The Psychological, the Sociopolitical, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry: Lessons from Frantz Fanon[*]

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This paper situates the role of psychology in interdisciplinary research of phenomena like colonialism and racism, via the writings of Frantz Fanon. It will describe how Fanon's style of analysis—given its focus on concrete examples, meaning, and context—enabled an interweaving of psychological insights through the disciplinary realms of sociology, geography, economics, and politics.

Fanon was a Caribbean born psychiatrist and political writer, known for works including *The wretched of the earth* (1961/2004) and *Black skin, white masks* (1952/1967). Though trained as a psychiatrist[1], Fanon's influence has spanned various such fields as philosophy, post-colonial and critical theory, and cultural studies. What sets Fanon's analyses apart from many of his contemporaries was his ability to relate psychological insights to domains typically within the purview of other disciplinary frames. For instance, Bhabha (2004) argued that Fanon's great contribution to ethics and politics was his ability to relate topics like colonialism and nationalism to the "psycho-affective realm" (p. xix) of the body, the emotions, dreams, imagination, and so forth.

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[*] Revision of paper presented in 2009 at the 117th Convention of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.

[1] Vergès (1996) reported that Fanon did not receive psychoanalytic training or therapy, but did use psychoanalytic techniques on some patients.

In Fanonian studies, five stages of scholarship have been identified (Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting, & White, 1996). The first four were: initial applications and reactions, biographical studies of Fanon's life, Fanon's political theory, and postmodern criticisms of Fanon. The fifth stage has involved using Fanon's work to advance various human studies disciplines—a task which the current paper will take up with respect to psychology. Gordon and colleagues succinctly stated that: "…even in cases where Fanon's name is prominent in the title, the objectives are ultimately the disciplines themselves…" (p. 7). The objective here will be, first, to explicate Fanon's psychological methodology and, second, to place this approach to psychology within interdisciplinary research more generally.

Fanon's continued influence on diverse disciplines is fueled in part by his groundbreaking and wide-ranging analyses of colonialism Fanon's astute insights into the workings of colonial structures garnered him the label, "the chronicler of colonialism" (McCulloch, 1983, p. 4). Fanon, however, remained intentionally silent on questions of methodology and how he went about these interdisciplinary analyses. Fanon (1952/1967) remarked: "It is good form to introduce a work in psychology with a statement of its methodological point of view. I shall be derelict. I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves." (p. 12).

Though Fanon remained silent on his own methodology, there is an emerging body of research that is giving it increasing attention (See Gordon, Sharpley-Whiting, & White, 1996; Hook, 2005; Maldonado-Torres, 2008).[2] The current paper continues this

[2]Hook (2005) has recently discussed how Fanon's postcolonial writings demonstrate ways in which critical psychology can (re)incorporate psychological and affective modes of analysis of complex phenomena like

line of research. In the next section, one of Fanon's most widely regarded[3] investigations of colonialism will be presented with an analysis of his underlying methodology.

Black Skin, White Masks

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon (1952/1967) sought among other things to understand the "man of color's view of the world" (p. 141), and the historical and experiential bases of these viewpoints. In one particular example, Fanon conducted analyses of the process by which colonized persons come to feel abnormal in order, or to elucidate how "a normal Negro [*sic*] child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world" (p. 143). In the course of his investigation, he was able to delineate relationships between psychological trauma experienced by black-Caribbean children in the French colony of the Antilles to colonist-colonizer encounters (politics), geographical diasporas (geography), storybook media (communicology/communications), and race/ethnicity (anthropology/sociology).

Fanon's (1952/1967) analysis of trauma explicated the contexts and relations integral to the structures of colonialism, exploring the psychological ramifications of internalizing violent, racist imageries from childhood illustrations and storybooks.[4] He discussed:

> In every society, in every collectivity, exists—must exist—a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released.

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racism, in addition to their commonplace discursive or post-structuralist approaches. In a way, critical psychology has tended to overlook lived experience itself and focused instead on disciplinary critique, discourse, or construction, see Hook, 2005, p. 487. Hook also described three modes of mixing psychology with politics in the service of critical psychology: psychologically understanding political structures and relations; politically critiquing psychology and psychological concepts; and using psychological knowledge for applied political purposes such as conceptualizing activist movements. (Hook, 2005, pp. 480-1). He labels this, following Lebeau (1998), Fanon's "psychopolitics".

[3] See Hook and McCulloch

[4] Some of his terminology relating to ethnic groups may be different than today's but I will try to retain the original unless a clarification of their meaning is necessary.

> This is the purpose of games in children's institutions, of psychodramas in group therapy, and, in a more general way, of illustrated magazines for children—each type of society, of course, requiring its own specific kind of catharsis. The Tarzan stories, the sagas of twelve-year-old explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse, and all those "comic books" serve actually as a release of collective aggression. The magazines are put together by [colonial] white men for little [colonial] white men. This is the heart of the problem. In the Antilles—and there is every reason to think that the situation is the same in the other colonies—these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.' (pp 145-146)

The child of color in the colony identifies with the hero in the storybooks, the white aggressor conquering "savages" of color. He does not identify with the latter objects of aggression, who are perceived to be of distant origin.

> When in school he has to read stories of savages told by white men, he always thinks of the Senegalese [i.e., he thinks of black-Africans, not his local community of black-Caribbeans]. As a schoolboy, I had many occasions to spend whole hours talking about the supposed customs of the savage Senegalese. In what was said there was a lack of awareness that was at the very least *paradoxical* [italics mine]. Because the Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as an Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively,

> intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a [colonial] white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe; and when he hears Negroes mentioned he will recognize that the word includes himself as well as the Senegalese. (p. 148)

Here Fanon described the process by which the colonized person, who had originally identified with colonial aggressors in stark opposition to supposed "savages," lives through psychological conflict once venturing to colonial French society, beset by distinct racial stratification. He is now a visibly oppressed minority. In French colonial society, the "Negro is made inferior" (p. 140). There, he comes to understand that, all along, he was considered a savage by aggressors just for being of a certain skin color; he must face the myth. Fanon stated: "…for the Negro there is a myth to be faced. A solidly established myth" (p. 150).

