Imagining career resilience research and training from an indigenous knowledge production perspective

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Abstract

More often than not, higher education curricula expound Western-oriented epistemologies of psychology. Trained psychologists may thus not be appropriately equipped to provide career counselling that is suitable to a resource-scarce environment, nor enriched with a heritage of knowledge related to customary career resilience practices. Rather than enabling clients, one could argue that existing career counselling training, and subsequent practice, may in fact hinder clients' ability to adapt and flourish in their (career-)lives. The thesis of this article is that an indigenous knowledge production imperative affords a way in which embedded values, practices, patterns and concepts synonymous with career resilience in South Africa can be documented systematically. Indigenous knowledge production urges researchers to appreciate what lies at the heart of everyday occurrences (such as career decision making), and be familiar with what is embedded in long-standing habits, rituals and patterns (related to for example career choice). In this regard I discuss both indigenisation and establishing an indigenous psychology as research schemas to develop ecologically-just curricula for

higher education training. I explain the epistemological premises of indigenous knowledge production and present research strategies framed within indigenous knowledge production.

Keywords: indigenous knowledge production, indigenise, indigenous psychology, career resilience, higher education psychology curriculum, higher education research and training

Introduction

Before embarking on her internship, a postgraduate educational psychology student made the following comment during her oral examination: "*the tools of our trade need to change so that they can be used for social justice too.*" Tebuhleni Nxumalo continued to explain: "*what we are doing now violates an already sensitive situation when a client comes to us.*" Another student supports an imperative to transform current psychology (and career counselling) training. During her exam session Temnotfo Nkambule said: "*Any culture has its richness which shows how people can be happy. What we do now is provide service may be irrelevant to our clients.*" These comments follow two years of intensive postgraduate theoretical, clinical and research training at a higher education institution.

As I reflected on these comments with students during the tentamen, we collectively acknowledged the need to revisit our mandate for the training of educational psychologists at a university. Together we acknowledged that current higher education psychology curricula, based on accepted understandings of psychology, probably fall

short of preparing graduates to provide psychology (and career counselling) services in a local setting. “What we do now”, what we profess and professionalise at universities, almost certainly does not incorporate existing knowledges into core career counselling (educational psychology) understandings. Higher education curricula in all probability include neither the knowledge of students, nor that of individuals and communities in a country where students aim to engage meaningfully in local contexts.

Our views thus indicate the need for transforming research endeavours and training agendas in (educational) psychology. And I could not have voiced a rationale for a study on aspects of indigenous psychology better than did these two female psychologists-in-training on the brink of engaging with South African youth to support them to become well-adapted, flourishing citizens. Nkambule’s plea for “*richness of culture*” aligns with an indigenous knowledge production (IKP)[1] stance to establish just training programmes. In this, indigenous knowledge production urges researchers to appreciate what lies at the heart of everyday occurrences (such as career decision making), and to be familiar with what is embedded in long-standing habits, rituals and patterns (related to for example career choice).

Why is it necessary to understand career counselling, and specifically career resilience[2], from an indigenous knowledge perspective? Career decision making in a resource-scarce country like South Africa implies that youth have to face multiple adversities, including stressors in their daily lives (e.g. poverty, HIV/AIDS-related stressors) and future lives (e.g. limited access to higher education, limited job opportunities and high levels of post-school unemployment). Yet South Africans receive career counselling support from professionals trained via curricula *informed by Western*

understandings of careers and resilience. More often than not, career counselling entails measuring South African youths in terms of assessment instruments premised on Western (especially American and British (Luthar and Zelazo 2003) understandings of career pathing that were standardised for these populations of origin. Even more perplexing, career interventions based on the outcomes of these measures are similarly based on ideals of careers that are not reconcilable with many South African clients' ecologies of practice. So, rather than enabling South Africans, one could argue that existing career counselling practices may in fact potentially hinder clients' ability to adapt and flourish in their (career-)lives.

