RETHINKING “RELEVANCE”:
South African Psychology in Context

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This article examines the phenomenon known as the “relevance debate” in South African psychology. It begins with a historical overview of the contours of the discipline in that country before describing the controversy’s international dimensions, namely, the revolutionary politics of 1960s higher education and the subsequent emergence of cognate versions of the debate in American, European, and “Third World” psychology. The article then details how South Africa’s “relevance” project enjoyed a special affinity with an assortment of ethnic-cultural, national, and continental myths and metaphors, all of which served the interests of the political formations of the day. It discusses how, in present-day South Africa, the intelligentsia has become an important catalyst for the so-called African Renaissance, which seeks to provide “relevant” solutions for the regeneration of African society. However, the global hegemony of what began in the 1970s as a “second academic revolution,” aided by the lifting of the academic boycott of South Africa, has blunted the once critical edge of “relevance” discourse. A new mode of knowledge production now holds sway, the outcome of a dramatic reformulation of the capitalist manifesto in which the values of the “May 68” generation have been hijacked by a managerialist rationality. In light of the capitalization of the knowledge-production enterprise, it is concluded that the idiom of “relevance” has outlived its usefulness.

Keywords: relevance, knowledge production, South Africa, apartheid, African Renaissance

For several decades, psychology in South Africa has fielded awkward questions about its academic and professional “relevance.” Criticisms are framed nowadays in terms of the skewed racial demographics of the country’s psychologists and counselors, the inability of most practitioners to speak indigenous African languages, the discipline’s continuing Eurocentrism, and the perceived failure to respond appropriately to post-apartheid policy imperatives. It may simply be down to a conceptual plasticity of sorts that the pertinence of “relevance” has endured. But when undergraduate psychology students, unfamiliar with the nuances of the debate, comment matter-of-factly on their chosen field of study’s unsuitability for the national life, some modicum of explanation is required that can account for the recalcitrance of “relevance” talk.

In this article, it is observed that apartheid-era calls for “relevance” were wedded to conservative, progressive and radical politics alike. In recent years, however, these have been superseded by a newfangled rendering of “relevance” that, in contemporary parlance, does the rounds as “engaged scholarship,” “social responsiveness,” and such like. Contrary to what they suggest, these terms obscure an altogether more significant trend: the relentless commercialization of the academy. Accordingly, the central claim of this article is that the introduction of democratic rule in South Africa and its reentry into the international community facilitated the insertion of its academy into the global intellectual order, which, at the time, two decades in the making, encouraged, above all, the commodification of knowledge. “Relevance” was reduced to little more than a catch phrase in funding applications and mission statements. By tracing the concatenation of politics, knowledge production, and “relevance” discourse vis-à-vis South African psychology and beyond, the remainder of this article will attempt to illustrate
how it was that “relevance” itself became irrelevant.

South African Psychology and the “Relevance” Debate

Psychology in South Africa developed rapidly in the 1920s when John Dunston, a British psychiatrist and the country’s first Commissioner for Mental Hygiene, returned from an official tour of England, Europe, and the United States. Realizing that mental health care could extend beyond the bare provision of custodial services, Dunston introduced a series of interventions, including the appointment of psychologists and the standardization of intelligence tests for South African conditions (Minde, 1975). His views on African intelligence, however, were unflattering: Dunston believed that Africans were appreciably less intelligent than Whites, were short on initiative, did not learn from experience, and lacked the reasoning skills for becoming paranoid (Dunston, 1923, cited in Seedat & MacKenzie, 2008). Moreover, his ideas about Black inferiority dovetailed seamlessly with the as-yet-untested notion of a “hierarchy of races,” advocated in 1920 by the Eugenics and Genetics Standing Committee of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science. In need of scientific validation, here was a challenge tailor-made for the ministrations of psychological expertise (Louw, 1997).

Yet the discipline’s most meaningful achievement during the interwar years stemmed from its involvement in the Carnegie Commission’s Poor White Study. The so-called poor white problem had raised concerns about sexual relations across the color line, which, it was speculated, resulted from the social equality of poor Whites and “the great mass of non-Europeans . . . This impairs the tradition which counteracts miscegenation, and the social color divisions are noticeably weakening” (Grosskopf, 1932, p. xx). The poor white problem afforded psychologists the opportunity of demonstrating the usefulness of psychometric techniques in addressing such problems, which they accomplished with extraordinary success (Louw, 1986). On the other hand, South African psychology, from its inception, aligned itself with the precepts of scientific racism, which, in turn, served the mission of apartheid capitalism (Seedat & MacKenzie, 2008).

The postwar period saw the institutionalization of Afrikaner apartheid rule and the increasing isolation of South African academia in continental Europe and Britain. The National Institute for Personnel Research (NIPR), established in 1946 and staffed initially by air force psychologists that had made important contributions to the mobilization effort, was instrumental in generating knowledge concerning the adaptability of African labor. Funded by state and industry, the NIPR’s unwritten mandate was to discover “how white-owned industries could best expropriate and exploit the labor of the African workforce” (Seedat & MacKenzie, 2008, p. 80). Beginning in the 1970s, however, psychologists were increasingly called upon to defuse a rising working-class militancy. A discernible shift in political momentum was afoot, epitomized by the failure of Christian Nationalism, mounting local and international condemnation of the wide-ranging depredations of apartheid policy, and, with respect to psychology, a not-too-distant revolt against an Afrikaner-led profession. The promulgation in 1974 of the Afrikaans Medium Decree contributed significantly to what would become the Soweto riots of 1976, followed in 1977 by the death in detention of the Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko. Along with the not inconsiderable regional turmoil of those years—particularly in Angola, Mozambique, and Rhodesia—these developments meant that, from the mid-1970s onward, the apartheid state lurched from one crisis to the next in a steady trajectory of terminal decline.

