-African does not draw a line between himself and the object; he does not hold it at a distance, nor does he

merely look at it and analyse it ... the Negro-African sympathises, abandons his personality to become identical with the Other, dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate; he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the Other; he lives in a symbiosis ... 'I think therefore I am' Descartes writes ... The Negro-African could say 'I feel, I dance the Other; I am'.

The implication of such an approach is that the Western injunction to realise or actualise the self does not play the same role in the daily life of the traditional African as it does among Westerners. For the personologist, this poses the problem that there is no role for an individual personality structure, and that the dynamics of the personality have to be attributed to the activities of the ancestral spirits and other magical powers outside the individual personality. It is therefore fair to ask whether the existence of a unique traditional African personality should be questioned.

According to Pasteur and Toldson (1982), individuality as a reflection of an individual personality is not foregone through the collective domination of the community. However, apart from citing Deren, who maintains that there are many more colourful individual personalities among the more traditionally oriented populations than in the standardised private lifestyles of the West, they give no indication of how this individuality is manifested. What is interesting, however, is that traditional Africans, for all their emphasis on the collective, use individual names unique to the individual, and not collective family names. Mbiti (1990:115) elaborates as follows:

Some names describe the personality of the individual, or his character, or some key events in his life. There is no stop to the giving of names in African societies, so that a person can acquire a sizeable collection of names by the time he becomes an old man ... The name is the person, and many names are often descriptive of the individual.

By contrast, the Christian (first) name of a Westerner is almost never used as a reference to a unique individuality, particularly not in formal circles, and it is the collective family name that is used instead.

It seems, therefore, that the Western concept of personality and the Western explanation of behaviour with its focus on individual function are not suitable for understanding and explaining the behaviour and functioning of the traditional African. At the most, African behaviour and functioning could be explained from an ecosystemic point of view – with the accent on the individual as a system comprising subsystems, who in turn form part of larger supra-systems.

Activity

Describe your own view of God and the function God plays in your life. Ask close friends to do the same. Then try to point

out the differences and similarities of your perspective, your friends' views and the traditional African perspective.

Self-evaluation questions

- Describe the three cosmic orders forming the basis of the African view of the person and worldview, and indicate in what respects the meaning and implications for behaviour of these orders differ from or accord with a European-American perspective.
- Critically discuss the ethos of ubuntu and how it impacts on people's lives.
- Describe the differences between European and African views on the individual–society relationship and indicate the implications these differences have on a Western-oriented perspective in personology.

4 Cognitive functioning and the concept of time

Notwithstanding the absence of an overarching, integrated theory on the psychological functioning of Africans, there are certain aspects of their behaviour with regard to cognitive functioning and the concept of time, on the micro-cosmic level, the personologist should know about.

Question: Do the thought processes and way of thinking of the traditional African differ from those of a Westerner?

In contrast to Westerners, the cognitive functioning of Africans could be described as **intuitive rationality**, because they rely more on *intuition* and *emotion* than on pure *rationality* (Ruch & Anyanwu 1981; Pasteur & Toldson, 1982; Sogolo, 1993). Although Senghor (1964:76) highlights the role of emotions in the thinking of the African, he believes that Africans have been unjustly regarded as beings without reason or discursive thought. According to him, there is a clear distinction between the cognitive function of the African and that of the Westerner, which does not imply that the one is better than the other, or that the one provides greater access to knowledge than the other. The rational functioning of Africans is closely interwoven with their collective way of life, and in comparison to that of the Westerner it can be typified as ... the reason of the touch, better still, the reasoning–embrace, the sympathetic reason, more related to the Greek logos than to the Latin ratio ... European reasoning is analytical, discursive; Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation.