How can psychologists support clients to address adversity in career decisions if, as scholars and practitioners, we do not know how clients are habitually inclined to adapt? How can we assess clients' levels of coping with career risk, resilience and wellness if we use unfamiliar categories of measurement? How can formal curricula and career counselling enable clients to thrive if the techniques used and the ideals aspired to are post-colonial surplus in a transforming society? Why do we continue to train psychologists in Western-oriented notions of careers, wellness, health and illness? Why do we persist in labelling clients post-assessment in terms of categories of health and illness as worded by scholars unfamiliar with a local habitus? Perhaps the answer to these questions is that, as scholars in a comfort zone of arguably ineffectual imported knowledge, we have failed to acknowledge local knowledge. We have neglected to systematically document and produce an indigenous psychology. Therefore, this article is an attempt to answer the question: How can indigenous knowledge production be used as

a framework to direct psychology research and training for a locally relevant counselling practice?

Indigenous knowledge production and psychology

Globally, there is a focus on the notion of indigenous psychology thinking – though it often remains a marginalised, somewhat exotic interest of non-conforming psychology scholars (Watson and Fouche 2007,). In India specifically, scholars did well by harnessing focused research to establish an Indian indigenous psychology that could serve as a heritage-true reference when importing epistemologies and methodologies foreign to their "wellness-soil" (Dalal and Misra 2010,). Since Sinha's (1965) call for integrating Indian thought into psychology thinking, a collective of scholars has established an indigenous psychology knowledge base in India. In the same way, many South African scholars have progressed towards putting forward ways of thinking aimed at developing a knowledge base for an indigenous psychology (Duncan 2008). These studies are in reaction to established South African psychology training, research and practice, all of which still largely embrace either exclusively Western perspectives on wellness and illness, or indigenised practices (where existing, "validated" Western concepts, techniques and approaches are "culturally adapted" for use in the South African arena (Stead and Watson 2006; Sinha 2000,)). By implication, Western-oriented perspectives and indigenisation strategies have often meant mis-understanding, counterproductive measurement and un-therapeutic intervention (Ally 2010, ; Eskell-Blokland 2005; Ratele et al. 2004; Petersen 2004,).

Some scholars have attempted to determine the extent to which Western-initiated psychology measures can be culturally tailored (indigenised) for use in South Africa. In

this regard, Moletsane (2004) explored the use of Rorschach ink blots locally, and Ebersöhn et al. (2009) investigated the utility of Kinetic Family Drawings to assess resilience with young children. Also locally, researchers have ventured to customise psychology thinking and action to context by including insider perspectives when engaging with clients. Examples include Maree's (2009,) emphasis on the use of constructivist, postmodern and qualitative ways of gaining insider perspectives with South African clients; Eskell-Blokland's (2005) problematisation of the predominantly Western orientation in psychology, irrespective of ecological meaning; Ally's (2010,) contemplation of folklore and cultural meaning making with regard to psychological dysfunction in South African Hindu and Muslim communities; Ebersöhn's (2007; 2010,) development of technologies to better understand ecologies of meaning making, and Moletsane's (2008,) exploration of the use of a well-known children's game (*masekitlana*) as a technique for psychological measurement and intervention with children.

Taking a critical view of existing psychology practices, Ratele and Duncan's (2003,) contemplation of identities and relationships is a recent masterpiece troubling psychology stances whilst embedding epistemology in the ecology of being. Similarly, their work with other researchers (Ratele et al. 2004,) demonstrates how scholars are engaging with issues of cosmology and ideology in post-colonial life worlds and psychological thinking. By and large, however, attempts to construct a South African indigenous psychology remain insignificant.