It is worth noting that, by the late 1970s, South Africa’s first Black psychologist, Chabani Manganyi, had been writing about the Black experience of political oppression for some years (see, e.g., Manganyi, 1973). Manganyi’s early contributions, significantly, were made during the apogee of apartheid rule, yet it was only with the writing already on the wall that developments in the professional mainstream started reflecting what was going on in the country and beyond. From 1978, the Afrikaner Whites-only psychology association, the Psychological Institute of the Republic of South Africa (PIRSA), in an intimation of a growing rapprochement with its rival association, backtracked on its founding ethos of racial separatism by holding joint conferences with the ra-
cially integrated South African Psychological Association (SAPA). In 1982, the two societies buried their hatchet to form the Psychological Association of South Africa (PASA). The new association, however, failed to convince many progressive psychologists, who interpreted the merger as a pragmatic gesture aimed at facilitating statutory recognition of the profession. In 1983, in a display of questionable judgment, the Institute of Family and Marital Therapy hosted an international conference at Sun City—a gambling and entertainment center in a Bantu stan “setting which is responsible for the break-up of thousands of [Black] families” (Vogelman, 1987, p. 24). An ad hoc committee of disenchanted mental health professionals and students formed the Organisation for Appropriate Social Services in South Africa (OASSSA), dedicating itself “to work only with those who are the victims of oppression” (Anonymous, n.d., p. 2). In the same year, the critical psychology journal Psychology in Society was launched to “contribut[e] to serious debate and understanding of a psychology which is clearly at a cross-roads . . . [and] is being torn apart by its inability to contribute meaningfully to a South African society increasingly in the throes of a deep structural crisis” (“Editorial,” 1983, p. 1).

By the late 1980s, the White-run OASSSA was deemed not radical enough by Black psychologists who founded the Psychology and Apartheid Committee instead—with the curious outcome that psychology’s resistance to apartheid was organized mostly along racial lines (Foster, 2008; Suffla, Stevens, & Seedat, 2001; Yen, 2008).

With the state apparatus now unraveling, critical psychologists slammed the discipline’s indifferent response to the human rights abuses of the day, accusing it of lacking “relevance.” They pointed out, variously, that the discipline was culturally insensitive (Holdstock, 1979, 1981a, 1981b), bourgeois (Turton, 1986), politically indifferent (Anonymous, 1986; Dawes, 1985; Lidwell & Kvalsvig, 1990; Mauer, Marais, & Prinsloo, 1991; Strümpfer, 1981), economically inaccessible (Berger & Lazarus, 1987; Vogelman, 1987), and theoretically impoverished (Gilbert, 1989). It came as no surprise when, at its national conference in 1994, South African psychology admitted its silent complicity with apartheid rule (de la Rey & Ipser, 2004). Weighed down by a long and detailed involvement with racist ideology (S. Cooper, Nicholas, Seedat, & Statman, 1990; Duncan, van Niekerk, de la Rey, & Seedat, 2001; Foster, 1991; Magwaza, 2001), the discipline was forced to confront its past in a manner that, for a hundred years, it had asked its patients to do.

A generation later, questions persist about the “relevance” of psychology for the lives of the majority of South Africans. Claims of professional “irrelevance” are substantiated by referring variously to the skewed racial demographics of the country’s registered psychologists and counselors (Pillay & Siyothula, 2008), the dearth of qualified professionals who speak indigenous African languages (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004), biased selection criteria for admission into professional training programs (Stevens, 2001), and the uneven racial composition of selection panels (Mayekiso, Strydom, Jithoo, & Katz, 2004). In respect to academic psychology, concerned intellectuals have been arguing since the late 1970s that psychological theories remain beholden to American and European (especially Germanic) explanations of human functioning (Holdstock, 1981a; Turton, 1986) and that the paradigmatic inclinations of psychology are in keeping with “the worldview of the colonizer” (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004). Others criticize what they imagine as the implied alternative, namely, the reification of culture and relegation of class, with all its evocations of apartheid-style characterizations of cultural difference (Nell, 1990; Seedat & Nell, 1990; Swartz, 1991; Turton, 1986). For those sympathetic to an Afrocentric psychology, however, it remains a largely marginal endeavor, leading one commentator to remark that psychologists in South Africa are in fact without a psychology (Ratele, 2004). And on the research front, suggestions have been made of continuing indifference to sociopolitical priorities—as in, for example, an analysis of articles appearing in the South African Journal of Psychology between 1999 and 2003, according to which a mere 2% of articles dealt with the issue of HIV/AIDS, while a further 2% handled that of “race” (Macleod, 2004). Whether in theory, practice, or research, the slow-moving transformation of psychology in South Africa remains a focus of concern.
Conceptualizing “Relevance”

