

Correspondence

Differentiation of emotions

DEAR SIRS

We were initially pleased to read in Professor Leff's letter (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, March 1990, 14, 171) that his views on differentiation of emotions had changed (?evolved), until reading further we discovered that his fundamental thesis remains the same.

In his original paper (Leff, 1973) and in his book, *Psychiatry Around the Globe* (Leff, 1981), he articulated his views very eloquently. He proposed a hypothesis which, simply put, stated that there was an evolutionary process of differentiation of emotions and this was reflected in the vocabulary of emotions present in different languages. He adduced evidence from a number of sources, but principally from his own work. His main conclusions were: that such an evolutionary process existed; that people from developing countries were lower on the evolutionary ladder compared with those from developed countries; that Africans and in particular Yoruba people from Western Nigeria were good examples of the lower evolutionary state; that Americans of African descent who had access to the English language (a language with a well differentiated range of words for emotions) were nevertheless unable to differentiate their emotions.

In Leff's schema, the evolutionary ladder proceeded upwards from (a) languages that reflect societies whose people do not differentiate between somatic and psychological experience of emotion; (b) languages that serve societies whose people do not differentiate between emotional experiences; (c) languages that express rich feelings of distinct emotional experience (like English) (Beeman, 1985).

There are a number of objections to Leff's propositions. The study upon which his thesis is built was faulty on several grounds. Leff (1973) used data gathered for the International Pilot Study on Schizophrenia to test his hypothesis. It is well established teaching not to utilise data collected for particular purposes to test any other post-hoc hypothesis. Even if that were not the case, the association or otherwise of ratings on anxiety, depression and irritability on a clinical sample composed mainly of people with schizophrenia is hardly adequate for generalisations to whole peoples. In his analysis of the data Leff chose to group together patients from all the developing countries, a strategy of dubious validity.

The other pillar upon which Leff's hypothesis rested was the report from the translators of the PSE into Yoruba. He claims that the translators had

particular difficulty in translating 'anxiety' and 'depression' into Yoruba. This is, in our view, a curious report. An examination of *The Dictionary of the Yoruba Language* which was first published in 1843 (OUP, 1950) gives several words for each of the two English words respectively. Leff may wish also to consult the *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* (Abraham, 1946). This curious anomaly is not a reflection on Leff; it demonstrates perhaps the quality of the PSE translation into Yoruba.

There are also objections to Leff's hypothesis on grounds of everyday experience. F.O. who speaks both English and Yoruba never had difficulty expressing his feelings to his grandmother who had no English but was literate in Yoruba. There was no confusion of anger and fear, nor of anxiety and depression for that matter. Indeed, there were and are, in Yoruba, different words for qualitatively distinct experiences of sadness, i.e. grief, pining, humiliation, and dejection.

There are already other more scholarly criticisms of Leff's hypothesis (Lutz, 1985; Beeman, 1985). The truth is, Leff's hypothesis and his attempts to provide research evidence to support it are fundamentally flawed; minor changes on the periphery of his main thesis will not alter its inherent problems.

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