Considering these endeavours, a central question is whether to indigenise psychology or whether to evoke an indigenous psychology. Indigenisation (importing

Western, standardised measures and interventions for use or adaptation in South Africa (Adair 1989) has dominated the psychology research and practice landscape since 1993. In this way, many Western tests (measures) of personality, intelligence, motives, values, health and well-being are used in South Africa – only a number of which have been adapted/culturally tailored for use. More and more, however, such outsider psychology research and practices are questioned in favour of establishing indigenous psychology perspectives as frameworks to guide inquiry, training and practice with regard to the science of wellness.

I propose to follow a route of indigenous knowledge production whereby psychology scholars can systematically explore and document culture-bound concepts and categories (Misra and Mohanty 2002,) (specifically regarding children's resilience). I wish to foreground the contemporary value of systematically documenting embedded heritage and cultural theories that can eventually constitute an indigenous psychology in South Africa.

Career counselling for career resilience: Western-oriented understandings

Most accepted definitions of career resilience build on London and Mone's (1987,) view of career resilience as individual resistance to career disruptions in a less than optimal environment. Schreuder and Coetzee (2006,) explain career resilience as the ability to adapt to changing circumstances by welcoming job and organisational changes, looking forward to working with new and different people, having self-confidence, and being willing to take risks. Bridges (1995,) adds that career resilience includes a low fear of failure, a low need for security and a high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Prominent in these definitions is the absence of chronic, cumulative environmental risk

that is synonymous with the South African workplace: in fact, here the "less than optimal environment" is not the exception, but the rule. Understanding how people habitually adapt to chronic poverty, lack of employment opportunities, limited skill sets, and barriers related to education may provide local knowledge of career resilience.

In addition, recent global perspectives on resilience *per se* call for an interrogation of what is accepted as knowledge on career resilience. Resilience refers to the tendency to rebound, bounce back or recover in response to adversity (Dent and Cameron 2003, ; Mandleco and Peery 2000,). From a resilience perspective (Ebersöhn and Eloff 2002 ; Cornia 2002, ; Haour-Knipe 2009, ; Heymann and Kidman 2009,), individuals become vulnerable because they face multiple adversities (risk factors) that serve as barriers to their resilience (Olsson et al. 2003, ; Rutter 1999, ; Brooks 2006, ; Ungar 2008,). For individuals to bounce back from adversity, various resilience-promoting resources come into play, thereby indicating resilience as both outcome and process. From this perspective then, career resilience is probably also process-oriented; it indicates competence in responding to adversity, and it equals reaction to experiences of vulnerability related to career pathing.

Furthermore, a process-oriented view of resilience implies scrutinising the dynamic interaction between risk factors and protective resources. Such interaction modifies the effects of adversity (Rutter 1999,). As mentioned earlier, cumulative career-related risk in South Africa relates to, among others, education barriers and high illiteracy levels, poverty and unemployment, as well as health and HIV/AIDS-related challenges. Whereas social-economic status naturally affects both career resilience and vulnerability, studies (Ebersöhn and Ferreira 2011, ; Lew 2001) have indicated how supportive

communities can promote professional resilience, for example teachers' careers, even in the presence of cumulative socio-economic risk. It follows that local knowledge of embedded practices, beliefs, structures and protocols is required to provide counselling that includes supportive communities as protective resource. Significantly then, ecological factors – also a central tenet within indigenous knowledge production – seem central to understanding career resilience.

Imagining training in career counselling from an indigenous knowledge production perspective

From the above explications of career resilience and related constructs, it is apparent that the gatekeeper frame of reference remains prominent in Western-driven epistemologies of psychology (Gustavsson 2007). Such theories (including career theories) are used as tapes to measure the extent to which "developed" scholars with validated knowledge on the topic view (for example) resilience scores of "others" to fall within or outside of "norms" of what is viewed as wellness or not. Some psychology scholars, however, are renegades who resist the unilateral acceptance of validated conceptualisations and measurements of resilience. Rebel psychology scholars like Ungar (2008,) advocate for "cross-cultural" and "ecological" understandings within psychology. However, studies in this genre often still favour quantified measurement and aspire to a nod of approval from existing theorists with regard to the extent to which the "new" knowledge compares with what "is accepted". In addition, one of the aims of cross-cultural psychology thinking remains an estimation of *that which is common across cultures*.

