

Teaching of Psychology in Contemporary Universities: Diversity, Positionality and Psychological Knowledge

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Abstract

The psychology curriculum has close ties to the histories and cultural traditions of industrialised societies' white middle-class populations, so it is unclear how it may relate to the values and interests of students from a variety of ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds in the contemporary higher education settings. To address this question, we established an innovative research project of de-centring the psychology curriculum, so that BA students from diverse backgrounds could familiarise themselves with cultural-historical, postcolonial, feminist and other critical approaches and reflect on the histories, contexts and limitations of classic developmental psychological theories and research. We also conducted focus group discussions with the students as to explore the teaching of psychology through their perspectives. The findings of our research form the basis for critical reflection on the positionality of psychological knowledge and the possibilities and challenges of de-centring the psychology curriculum in the contemporary university settings.

Introduction

Since October 1974, when the American journal *Teaching of Psychology* was founded, long debates on psychology teaching have taken place in this as well as in similar forums such as the *Studies in Higher Education*, which is linked with a UK-based international academic society. Recent research has focused on a variety of topics such as: computer-based demonstrations in cognitive psychology (Copeland Scott & Houska, 2010); curriculum contents and psychology workforce readiness (Wielkiewicz & Meuwissen, 2014); online discussion forums and support with assignments (Sheen, AlJassmi & Jordan, 2017).

There has been little research, however, exploring how university students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds may experience the teaching of psychology in terms of contents, pedagogical approaches and assessment procedures. Students from ethnic and racial minority groups and lower socio-economic backgrounds manifest significant differences from white middle-class populations in preferences, learning styles, understandings and performance levels in higher education. Specifically, in one of the most comprehensive studies in this field, Burke (2012) explored the institutional micro-politics of recognition and misrecognition, and issues related to literacy and writing for diverse bodies of students while critically examining a wide array of materials – from national and institutional policy documents to interviews with social inclusion practitioners and students in the UK, US and India. Burke (2012) introduced tools for critique and reflection on the so-called “Widening Participation” policies and suggested that embedding all relevant actors (from students and lecturers to senior managers) is key for widening participation initiatives to be effective.

While focusing specifically on psychology, Hodges and colleagues (2007) suggested that students from ethnic and racial minority groups felt loyal towards their psychology degrees; yet they simultaneously reported feelings of exclusion from, and underrepresentation in the psychology curricula. Psychology curricula have indeed initially been developed in Global North societies and have close ties to the histories and cultural traditions of these societies' white middle-class populations. The ethnic, racial and socio-economic characteristics of psychology students have, however, changed significantly in the past decades, and diverse groups of students are now entering higher education institutions in countries such as US, UK, Germany, Canada or Australia (Maringe, Foskett & Woodfield, 2013; Varghese, 2013). Psychology is attracting increasing interest in the Global South, as well (Stevens & Gielen, 2007; Takooshian, Gielen, Denmark & O'Roark, 2018).

The characteristics of modern psychology students beg a question on how the teaching of psychology relates to the values and interests that students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds may bring with them; do these differ from values and interests of university lecturers and researchers? To address this question, we present findings from an innovative research project which introduced a variety of critical readings to psychology classes. We analyse focus group discussions with students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds at a South London University, and explore the teaching of psychology through their perspectives. We conclude the article with a broader reflection on the teaching of psychology in diverse university settings, and the challenges this may imply for psychology's epistemic project.

Problematizing “White Middle-Class Man’s” Psychology

Initially the psychology curriculum (as well as psychological theories and research) reflected the cultural and historical background of white middle-class populations, which could access the relevant study and research trajectories. Psychological Societies such as the *British Psychological Society* have historically updated their guidelines for undergraduate and post-graduate psychology programmes as to incorporate new research areas, approaches and theoretical debates. As a result, psychology curricula in the UK currently cover qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies, discuss theoretical and historical issues in parallel to exploring neurocognition, and sometimes entail a few cross-cultural and global references – which becomes a significant selling point when marketing degrees to international students (cf. Lumby & Foskett, 2015). However, liberal and open-minded such an approach to the teaching of psychology may seem to be at a first glance, there is little reflection on the assumed impartiality and value-neutrality of most psychological knowledge.

