

'Product placement' to widening participation in psychology: The case for culture

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The case is made that psychology, and the British Psychological Society in particular, should make culture in all its guises (multiculturalism, diversity, ethnicities, gender, sexuality, class) part of the core curriculum of undergraduate degrees. It is suggested that this could increase participation by Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BME) because psychology is a self-reflecting discipline and its diversification will provide role models, representation and visibility that impact on people's motivations, sense of identity and belonging. It is argued that the 'product' of psychology presently is 'culturally cleansed psychology' which is partly a by-product of positivistic science epistemic motives that are implicitly conservative in nature. Placing psychology's 'product' in culture would increase the palatability of what we 'give away' by making this 'product' more suitable for a multi-cultured world and a multicultural society, and hence add to the betterment of the everyday, civil life of society.

'The game ain't about that any more. It's about product. Yeah, we got the best goddam product so we gonna sell no matter where we are, right?' Stringer Bell. (Simon & Colesberry, 2004).

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REPORTS have highlighted that the subject of psychology is a popular undergraduate degree choice amongst students (QAA, 2002; BPS, 2004), with applicants for psychology places between 1998–2001 being approximately 80,000 per annum (BPS, 2004). Hence, psychology seems to be a highly valued 'product'. No data could be located to directly address the reason for psychology's popularity; however, attention should be paid to one aspect of psychology that makes it unique to many other disciplines and maybe one of its great selling points. Psychology as a discipline is a self-reflecting subject. Namely, the study of psychology is the study on oneself and one's nearest and dearest (Richards, 1996). Bringing this aspect to the fore could make psychology more attractive to certain segments of society. Many students' expectation is that psychology will be relevant to them, but for many this is not what they receive and this experience could be a contributory factor to drop out rates. This

paper suggests that a way to widen participation in psychology is, therefore, to make culture, and its diverse forms, highly visible. The phrase 'culture' is used here as shorthand to indicate many guises of difference (diversity, multiculturalism, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class).

Within psychology, culture in the form of multiculturalism has been seen as '*a very potent force*' (Fower & Richardson, 1996, p.609), indeed, it has been referred to as the '*fourth force*' (Pedersen, 1991, p.6). Being labelled the fourth force suggests that the explanations of human behaviour provided by a multiculturalism perspective is on par with the other great schools of psychology. The American Psychological Association's guidelines confirm the importance of multicultural practices, stating '*individuals exist in social, political, historical, and economic contexts, and psychologists are increasingly called upon to understand the influence of these contexts on individuals' behaviour*' (APA, 2003, p.377). However, multiculturalism is still peripheral in many fields of psychology, with the 'fourth force' contention

much more visible in counselling and psychotherapeutic settings. So then culture is aligned as only necessary when 'repair of the person' is needed. However, this paper presents the case that culture, whether it be diversity within and between borders, needs to be introduced as one of the core curriculum areas of psychology degrees; that '*cultural information should be integrated throughout the psychology curriculum*' (Hall, 1997, p.647). The paper makes reference to Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BME), but it should be remembered that this is only one form of culture (Cohen, 2009) and the arguments made can equally apply to many forms of diversity.

The product of psychology

In the acclaimed American TV series *The Wire* (Simon & Colesberry, 2004), the character Stringer Bell, who is second-in-command of a drug empire, makes the point that protecting areas (corners) is less important than the quality of the product (drugs) being sold. Psychology has for much of its history had to defend its 'corner' by proving its '*scientific credentials (an anxiety less acute than it once was)*' (Richards, 1996, p.2). Its status as a worthy '*product*' appears secure for '*as a discipline psychology is already one of the most popular throughout education*' (BPS, 2004, p.34). Indeed, the demand for self-help books and psychologists' specialised knowledge and skills (Zimbardo, 2004) testify to this fact. As a '*product*' psychology appeals well to BME groups. The British Psychological Society's study (BPS, 2004) claims that '*students from BME background are more highly represented (12 per cent) on psychology courses compared with the general population*' (BPS, 2004, p.4), but that '*the relative proportions of BME students are higher for the prestigious biomedical sciences such as medicine, dentistry and pharmacy*' (BPS, 2004, p.4). The Society's study goes on to state '*Nevertheless, as a profession we could aspire to achieve even greater popularity with BME school students and their communities, and seek to achieve ethnic application rates similar to the high status professions such as Law and Biomedicine*' (BPS, 2004, p.34).