Senghor (1964) comes to the conclusion that Europe has given the world a civilisation of analytical reasoning while Africa contributed a civilisation of intuitive reasoning. This difference in cognitive functioning is an offshoot of the different views of the person that underlie behaviour. The Western view of the person is firmly anchored in the Cartesian reification of reason in terms of Descartes' maxim, *'I think therefore I am'*. According to Viljoen (1991), Descartes' characterisation of human consciousness as *res cogitans* is responsible for the foothold gained by the **'cognitised view' of the person** in modern Western thinking. Hence the definition of cognitive functioning as 'rationality' in which there is no room for intuitive thinking. It is true, of course,

that there have been those in Western thinking who have stated the case for intuition. Blaise Pascal (1632–1662), a young contemporary of Descartes, was eloquent in his plea that, besides the ‘logic of reason’ there should be a place for the ‘logic of the heart’. According to Pascal, the heart is

... the personal, spiritual centre of man, his innermost operative centre, the starting point of his dynamic relationships with other people, the precision instrument by which he grasps his reality in its wholeness. Heart certainly means mind: not however mind as pure theoretical thinking, as reasoning, but as spontaneously present, intuitively sensing, existentially apprehending, totally appreciating. (Cited in Viljoen, 1991:16).

Pascal’s view on ‘the logic of the heart’ (in French, *sentiment*) is therefore closer to the cognitive functioning of the African than it is to the Western ‘logic of the reason’ (in French, *raisonnement*), which makes no allowance for a more intuitive rationality.

Question: Is there something unique and different about the way a traditional African conceives time?

The African view of time seems to be diametrically opposed to the Western view. Boon (2007:5) believes that the difference between the two views impacts on and reflects different approaches and attitudes to life, humanity, to work and business. It also affects the interaction with one another and the “difficulty Africans and Westerners sometimes have in understanding each other’s motivation and behaviour”.

In the traditional African conception, **time is a two-dimensional phenomenon** with a long history, a present and virtually no future. It is a circular view of time. The linear Western conception of an infinite past, a present and an infinite future is foreign to the traditional view. The Western somewhat futuristic view “pervades every aspect of the Western psyche.” Planning and future forecasting dominate the business and daily lives of Westerners (Boon, 2007:5). Contrary to this view, the future has no meaning for Africans because it has not yet been lived. As Mbiti (1990:17) puts it:

Since what is the future has not been experienced, it does not make sense; it cannot, therefore, constitute part of time, and people do not know how to think about it – unless, of course, it is something which falls within the rhythm of natural phenomena.

By contrast, the present and the past derive meaning from people’s unique experiences, or from the things already lived and experienced by previous generations. Mbiti (1990) distinguishes between **actual time** and **potential time** among traditional Africans. *Actual time* refers to events that are currently happening or that have already happened, while *potential time* refers to something that will definitely happen in the immediate future, or something that will happen in the natural rhythm of phenomena (such as the rising and setting of the sun). Events that have not yet taken place are outside of time and are classified as ‘no-time’. Accordingly, in the traditional conception there is no place for long-term, forward planning, a future messianic deliverance or a final destruction of the world.

Mbiti (1990:16) believes that this view of time influences the entire functioning of the traditional, as well as the modern African, and he explains this as follows:

The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation ... On this subject there is, unfortunately, no literature and [it] calls for further research and discussion.

Thus time is not a mathematical construct, but is instead associated with the natural rhythm of the universe. The idea of time as successive mathematical units that are imposed upon human activities in order to direct and determine these activities is, for Africans, at odds with the natural rhythm of the universe. The activities or events are central, not the time at which they have to take place. So it is more important for Africans 'to be in time than on time'.

Mbiti (1990) also points out that time, in Western technological society, is a commodity that can be bought and sold, because 'time is money', whereas for Africans, **time is something that has to be created and produced**. Africans are not enslaved by time, because they create time to suit themselves. This is an aspect that Westerners find troublesome and comment on with remarks such as 'Look at them, sitting there, doing nothing and wasting time', or 'Blacks are always late'. According to Mbiti (1990:19) such comments are based on ignorance of what time actually means to Africans:

Those who are sitting down, are actually not wasting time, but either waiting for time or in the process of 'producing' time.