Here I want to ponder the alternative perspective of cultural research engagement in indigenous knowledge production by borrowing a vignette from Nkambule's tentamen.

She presents a mask (Photograph 1) to metaphorically explain her sense of otherness as trainee-psychologist who envisions her future practice:

> *…it is a cultural mask, for me it is a mask that sometimes hinders practice. My experience has alerted me on to how personal factors (race, ethnicity, background, language, traditional practices to name but a few) can be detrimental to my professional practice. This applies to assessment, interpretation and intervention… There is often a conflict between cultural expectation and professional conduct... However, beneath this mask there are rich values such as respect, generosity and the spirit of Ubuntu (humanity) in general. I believe that embracing different cultures (my own and clients'), I can tap into rich cultural values and virtues. I am convinced this could possibly contribute to rendering meaningful and relevant intervention.*

Photograph 1. A mask for training practice.

Photograph 2. 'To me it's a Swazi princess'.

From the vignette it appears that she perceives her cultural bounded-ness as a barrier to act in ways lauded as "professional" in her training. To be "professional" within her training framework seems to imply bracketing her cultural-ness. In essence,

she cannot be her cultural-self when she practises as psychologist. Also, she appears conflicted by the notion that she will not able to view her clients as themselves. She seems confused by the implied loss of rich understanding that accompanies such alienation.

An alternative training imperative would be to induce the wealth of cultural legacy into training and practice. Nkambule's ideal for psychology practice reflects the orienting ideas underpinning Lee's (2010,) understanding of ecologies of human development and learning. These ideas include (i) the intertwining of culture and biology in human development, (ii) adaptation through multiple pathways, and (iii) interdependence across levels of context. The acknowledgement of a birthright of intertwined, collective (what I view as) cultural-ness is preeminent in this perspective on human (and thus career) development. Studying culture based on these premises implies an understanding of culturally bequested aspects that predispose career resilience, for example. As with indigenous knowledge production, an understanding of culturally inherited characteristics and practices promises insights into aspects that potentially scaffold career resilience in cultural specific ways.

Curriculum development in psychology based on indigenous knowledge production

Naturally, before we (as psychology scholars and higher education teachers) can venture into training infused with indigenous knowledge, we require an accountable content for the curriculum. Curriculum knowledge is of course generated in systematic knowledge production processes. In the following section, I outline assumptions on knowledge and knowledge production that would signal an indigenous knowledge production agenda for career counselling research and practice. Such knowledge production and practice would

put to paper “old”, lived knowledge for “new” epistemologies regarding indigenous psychology. In this regard, knowledge to be emphasised relates to what Odora-Hoppers (2009,) typifies as ethics, norms, protocols and actionable strategies in support of human development in relation to career resilience, for example. In these processes, Western and colonial understandings of resilience will be not be used as a means to define career resilience in terms of how it exotically differs from or is similar to existing career conceptualisations *per se*, but rather to authentically describe career resilience as part of indigenous psychology theorising.

Indigenous knowledge production processes can be informed by conceptualisations of indigenous psychology as posited by Sinha (2000,) and Dalal and Misra (2010,). I support their research approaches, which differ from generally held assumptions in Western psychology and maintain distinct positions in terms of field, content and methodology during indigenous knowledge production. In generating career resilience knowledge, I thus oppose the sole inclusion of what Dalal and Misra (2010, 125) refer to as “*mechanistic and reductionist framework(s) supported by an empiricist methodology*” and a “*trinity of materialism, quantification, and objectivity*” immune to cultural context.

Epistemologically indigenous psychology entails culturally sensitive content. Rather than engaging in efforts to critique and reconstruct existing career counselling (psychology) practices, the indigenous knowledge production imperative would be to explore and document embedded values, practices, patterns and concepts synonymous with career resilience in South Africa.

