

‘Be the best version of yourself... that’s what African psychology does for me’

Erica McInnis talks to Ian Florance about African psychology and her career

Dr Erica Mapule McInnis is a Clinical Psychologist. She trained as a Disability Psychotherapist (Frankish Training) and has worked for 22 years in the NHS. She is now Director and Principal Chartered Clinical Psychologist with her own company, Nubia Wellness and Healing, a company she set up to disseminate practice after gaining a Churchill Fellowship to research the area in 2016. She is keen to spread knowledge of African psychology, and I asked her to give me some background to its development and ideas.

‘Black psychology is not a rejection of Eurocentric psychology,’ Erica McInnis tells me. ‘It’s about advancing a science of human functioning for black people around the world, using the best of African thought, culture and rituals to create wellbeing. It centres on wellness, so it emphasises the positive. Grounded in the sense of spirit, it has its own healing paradigms, theoretical frameworks, and intervention protocols. It is a scientific discipline in its own right. I see it as choosing from the best of all cultures, including my own, as appropriate.’

The modern discipline developed in the USA with the establishment of the Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi). Various definitions developed over the years but the most commonly accepted one is that of the ABPsi (which you can read at www.abpsi.org/pdf/AfricanCenteredPsychologydefinition.pdf). Erica emphasises several essential elements of African psychology, including:

- the cultural context in which black people exist (globally underrepresented in all the right places; overrepresented in all the wrong ones);
- particular issues affecting black communities and who they were before enslaved, using progressive ancient black civilisations as a point of reference;
- the impact of melanin;
- formulating the present-day impact of historic experiences such as the Maafa – the African holocaust and transatlantic chattel slave trade – and colonisation;
- a dynamic manifestation of unifying African principles, values, and traditions; and
- communal self-knowledge as the key to emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

‘We ask, “Where does psychology come from?”’, Erica continues. ‘The ancient Greeks called it psychology: our position is that they studied in ancient Egypt and took some knowledge from that civilisation



while ignoring other parts. They often repackaged this knowledge as their own, as mentioned by George G.M. James in his book *Stolen Legacy*. The Ancient Egyptians (whose early dynasties were black) studied illumination of the spirit and how to advance communities spiritually, physically and emotionally. This was researched by Wade Nobles in his book *Seeking the Sakhu*. An understanding of what is called organisational psychology must have existed in Ancient Egypt's pyramid age. Motivational theory and pre-visioning must have existed to coordinate the various professions and to build to such a high standard. Papyrus texts, wall etchings and other articles document the historic process and the influence of wellness approaches – what we now call psychology – over these civilisations.'

Erica points to a conference of the American Psychological Association in Oakland 50 years ago as a key moment. 'The ABPsi was founded when a number of black psychologists walked out of that conference. It was their severe dismay at the way psychology considered black people as intellectually inferior, and often misused psychological testing to enforce unjust conditions which would have major impacts upon families. Furthermore, when interventions were offered, psychologists did not consider concepts highly relevant to black families and used a frame of "normality" which automatically placed black people as inferior rather than just different.'

Erica stresses that African psychology takes a world

view. 'When you think about it, there are more black people in the world than Caucasian. Furthermore, by most accounts civilisation started in Africa, so Africans are not third-world people, but first-world people, as proposed by Marimba Ani in her 1994 book *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior*. Africans were here first. Maafa is an ancestral trauma which needs to be healed. It traumatised some, it created extraordinary resilience in others. It certainly disturbed attachment mechanisms.'

I asked Erica to give me a specific example of an African psychology approach to these sorts of issues. She refers to Emotional Emancipation Circles. 'The Emotional Emancipation Circles were developed by ABPsi leaders in association with the Community Healing Network. They're becoming a global movement of safe spaces where black people work together on self-healing and emotional emancipation. Initially, they started as a response to help the community heal emotionally from human-made disasters such as unjust deaths of black people when interacting with law enforcement services and the uprisings which were often a way of the community expressing its hurt. Now, rather than waiting for problems to occur – and we know they inevitably will – the circles work on developing resilience skills pre-emptively.' What do they consist of? 'People telling stories, dancing, singing, practising African rituals. We practise mindfulness/resilience tools and share coping and wellness strategies, as well as learn more about

how historical and social forces affect our relationships and emotions. It's critical that people feel safe in these circles, and also that they feel completely comfortable with saying what they want to say in front of other members. They are therefore black-only spaces.'