Enrichment

Link between locus of control and the concept of time

The predominance of a futuristic view amongst Westerners is, according to Boon (2007), closely linked with an internal locus of control, in that Westerners believe they can, to a large extent, control and determine their own future and destiny. The traditional circular view of time, in which the future plays almost no role at all, is linked with an acceptance of an external locus of control. This external locus of control is located in "mystical, animistic and magical forces" (Eagle, 2004:7) and is seen as operating from the past into the present. These forces drive and influence every person's life over which he or she has absolutely no control; it is in this regard that the ancestors and witchcraft seem to play an ongoing and complementary role in every aspect of the lives of traditional Africans. Boon (2007:6) demonstrates the role of the locus of control with the following phrases:

Westerners:		<i>I missed the bus</i>
Zulu:	Ngishiywe itaxi	<i>The taxi left me</i>
Xhosa:	Ndafelwa yibhasi	<i>The bus died on me</i>

Referring to a recent survey conducted amongst rural and urban Africans in South Africa, Boon (2007:6) stresses that the influence of the ancestors and the past in

the behaviour of Africans should not be underplayed. The results indicated that 66 percent of the 1637 respondents still believe in their ancestors playing a role in their lives. According to Boon, this implies that a great number of Africans will turn to their ancestors and the past if anything goes wrong in their present lives. By asking the ancestors to intercede on one's behalf, "they who are timeless will be able to sort out the problem in the past. As soon as this is done, the current problem will be resolved and the future will take care of itself. No amount of future planning will help".

It would be possible to fit the African concept of time, at least partially, into a Freudian, Jungian or Skinnerian frame of reference, because they also explain behaviour in terms of the individual's bondage to his or her past (e.g. Jung's idea of 'archetypes'). The African view of time, however, cannot accommodate the notion of future orientation as expressed in the theories of Jung with his 'teleological perspective', or Adler and the existentialist-oriented approach, in particular. This African view of time also holds practical implications for how people plan their daily lives in a modern Western system that is strongly geared towards future planning (for example pensions, life insurance).

Self-evaluation question

Describe the most important differences between a traditional African and a Westerner regarding cognitive functioning and the conceptualisation of time.

5 Optimal development and mental health

Question: How do traditional Africans attain optimal development and how does this differ from the development of Westerners?

Pasteur and Toldson (1982) believe that, because of their **connectedness with their physical and spiritual environments** and the **balanced use of the left and right hemispheres of the brain**, traditional Africans are better equipped to reach and sustain optimal development and psychological health than modern Westerners.

The Westerner's functioning is dominated by the left hemisphere of the brain in an attempt to investigate, analyse and take things apart in order to understand and explain them logically. But this functioning is subject to an imbalance in the functioning of the right and left hemispheres. This imbalance causes tension and stress, and induces Westerners to seek help in all kinds of pharmaceutical and relaxation aids to relieve the tension. Pasteur and Toldson (1982:25) maintain that the holistic view of the person and worldview of Africans gives rise to the balanced use of both hemispheres. They argue as follows:

Equipped with its own capacity for synchrony and harmony, the mind requires only a fuller use of the right brain system. It is here that the black/African mind has an edge ... instead of one-sided dominance, the tendency

of the black African mind is to bring things together – to see, experience, and express the parts of things identified by the left hemisphere as whole, complete entities, which is the duty of the right hemisphere of the brain. The right hemisphere is not repressed in the black/African mind and is therefore allowed to freely interact with the left, infusing it with creative imperatives. This is how the wonderful blend known as harmony comes to reside in the personality.

A further factor that Pasteur and Toldson (1982:79) identify as promoting optimal development and functioning among Africans is their **collective existence**. The Westerner's stress and tension can, to a large extent, be ascribed to the accenting of individuality, which in practice constantly refers individuals back to themselves and places them predominantly in competitive relationships with their fellows, in which they measure themselves against others. By contrast, the selflessness of Africans, who are wholly rooted in their collective existence, offers the essential security that can counteract anxiety and tension. Pasteur and Toldson (1982) see the advantages of group life as follows:

Invested in the group is a kind of super power that, being stronger than individual members, helps them control their weakness as individuals.



Could toyi-toying and dancing perhaps be coping strategies for stress and tension, promoting optimal mental health among traditional and modern Africans?

