



# Psychology in the English-speaking Caribbean

**S**UN-drenched beaches fringed by palm trees and turquoise waters, an abundance of rum, a laid-back atmosphere... as the largest of the English-speaking Caribbean islands, Jamaica shapes the view many Europeans have of the region. Few tourists venture far from the resort areas to discover the realities of Caribbean life for the ordinary people. If they did, they would discover a local population struggling to make a living, and areas beset with social problems including drugs and violence. Some 40 years after independence, these societies are still struggling with the legacy of European colonialism. It is within this context that psychology has recently become established, and there is much scope for the discipline to make an impact.

## Overcoming the legacy of colonialism

At a time when the British have disowned their empire and schoolchildren are barely aware of this aspect of their country's

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history, former colonies are still grappling with the legacy of colonialism. These effects include the virtual annihilation of the indigenous population, the repopulation of the region by migration of European settlers, and the forced migration of African slaves.

Each European colonial power reshaped the social environment in its own likeness and image, much of which remains in place today. Under British colonialism, the culture of the African majority was suppressed in favour of the minority rulers. The BBC provided the official news, with Sunday worship available at the Church of England in Jamaica. Glissant (1997) wrote passionately about the effect on his home country of Martinique of French cultural dominance, pointing out such anomalies as the local press regularly alerting the population to the first day of spring, in a country where the temperature rarely falls below 30° centigrade. At the end of such domination, populations are left struggling for a sense of identity (see Trimble *et al.*, 2003, for more general discussion of the issue of ethnic and racial identity development).

Coupled to this is the legacy of 300 years of slavery. Whilst modern Europeans may have difficulty seeing why current African Caribbeans should still be affected by the

legacy of slavery over 150 years after abolition, it is hard to imagine the effect of constantly knowing that one's ancestors were forcibly removed from their homeland to work on the plantations of the New World. Most Caribbean people insist that the African retentions of language, religions, and cultural expressions of art drama, dance and music present in everyday life are constant reminders of the major and often traumatic syncretism with European culture.

Most Caribbean people strongly believe that such deep trauma on a people can result in long-lasting psychic upheaval, which must certainly be a question worthy of psychological attention. Such trauma might be evident in the psychological make-up of the individual, for example in feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. More obviously, the total dislocation of slavery and its subsequent impact is likely to have disrupted social and family practices. Such disruptions are quite likely to have permeated across several generations, resulting today in dysfunctional families, poor parenting and difficult relations between sexes. Even if the effect were not as dramatic as some suggest, the ongoing legacy of underdevelopment and economic disadvantage is very real and undeniable.

Furthermore, as people of colour,

## WEBLINKS

Jamaican Psychological Society:  
[www.jps.org.jm](http://www.jps.org.jm)

Caribbean norms and test development as well as material on ethno-psychology:  
[www.neuropsychologica.com](http://www.neuropsychologica.com)

African Caribbeans have had to endure generations of racial prejudice. Fanon (1956/2000) spoke eloquently and at length of the severe shock to the system he had experienced as a black Martinician travelling to France. Having been brought up in a French colony all his life and educated to see himself as French, it came as a very big shock to see that he would be treated very differently in the motherland. Caribbean psychiatrists from Jamaica and Trinidad respectively, Hickling and Hutchinson (1999, 2000), have suggested that these racial identity conflicts in African Caribbean people – when brought into confrontation with European racism – may be a significant cause of the high rates of psychosis that have been reported in African Caribbean migrants to the UK and Holland.

In our opinion, all of these issues affecting post-colonial societies demand a dynamic response from the psychological profession. There are several other immediate concerns for psychology in the English-speaking Caribbean. Crime and violence is escalating, demanding an input from forensic psychology. The continuation of the plantation economy and old management practices, inherited from the colonial legacy and now perpetuated by the present ruling elite, have contributed to economic stagnation. These factors, and the need to adopt the latest technology, suggest a role for occupational psychology. Troubles in schools, an outdated selection system based upon the old English grammar school hierarchy, and families split by parents having to seek work abroad, all point to the need for educational and developmental specialists. A growing HIV/AIDS problem and mushrooming mental health needs further point to the need for health and clinical psychology.

### **A growing profile**

Psychology has been developing for some time in the non-English speaking Caribbean. Cuba has well-developed psychological services. Guadeloupe and Martinique, which remain *départements* of mainland France and therefore regarded as 'French' territory, are probably the best provided for in the region, following the centralised French requirements specifying the required number of psychologists per head of population. Even the economically impoverished Haiti has for some time experienced psychoanalysis, and psychology has figured on the curriculum of the state university for many years.

