

# Psychology in Vanuatu

**W**HEN *The Psychologist* began its series of international articles, I was working in Vanuatu, a Y-shaped chain of 80 inhabited islands between Fiji to the east and Queensland, Australia, to the west. As I read about psychology in other countries going from strength to strength, I thought you might like to hear about a country where the most noteworthy feature of psychology is its almost complete absence.

## About Vanuatu

Vanuatu is located on the Pacific ring of fire, where the Pacific tectonic plate is sliding under the Indo-Australian plate. Along with New Caledonia, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Papua, it is part of Melanesia. The original Austronesian inhabitants migrated here some 3500 years ago from the Solomon Islands, and the population today is about 192,000: 97 per cent Melanesians and 3 per cent Polynesians, Asians and Europeans. Prior to independence in 1980, Vanuatu was known as New Hebrides and was administered by a British/French condominium.

The average life expectancy is 62 for males and 64 for females, and the infant mortality rate is high at 45 for every 1000 live births (Coyne, 2000). The gross national product is an average of US\$1286 per person, with income derived from agriculture, fishing, tourism, financial services and international aid. However, in *kastom* (traditional) areas many people live

wholly or mainly outside the financial system of cash, bank accounts, credit cards, and so on.

The nation has over a hundred distinct languages and is said to have more languages for its population size than any other. The main language used in the capital, Port Vila, and when people from different islands want to speak to each other, is Bislama, a mix of English, French and local words. The language used in schools is either English or French.

Ni-Vanuatu culture differs from Western cultures in many ways ('ni-Vanuatu' is what the people of Vanuatu call themselves). One notable peculiarity is the widespread use of the narcotic drink kava. This is culturally important in many Pacific island nations. The root-based drink is at its most potent in Vanuatu, where one or two 'shells' (a shell is about 200ml) are enough to render the unfamiliar intoxicated. According to Crocombe (2001), kava was used before important meetings when there was the possibility of tension and conflict, to reduce that possibility. Formerly used only by chiefs, it is now drunk widely in the equivalent of public houses known as *nakamals*.

## A world without psychology

Until last year I worked at the Vanuatu campus of the University of the South Pacific (USP), teaching and researching developmental, health and community psychology. The university is owned by 12 Pacific nations, including three of the

smallest nations in the world – Niue, Nauru and Tokelau. There are no psychology associations in either Vanuatu or any other of the 12 USP nations. To my knowledge there is now only one degree-holding psychologist in the country: Andonia Piau-Lynch is from Papua New Guinea and has a part-time counselling practice, and also advises the local courts on the psychological aspects of some cases.

The country has no mental health facilities. People who have mental health problems are dealt with through the legal system if they break the law; otherwise extended families and communities in their villages look after them. To understand how the current support system works requires understanding the wantok system. *Wantok* means literally 'one talk.' Wantoks are people who speak the same language as you – your family and your clan. The wantok system involves both responsibilities and privileges. Within a village, everyone is entitled to land, food and a share in community assets. If ni-Vanuatu travel anywhere, other wantoks are expected to feed and shelter them until they can make longer-term arrangements. In a country without a social security system, the wantok system provides for material care, a sense of identity and support during difficult times, including a mental health crisis for example.

In other areas of life to which psychologists contribute in richer, more developed countries, there is either no input from psychology or it is indirect through

## VISITING PSYCHOLOGISTS SCHEME 2005

The Research Board and  
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invite nominations

**Members of the Society are invited to nominate a psychologist from Eastern Europe and developing countries who would like to make study visits to the UK.**

- Four or five places are available from a total budget of £4000.
- The scheme covers the cost of economy class air travel to and from the UK; standard class rail travel within the UK; a contribution towards subsistence and accommodation expenses; and an allowance for costs such as photocopying.
- There is no ceiling on the grant available as proposals are considered on their own merits. An estimated breakdown of costs must be provided.
- The grant enables the visiting psychologist to undertake academic work or to carry out applied work.
- Proposers are expected to act as hosts for the visitor, or to arrange for a host to take responsibility for the practical arrangements of the visit, ensuring that all necessary facilities are available.
- Nominations must include an account of the visitor's academic / professional background and experience, a detailed proposed itinerary and the goals of the visit.
- An end-of-grant report must be submitted to the Boards for consideration at the end of the visit.

**Nominations should be sent to the Chair of the Research Board c/o Lisa Morrison Coulthard (Scientific Officer) at the Society's Leicester office by no later than 26 September 2005.**

being imported from elsewhere. For example, the education system has changed little since independence in 1980, when education was modelled on either a British or French system. In this, as in other areas of life, there is no perceived need for psychologists. There are thus no ni-Vanuatu taking psychology programmes, either at USP or elsewhere in the region.

In part, this is a result of not knowing what psychology is or how it could contribute to development. Psychologists in most countries usually know that the public may not be aware of the range of jobs that psychologists do and may assume that someone who describes himself or herself as a psychologist is working in some aspect of mental health care. In Vanuatu I once spoke to a young man who had taken some foundation courses at the local university where psychology is offered. On hearing that I was a psychologist, he presented me with his hand and asked me to read it. This is consistent with the widespread view that the origin of most or all human behaviour is ultimately mystical or supernatural. For example, most people have supernatural explanations for mental disorders, using concepts of spirit possession, curses or sorcery by enemies. This could explain why, in former times, some people with mental health problems were killed. In many countries in this region, psychology is regarded as synonymous with witchcraft.

Within most of the region covered by the university, psychology is at a similar stage of development. The exception is Fiji, where there is growth in the area of counselling psychology, particularly since the attempted coup of 2000 and the growing awareness of the high levels of youth suicide in the country and region.

The two main reasons why psychology is studied at all in Vanuatu are that two of the compulsory courses in the popular bachelor of education programme at USP are developmental psychology and educational psychology, and students at USP need to complete programme elective course requirements and some choose psychology courses from personal interest.

The most likely conditions which could lead to a growth in psychology in Vanuatu are:

- future undergraduates deciding that it is possible to have a career in psychology, as the choice of a university programme is almost entirely driven by vocational considerations;
- government ministries, particularly the

Ministry of Education, seeing potential benefits in psychology and sponsoring students to take psychology programmes (currently students cannot get scholarships or grants to study psychology);

- international aid agencies linking funds to the development of psychological and psychiatric services; and
- church groups deciding that those who provide pastoral care need an understanding of people from sources other than Scripture – church attendance levels are high and the churches are influential organisations.

One of the main factors that could fuel the perception of a need for psychology services is the process of urbanisation. As people migrate from rural areas to the two main urban centres of Luganville and Port Vila, they gradually lose contact with their traditional support structures. There is awareness of the problems of urbanisation and their consequences in some parts of ni-Vanuatu society, particularly the police, chiefs' councils and NGOs that are based in the two main towns. However, no one, neither I nor those consulted during the preparation of this article, is aware of any plans or strategies to counter the problem. Large-scale, 'Western-style' approaches involving social workers, psychologists and other outside 'experts' are alien to ni-Vanuatu culture and require more resources than they have. An approach that has helped in other parts of Melanesia is a body, organised by a government ministry, that represents a broad cross-section of ni-Vanuatu society and that includes psychologists. If it included those that work at a 'yam-roots' level, such as church groups, police and teachers, it could be the start of a much-needed, integrated approach.

In the meantime, until the situation changes, the role of psychologist in Vanuatu remains arguably the loneliest job in the world.

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### References

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