Biko (1998:27) emphasised the role of **music**, **dancing** and **rhythm** in the daily lives of Africans, not only as means of communication but also to attain emotional equilibrium.

Music in the African culture features in all emotional states. When we go to work, we share the burdens and pleasures of the work we are doing through music...music and rhythm (are) not luxuries but part and parcel of our communication. Any suffering we experienced was made much more real by song and rhythm.

He also states that music is more than mere notes to meaningful sounds, it becomes the expression of real feelings in the course of which passive listening is not possible; active participation through dancing or singing becomes a means of expression (e.g. mothers dance and sing with babies on their backs, or beat the drums with infants on their lap, virtually teaching rhythmic and dancing skill with mother's milk). Holdstock (2000:184) also underlines the importance of rhythm in the lives of people of sub-Saharan Africa, indicating the meaningful role it plays in poetry, music, art, theatre and in healing practices. He articulates it as follows:

Rhythm is the architect of being, it is the purest expression of life force in Africa. Rhythm provides the internal dynamic, which structures African speech, music, dance, poetry, theatre, and athletic performance. Without rhythm, the African is said to be like a rudderless ship drifting on the sea of life. Rhythm brings purpose and meaning, enhances understanding and the sense of being. It unites the individual with the great cosmic force. It lifts the spirits, and in so doing, heals. It is at the basis of techniques used by indigenous healers to achieve altered states of consciousness, enabling them to divine and heal.

Music, dance, and rhythm are all mechanisms which form an intricate part in the attainment of a fulfilled life amongst Africans, and play an important role as psychological healing devices.

Pasteur and Toldson (1982) also point out that the unconscious, in the Freudian sense of repressed contents of consciousness and the accompanying defence mechanisms such as *denial*, *sublimation*, *rationalisation* and *intellectualisation*, are not present among traditional Africans to the same extent as among Westerners. The reason for this is that Africans give more immediate and direct expression to all contents of the consciousness through cultural activities such as dance, song, oratory, painting and sculpture.

According to Pasteur and Toldson (1982:95), Westerners would do well to adopt features of the traditional African way of life in order to attain optimal development and mental health:

And it is Africa, and the people of Africa, to which we must turn for models of living, models of therapy, models of learning and instruction that allow for an enduring fulfilment and satisfaction, models that vibrate with nature's pulse – rhythm.

Self-evaluation question

- Provide a critical discussion of Pasteur and Toldson's view that the traditional African is in a better position to achieve optimal psychological development and health than the Westerner.

6 Views on psychopathology

Question: How do traditional Africans view illness and pathological behaviour?

The African view of psychopathology cannot be separated from their holistic ontology and the role that the ancestors, malignant spirits and sorcerers play in determining their behaviour.

Holistic ontology implies that health, whether it be physical, mental or societal, refers to a **state of wholeness and integration** and ill-health refers to a **state of fragmentation and disintegration**. The Zulu healer Mutwa (1996:27) underlines the view that illness is seen as disharmony, stating that:

Where illness or madness have come, the *sangoma* knows that some power of the universe is disrupted and must be balanced or restored to harmony again.

The premise of 'wholeness', according to Maiello (1999:224) is based on the body–mind assumption that:

In African culture, illness is not split into either physical or mental suffering. Body and mind are a unit, and the mind is never experienced as separate from the body.

This view implies that, from an African perspective, mental illness is not devoid of physical symptoms and that all mental disorders should be seen as psychosomatic disorders. Gumede (1990) points out that this psychosomatic interrelation is based on the concept of a *primary and indivisible unity* between body and mind, rather than on the Western idea of *reciprocity* between mind and matter. It is therefore not uncommon for a depressed African patient to describe his problem in purely physical terms, saying that 'my body is broken', which Bührmann (1987:276) attributes to the fact that 'the general use of body terms for what Westerners would call emotions is very common'.

The holistic premise also implies that in the African conception of health and illness, it is the whole human body that is considered to be either well or ill, not merely some part of the body. Sogolo (1993:110) points out that:

In the West, a patient consulting a physician often throws some hint as to what part of the body he thinks there is affliction. The traditional African is generally non-specific as to the part of the body afflicted by disease. Even the healer whom he consults does not press for specific information.