Psychology has, indeed, often been criticised as the science of the “white, middle-class man” (Staeuble, 1991; Teo, 2005). It has also sometimes been racist – especially in its early phases (Richards, 2011; Lack & Abramson, 2014). In opposition to white-centred, racist psychological theory and research, Fanon published the seminal “Black skin, white masks” in the 60s (Fanon, 1952/1967), while movements to establish so-called “indigenous” or “indigenized” psychologies were taking place in the Philippines (Paredes-Canilao & Babaran-Diaz, 2013), in Taiwan (Hwang, 2005), and later on in Latin America (Kontopodis, Magalhães & Coracini, 2016), India (Sinha, 1997) and elsewhere in the world (cf. Jahoda, 2016; Brock, 2014). Various efforts to establish non-white-man-focused psychological approaches have taken place in North-Western settings, too (feminist, queer, postcolonial, etc., cf. Burman, 2005; 2017; Parker, 2015; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Walkerdine, 2001).

In this frame, many scholars, have argued for the necessity to “de-centre” theory and research, so that diverse *polyphonic* and *polycentric* psychologies emerge (Staeuble, 2004; Hook, 2012). For this to happen, one should indeed acknowledge that knowledge production and dissemination does not take place on neutral grounds, but within a continuing global history of racism, wars, forced migration, and exploitation of natural resources and local populations (Mignolo, 2012), which psychology as a science has, unfortunately, often supported and facilitated (Richards, 2011; Parker, 2015).

Research Design & Methodology

Taking the above-sketched debates as a point of departure, we established an innovative research project as to de-centre the psychology curriculum, so that students from diverse backgrounds familiarise themselves with *polyphonic* and *polycentric* psychologies (Staeuble, 2004). We expected that non-classic psychological literature would reflect better the interests and values of students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds than classic developmental psychological literature (such as Berk, 2013).

Without adopting (only) one specific approach, we guided year 1 BA students from a South London university, who were of diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, to study the histories, contexts and limitations of classic developmental psychological theories in a series of lectures and seminars focusing on cultural-historical (Hedegaard, 2011; Stetsenko, 2017), postcolonial (Enriquez, 1995; Hook, 2012), feminist (Burman, 2017; Walkerdine, 2001) and other critical approaches (Kontopodis, 2014; Morss, 1996). These lectures and seminars were part of a compulsory module on psychology and human development, which included classic approaches and references to contemporary empirical research, as well. Specifically, in five 2-hour-long lectures we explored historical, epistemological and theoretical issues in psychology and human development on the basis of the above-mentioned literature. In another five lectures classic theories of cognitive, emotional and moral development were discussed in relation to empirical research on timely topics such as learning difficulties; new media; parenting; bullying (cf. Berk, 2013; Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2015).

Lectures were attended by a cohort of about 80 students and were followed by seminars and tutorial sessions aimed at supporting students in reading and reflecting on the course literature, and at preparing for their assignment. The module was assessed by means of essay writing according to a variety of typical criteria, such as presentation and language, clarity and coherence, appropriate use of terms and critical analysis and synthesis. These contents aimed specifically at addressing the needs and interests of a diverse student population: approximately 40% of the students at that university came from lower socio-economic and/or non-white ethnic backgrounds (primarily British African-Caribbean, Asian and Arabic). Many of them were also mature and/or parents themselves as indicated by the data collected for their registration (average per year: 10% aged 25-29 years and 20% aged 30 or older).¹

¹ The university name is not given as to guarantee the anonymity of participants and keep confidential relevant institutional information. The above-mentioned percentages are high when comparing to other UK Universities; they reflect the entry criteria for BA students in this particular university: The average tariff required to enter the university where the research took place was about 285 points while minimum entry standards for Cambridge are around 600 points (the highest entry level in the UK in the respective year). Out of a total of 126 universities in the UK there are about 20-25 universities with lower entry standards than that (the lowest entry standard in the UK was 220). Resource:

In this context, two focus groups (Bohnsack, Pfaff & Weller, 2010) in which 3 and 4 participants, respectively, took part, were conducted approximately for 1,5 hour each during the last two weeks of the course, and before grades were announced. The aim was to gain in-depth insights into these students' views on the non-classic psychology contents that we had introduced. We also aimed to explore their broader interests, preferences and dispositions with regards to the teaching of psychology as well as potential links to their everyday lives and experiences outside of the university settings. For this first study our priority was to reconstruct the order of discourse by the students – hereby inspired by sociological approaches to knowledge and discourse (Keller, 2012; Keller, Hornidge & Schünemann, 2018). Our research project focused on a small opportunity sample (n=7) of students attending the course; who reported volunteering to participate in the study for a variety of reasons including curiosity to engage with research procedures, interest in expressing their views on the course, and/or motivation to socialise with peers. A follow-up study with larger sample and repeated focus groups on weekly basis would obviously be necessary as to closely explore potential differences in the discursive positioning among the various students, in terms of their ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds and gender.

Even though our focus group sample was small, the analysis of the participants' grades and demographic information revealed that they could be seen as fairly typical students of the university they attended with regard to a range of backgrounds including age, family socio-economic circumstances, entry points and final grades, as shown in Table 1. In total 6 out of 7 participants were female; 4 participants were younger than 21 years, 1 was 23 and 2 were aged 30-35 years. Four participants were mature students and 2 had children. Three participants categorised themselves as white and the rest were of Asian or black-African/Caribbean ethnic background. In terms of parental education, 2 participants' parents had no formal qualification, 3 had mothers but not fathers with university education, one participant's both parents had a university degree and one's had A-levels and GCSE qualifications suggesting a broad range of parental education level amongst participants. Four participants had own or parental total income less than £20.000, and 3 had parental family income between 20.000-40.000 per year; which is a very low income for London living standards. In terms of essay grades 2 participants achieved only 40%, 1 participant received 58%, 1 68% and there were also a 78% grade and 2 85% grades. One participant was diagnosed with dyslexia. With regard to entry criteria, 2 mature students were accepted onto the course based on their prior training and/or relevant work experience in education. Three other participants, aged 19-21 years, entered the university having obtained about 280 entry points or 320 entry points from their A levels, respectively. Two participants were international students.

The questions were open with a minimal probing by the coordinator of the discussion as to minimise bias and facilitate a debate between the focus groups' participants. Two researchers were present in the group discussions: the first author, who was the main lecturer at the developmental psychology course (white, male in his thirties) and a white (female) research assistant in her mid-twenties, who was not involved in the course and helped with the data collection. The focus group discussions were video-recorded. One more researcher (the second author) was later on involved in transcribing and analysing data, as to avoid biases in the interpretation. The group discussions took place in a quiet office at the university. The atmosphere was relaxed; the students laughed a lot and mostly agreed with each other on their viewpoints.

<http://www.thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk/league-tables/rankings?o=Entry+Standards> (date of access: 11-Jan-18).

The students were seen as “experts” in the respective field and topic of investigation (Gläser & Laudel, 2004). The analysis and interpretation followed sociological approaches to knowledge and discourse (Keller, 2012; Keller, Hornidge & Schünemann, 2018) in three steps: (a) mapping of the overall structure and progression of the focus group discussion and identification of main- and sub-topics; (b) focusing on longer extracts with dense information and interpreting of *what* meaning is communicated and *how* this meaning is communicated; (c) verifying the generated categories on the whole set of data/ generalising i.e. reconstruction of implicit understandings, and discursive patterns. Particular attention was therefore paid to the choice of words as well as to the silences, interruptions and intonation. Additional materials collected included a questionnaire on the students’ personal data and family background as well as the standard course evaluation questionnaires and the student’s grades.

Ethical permission to conduct this project was granted by the university authorities and all standard procedures were followed (informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, optional participation, data safety cf. Brooks, te Riele & Maguire, 2014). The focus group discussions took place in addition to class activity outside the class time; there was no link to the class activities and any obligation or benefit for students to participate in the research.

“Intriguing” and “Relatable” Contents

It is well known that widening participation in higher education is not straightforward and does not occur just by offering more places to students from diverse backgrounds. Much tutorial and pastoral support is required so that students become familiar with white, middle-class-like modes of academic reading and writing, with taking notes, time management as well as with appropriate communication styles (Burke, 2012; Richardson, 2008). It is difficult to work with students on any contents, if the provision of such support – which is obviously costly – is not regular, adequate and long-standing.