What is peculiar about psychology's position is that it recognises that '*The discipline has to ensure that it is capable of explaining human behaviour across a wide range of cultural groups other than the traditional White Eurocentric approach with which it has been traditionally associated*' (BPS, 2004, p.7), and that how '*psychology is perceived externally will influence its popularity as subject for study within schools and universities*' (BPS, 2004, p.4), yet its '*product*' displays a '*ethnocentric monoculturalism*' (Sue et al., 1999, p.1065). This characteristic of psychology was sharply brought into focus in Arnett's (2008) study that analysed the representations of people of the world in seven prestigious APA journals. From this he concluded that the theories generated by psychology are principally based on only five per cent of the world – North America. In a passage worth reflecting on Arnett states:

'... no other science proceeds with such a narrow range of study. It is difficult to imagine that biologists, for example, would study a highly unusual five per cent of the world's crocodile population and assume the features of that five per cent to be universal. It is even more difficult to imagine that such biologists would be aware that the other 95 per cent of the world's crocodile population was vastly different from the five per cent under study, and highly diverse in habitat, eating habits, mating practices, and everyday behaviour; yet show little or no interest in studying that 95 per cent and continue to study the five per cent exhaustively while making universal claims. An outside observer would regard such a science as incomplete, to say the least, and would wonder why there was such intense focus on that unusual five per cent while the other 95 per cent was neglected. Yet in studying human beings, whose environmental, economic, and cultural differences make them more diverse than any other animal species, this is what American psychologists do' (Arnett, 2008, p.608).

Producing ethnocentric monoculturalism

The domination of the ‘product’ of psychology by one culture stands in stark contrast to a *‘psychology [that] celebrates cultural diversity, which has become one of the professional core values’* (Redding, 2001, p.205). A number of reasons can be put forward for the absence of culture, in its various guises, from psychology. Banyard (in press) points out that the requirement for Graduate Basis for Chartered Membership (GBC) is one contributory factor that greatly determines the content of the British undergraduate degree. The ethnocentric monoculture ‘product’ of psychology is reinforced by this GBC accreditation process which claims it aims is *‘to promote the advancement and diffusion of a knowledge of psychology ... promote the efficiency and usefulness of members of the Society by setting up a high standard of professional education and knowledge’* (BPS, 2009, p.6). As such psychology degrees need to satisfy the requirements of core knowledge domains, yet, strangely, this ‘efficiency’ and ‘usefulness’ is seen as not requiring an awareness of culture.

This neglect of culture may reflect a certain way of thinking of psychology, where-upon a colour-blind (or class-blind, or gender-blind) view that we are basically all the same is taken, or that these are sociological topics. However, with psychology being described as the ‘scientific study of people, the mind and behaviour’ (BPS, n.d.), such an understanding is untenable. For instance, *The Guardian* columnist Gary Younge’s (2009) review of the past decade describes it as starting optimistically with the Macpherson report into the death of Stephen Lawrence, but ends up with two BNP MEPs. These two events demonstrate that differences, whether factual or not, matter in what people do, in these instances murder, the response to it, and voting behaviour.

Moreover, in a world where globalisation is seen to simultaneously bind us together, for instance in term of bicultural identities (Arnett, 2002), or prise us a part, as Hunt-

ington’s statement proclaims that the *‘great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural’* (Huntington, 1993, p.22), this omission of culture as a core curriculum area of psychology is inexplicable. Are we really suggesting that culture has no constitutive element in cognition, development, individual difference or social behaviour? Or is it that it is believed that culture is just a moderating, intervening or add-on variable (Gergen et al., 1996) of less significant to these areas? Rather than see culture in these ways, culture is ever present and constitutive of human phenomena. Indeed, *‘science is largely a by-product of the Western cultural tradition at a particular time in its historical development’* (Gergen et al., 1996, p.497).