Moreover, in order to move up in that French society, he must reject himself: "The Antillean has therefore to choose between his family and European society; in other words, the individual who *climbs up* into society—white and civilized—tends to reject his family—black and savage—on the plane of imagination, in accord with the childhood *Erlebnisse* that we discussed earlier." (p. 149).

Reflecting on His Method

Fanon's methodology will now be delineated by describing his goals, process, and outcome. The following is a list of what appear to be the main features of his method:

1. Research topic: individual processes and structures of colonialism
2. Participants: persons in the Antilles and France, presumably including his own experience.

a. Delimit the population and the parameters of investigation: “Since I was born in the Antilles, my observations and my conclusions are valid only for the Antilles—at least concerning the black man *at home*” (p. 14).

3. Focus on description of lived experience: He proceeded with his investigations, following Freud, by seeking “origins in specific *Erlebnisse*” [lived experience], which are now “repressed in the unconscious” (p. 144).[5]
4. Psychological subject matter: identification, trauma, imagination, and psychological conflict
5. Meaning[6]: meaning of relations to the world, others, political structures, collective traditions, and so forth.
    a. Fanon remarked, referencing Jaspers, that: “What matters for us is not to collect facts and behavior, but to find their meaning.”[7]
    b. Fanon showed that psychological trauma is experienced on different planes: on the level of “imagination” and colonial encounters/relationships—the meaning structure is the same for both
    c. Fanon demonstrated the shift in psychological meaning of the identification process for individuals of color born and raised under colonialism: from the developmental context of early childhood in the colony (Antilles) to the adult living in the colonial core (France)

[5] Or how “a Negro who has passed his baccalaureate and has gone to the Sorbonne to study to become a teacher of philosophy is already on guard before any conflictual elements have coalesced around him” (p. 145).
[6] See Wertz (1993) for discussion of Freud’s method and the role of meaning.
[7] Jaspers quote: “Comprehension in depth of a single instance will often enable us, phenomenologically, to apply this understanding in general to innumerable cases. Often what one has once grasped is soon met again. What is important in phenomenology is less the study of a large number of instances than the intuitive and deep understanding of a few individual cases” (Psychopathologie Generale, p. 49 cited in Fanon (1952/1967), p. 168)

        i. Fanon linked current experience to past experience via complex relations of lived meaning within a structural unity, i.e., part-to-whole and whole-to-part (e.g., the meaning of object of aggressor changes from unknown persons in Africa to self as overall structure of experience changes).

    d. Fanon understood psychological conflict in the context of intentionality: desire to move up in society verse abandoning one's family/upbringing, one's self, one's culture

6. Investigations of complex phenomena via interdisciplinary analyses
    a. Cultural geography of Antilles, Africa (Senegal), and then France; complex diasporas and forced/unforced migrations
    b. Sociology of children's magazines and storybooks (media/communications)
    c. Sociology of race relations
    d. Political motives of colonial relations
7. Relation of psychological experience to sociocultural processes
    a. A child in the colonies wanting to identify with a hero figure will often, in this process, be at risk for psychological trauma
        i. The hero in the stories wants to conquer those that look Black, but this is not understood by the Black child at the time
    b. That meaning, of being an object of aggression due to one's color, comes to be experienced later in life (when he travels to a place where racism is more apparent along color lines), occasioning a type of psychological

conflict. In other words, the adult's experiences with explicit racism are linked via their structure to the stories of his childhood and imagination, now distant from immediate awareness, or "unconscious." He experiences his early childhood as characterized, not by being a hero, but by being a hated savage—by multiple cultural traumas. These traumas are now experienced as strong psychological conflict of being abnormal. Fanon calls this a kind of "neurotic" development, since his and Freud's version both entail a type of amnesia, or forgetting, of traumatic experiences which come to the fore in present experience passively.

Commentary on Interdisciplinary Analysis

Fanon's form of psychological analysis, given its non-psychologistic focus on meaning, enables Fanon to seamlessly extend his psychology to more multiperspectival and interdisciplinary knowledge using other disciplinary realms like sociology, political science, economics, and history. The potential for interdisciplinary analysis is generally possible because existence can be disclosed in various ways. The task of the psychological researcher is to thematize psychological meanings by taking up the appropriate attitude while not falling into "psychologism," or reducing reality to the psychological.[8] The psychologist is then free to describe the interrelations to other

[8] Husserl (1952/1989) on the personalistic attitude: "But it is quite otherwise as regards the *personalistic attitude*, the attitude we are always in when we live with one another in greeting, or are related to one another in love and aversion, in disposition and action, in discourse and discussion (Husserl Ideas II, p. 192)…. The persons who belong to the social association are given to each other as "*companions*," not as *opposed objects but as counter-subjects* who live "with" one another, who converse and are related to one another, actually or potentially, in acts of love and counter-love, of hate and counter-hate, of confidence and reciprocated confidence, etc." (p. 204)

disciplinary realms, which are only separated at a conceptual level.[9] They are in essence part of one and the same phenomenon.

[9] This also assumes the various phenomenological reductions; for example, understanding what racism means, in order to critically evaluate the practice, involves suspending prejudgments, prejudices about the practices, and investigate their meanings in a fresh way, gaining knowledge of "the things themselves" in the lifeworld.

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