Enrichment

Difference between the African and Western conceptions of stress

Godwin Sogolo (1993:113) maintains that in the Western context, stress can also be work- and object-related, while in the African context it is mainly community-related, for example:

A business executive in the West could suffer from stress if his business is at the verge of collapsing; a heavy day's work without rest could lead him into a state of stress; or his anxiety over possible contingencies could make him suffer from stress. In traditional Africa, stress is mainly due to strained relationships either with one's spiritual agents or within one's community. It could also be due to a feeling of guilt arising from a breach of communal norms. For example, if an African is involved in an adulterous act with his brother's wife, whether or not this act is detected, he undergoes stress, having disturbed his social harmony. If he cheats his neighbour, has been cruel to his family or has offended his community, the anxiety that follows may take the form of phobias, either of bewitchment or the affliction of disease.

Enrichment

Incidence of suicide amongst Africans

In a historical survey Julie Parle (2007:207) states that the paucity of research into suicide amongst Africans begs the question of whether self-killings were really as rare as a variety of sources - literary, anthropological, medical, psychiatric and anecdotal - seem to suggest. According to her these sources gave rise to the conventional view that suicide amongst black Africans has always been rare, and that cultural and social taboos against self-destruction are particularly strong amongst Africans. Based on this assumption the conventional view ascribes the current rise in suicide amongst Africans to a weakening of the traditional constraints due to westernisation. Parle (2007:204), however, is of the conviction that there is sufficient archival evidence to suggest that self-annihilation was not entirely taboo amongst Africans. She believes that the so-called absence of suicide amongst Africans "may be attributed to poor record-keeping as well as to the fact that until recently the act of deliberately attempting to take one's life was regarded as primarily a legal, rather than a medical matter". When Africans were charged with attempting suicide a criminal conviction was recorded and it never became a medical/psychiatric statistic.

Linked to the meso-cosmic order, the African view of psychopathology cannot be separated from the role the **ancestors**, the **malignant spirits** and **sorcerers** play in their lives. Pathological behaviour and illness are thus seen as the result of disharmony between a person and his or her ancestors, or caused by the evil spells or deeds of the malignant spirits or sorcerers. In a recent study Mokhosi and Grieve (2004) observed that many Africans believe that various ills, misfortune, sickness, injuries and accidents are the result of witchcraft, ancestral anger or *thwawa*.

Enrichment

Thwawa and sickness

Thwawa is a process of becoming a traditional healer. If a person is called to become a traditional healer and does not carry out the directive he/she received from an ancestor, punishment is believed to be meted out by the responsible ancestor. The punishment takes the form of emotional disturbance, epilepsy, injuries, or ailments. It is believed that if the 'patient' goes through the rites of *thwawa* carrying out the directives of the ancestor who was a *sangoma* or *nyanga* he or she would fully recover. (Mokhosi and Grieve, 2004:311)

According to Maiello (1999), the aetiology of pathology in African culture is not ascribed to the question of what caused the illness, but who brought it about. In a Western context the patient presents the doctor with the reason for his or her consultation, usually in the form of physical symptoms, but in the African context it is the healer who tells the patient why he or she has come to see the healer. Traditional healers also do not start their diagnosis of illness with a physical examination of the body; their primary concern is with the patient's background in socio-cultural and in divine/supernatural relations. Rudnick (2002) notes that most forms of traditional healing involve some kind of triangulated mediation between the healer, patient and the ancestors, with the healer being able to consult the ancestors in regard to the patient's problems.

Question: What is the significance of ancestors in the lives of traditional Africans?