In contrast, psychology has until recently been virtually non-existent in the English-speaking Caribbean. The profile of psychology in the English-speaking territories started to increase with the return to the region of psychologists trained abroad. In Jamaica, Leachim Semaj established occupational psychology, whilst Dr Peter Weller helped establish clinical psychology, along with Audrey Pottinger, Rose Johnson and Orlean Brown. In Trinidad the return of Sharon Gopaul McNicol, following a stint with the American Psychological Association directing professional affairs, will no doubt boost psychology there. Since the 1970s one of the co-authors of this article (Professor Hickling) has played a significant role in promoting the relevance of psychology to Jamaican society. This included a popular radio talk show. Eventually, this increasing profile of psychology led to the establishment of undergraduate provision at the region's university, and recently to various postgraduate courses as well.

Despite psychology's recent appearance in the English-speaking Caribbean and the relatively low number of established practitioners, public exposure is strong and the perception very positive. This is probably in part due to the high profile of the various psychology pioneers who have established the discipline, many of whom are gifted self-publicists. In a small society with a number of highly active media outlets it is easy to gain exposure and prominence. Psychologists regularly appear on various radio programmes, and in Jamaica the main daily newspapers frequently include articles on psychological topics. The university radio station has a magazine programme devoted to psychology, which is rapidly changing the public perception of the discipline. In Trinidad, Ramesh Deosoran has done much to publicise the discipline from a forensic angle.

JACK CASEMENT

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### **Towards a professional framework and dialogue**

The University College of the West Indies was originally founded as an offshoot of the University of London, in 1948. Perhaps because the colonial masters failed to see its relevance, or perhaps because it was still quite undeveloped at the time, psychology was not included in the original discipline mix. Even with the expansion to three campuses in the 1960s and the redesignation as the University of the West Indies (UWI) following independence, psychology did not make an appearance. It was not until the mid-1990s that psychology first appeared as an undergraduate specialisation, with the advent of majors in psychology in 1995 in Jamaica and Trinidad, and in Barbados in 2000.

Psychological associations have recently been formed in Trinidad (Trinidad Association of Professional Psychologists) and Jamaica (Jamaican Psychological Society), and these are taking the first tentative steps towards establishing a professional framework for the islands. The Sections of Psychology and Psychiatry at UWI have combined to produce the first cohort of clinical psychology master's students, who graduated from the Mona campus last year (there was a single previous cohort from an early attempt at mounting such a course in the 1980s) (Hickling & Matthies, 2004). A group of clinical PhD students are well into their studies. An additional master's course in applied psychology commenced last September, designed to meet needs for occupational health and organisational psychology, and a novel course in productivity catalysis is currently being designed as a joint programme between the Departments of Psychiatry, Psychology, Management Studies, Education and Cultural Studies at UWI at Mona. Finally, various research projects have begun the task of developing and validating measures and instruments for use in the Caribbean (e.g. Crossman *et al.*, in press; Ward, 2002).

Despite the enormous success of undergraduate programmes (there are currently over 500 majors in psychology at Mona in Jamaica), there are those who question the need for this discipline within the region. Most people are unclear of the difference between psychology and psychiatry, and few understand that there are many different areas of psychological

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specialisation. Psychology clearly has some way to go in educating Caribbean society about its relevance and need. However, we are encouraged by the collaboration between the Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry at UWI at Mona, and the attempt to minimise the differences between these sister subjects. Given the

needs of society and the huge interest amongst students, we have no doubt that it will go from strength to strength and that in the years ahead a unique Caribbean perspective will emerge. We look forward to the dialogue with colleagues in other parts of the world, and to the day when Caribbean psychology can fully play its part in the international community of psychologists.

It is our hope that psychologists in the UK will take an interest in the various issues we have raised in this article. Such issues may be relevant to psychologists working with the Caribbean diaspora, in educational and clinical psychology settings. It is our belief that psychology has a vital role to play in Caribbean society, and that one day research in this area may have a contribution to make to important debates, such as those around reparations. Whilst British society may not yet be willing to acknowledge its historical role in traumatising generations of Africans subject to a sustained campaign of genocide, psychologists should be open to the possibility of such effects, on which we would encourage further work and research. In this respect, it is unfortunate that many of our postgraduate courses in the UK seem to have mislaid the mission of helping former colonial territories in the Commonwealth acquire much-needed skills. It is currently impossible for an

African Caribbean of Caribbean nationality to come to the UK to study clinical psychology, even if they have the financial resources to pay whatever overseas fees are being set. This is due to trainees being required to have European nationality, and to the closing off of the self-funding option, partly as a consequence of the move to three-year training programmes. Surely this cannot have been a deliberate intention of the move to three-year doctorates? Surely there must be scope for some self-financing students and bursaries? In a similar regard, the BPS is not always perceived as helpful in facilitating overseas students to train in the UK. The vetting process for overseas applicants is bureaucratic, drawn out and unsympathetic to the conditions prevailing in the student's home country. Surely British society owes a debt to the peoples who were colonised for economic advantage for over 350 years?

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