As far as the history of South African psychology is concerned, it may be said that “relevance” functions typically as an adjective: disciplinary conventions are either lauded as “relevant” or dismissed as “irrelevant.” The adjectival form of “relevance,” however, obscures a historical significance that can be enabled through a focus on its nominal usage. “Relevance” is then transformed into a concept that, like any other, carries a certain history. It invokes, specifically, the troubled antinomy inhabited by science and society, reminding one that the notion of “science for its own sake” is nowadays difficult to sustain (Harding, 1991). The scientific rationale is no longer considered a self-evident truth: It is subject to changing societal contingencies that, over the centuries, have asked different things of science (Hessels, Van Lente, & Smits, 2009). The production of knowledge has been associated with values and institutions for at least the past 400 years and has been “nationalized” increasingly over the last century and a half (Pestre, 2003). Science is a fundamentally social exercise: As an intellectual practice, research is located within a wider, rule-bound community of practice that is itself immersed in hegemonic societal configurations.

“Relevance” in Context

Demands for “relevance” are peculiar to neither psychology nor South Africa. A striking precedent can be seen in the worldwide calls for educational “relevance” in the 1960s, first made by disaffected university students and subsequently taken up by their teachers (Rotenstreich, 1972). Historical scrutiny indicates that, in America, the young people that railed against the “irrelevance” of their educations were not the working-class victims of epistemic violence but, rather, a well-to-do generation scandalized by the moral hypocrisy of preceding ones. Students protesters were sympathizing in effect with those they deemed “less fortunate” than themselves (Keniston, 1970, p. 162). In the rarefied atmosphere of higher learning, they came to the conclusion that there was little on offer that could prepare them for entry into a society traumatized by racism and war (Sampson, 1970). Their German doppelgängers were similarly “the first generation that [knew] no economic insecurity and relative poverty [yet] openly perceive[d] the disproportion between the potential wealth and potential gratification of an industrially developed society, and the actual life of the masses in that society” (Habermas, 1971, p. 24). Around the world, in fact, the inner circles of student activists seemed to have enjoyed distinctly bourgeois upbringings (Boudon, 1971)—an ironic state of affairs, given their unmitigated rubbing of the very institutions, along with vast armies of functionaries, that had promoted their interests so devotedly.

On both sides of the Atlantic, emancipatory anticapitalist sentiments demanded reforms in knowledge production, finding resonance especially among the social sciences. A clutch of American universities was forced into a reflexive rethinking of their modus operandi. European student protests, in connection with a host of social issues—totalitarian governance, nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation, homophobia, and the like—brought about analogous, yet more thoroughgoing, consequences. Young European radicals, committed to a transdisciplinary agenda of social and academic transformation, had found inspiration in critical theory and the Frankfurt School—despite the school’s own misgivings. For the latter, mobilization had become an end in itself, risking its own undoing through the privatization of “alternativeness” and an aimless “new actionism” (Habermas, 1971, p. 26). The ensuing dissolution of the student movement seemed to vindicate this skepticism, while a corporatist assimilation of May 1968 values (Pestre, 2003) ensured that the students’ main legacy would be one of “libertarianism which came to be appropriated by a Right eager to dismantle bureaucracies and the welfare state” (Müller, 2002, p. 33).

In the so-called Third World, meanwhile, critics insisted that the “colonial aftermath” was a contradiction in terms on the grounds that postcoloniality was located at the onset—rather than the termination—of colonial rule (Gandhi, 1998). Newly liberated societal energies were sublimated in the euphoria of independence, the groundswell of anti-Western nationalism, the twin imperatives of development and change, popular uprisings against political oppression and more general social contradictions, and this coincided with discerning calls for the decolonization of everyday consciousness (Fanon, 2008), knowledge institutions (al-Attas, 1985; al-Faruqi,
1982), and the educated class (Mazrui, 1978). Within the academy, this revolt against “cultural dependency” (Mazrui, 1978, p. 13)—Fanon (2008) called it “imitativeness”—would be taken up in the form of discipline-specific debates about “relevance.” The problem, however, was that the imported Western disciplinary order was “a particular manifestation of . . . how western civilization sees its problems. . . . It has no real meaning for nonwestern cultures” (Sardar, 2005, p. 200). In such contexts, intradisciplinary problematizations of “relevance” were consequently difficult to resolve.

The “Irrelevance” of American Psychology

Against this backdrop of international appeals for educational “relevance,” a standout event in the history of American psychology occurred on September 1, 1969, when the president of the American Psychological Association (APA), George Miller, was introduced at the annual convention of the APA. The theme for that year’s convention had been dubbed “Psychology and the Problems of Society” and Miller’s (1969) imminent address would itself become a watershed moment in American psychology’s debate on “relevance.” Unexpectedly, though, a group of students emerged from the audience and approached the stage, resulting in the APA president ceding the podium to these representatives of the Black Students Psychological Association (BPSA). Gary Simkins, national chairman of the BPSA, proposed that the student organization present a list of demands, the following day, to the APA Council of Representatives (Simkins & Raphael, 1970). As it turned out, the council debated the list for six hours, eventually endorsing the proposal. What it validated was a five-pronged student-driven plea for equitable selection procedures for entrance into professional psychology training programs, aggressive recruitment of Black academics into psychology departments, financial assistance for Black students, practical community experience for Black trainees, and terminal programs at all degree levels—each of which was premised, in varying degrees of explicitness, on the felt “irrelevance” of psychology for Black America.