Yet, contents matter as well: The introduction of cultural-historical, postcolonial, feminist and other critical psychological literature aroused the curiosity and interest of all the students participating in the focus groups. It is notable that different students used the word “intriguing” a few times and in different moments of the group discussions as to describe their feelings about it, as in the example below:

- G2-65. D. I would say it was (...) was really quite intriguing to me it’s something
66. I’m quite interested in in terms of ahm, people living with dual, ahm cultural
67. identities (...) I was really intrigued when I saw that
69. this ((cultural identity)) is another layer another, ahm, aspect of child
68. development

Damien² uses the word “intriguing” here as to emphasise his genuine interest in the developmental approach to multiple cultural identities by Hedegaard (2011). For Damien, Hedegaard’s approach was of personal interest and relevance since he himself has contact with and has grown up in an area where many children have dual cultural identities: one at home and one within the community they live in. He did not seem to expect, such an aspect of child development to be included in scientific theorising. While the concrete extract above refers to the specific contents, “intriguing” – as voiced by others at different times during the focus group – also referred to the students’

² All names are pseudonyms matching the participants’ ethnic background and gender for purposes of valid interpretation.

feeling of appreciation with the lecturers' decision to include such literature in the course in general. The students seemed to understand that this content was chosen to address their specific interests and experiences. Since they did not expect such contents, the lecturer's choice of topics relevant for them created a higher motivation to engage with the readings, and to participate in the relevant class activities. Moreover, it became apparent in the focus group discussions that the book chapter stimulated conversations on this topic with peers outside the university.

For the participating students the discussed topics were not only intriguing; they inspired them to connect with the developmental psychological readings and theoretical models, and to reflect on them taking under consideration their personal experiences and own developmental trajectories. They used words such as "relate to", "relatable", "engaging" to explain this feeling, which entailed two interrelated dimensions: (a) the theory under consideration related to their everyday lives and development as children and (b) the theoretical model is contemporary and addresses complex current issues as opposed to classic cognitive and behavioural psychological approaches. For example, the participating students expressed much enthusiasm towards the topic of multiculturalism in general, and said that they could engage with it more easily since it was more contemporary to them.

The importance of a topic being "relatable" was a theme shared across the various discussions by the participating students, as we can also see in the following extract from discussion by another student, Horathi:

- G2-141. H. (...) When you, when you can relate to a specific ((topic)), you know like
142. multicultural or something, I think it's, I think it's really
143. helpful and kind of engaging when you kind of relate to something as well.

For Horathi linking psychology to current debates on multiculturalism motivated students to make the effort required to engage with the academic style of psychology texts, which was rather new to them. As part of a longer dialogue with Damien and other participants, she subtly expressed a general preference for the more contemporary readings, which students might find easier to talk about and relate to rather than the otherwise traditional child development course content:

- G2-195. H. the more contemporary; the more contemporary. A bit more nowadays 196.
would be a bit more relatable but you know maybe also is a bit more (...)
197. ahm, or maybe a bit more current. So I mean I think it is a bit more eeeasier
198. D. hmm
199. H. than to talk about current issues
200. D. 'cause we are able to relate.

The words "contemporary" and "relatable" are seen almost as synonyms in this extract, which was typical for the way students expressed themselves in the group discussions as well as in the course evaluation questionnaires.

It seems that students engage more with various learning and teaching activities when they can personally relate to the contents in question – in this case to the psychological literature that explores issues, which students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds are facing in their everyday lives and communities. If needed, by taking such psychology literature as a point of departure, one could critically review, in close dialogue with the students, other types of psychological research (such as brain research cf. Arievitch, 2017) – covering, more mainstream aspects of the psychology curriculum, as well.