With reference to the ancestors, Bührmann (1984), a Jungian, postulates that they represent archetypes from the collective unconscious, and that pathology occurs when an imbalance exists between the conscious and unconscious. As archetypal projections, the ancestors communicate in altered states of consciousness such as dreams, hypnogogic perceptions, trance conditions or hallucinations. Contrary to this view, Holdstock (2000:172) maintains that the ancestors are not experienced as abstract projections but as real persons who manifest themselves during waking in the form of visions and voices, or through the medium or diviner and in sleep through dreams; "...the ancestors is not just an empty custom, but one imbued with the greatest importance". An encounter with the ancestors place a heavy demand on a person, as Holdstock explains:

Unless the customs are upheld and the proper rituals performed to honour and prepare the induction of the deceased's spirit into the ancestral realm, the ancestors pass into the unknown as dangerous spirits, from where they can exact a heavy toll on the living. Misery in this life is invariably considered to be due to ceremonial negligence in honour of the ancestors.... When proper respect has been paid to the memory of the deceased by the performance of the appropriate ceremonies, the ancestors are on the whole experienced as benevolent guardians, capable of interceding on behalf of the living.

Beuster (1997:17) also notes that ancestors are seen as benevolent creatures who preserve the honour, traditions and good name of the tribe, and that they play ‘a vital role in the maintenance of mental health, because they provide protection against evil and destructive forces’. If the demands of the ancestors, however, are ignored, they send disorder and misfortune – physical and mental illness – as punishment or warnings to amend one’s behaviour.

Dreams play an important role in the daily lives of African people, but they are not interpreted on a symbolic level as in the Western culture, but are more like reflections of concrete reality. Messages received from an ancestor through a dream are taken at face value and are acted upon concretely in waking life.

Because the ancestors play a pivotal role in the causation of mental illness, they also play an important role in the healing and therapeutic process. According to Bührmann (1977), the patient cannot recover unless he or she listens to the voices of the ancestors. As breaking the connections with the ancestors brought about the illness, almost like the splitting of parts of the personality in a Jungian sense, recovery is only possible if the ancestors are ‘brought home’ again and wholeness is attained by re-establishing the broken communication.

Question: What is the significance of malignant spirits and sorcerers in the lives of traditional Africans?

Malignant spirits and sorcerers are also seen as the cause of mental disorder amongst traditional African people. They employ supernatural creatures such as the *thikoloshe* and the *izithunzela* to inflict misfortune but also to cause mental disorder in their victims. The *thikoloshe* is believed to be a small man with one buttock and a gigantic penis, which is carried over the shoulder, while the *izithunzela* or zombie is a revitalised corpse without a tongue. According to Beuster (1997), accusations of malignant spirits and sorcery appear mostly in situations where the harmony of the group is threatened and a scapegoat is required to protect the well-being of the group. However, accusations of malignant spirits and sorcery are often projections of a person’s own hatred and the manifestation of paranoid delusions.

Western-oriented psychologists and psychiatrists, by ignoring the cultural context and belief systems of African people, have caused a lot of pain to African patients by way of **misdiagnosis** and applying ‘**anti-therapeutic**’ techniques. Cheetam & Griffiths (1981) established that a great percentage of African patients were misdiagnosed as ‘schizophrenic’ because of insufficient knowledge of the cultural background. If patients believed that they were being bewitched or that ancestors had spoken to them, ill-informed psychologists and psychiatrist diagnosed paranoid delusions and auditory hallucinations.

Self-evaluation question

- Describe the differences between the traditional African and Western conceptualisations of pathological behaviour and emotional stress.

7 Psychotherapy

Question: How does Western psychotherapy differ from African healing practices?

The therapeutic process in the African context differs from Western psychotherapy mainly with regard to the importance of verbal communication and the role of the individual patient in the therapeutic process.

In Western-style psychotherapy, popularly typified as a ‘talking cure’, **verbal communication** seems to be the most important feature of the process, and it is based on the high priority Western culture attributes to verbal language as a means of communication. According to Maiello (1999), words do not seem to have the same value in African culture. Biko (1989) also maintains that music and rhythm are more important ways of communication than words.

Bührmann (1984:22) confirms this view, stating that what Western people think and talk about, African people tend to act and represent in dancing, singing, rituals and ceremonies. In this regard she quotes an African healer who remarked that ‘There are things you can never put in words; you can only feel them in your body’. This implies that psychotherapy, which is mainly based on verbal communication, might not have the same effect in an African context. That is why dancing and the rhythmical stamping of feet may have a greater therapeutic value within the African context than psychotherapy, because it is known that prolonged ritual dancing brings about certain neurophysiological changes in the organism which could impact as a healing procedure (Maiello, 1999).