Of course the question arises as to "whose knowledge" underpins such knowledge generation. In answer, indigenous knowledge of locally relevant career resilience is owned by and manifested in the lived experiences of clients, youths attending local universities, their parents, their lecturers and elders from the respective communities. These varied groups of individuals are viewed as partners in indigenous knowledge production for the purpose of career counselling. The knowledge is put to paper by researchers, taught by lecturers, and implemented by trained professionals. The assumption is thus a participatory process of generating knowledge lived by local designates regarding career resilience – as opposed to importing knowledge of predominantly American and British scholars for contrived use in the South African context.

In this way, indigenous career counselling strikes a partnership with beneficiaries (future clients, future psychology-trainees) to understand and document experiences of career resilience in terms of local life worlds, rather than to solely bolster positivist, mechanistic Western conceptualisations and scores by measuring and comparing career resilience (as perceived from an outsider perspective). *What can count as career resilience knowledge* includes children's playful yet meaningful engagements with clay, drawing and songs, as well as *ways of knowing* client expressions by means of life story narratives and memory box-derived family histories.

A core premise in indigenous knowledge production is *co-optation*. In this I recognise that knowledge generation shifts are required in authority, control and power (Fatnowna and Pickett 2002). Co-optation will therefore need to inform the conceptualisation of higher education curricula, the writing of research proposals, and the

moulding of participatory research designs. Knowledge production (for training and practice) would embed co-optation and possibly include collaborative strategising phases. In order to eventually understand local career resilience conceptualisations and practices, collaborative strategising could focus on an informed selection of "best placed" envoy emissaries of information, issues of ethical engagement in partnerships, as well as participatory and collective dissemination.

As I indicated elsewhere, it is more common in psychology (and career counselling) research and practice to import ("indigenise", according to Sinha (2000,)) thoughts (on resilience), measures (to assess resilience) and interventions (to buoy resilience) than it is to contemplate the nature of resilience from an indigenous knowledge perspective. For this reason, even as I write this article, I continue to battle against polarising my own thinking in terms of rebellious either-or thinking. In this, like Bhaba (1995), I want to candidly concede the existence of indigenous knowledge systems (here related to career resilience) and, resistingly, I want to co-opt knowledge production and refrain from defining my thinking in terms of what is "known" and deemed "knowable." For indigenous knowledge production in career counselling I want to bring to the fore central values pertaining to "career" and "resilience". As Odora Hoppers (2008a) argues, the positioning of bequested values centrally within (resilience) discourses means emphasising equal access to the domestic knowledge that is "career resilience" locally – and ultimately, equality in reaping the benefits that such public understandings of resilience may sow in education and psychology service delivery.

Indigenous knowledge production that pertains to career resilience can be informed by research strategies as delineated by Kim and Berry (1993). Firstly, the

impetus would be to understand career counselling (psychology) knowledge within various contexts. An example of knowledge production could be to contextualise a study as school-based, as pertaining to isiXhosa and urban ecologies in the Eastern Cape, or as pertaining to isiZulu and rural life-worlds in Mpumalanga. Specifically youths, elders and primary school teachers could be the "expressors" of indigenous experiences. Secondly, indigenous knowledge production would not posit indigenous psychology in terms of peculiar or outlandish practices of career resilience. In fact, indigenous knowledge production would need to acknowledge that multiple perspectives can be held across various cultures – and within particular cultures. For this reason, knowledge production on indigenous career resilience would have to be delineated within specific arenas of knowledge.

Methodologically, an indigenous psychology framework adopts qualitative methods that rely on subjectivity, human experience and constructivist/interpretivist cosmologies of human understanding. From this perspective, arts-based, visual and activity-based methods in participatory mode can be privileged as a means to collectively facilitate the expression of insider perspectives on career resilience. Significantly, in documenting indigenous knowledge on career resilience, alternative perspectives of psychology need to remain recognised, although the focus would be on knowledge production from indigenous knowledge in distinct South African ecologies of careers and resilience (well-being). In this we acknowledge that certain career counselling (psychological) universals exist – as is evident in Ungar's (2008,) research on resilience in a cross-cultural way.