The existing critical psychological literature developed since the 1970s, briefly outlined in the introduction above, are certainly providing a fertile ground on which teaching contents that are of interest to today's diverse psychology student bodies can flourish – this of course takes time and commitment to develop. We found it particularly difficult to deal with female students' questions around religion, faith and sexuality given the lack of literature and research on these topics, and we can only guess that there may be more topics that we or other colleagues would feel difficult to address, (cf. Tomalina, 2007). Creating spaces for students to explore their own questions, for example through student presentations on topics of their own interests, may offer itself one way to proceed in case of lack of research literature. Moving away from established research (and funding) pathways and addressing such issues in the psychology literature would in the long run be necessary as well, so that enriched psychology handbooks and relevant research literature are developed.

Values and Positionality

It may be popular, as well as profitable, these days to welcome students from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (home students or international) to contemporary universities; one should not however forget that intercultural communication and university knowledge production do not take place on neutral grounds, but within a continuing history of power relations – such as between children and adults, women and men, majority and minority populations (Wilder, 2013; Howell, & Tuitt, 2003). It would be naïve, if not hazardous, to believe that psychology can be taught in a neutral way in this context; there is however little research that explores the teaching of psychology in such a perspective (cf. Elicker, Snell, & O'Malley, 2010; Boysen, 2011).

In our focus groups, after expressing their personal feelings with regard to the “intriguing” and “relatable” contents mentioned above, the students expressed value-related dispositions, bringing in discussion criteria on the basis of which various approaches to child development can be contrasted with each other and evaluated. When comparing cultural-historical to other approaches such as classic behaviourism and neurocognitive approaches, they agreed that they preferred the cultural-historical because they lead to a “person-focused” or “human” professional practice, for example in school spaces:

- G2-427. K: I think it completely changes your approach as well. Because if, if you
428. have a teacher ((...)) from a different course, they will focus on, ok, let's do
429. science, let's, let's let's do that and that. Whereas with that knowledge, that
430. we have from here, you will approach it, you approach the person, or what
431. drives you ((...))
432. H: Like you won't be focused on just the curriculum, like, like I
433. said, you'll be understanding of the actual knowledge and then executing it
434. it'll be a lot more, I guess it'll be a bit more, not, not fun, in a fun way, but
435. it'll be a bit more
434. K: human.
435. H: Yeah, a bit more adventurous and a bit more, a bit of a different manner.
436. Like you'll see things from a different sort of (~).

Kasia argues in this extract that the cultural-historical approach enables teachers to understand child development from a person-focused perspective as opposed to teaching with a focus on a particular curricular subject, such as science. Horathi agreed with Kasia, further suggesting that having studied child development enables teachers to move beyond the curriculum, and to be able

to facilitate learning in a more person-oriented, as opposed to subject-oriented manner. While Kasia used the words “drives you”, Horathi used the word “adventurous” implying that a person-centered approach is dynamic, but that it may be more challenging and also interesting and efficient for both teachers and pupils.

Another issue that was brought into the discussion and evaluation of various approaches to child development by the students was that of *social justice* and *discrimination*. Certain readings referred to examples from classroom observations in which white teachers did not fully acknowledge the challenges that pupils from different ethnic backgrounds were facing. Although our own explanations in the lectures brought to students’ attention various perspectives and challenges teachers may have been facing, the participating ethnic minority students seemed to identify themselves with the ethnic minority pupils in these examples, rather than with the teachers. The students expressed much concern that pupils may be treated unfairly because of their colour, race, origin or ethnicity. Therefore, they agreed that critical and culturally sensitive psychological approaches are necessary to develop best practice in teaching and childcare institutions. The extract presented below is exemplary for this kind of talk:

G1-228. B: yeah, me and Raha were discussing about with another friend as well,
229. and hmm it was it was unfair on them (...) I think like any if you reflect on
230. how it is now (...) you can see how hmm (...) some people do get treated
231. unfairly because of where (...) they’ve come from and, the back ((...))
232. and like just because they come from another country and some people
233. don’t. I know it isn’t an issue now ‘cause you hear on the news and stuff
234. (...) but like the text it was really unfair on them because the teachers
235. didn’t treat them equally (...), and you know in (...) education in general
236. the policy is that they always say that everyone should be treated fairly
237. and equally and no one should be discriminated or anything like that, so
238. for me to see that in the text it was just like, that’s was just like that’s quite
239. sad like why would them have do that that’s not really nice.