On another front altogether, artifact and ethics crises in psychological experimentation had undermined the real-world applicability of social psychological theory (Baumrind, 1964; Orne, 1962; Rosenthal, 1966), inaugurating “the age of relevance in social psychology” (Rosnow, 1981, p. 78). In an influential article, Kenneth Ring (1967) framed the corrupting and aimless flamboyance of experimental social psychology as a defensive posturing against the a priori vacuousness of the field; the “frivolity” of it all could only be countered by, among other things, initiating research of broad human importance. In a similarly devastating indictment of social psychology, Kenneth Gergen’s (1973) central thesis was that social psychological facts were mostly unrepeatable and that the preeminent experimental method was, therefore, entirely inadequate as a method of enquiry. Gergen argued that a “feedback loop” characterized the relationship between psychological science and society; this was the result of a combination of prescriptive bias in psychological theory, the nonexistence of naïve subjects, and the influence of Western cultural values on subjectivity (specifically, freedom and individuality). The upshot was that “social psychology alters the behavior it seeks to study” (Gergen, 1973, p. 314)—that is, social psychological theory invalidated itself precisely because of its relationship with society. But, science apart, Gergen (1973) pointed out that society, in any event, changed across time and place, thereby problematizing in perpetuity all efforts “to build general laws of social behavior” (p. 316); at any given point in time, social psychological theory could never be more than contemporary theory. The implication was that pure science, with its canonical focus on timeless universals (which, when they existed, tended to be of negligible social significance anyway), had to take a backseat to more socially “relevant,” applied, albeit time-bound research. By focusing on knowledge production itself—each in its own way—the artifact, ethics, and “relevance” crises raised troubling questions about the relationship between psychological science and society.

European Psychology and the “Relevance” Debate

Contemporaneous with these developments, a kindred zeitgeist took hold in western Europe. Inspired by the Frankfurt School’s insistence on the interestedness of all knowledge, the student revolution of 1968 fostered a crisis of “rele-
vance” among European social psychologists that stood accused of methodological fetishism (Moscovici, 1972). The discipline had imported, wholesale, the American “social psychology of the nice person” (p. 18), while ideologically inoculating itself against European social verities. And since the American research agenda was apparently in thrall to economic and political stakeholders (see also Parker, 1989), the implication was that its European hangers-on had “done no more than to operationalize questions and answers which were imagined elsewhere” (Moscovici, 1972, pp. 31–32). To make matters worse, the theoretical impoverishment of European social psychology—a consequence of positivistic epistemology, aversion for philosophical speculation, and methodological tensions—confounded any desire to generate locally “relevant” questions and answers. The outcome was a “psychology of well-tried aphorisms” (p. 37) and an associated charge of triviality. In contrast to Ring’s (1967) argument, experimental research was not “irrelevant” because it was fundamental rather than applied; what made it “irrelevant” was “due to the social psychologists having often taken the wrong decision as to what kind of homo their discipline is concerned with: ‘biological,’ ‘psychological’ or ‘sociopsychological’” (Tajfel, 1972, p. 71). The triteness of social psychological knowledge derived from an ill-conceived attempt to explain social phenomena at the level of the individual. Or, to rephrase Moscovici’s (1972) provocative question, there was nothing social about social psychology.

Harré and Secord’s (1972) analogous argument drew a line under many of the same themes. The banality of experimental research in social psychology was a direct consequence of the prevailing behaviorist hegemony. The assumption that complex behavior was the uncomplicated aggregate of simple behaviors rendered the laboratory experiment simultaneously inadequate for understanding real-world behavior yet suitable for making sense of “a kind of never-never land of behavior” (p. 49). An information-processing model of human beings, conceptual simple-mindedness, the confusion of scientific with human variables, and the “special kind of society” (p. 46) that was generated by the psychological laboratory were all implicated in a corresponding loss of “verisimilitude.” Theory and method were mutually “irrelevant,” a scheme of near axiomatic proportions that could only be salvaged by a dramaturgical model of behavior at the center of which stood a capable and conscious actor preoccupied with presentation, monitoring, and control.

“Relevance” in “Third World” Psychology

For newly independent countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the end of colonialism had generated a powerful imperative of socioeconomic and technological development that had taken centuries to accomplish elsewhere. Systematic planning was required not only to produce the necessary changes but also to overcome any attendant resistances—which was to be achieved by revisiting the core ideals of their respecting knowledge-making industries. A shift in the balance was inevitable: “Research for prestige” needed to be tempered in favor of “research for policy.” In research circles, “social applicability” became the new mantra, counterposing itself winningly against the “immorality of irrelevance” (Baumrin, 1970, quoted in Sinha, 1973, p. 5).