If the above claims are seen to be extreme, the absence of cultures, even as a variable, creates an image of psychology as being disengaged from the reality of society and the people it wishes to attract, and provides a ‘product’ that is unsuitable for a multi-cultured world and a multicultural society. Britain is undoubtedly still comparatively homogenous, with something like 85 per cent of the individuals’ surveyed by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), describing themselves as White British, but this study suggests *‘if we start to look across generations there are indications of change and increases in diversity of the population’* (Platt, 2009, p.4). The report highlight that one-in-10 children in the UK now lives in a mixed ethnicity family, and goes on to suggest that *‘inter-ethnic relationships have often been seen as indicative of the extent of openness in different societies and of the extent to which ethnic identities are adapting and changing over time’* (Platt, 2009, p.5). As a spokesperson for the Equality and Human Rights Commission is reported on the ISER website as saying *‘Britain’s diverse culture is becoming all the more fascinating and inter-connected’* (*The Rise of Mixed Race Britain*, 2009). It is peculiar that a discipline such as psychology, described by Redding (2001) as dominated by people with liberal political views, is so out of step with society’s openness to culture via

embracing ethnicities. After all, psychologists are also citizens. So how it is that psychology fails to embrace culture? Why is there an absence of multiculturalism as an essential psychological phenomenon in explaining human activities? The suggestions given so far for this absence can only be part of the story since, as stated, psychologists are members of society. Psychologists participate in society’s shared meaning system of language and culture, and are constitute and constituted by it.

As mentioned previously, Richards (1996) claims that psychology has become less anxious to prove itself to a science. However, there is a sense in which this anxiety still curtails our discipline. It should be that we have secured our place as worthwhile and could be willing to let ‘psychology be psychology!’ It could be contended then that psychology’s problem with culture, multiculturalism, and diversity and why it is not part of the core curriculum is not an intentional oversight; psychologists can ‘talk’ liberalism with the best of them, however psychology as a practice ‘does’ conservatism. The way we go about doing psychology is more in keeping with what Jost et al. (2003) identified as the epistemic motives of conservatism. Conservative epistemic motives fit closely to a psychology that is positivistic in it

nature – it echoes the stereotype of a scientist (see Table 1).

As Jost, Nosek and Gosling, (2008) point out, this conservative motive is a view that is ‘supportive of the status quo, and hierarchical in nature’ (p.127). The claim, of course, is not that psychologists are all politically right-wing but that the practices of psychology as a discipline are prone to be conservative, and this restricts us from embracing a concept like culture which is not easily amenable to experimentation. This way of doing psychology is deeply cultural rooted and can itself act as a deterrent to BME whose epistemic stance may be different. For example, some BME groups place a great deal of emphasis on spirituality which Sue et al. (1999) claim should be a basic dimension of the human condition. Operating from its present dominate epistemic motive psychology would struggle with such a concept. With qualitative methodology a core area of British Psychological Society accreditation, there is the ability to embrace some aspects of culture. However, this methodological approach cannot be seen to be a panacea. It maybe an initiator, but the ultimate goal would be to make clear how we as people interacting in our social world ‘do culture’, and this would call for liberalism in methodology (and, of course, in journals!).

Table 1: The Epistemic Motive of Conservatism (Jost et al., 2003) to the Archetypal Positivist Scientist.

Conservative Epistemic Motives	Positivistic Scientist Epistemic Motives
Intolerance of Ambiguity Uncertainty Avoidance Need for Order, Structure and Closure	Objective, Stable Measureable World. Operationalisation Predictability, Controllability Experimentation Hypothesis Refutation

The influential of psychology

The call for the diversification of psychology is not a new suggestion for, amongst others, Hall (1997) and Sue et al. (1999) have made this case in terms of ethical, economic, moral and relevance consideration. Just consider what happens when you say you are a psychologist or studying psychology. This statement commonly invokes a self-awareness/self-surveillance in the other that spotlights the psychologist's role as a disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977), arguably in similar status to that of the police and medical doctors. This experience ought to alert us when we consider one of the common aspirations of psychology that is to 'give psychology away' (Miller, 1969).

The current popularity of psychology should be welcomed, especially in reference to Miller's (1969) assertion that *'our responsibility is less to assume the role of experts and try to apply psychology ourselves than to give it away to the people who really need it ...'* (p.1071). In other words, society should be more psychologically literate in comparison to previous eras and this should contribute to our understanding of each other (Banyard, in press). However, with Miller's proposal that we give psychology away, the diversity of the undergraduates we are giving this psychology away to, and what we are giving become crucial. If we ignore cultural differences then the psychological literacy being facilitated become 'psychological cleansing'; a zero-sum game that amounts to a 'forced deportation' of one culture via the propagation of one view as if it is normative while ignoring, making invisible and ultimately destroying, another view of understand ourselves.