Accordingly, for the purpose of articulating a South African indigenous psychology of career counselling, epistemological engagement means identifying, developing and testing indigenous concepts and theories pertaining to careers and well-being. I concur with Dalal and Misra (2010, 127) that the purpose here is not to prove the "intrinsic superiority" of indigenous thinking. Rather, constructing indigenous psychology is a "theoretical and methodological movement towards contemporising (South African) theories and (determining) their relevance for enhancing human functioning (and) enhancing well being." Part of this epistemological growth will include interpreting and deconstructing traditional concepts and theories to be accessible in present-day language – also involving conferences, conventions and a specific journal to provide forums for dissemination, discourse and an impetus for indigenous psychology development. In India, for example, this movement in psychology research, training and practice has meant an engagement between indigenous psychology and involved issues of justice, poverty, interpersonal interaction, organisational development, creativity, concept of self and others, pain and suffering, emotions and affect, spiritualism and peace (Dalal and Misra 2010,).

CONCLUSION

It is my belief that indigenous knowledge production proffers theoretical and methodological lenses to conceive of and deliver relevant career counselling (psychological) services in scarce-resource South African communities. The reason for this is that psychological technologies for measurement and intervention will align with daily ways of living, as Odora Hoppers (2008b) points out with regard to indigenous

knowledge production. I feel it is required to revive career counselling (psychology) research, training and practice based on ancient knowledge. I contend that South Africa has a significant role to play regarding ecologies of well-being in terms of career resilience. Too often South Africa is scripted as struggling, developing, faced with hardships of poverty, HIV/AIDS afflicted, lowly educated. Not enough times is knowledge created on South African ecologies of wellness, or on how codes of emotion, behaviour and interaction constitute indigenous knowledge of living lives that have "enabled everyone to live within their environmental means" (Odora Hoppers 2008b). (Here I choose to characterise "environmental means" as resilience resources for career/life pathing.)

Strategically this article joins calls for epistemological knowledge production processes that will reflect indigenous knowledge systems. A generative indigenous psychology theory on career resilience could give rise to understandings of wellness that are recognisable to psychology scholars, trainees and clients. When "household" discourses and practices characterise our health-promoting practices as psychology scholars, we may be better placed to intervene early to prop up where there is need, and to mould our "propping up" based on an insight into what is familiar. An indigenous psychology understanding of career resilience may very well transform our psychology thinking and practice from an artificial quasi soap opera of illness, to relieved sighs of "being ourselves."

I conclude in the same way that I began my appeal, by quoting from Nkambule's tentamen. In this instance she speaks to another symbol – a doll (Photograph 2). She explains: "*there is often a conflict between cultural expectation and professional conduct.*

For instance in my…culture…I should behave in a certain way (different from my professional conduct)." At the core of my appeal lies the possibility of another future trained psychologist who proclaims:

> *My cultural expectations and professional conduct exist in harmony. For instance, in my practice I can behave in the same way as I am used to doing in my culture. As a professional I know how my clients' culture provides rich information on how they can be happy. What I do now is provide service that is relevant to my clients.*

I submit that indigenous knowledge production presents one framework to attain such combined psychology research, training and practice outcomes. Obviously, a venture to articulate and cultivate a psychology with South African concepts and theories is a collective undertaking that will take considerable time and may optimistically gather momentum over time.

ENDNOTES

1. Indigenous knowledge production is a research agenda whereby scholars can systematically explore and document culture-bound concepts and categories (Misra and Mohanty 2002,).

2. Career resilience, from a Western perspective of science, is an individual's resistance to career disruptions in a less than optimal environment (Van Vuuren and Fourie 2000, 15).

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