Do these circles replace other forms of psychological treatment? 'We're very careful to stress that they don't. Where necessary, we encourage members to get help outside what is, in effect, therapeutic but not therapy. This is important to me. As a psychologist, I want to offer a wide range of approaches and this is just one of them. For me, the Emotional Emancipation Circles are the first line of defence. The second line of defence is other forms of African psychotherapy such as optimal psychology as developed by Linda James Myers, or Ntu therapy as developed by Fred Phillips, as well as working using an African psychology framework or in an integrative way with African psychology concepts alongside Eurocentric concepts.'

Erica was invited to add African Psychology to the syllabus of the University of Hertfordshire Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme this year as 'it's a tool for any psychologist to use. I feel my ability to teach African psychology has got better with practice. My other interests are pretty wide, including mindfulness, compassionate mind and dialectical behaviour therapy.'

Would non-black psychologists be able to learn and use the paradigm? 'Actually, white psychologists originally interested me in it. We can't just leave it to black psychologists to address these issues – if we do we'll still be here in decades time: there simply aren't enough. The teaching of African psychology might, in time, increase the recruitment of black psychologists with an interest in advancing Africans and other communities – something that's badly needed.'

Which brings us to the issue of how Erica became a psychologist and grew interested in African psychology. 'My mum was a psychiatric nurse who worked extra shifts to send me to a private school, so I was used to the area of psychiatry and mental health issues from a fairly early age. Originally I wanted to study medicine but was helpfully told that as a black woman I'd end up in "a Cinderella service – like psychiatry", so that I might as well aim for that field in the first place. I suppose one of the formative experiences was when I was working at a nursing assistant at a local hospital during holidays from university. I met psychologists working on the ward and, after my 7am till 2pm shift I shadowed them from 2pm till 5pm. I grew to resonate with their approach.'

Erica did a degree in Psychology with Biology at the University of Sunderland. 'I hadn't done psychology at A-level, so I was quite surprised at what I learnt. I struggled in the first year, not least because the university had real resource issues. But things improved. In the second year I did better as the course involved more scientific thinking.' She also got involved with the National Union of Students and was on its national women's committee. 'I'm quite an activist.'

After working as a nursing assistant and assistant psychologist, Erica started a master's in applied psychology at Manchester, then got an assistant psychologist post working in learning disabilities in Birmingham 'while applying for clinical training courses everywhere I could. Initially I got a place at Queen's University Belfast but declined it when a place came up on the Coventry and Warwick course.'

After her clinical course she worked at Ashworth Hospital. 'I'd always been interested in forensics, but I found I was not as ready as I could be for that post. However, the job did give me skills in risk assessment, which I've used in the community.' Erica then worked in Manchester in learning disabilities. In 2008 she went on a 'Towards Strategies for Success' leadership course as part of an NHS initiative to develop more black leaders. 'I was told that I needed further support. I met one of the leaders, Rameri Moukam of Pattigift, on this course and in 2010 attended my first ABPsi conference in USA. It was fantastic. One year had an ABPsi boot camp on the WAIS-IV plus other workshops, and I fell in love with African psychology. In 2016 I received a Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship to travel to Washington DC to learn more about African-centred approaches to wellness and healing. That convinced me that I could pass on what I'd learnt about the area and when I came back helped to launch the Manchester Emotional Emancipation Circles.'

Erica was involved in setting up the UK chapter of the ABPsi but has stepped down from it (though she is still International Relations Representative for the ABPsi National Board). 'At the moment my main role in life is as a carer. My father had several health problems and died last year. Sadly, my mother has terminal lung cancer. So, caring for her is my priority.'

I asked Erica to sum up her thoughts on African psychology. 'As a black person, you need an education that helps you navigate the Eurocentric system. Then you need one that helps you understand and develop yourself to be the best version of yourself... that's what African psychology does for me. I can now use it to help others too and have had a good response running clinics in Manchester working from an African-centred perspective and running workshops nationally and internationally. African psychology just makes sense of some people's experiences and they can't get enough of it.'

More information on the Association of Black Psychologists [ABPsi] can be found at www.abpsi.org

Some key concepts in African psychology

Maat or Ma'at: the ancient Egyptian concepts of truth, justice, harmony, balance, propriety balance, order.

Ubuntu: can be translated as 'humanity', but is often used to indicate that all humanity shares a bond. Ubuntuism came to prominence in South Africa in the 1980s and '90s and has been popularised by Desmond Tutu among others.

Yurugu: the title of a hugely influential book by Marimba Ani. The word *yurugu* stems from a Dogon legend.