The observations of critical psychologists relate to this notion of 'psychological cleansing'. Critical psychologists (i.e. Parker, 2007; Fox, Prilleltensky & Austin, 2009) highlight the explicit, and more insidious, implicit influence that psychology the discipline has in/on society. Psychology does not exist as an impartial science, but always occupies a position of social, moral and political standing (Harré, 2005). In many respects, psychology

is not exclusively ours to give away, for psychological theory interacts with the world in the form of a 'looping effect' (Brinkman, 2005; Gergen, 1973; Hacking, 1999). Danzinger (1990) argues for a dialectic relationship between social practice and psychological investigation, and that psychological practice have social ramification. In this respect then psychology is merely social history (Gergen, 1973), in that it is *'essentially engaged in a systematic account of contemporary affairs'* (p.316). As such what we give away as the 'product' of psychology, and who we give this to, has major implications for it draws on, amplifies and temporally solidifies certain accounts of people and society. Without taking on board culture psychology offers people a contemporary but parochially incomplete understanding of themselves, especially to BME groups.

Citizens as well as psychologists

The desire to widen participation in higher education is fundamentally a moral impulse for social justice, social mobility, equality and social inclusion that also underpin multiculturalism and the acceptance of diversity (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009, Widening Participation). As lecturers, researchers, constructors and guardians of psychology, we have a valuable role to play in widening access and improving participation. Widening participation should not only be about addressing the discrepancies in the take-up of higher education, but also about broadening the discipline of psychology itself and reflecting Britain's multicultural society. Hence, as argued, the 'product' of psychology itself needs to be examined as one of the main factors that impacts upon who we can give this psychology away to. Psychology recognises that role models, representation and visibility impact on people's motivations, sense of identity and belonging. For instance, the importance of role models in career development (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) and how these models might inspire others (Jung, 1986) have been docu-

mented, yet the curriculum of psychology does not practice what its findings preach. The diversification of psychology undergraduate degrees would be one step in increasing the appeal to BME groups by creating a contact point between the discipline and people’s culturally saturated lives.

The failure to recognise that one important aspect to an individual is culture can reinforce the view that only one way of being is correct. This can result in the alienation of potential students by subtly directing them away from psychological studies, and since BME representation in psychology is invisible it denies such a group the scaffolding that culture can offer individual identities. This is particularly problematic for what is happening in Britain presently, as discussed earlier.

So what can be done to initiate placing the ‘product’ of psychology in culture? The main contention is that the British Psychological Society accreditation criteria should require all undergraduate degrees to include culture. This would increase the attractiveness of psychology to BME groups by building on the complex reflexive characteristic of psychology so that BME group see ‘their’ psychology in what is taught. A radical move would be to draw on what is being taught presently in social anthropology, and to incorporate some of the methods it uses. Indeed, Arnett (2008) suggests that students should do some anthropology. A less radical step would be for the British Psychological Society to insist that material presently existing in the areas of cross-cultural psychology, diversity, and multiculturalism, be included in undergraduate psychology degrees. The best ways to introduce these may not only be to have specific dedicated modules to culture, but instead to incorporate specific lectures and seminars within all the core established knowledge domains, so that culture is seen as an integral phenomena. Courses would be encouraged to not only present this work but also highlight the contribution to psychology of people from BME backgrounds so that the image of psychology itself mirrors, and

hence necessarily talks about, culture. But also linking culture with community psychology (see Kagan, 2008) would greatly increase the relevance of what we talk about.

However, whatever approach is used would need careful handling for it could be construed that there *necessarily exist* different categories of people rather than different culturally informed way to enact psychological phenomena. A maxim that should be encouraged by the British Psychological Society in this regard is aptly given by Malcolm, a participant in Hylton and Miller’s (under review) study on British Black male identity. Malcolm states:

First you must remember I’m a Black man, secondly you must forget I’m a Black man ... You must respect me as being a Black man ... I have no choice other than to say that because conditioning has led me to say that.’

Fowers and Richardson (1996) identify multiculturalism to be good because of its moral centre that considers ‘what makes life worth living?’, while Fowers and Davidov (2006) consider multiculturalism to be based on the virtue of openness to the other. Indeed, culture, in its many guises of difference, must be a serious contender for what is called human nature. When there exist such things as a positive psychology agenda, making psychology ‘cultured’ is a necessary rectification of an earlier error and can assist in widening participation, stimulating research into culture, and add to the betterment of the everyday, civil life of society.

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