Beverley expresses here her concern that pupils may be treated unfairly in school because of their country of origin. Through repeating words like “unfair on them”, “really unfair”, “equally”, “discrimination”, “not really nice” she takes a clear position on the side of the pupils who may have been discriminated, and emphasises that none should be discriminated in education and in society in general, which was a shared concern among the other students, too.

Discussing value-related issues openly with the diverse psychology students, who brought their own interests and value-related positions reflecting the intersectionality of their genders, socio-economic backgrounds, races, faiths, cultures and/or ethnicities was not anyhow difficult or provocative during our focus group discussions. Instead it occurred intuitively since the readings and discussed materials offered the ground for such a debate to take place. Indeed, much debate has taken place about the positionality and values that may be implicit or explicit in psychological theory and research, including in *Theory & Psychology*. De-centralising psychology curricula in this regard does not only imply widening students’ participation by addressing diverse students’ learning interests; it also implies *empowering students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds* to speak and to be listened to, eventually contributing to the “decolonisation” of psychology programmes and faculties (cf. Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

Paternalism, Objectivity and Epistemological Concerns

Psychology has not only been the science created by and studied primarily by the “white, middle-class man”; it has also been one of the main disciplines that enabled that “white, middle-class man” to supposedly *help Others to develop* – the “Others” being from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds (Teo, 2005; Mills, 2014). The fact that the “Others” may nowadays study psychology themselves, and then work as psychology practitioners in their own local communities and places of origin, instead of the communities relying on the psychological services provided by white, middle-class psychologists, does not necessarily imply shifts in the distribution of power and ruptures in the existing knowledge systems (cf. Hook, 2007). Psychology graduates from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds may, as well, reproduce the so-called *paternalist* approaches i.e. seek affirmation of superiority through the provision of help in their professional roles, and practices instead of raising awareness of the complex structures, viewpoints, and power relations that create and maintain exploitation and inequality (cf. Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

In our focus groups, even if the participating students evaluated the various theories and approaches and expressed clear preferences for culturally sensitive, feminist and critical thinking, still they did that as part of a broader endeavour to identify the “best” knowledge that would enable the “best” professional practice for the “benefit” of all:

- G2-551. D: I just think some, some knowledge of developmental psychology ahm could make
 552. a difference to so many people, if they knew, if they just knew the effects of so
 553. many things that are [going]
 554. H: [oh yeah]
 555. D: around their children, [around themselves]
 556. K: [it’s power it’s a] power
 557. D: (...) around their teenagers, yeah, it’s amazing ((...))
 573. D: Well yeah what you’ re saying there is no handbook for being a good parent. You
 574: know, there are norms, to every society and every culture, but there is no
 575: handbook that says do this and do that and you’ll be able to be a perfect parent.
 576: (...) however if you have someone with knowledge of developmental
 577. K: you’ll
 578. D: have perfect child psycho[logy]
 579. H: [you’ll] understand which factors
 580. D: regardless of your culture (...) regardless [of your]
 581. K: [What could] harm, (...) what [could],
 582. H: [yeah]
 583. D: gender. Yeah, you could have a rough idea of how, of what to do best by the child
 584. H: or to benefit, what would be beneficial for it

In this example, echoing each other, the three discussants agree that developmental psychological knowledge could be beneficial for any child regardless of one’s culture or gender. They also talk of knowledge as “power”, which goes back to Francis Bacon’s well-known aphorism “*ipsa scientia potestas est*” from his *Meditationes Sacrae*. The students express a strong belief in psychology as a science i.e. as a system of knowledge that is objective and impartial – even universal – and aims at benefiting all.

Obtaining objective knowledge and helping others seemed to be an important motive for the students from diverse backgrounds to spend a significant amount of money and resources to study. The long history of psychology entailed in widespread popular understandings about psychological practice is reflected in the expectations of students, their families and communities,

and it cannot easily be reversed by means of critical readings and discussions – even if these are coherent and systematically organised through the whole academic year. The question poses itself in this frame – echoing Brock (2006) – whether a “de-colonial”, “postcolonial”, “feminist” or “indigenous” “psychology” is possible at all, or whether these word combinations are oxymora and no such psychology can exist. It would be far stretching for us to adopt such a negative position, we suggest instead though that one should acknowledge the power relations historically entailed in psychological knowledge production and professional practice; it may take generations of critically oriented lecturers and students for changes to occur at a large scale in this respect.