With regard to psychology, it was not long before the “relevance” crisis gained traction in the disciplinary hinterland. Beginning in the mid-1960s and spreading rapidly over the following decade, a sustained critique of both American and European preeminence emerged and proliferated among psychology communities throughout the so-called Third World (Abd, 1987; Abd, 1975; Ardila, 1982; Ching, 1984; Holdstock, 1979, 1981a; Khaleefa, 1997; Naidoo & Kagee, 2009; Sinha, 1984). This was less a matter of “relevance” contradicting itself to become an instance of Fanonian imitativeness than of inevitable questions being asked about the “Third World” applicability of an imported Euro-American “ready-made intellectual package” (Nandy, 1974, p. 7). Psychologists from “developing” countries naturally assumed a problem-oriented approach “so that the data provided through psychological research [could] be of some use in dealing with myriads of pressing demands connected with national development” (Sinha, 1975, p. 10). These critical calls for “relevance” formed the intellectual starting points for positive attempts at indigenizing the discipline,
which were as numerous as they were varied, focusing on “structural” (resource-driven), “substantive” (content-driven), and “theoretic” (concept-driven) aspects (Kumar, 1979, pp. 104–105, quoted in Atal, 2004, pp. 105–106).

In particular, the Indian search for a “macropsychology” (Sinha, 1985) and the transdisciplinary outlook of Filipino psychology are illuminating examples of substantive and theoretic indigenization, respectively, while the South African pursuit of a “relevant” psychology embodies both facets. Each of these cases is treated in turn.

**Indigenizing Indian Psychology**

During the preindependence years, Indian research in psychology was, at best, imitative of Euro-American disciplinary trends, a situation that changed negligibly after independence, when research topics popular in Western psychology still predominated and related only secondarily to the demands of Indian society (Sinha, 1986). In the early 1960s, however, a discernible problem-oriented stance emerged: Indian psychologists became increasingly concerned with the practical challenges that accompanied the real-world processes of national development and social change, and began to direct their research efforts accordingly. There was also a growing realization that theories and methods borrowed from Western sources could not be applied indiscriminately, such that, by the mid-1960s, a strident critique of the patent “foreignness” of Indian psychology propelled efforts toward indigenization.

In spite of this newfound disciplinary zeal, the psychology of the mid-1970s was deemed “not merely imitative and subservient but also dull and replicative” (Nandy, 1974, p. 5); in an ironic about-turn, even the call for “relevance” was considered imitative and therefore amounted to little more than a “gambit.” At the turn of the 1980s, there were evident “signs of growing crisis in [Indian] psychology” (Pareek, 1980, quoted in Sinha, 1986, p. 64). By the 1990s, in spite of a now stronger indigenizing trend that encouraged the selection of socially “relevant” research topics and variables, Indian psychology remained marooned in a “recipient culture of science” (Nandy, 1974, p. 1) and its own endemic parochialism. It was not that gains had not been made at all—rather, it was that many psychologists . . . are finding it difficult to cast off the microcosmic and individualistic orientation acquired in the West; they are bound by the prevailing disciplinary ethos, are critical about this [indigenizing] tendency, and doubt the distinctive identity of psychology in India. (Sinha, 1993, p. 40)

**Indigenizing Filipino Psychology**

Of all the Asian countries, the indigenization project has proved most successful in the Philippines (Sinha, 1997). Initially a Spanish colony for more than 300 years, the Philippines eventually achieved independence from the United States in 1946. By then, psychology—which had been introduced as a subject at the University of the Philippines in 1908—was thoroughly American (Montiel & Teh, 2004). During the early years of independence, however, Filipino nationalism was in the ascendency, and psychologists started directing their attentions toward the study of Filipino national identity and personality (Lagmay, 1984). By the 1960s, the general ill-suitedness of American psychology to the Philippine context was widely acknowledged; what was lacking was a coherent alternative (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

The Philippines was deeply affected by the worldwide student protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Lagmay, 1984). The lingering imperialism of American culture was the common object of disillusionment; there was a growing feeling that the primacy of the English language in education—in psychology, for example—needed to be challenged by introducing the national language as a medium of instruction. Nationwide teach-ins, demonstrations, and violence culminated in the imposition of martial law in September 1972. By then, Virgilio Enriquez had just returned to the country after completing his PhD in social psychology at Northwestern University. If anything, his American education made him even more Filipino-centered in his teaching and research, and he set about establishing the Philippine Psychology Research House. In 1975, he chaired the First National Conference of Filipino Psychology, where the guiding principles of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino psychology) were officially enunciated (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). In January 1976, Enriquez founded the National Association for Filipino Psychology, which deliberately sought to expand its membership beyond the discipline,
opening its doors to anthropologists, sociologists, historians, philosophers, and others besides (Lagmay, 1984).

In the words of Enriquez himself, “psychology [was] too important to be left to the psychologists alone” (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, p. 54). Sikolohiyang Filipino developed into a dynamic site of protest against “a psychology that perpetuates the colonial status of the Filipino mind, the exploitation of the masses, and the imposition of psychologies developed in industrialized countries” (Church & Katigbak, 2002, p. 131). In time, it would cons-tellate itself around four core themes: an understanding of identity and national consciousness, with a social psychological focus on an indigenous conceptualization of the psyche; an awareness of, and involvement in, social issues; attention to national and ethnic languages and cultures; and the development of psychological practices appropriate to the Philippine context (Enriquez, 1993).