Bührmann (1977) also stresses the fact that within the African context, dream interpretation and analysis are not seen as a matter of verbalisation as they are in a Western context. This is dealt with in a group situation where the dream is told bit by bit, accompanied by singing and dancing to the beat of a special drum to invoke the help of the ancestors.

Within the Western context, psychotherapy is predominantly focused on the individual, with group- and family therapy playing a secondary role. Within the African context, therapy or **healing is grounded in the collective existence** of the microcosmic order, whereby the individual is always seen as an integral part of the community. Bührmann (1984:25) writes that:

Treatment, especially for any mental dysfunction, is not individual, but requires the cooperation of the family and at times the active treatment of others in the family.

Parle (2007:9) also endorses the fact that African therapeutic systems emphasise “collective social responses to afflictions” rather than individualistic diagnosis and treatment. Because of this ethos of collectivism, it is not a strange occurrence for a patient to send a family member as substitute for a therapy session, which in a Western context would appear to be a form of resistance. The Western-trained therapist must be aware of the influence of these social structures on behaviour.

Enrichment

Link between Western psychotherapy and traditional healing

According to Rudnick (2002), it appears that there are almost two healing worlds in South Africa, the one Western and predominantly medically-oriented and the other African and predominantly spiritually-oriented. He draws a comparison between the dynamics of Western psychotherapy and traditional healing and comes to the conclusion that psychological factors which play a role in psychotherapy also play a vital role in shamanic healing, and he also tabulates the most important differences (see Table 17.1 below). Rudnick (2002:45) states:

Both Western therapists and African shamans are socially sanctioned healers of their respective cultures. Both use rituals to help relieve clients of their distress. In the case of Western therapy the rituals could involve planned weekly sessions of therapeutic conversation, or amongst other things drama, art or hypnosis. In traditional healing it could involve rituals of throwing bones or an ecstatic trance.

He also notes that, in a similar way to psychotherapy, traditional healers and shamans make extensive use of rituals and objects steeped in symbolism which generally help to evoke in the client a sense of trust and belief. Most traditional healing incorporates some kind of confession and catharsis, which assists the client to offload the guilt and anxiety of a transgressed taboo or broken harmony with the ancestors.

	African	Western
1.	Practical relationship	Idealised (Rogerian) relationship
2.	Open (community) relationship	Confiding (private) relationship
3.	Directive approach	Mostly indirective approach
4.	Deals with supernatural and natural world	Deals mostly with natural world
5.	Focus is 'Who caused this?'	Focus is 'What is happening?'
6.	Aimed at social cohesion	Aimed at individual empowerment
7.	Healer tells client why he has come	Client tells therapist why he has come
8.	Mostly incorporates pharmacology	Sometimes resorts to pharmacology
9.	Generally prescribes a ritual	Rarely prescribes a ritual
10.	Boundaries often wide, e.g. client lives with healer	Boundaries mostly restricted, e.g. non-contact weekly visit

11.	Client motivation generally seen as conscious	Client motivation generally seen as unconscious
12.	Dreams are direct communications from ancestors	Dreams are intrapsychic and symbolic
13.	Healer's personal values intrinsic to the process	Therapist's personal values are subjugated
14.	Main tools are materials such as bones or equivalent	Main tools are verbal

Table 17.1 *Rudnick's (2002:71) tabulation of differences in Western and African healing*

It remains, however, an open question whether Western-trained psychotherapists can be made fully aware of cultural differences, as Maiello (1999:235) notes:

Yet, the knowledge a Western psychotherapist can acquire about another culture will inevitably remain superficial, and an infinity of culturally determined non-verbal clues cannot be learnt and shared. Researchers of intercultural therapy have in fact expressed doubts about the depth of its effectiveness ... This does not mean that cross-cultural therapy should not be undertaken ...

I believe that knowing about the inevitable limits of cross-cultural therapeutic work will promote the necessary caution and respect in approaching patients from other cultures.