Discussion and Conclusions: De-Centring the Psychology Curriculum

The psychology curriculum has close ties to the histories and cultural traditions of industrialised societies’ white middle-class populations. Psychology students are no longer, however, a homogenous group largely consisting of white, middle-class men. It is timely and worthy, in this frame, to bring critical psychological readings for debate into university lecture theatres and seminar rooms, and to discuss the foundations, histories and potential limitations of psychological knowledge with diverse students. The present article explored the teaching of psychology through the perspectives of university students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds in the UK. While taking critical distance from psychology as the science of the “white, middle-class man” (cf. Hook, 2012; Teo, 2005), we established an innovative research project of de-centring the psychology curriculum, so that BA students from diverse backgrounds familiarise themselves with *polyphonic* and *polycentric* psychologies (Staeuble, 2004). By analysing focus group discussions with the students, we explored the teaching and learning of psychology through their perspectives.

Indeed, as we expected, non-classic psychological literature seemed to reflect the interests and values of students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds. In our study students talked about being “intrigued” by cultural-historical, feminist, postcolonial and other critical psychology approaches and approved of these rather difficult readings as “relatable” and “contemporary”. They expressed concerns with regards to diversity and social justice in relation to psychological theory and research, and brought to the foreground their own everyday experiences when doing that. At the same time, it proved difficult to challenge the students’ beliefs in psychology as a system of objective, impartial and even universal knowledge that aims at benefiting all – a belief, which has been much debated in the relevant critical psychological literature.

Echoing current research and debates on de-colonising higher education (Stein & Andreotti, 2016), we propose that the teaching of psychology in today’s universities should not only imply access to culturally enriched psychology handbooks and teaching materials, but that it should also entail continuous critical reflection on one’s values and epistemological dispositions. This is a difficult task though: Relevant theory and research in “indigenous psychologies” (Brock, 2014) as well as in the fields of “postcolonial” and “de-colonial studies” caution that particular forms of knowledge and certain modes of life have been privileged over others in the course of modernisation. In this context, a wide range of people around the globe has often not even been able to communicate their views and participate into the relevant institutional spaces (cf. Spivak, 2012; Mills, 2014).

Without necessarily adopting quickly one critical psychological approach over the other, it is important that psychology faculty reflects on the fact that psychological knowledge production and dissemination has not taken place on neutral grounds, but within a continuing global history of racism, inequality and asymmetrical relations of power between children and adults (Parker,

2015; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002). Following from such a critical stance, psychology faculty may undertake a few concrete steps as to address the challenges *in dialogue with* their diverse students. These steps would be:

- Creating spaces for psychology students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds and age groups to explore their own questions;
- Discussing epistemological and value-related issues openly with students from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds, who bring with them their own interests, forms of knowledge and value-related positions, as well as their own community histories and future imaginaries;
- Empowering students to search for and critically analyse differentiated readings and sources of information in their own languages on topics of their own interests.

Such an engagement could be facilitated through self-organised student seminars and study groups, as well as through alternative assessment formats such as student presentations or small-scale research projects. Of course, this would also require appropriate resources, such as time for discussions with student representatives and engagement with diversified readings for the involved academics; engagement within professional accredited organisations, such as the British Psychological Society, as well as support with programme development and evaluation procedures. On the longer run, participatory and co-productive research with the students and graduates from diverse ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds themselves (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016) would be necessary for a variety of topics, which are relevant for these students and their communities, to be investigated across diverse settings so that new teaching materials are developed. Whether such a de-centred psychology could emerge from the highly contested history of psychology as a discipline remains to be seen. We leave this question open and look forward to the answer, which future developments in widening participation in higher education may stipulate.

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Appendix

Transcription symbols (adapted from: Edwards & Lampert, 1993)

G1/G2	Focus Group 1/ Focus Group 2
[text]	text articulated simultaneously by the interviewer and interviewee
(...)	pause lasting less than 1 second
(~)	unclear word
((...))	text omissions or explanations added by the researchers