Apartheid Ideology, South African Psychology, and “Relevance”

In both the Indian and Philippine cases, the reorientation of knowledge production activities proceeded on the basis of an explicit juxtapositioning of the “local” and the “distant.” In apartheid South Africa, the conditions were rather different, with the country still being colonized not from without but from within. When the National Party (NP) emerged victorious at the 1948 polls, it had done so by warning a nervous electorate of an approaching inundation (oorstroming) of Blacks (O’Meara, 1996, p. 34). The metaphor of an unstoppable Black deluge—not infrequently tinged with sexual anxiety—had haunted South African politics for decades and provided ample justification for the NP’s defensive brand of apartheid thinking. With H. F. Verwoerd running the Department of Native Affairs from the mid-1950s, however, a Christian National reading of racial segregation took hold. Apartheid ceased being about Whites’ amibi-latory fears, instead finding validation in God’s will that “the Afrikaner . . . implement it for the well-being of Black and white alike” (Moodie, 1975, p. 248). In 1959, when Verwoerd’s successor, Daan de Wet Nel, stood before Parliament with the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Bill, he articulated in full the touchstones of this new apartheid rationality: first, the existence of an inviolable, God-given calling for every volk (ethnic group); second, the volk’s right to self-preservation; and third, the suitable development of the volk through segregation from other ethnic groups (Moodie, 1975; O’Meara, 1996). Apartheid policy no longer amounted to the purely “negative” defense of the White race against degenerative miscegenation but had a “positive” aspect, too—the creation of a segregated yet prosperous and peaceful multiracial society. Being well aware of the Black Nationalist sentiment sweeping across the continent, Verwoerd—who was by then prime minister—skillfully advanced a doctrine of cultural particularity as a political rationale for the creation of independent ethnic homelands. In an almost imperceptible change to the nomenclature, negative apartheid transmogrified into the more positive-sounding “theory of separate development.”

Afrikaner psychologists, in particular, took the separate development program seriously and stressed the importance of addressing such substantive issues as alcoholism, road safety, family disintegration, the nation’s mental health, moral decay, and youth criminality (La Grange, 1962). It was believed that the identification of gifted children would facilitate nationwide development on condition that “provision . . . be made for the discovery and development of talents within the different communities of our population according to the special needs of the different racial groups” (La Grange, 1964, p. 12). Indeed, the very existence of the Whites-only psychological association, PIRSA, established in 1962, demanded “a strong motivation toward service of country and volk, including service toward our fellow citizens in the different racial associations” (La Grange, 1966, p. 18). Just as clinical psychology in the United States had attained prominence because of its engagement with social (i.e., educational and military) problems, a similar pattern was identifiable in the rise of the profession in South Africa (Hattingh, 1966).

For others, on the other hand, the “relevance” of South African psychology was still a matter of contention:

Too much [research] is unrelated to our national needs and the findings are frequently of such a nature that they have no meaning for anyone other than the researcher . . . . Research on such a topic as the sexual life
Mbeki (1999) aligns himself with the writer’s “spirit of impatience” and confirms his belief that the conference participants, “by convening as you have, you have taken all of us an important step forward toward the realization of our common goal of the renewal of our continent” (p. xiii). He hopes for a new African world which the African Renaissance seeks to build . . . one of democracy, peace and stability, sustainable development and a better life for the people, nonracism and nonsexism, equality among the nations, and a just and democratic system of international governance.” (p. xviii)

Mbeki calls for the restoration of African pride, lost through centuries of “contempt for the color black. What this means is that we must recall everything that is good and inspiring in our past” (pp. xx–xxi). It is, moreover, “the enormous brain power” (p. xxi) of Africa that must secure the new century for the continent.

The African Renaissance is in the first instance an anti-imperialist project (Maloka, 2001): It represents at once a postcolonial, pan-African protest against global domination and an academy-inspired commitment to locally generated, socially “relevant” solutions. Even so, critics point out that it is unclear who the keepers of the African Renaissance really are: Does it belong to the continent, the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress, or the Union Buildings in Pretoria (Maloka, 2001)? Some are skeptical of its European parallels, others liken its thoroughgoing discourse of reified difference to the divide-and-rule strategy of the apartheid regime, while others still—such as the former president’s brother—decry it as “a triumphalist syndrome that afflicts newly liberated African countries” (M. Mbeki, 1998, p. 213, quoted in Maloka, 2001, p. 2). The political currency of Africanization is hard to miss, its ethnosophical inclinations urging a wistful return to “traditional African practices and beliefs” (Maloka, 2001, p. 4). The now much-bandied-about feel-good term, ubuntu, which stresses the virtues of the communal life, has become the trade name for a free-source computer operating system. A Zulu impi bused in from the nearest township can put on a spectacle for appreciative Versace-clad tourists in air-conditioned designer shopping malls. The late South African health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, attempts to treat AIDS patients with a vegetable cocktail (specifically garlic, beetroot,
lemons, and African potatoes), believing that “we cannot use Western models of protocols for research and development” (BBC News, 2008). For Comaroff and Comaroff (2009), what these self-conscious, stage-managed performances of culture instantiate, is a commodification of ethnicity.