Self-evaluation question

- Discuss the differences between Western psychotherapy and traditional healing.

8 Evaluation of the perspective

In light of the absence of a comprehensive theory of personality, it is difficult to evaluate the contribution of this perspective to personology as such, but Laurens van der Post (1955:19–20) makes the following remarks about the lessons Westerners can learn from Africa.

I do not think of the European as a being superior to the Black one. I think of both as being different and of the difference as honourable differences equal before God. The more I know the [African] the more I respect him and the more I realise how much and how profoundly we must learn from him. I believe our need of him is as great as his of us. I see us as two halves designed by life to make a whole ...

Over and over again I have been humbled by what goes on in the hearts of [African] people ... One realises that it is not we who are filled with spirit and soul, but rather the dark people around us. They have so much of it that

it overflows into the trees, rocks, rivers, lakes, birds, snakes and animals that surround them. The Bushman makes gods out of all animals around him; the Hottentots kneel to an insect, the praying mantis ...

The Bantu listens to the spirits of his ancestors in the noise of his cattle stirring in their kraals of thorn at night ... Whatever happens to them, their lives are never lonely for lack of spirit nor do they find life wanting in meaning (they are less lonely because of their community embeddedness).

The view reflected in these remarks is to a certain extent echoed by Holdstock (2000:71) about what is to be attained by an Africentric psychology.

It endeavours to imbue life with meaning, sacralising the animate as well as the inanimate world around us. In searching for its essential nature in the context of mythology, Africentric psychology hopes to come to an understanding of the origin and essential nature of things, of the purposive character of the universe. In a very real sense, African psychology dreams of redeeming, not only the discipline and profession of psychology, but of the entire human condition. It dreams of initiating a science that will enable us to understand the universal nature of our being, of establishing a relationship with the world around us. What Coleridge has said of poetry can be applied to Africentric psychology, 'in ideal perfection', it 'brings the whole soul of man into activity'.

Self-evaluation question

- Critically evaluate the necessity of an African perspective in personology, and contemplate if a Westerner can contribute meaningfully to this perspective.

9 Suggested reading

- Beuster, JTR (1997). Psychopathology from a traditional South African perspective. *Vista Occasional Papers*, 5 (1) 13–22; also published in: *UNISA Psychologia*, 24 (2) 4–16.
- Boon, M. (2007). *The African way*. Cape Town: Zebra Press. (Third Edition)
- Coetzee, PH & Roux, APJ (1998). *The African Philosophy Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Eagle, G. (2004). Therapy at the cultural interface: Implications of African cosmology for traumatic stress intervention. *PINS Psychology in Society*, 30: 1–22.
- Holdstock, LT (2000). *Re-examining Psychology: Critical perspectives and African insights*. London: Routledge.
- Mbiti, JS (1989). *African religions and philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Rudnick, H (2002). *The links between Western psychotherapy and traditional healing*. Unpublished doctoral thesis presented at the Rand Afrikaans University: Johannesburg.
- Sogolo, G (1993). *Foundations of African philosophy: A definitive analysis of conceptual issues in African thought*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.

10 Concepts highlighted in the chapter

- **actual time:** refers to events currently happening
- **African:** refers to a polymorphous grouping of indigenous peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa
- **ancestors:** represent archetypes from the collective unconscious
- **anthropocentric ontology:** implies that humans form the point of departure as well as the centre of the universe
- **holistic ontology:** implies that humans form an indivisible whole with the cosmos
- **intuitive rationality:** a description of African cognitive functioning relying more on intuition and emotion than on pure rationality
- **izithunzela:** a revitalised corpse without a tongue
- **macro-cosmic order:** the domain of God and religion
- **meso-cosmic order:** a kind of no man's land where coincidence, the ancestors and the forces of malignant spirits and sorcerers hold sway
- **micro-cosmic order:** the domain of the individual person in his or her everyday collective existence
- **potential time:** refers to something that will definitely happen in the immediate future
- **sangoma:** healer
- **ubuntu:** a code of ethics governing one's interaction with others, implying that a person is only a person because of other people.