The situation is hardly much different in psychology, where the search for an “African” perspective continues to loom large in the struggle for theoretic “relevance” (Holdstock, 2000; Mkhize, 2004). As in the past, latter-day articulations of cultural essentialism are welcomed without much protest—presumably because they, too, corroborate a hegemonic political order. Black thinkers, including the likes of Aimé Césaire, Leopold Senghor, and John Mbiti, are routinely lionized in the course of hackneyed arguments about the cultural uniqueness of the continent and its potential as a fountainhead of indigenous psychological theory. A supposedly African weltanschauung provides the intellectual justification for this new psychology: Counterposed to an equally monolithic Western tradition, African metaphysics is described as past- and present-oriented, encouraging harmonious relationships of all kinds, emphasizing the processual nature of personhood and presuming a sociocentric definition of self (Mkhize, 2004). Animating this quest for an African psychology is a desire to reclaim and reassert an inferiorized past, necessitating, in Fanonian terms, the renunciation of inner whiteness and the veneration of one’s “own revolting ugliness” (Fanon, 2008, p. 154). It is believed, furthermore, that a “relevant” South African psychology should immerse itself in the substantive issues facing the nation—such as “race” and racism, HIV/AIDS, and poverty (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; MacLeod, 2004).

The Academy, the New Mode of Knowledge Production, and “Relevance”

Despite the populist rhetoric—“The people shall govern!”—Mbeki has never managed to shake the public’s impression of him as a tweed-wearing (Gevisser, 2007), pipe-smoking “black Englishman” (F. van Zyl Slabbert, personal communication, November 21, 2006, quoted in Butler, 2007, p. 271). His conspicuous nonidentification with “the people” mirrors the impossibility of his appeal for a socially responsive intelligentsia. Much of the existing intellectual class was constituted through the prism of oppressive power formations with the result that, Black or White, regardless of one’s imagined class solidarity, to “make” faculty involves successful negotiation of a force field that imposes its specific determinations upon all those who enter it. Thus, she who wants to succeed as a scientist has no choice but to acquire the minimal scientific capital required and to abide by the mores and regulations enforced by the scientific milieu of that time and place. (Wacquant, 2008, p. 268, original emphasis)

While a socially conditioned habitus can have some bearing on one’s idiosyncratic uptake of that capital, the field constrains the range of positions that may realistically be adopted in any given discipline.

In the case of psychology, this much is clear from Stevens’s (2001, p. 51) description of a “double bind” that overtakes Black South African trainees in professional psychology, forcing an impossible choice between the foreign values of the discipline and the familiar ones of their communities of origin. For Callaghan (2005, p. 143), South African student psychologists “dis-identify with activist subject positions because of the explicit and implicit censure of such identities in the discourse of professionalisation that is characteristic of psychological practice.” This assumes, of course, that candidates with strong political views have not already been “selected out” of training programs (Callaghan, 2005, p. 143), since the “authority to speak” demands the foregoing of all other subject positions (p. 145).

Intrinsic to academic life is a struggle between “temporally dominated” disciplines—that is, the “hard” sciences and the “soft” humanities (Bourdieu, 1988, 2001)—a conflict well known to psychologists, almost all of whom will have experienced, at some time, the unremitting “horizontal” tension between basic and applied psychology. In South Africa, whereas in years gone by when the basic science enjoyed the lion’s share of both academic and intellectual capital, since the last decade of apartheid rule, the applied science’s standing has risen significantly amid insistent appeals for socially responsive research. In time, the “relevance” factor has morphed into a strategic tool, by means of which socially privileged rival groupings compete for access to academic and
intellectual capital. This typically involves the tacit claim of representing faithfully the interests of marginalized constituencies, despite the considerable difficulties of doing so (Spivak, 1988). Whatever confessions of bias are made, they are usually of token significance only, approximating to little more than the postmodern penchant for “narcissistic”—rather than rigorous “scientific”—reflexivity (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 281).

What Etzkowitz (e.g., 2001) calls a “second academic revolution”—and D. Cooper (2011, p. 28) dubs a “second academic transformation”—which began in the 1970s and took off in the 1980s, was, theoretically, a search for “relevant” knowledge (Hessels & Van Lente, 2008). In practice, it was realized by universities through the adoption of a third, industry-driven mission—societal development—that complemented the first two missions of teaching and research. Beginning in the United States, an academic revolution, predicated on the capitalization of knowledge, spread throughout the world. In Thatcherite Britain, for example, the universities, long suspected by Conservatives of being incubators of socialism, were particular targets. They, too, were told to become entrepreneurial. Academics were to be useful members of the society, contributing directly to the national goal of wealth creation. The government, which finances the main funding councils of research, has made it clear that research, which aids the nation’s profitability, should be given priority. . . . Entrepreneurial professors are the order of the day. Academics compete to obtain research contracts. Funding is not sought in order to do research. but research is done in order to get funding. (Billig, 1996, p. 8)

At the revolutionary core lay new criteria for the legitimacy of science that had varied historically from neutrality to rationality to innovation (Hessels et al., 2009). Over the centuries, society had served as science’s benefactor for different reasons—it now demanded “relevance,” be it “practical applications of research outcomes . . . the sociocultural value of improved understanding of the world or the provision of a breeding ground for highly educated members of society” (Hessels et al., 2009, p. 388). Known variously as Mode 2 (Gibbons et al., 1994), finalization science (Böhme, van den Daele, Hohlfeld, Krohn, & Schäfer, 1983), strategic research (Irvine & Martin, 1984), academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997), postnormal science (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1994), postacademic science (Ziman, 2000), and the triple helix (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1997), these variegated theorizations of the new knowledge production regime emphasize the contemporary significance of interinstitutional synergism.

The actual import of this development remains disputed. A critical reading—advanced in this article—is that the student-driven movements of the 1960s, produced under conditions of social alienation, were assimilated into a re-invigorated “spirit of capitalism” (Pestre, 2003, p. 252). Reminiscent of Benda’s (2007) treasonous intellectuals and Marcuse’s (1965) repressive tolerance, “engaged scholarship”—known otherwise as “social responsiveness”—has been operationalized in such a manner as to encourage its antithetical commodification as a series of color-coded signposts on the long and winding road to tenure.

In their work on academic capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) assign a central role to globalizing forces in the changing complexion of intellectual labor since the 1970s. A combination of declining public funding of universities and the escalating requirements of postindustrial technoscience society has brought about a proliferation on campuses of both “marketlike behaviors” (tuition fees, endowment funds, university–industry collaborations, and so on) and out-and-out “market behaviors” (patenting activities, spin-off companies, for-profit arrangements with bookstores, and the like). They warn against the dangers of state-promoted academic capitalism, remarking that, while academic entrepreneurs function to some extent within contexts of application, their reasons for doing so are hardly altruistic. In its founding rationale, professionalism valorized service and selflessness and “turned on the practitioner eschewing market rewards in return for a monopoly of practice” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997, p. 4). All this changed when, in the latter half of the 20th century, professors started entering the marketplace (Slaughter & Rhoades, 1990, cited in Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). The university-specific dispensation that had previously inserted faculty into a space somewhere between capital and labor was now more likely to be withdrawn, as the academic practitioner—the archetypal, all-credentialing professional—came to resemble all other laborers. Ziman (2000) further remarks that funding expertise has taken precedence over academic distinction.
State patronage has inexorably led to the politicization and bureaucratization of science, while the latter’s progressive industrialization has left it vulnerable to an instrumentalist corporatism. Although a new mode of knowledge production has been inaugurated, abiding continuities with traditional science have created the impression that nothing much has changed—hence, “the undramatic character of this cultural revolution that has concealed it even from those of us who have lived through it” (Ziman, 2000, p. 69).

For its part, the South African academy, in the wake of both the lifting of the academic boycott of the apartheid years and its cooption into the African Renaissance project, has proven no less vulnerable to these international changes. “Relevance” has become subsequently little more than a buzzword for project funding and mission statements. Apropos of psychology, the discipline remains mired in a neoliberal moment: Faithful to the cause of a now global capitalism, “‘relevance’ today is more closely linked to the discourse of marketing than that of politics” (Painter & van Ommen, 2008, p. 441). This has inevitably led to questions—in South Africa and, indeed, elsewhere—about the commitment of mental health professionals to building inclusive societies, leaving some to wonder whether it is all a case of “rhetoric” (Freeman, 1991, p. 141) and “political correctness” (Pillay & Siyothula, 2008, p. 734) being pulled along on a “bandwagon of slogans” (Adair, 1992, n.p., quoted in Church & Katigbak, 2002, p. 139).

**Conclusion**

The essential tension in debates about “relevance” concerns the relationship between science and wider society. This article has described how social upheaval can inspire intellectuals, in general, and psychologists, in particular, to pay closer attention to the science–society dialectic. It further contends that the latter-day conception of “relevance” has abandoned, to a significant degree—and perhaps unwittingly—its early radicalism and has been absorbed by a new dispensation that commodifies knowledge.

The question of “origins” is a complicated one. This article has not attempted to locate the roots of “relevance” discourse in psychology, but instead has focused on how talk of “relevance” insinuated itself throughout the discipline from the turmoil of the 1960s onward. An interesting argument is that a history of “relevance” in psychology is in some ways unnecessary, coinciding with the history of the discipline itself. Jahoda (1973) noted, some years ago, that the issues psychology is traditionally accused of neglecting (he mentioned race relations, violence, and environmental degradation) are “mainly accompaniments or consequences of rapid social change” (p. 466). Psychological theories are therefore inherently presumed to lack “relevance,” precipitating “some talk of a crisis” (Jahoda, 1973, p. 466). He claims that, because the discipline’s research methods were elaborated on the assumption that the individual—rather than broader social arrangements—was its apposite subject, psychology from the very outset was rendered incapable of theorizing change. Having appropriated its methods from the natural sciences, the discipline became ensnared in the quagmire of ahistoricity—hence its trouble convincing newly independent countries (most of whose challenges were social-developmental) of its “relevance” credentials.

Concerning the call for “relevance” in South African psychology, three cautionary notes emerge. First, a cursory knowledge of the workings of today’s academy suggests that “relevance” has become a red herring of sorts: It has long been recognized that the natural subversiveness of intellectuals has been overtaken by “technical, applied social service functions” (Sampson, 1970, p. 2), the inevitable consequence of living in an increasingly administered society where students function as little more than human inputs for the machineries of graduate schools and industry. Second, the ongoing demand for cultural “relevance” undermines, to some extent, the prospect of a nonracial society and perpetuates the same false consciousness propagated by “positive” apartheid theory. And third, to imagine the very existence of a “relevant” psychology, one must presume that Spivak’s subaltern can speak after all—and if that is possible, whether it makes any difference in the end:

For me, the question “Who should speak?” is less crucial than “Who will listen?” “I will speak for myself as a Third World person” is an important position for political mobilization today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism... (Spivak, 1990, pp. 59–60)
Neutralized by a corporate takeover, covert racism, and a false empathy, the idiom of “relevance” has outlived its usefulness.

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