



Conviviality in Nigerian higher education institutions: decolonizing the contents for cutting-edge research

La convivialité dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur nigériens : décoloniser les programmes pour une recherche de pointe

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ABSTRACT

Given the state of polity and lack of recognition, we argue that there is a myriad of problems in Nigerian higher education institutions (NHEIs). These problems have impeded the progress of academia across all the thirty-six states of the country. In addressing research, teaching, community service, and the impact of NHEIs, we seek the tool of conviviality. By conviviality, we mean the state of incompleteness that challenges every individual and group to be open-minded in their relationships, claims, being, belonging, and articulations of identities. The paper employs a critical lens to understand the indefatigable tool of conviviality among researchers, academics, and analysts for promoting cutting-edge research. This is done specifically to address, propose, and re-energise the missing link that exists in modern Nigerian higher education institutions.

Keywords: Conviviality, Collaboration, Higher Education, Nigerian Universities, Decolonization.

Article originality and practical implications: This article offers a fresh perspective on enhancing Nigerian higher education through conviviality, advocating for collaborative, decolonized approaches to research and teaching that foster inclusivity and innovation.

RÉSUMÉ

Étant donné l'état de la politique et le manque de reconnaissance, nous soutenons qu'il existe une multitude de problèmes dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur nigériens (EESN). Ces problèmes ont entravé le progrès de l'académie dans les trente-six États du pays. Pour aborder la recherche, l'enseignement, le service communautaire et l'impact des EESN, nous cherchons l'outil de la convivialité. Par convivialité, nous entendons un état d'incomplétude qui incite chaque individu et chaque groupe à être ouvert d'esprit dans leurs relations, revendications, existence, appartenance et articulations identitaires. Cet article adopte une perspective critique pour comprendre l'outil indéfectible de la convivialité parmi les chercheurs, les universitaires et les analystes pour promouvoir une recherche de pointe. Cela vise spécifiquement à aborder, proposer et réenergiser le lien manquant qui existe dans les établissements modernes d'enseignement supérieur nigérien.

Mots clés : Convivialité, Collaboration, Enseignement supérieur, Universités nigérianes, Décolonisation.

Originalité de l'article et implications pratiques : Cet article offre une perspective novatrice sur l'amélioration de l'enseignement supérieur nigérien grâce à la convivialité, plaidant pour des approches collaboratives et décolonisées de la recherche et de l'enseignement qui favorisent l'inclusivité et l'innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions today, specifically universities, are being recognized as chief agents of knowledge and innovation stimulated with a drive towards building and repositioning a moving train of growth and development in society. Considering the Nigerian milieu in contemporary times, the prominent position of universities plays a vital role in the development of the country (Bako 2005). This could be demonstrated and seen in the recent decades' rapid increase of Nigerian universities. Universities established in Nigeria since the euphoria of independence have risen from one to two hundred and twenty-one (221), with fifty (50) federal universities, sixty (60) state universities, and one hundred and eleven (111) private universities (NUC 2023).

The thrust of this paper goes beyond the creation of new universities in a milieu where existing ones are left unattended. Considering the basis why universities are being regarded as main agents of development today, it would be imperative to examine its primary role, research, which stresses a rigorous search and inquiry for an increasing sum of knowledge, focusing on the search and application of knowledge for the development of new and improved products, services and industrial processes of capital development. Research and development have become the most enduring and effective means of boosting sustainable economic development, which society solely expects from both old and emerging tertiary institutions. Few reports have brought to the fore the contribution of higher education to the expansion of world knowledge and innovation (Bako 2005; Otonko 2012).

The criteria for ranking world universities in the present age is not largely dependent on the volume of teaching, student enrolment, number of professors or associates, and community services as it were, but rather on the cutting-edge research output or findings published in first-class journals and medal winning books, which serves as contributions to knowledge. However the position can also be problematic. By the position, I meant the rubrics and actors involved in the ranking of universities and the ideology guiding the assessment of academics. It is not however within the scope of this paper to address these nuances.

This paper argues for intensified attempts at making Nigerian universities inclusive institutions by embracing African traditions of knowing and knowledge production that would require looking beyond the existing Westernised practice. It calls for a paradigm shift in the structure and positioning of university education, by embracing convivial scholarship in the accession of educational pursuit. By conviviality, we mean a state of incompleteness that challenges every individual in groups to be open-minded and open-ended in their relationships, claims, and articulations of identities.

This article explores the idea of convivial scholarship, which emphasises cooperation and mutual gain rather than a zero-sum competition with winners and losers. The aim is to promote a mindset of incompleteness and humility while acknowledging the realities of debt and debt's pervasiveness in Nigerian culture. Themes such as linkages, dependencies, compositeness, and incompleteness among academics, researchers, analysts, and other stakeholders are crucial in convivial scholarship rather than being seen as drawbacks.

By accepting these principles, the convivial scholarship aims to build a more diverse and equitable academic community that is better suited to handle the intricate problems that the Nigerian education system is now confronting. In this paper, we clarified the concepts of convivial scholarship against any unforeseen bewitchment. We also briefly highlighted the current trends of research in Nigerian universities. The paper adopted a knowledge system as a guiding framework vis-à-vis the necessity of convivial scholarship in Nigerian universities.

Why Preoccupation with Convivial Scholarship?

The term, conviviality has become one of the groovy things in contemporary decades. With the term cosmopolitanism and a host of other terms, it has become ubiquitous that various scholars have conceptualized the term, 'convivial' in varying degrees as it concerns their domains. The bone of contention is how scholars and researchers can see beyond their limited fields by accepting the challenges of intercultural or interdisciplinary relations in an increasingly globalised world for productive possibilities.

Conviviality originally means "the art and practice of living together" (Baruwa, 2020). It is best synonymous with the Spanish term 'convivencia' (Wise and Noble 2016), and thus, encompasses living together in solidarity, in sharing resources, and in the joint struggle for human dignity, creativity, and sustainable community life. This is basically a communal life where all live together to share various ideas for the benefit of the majority and minority. Illich (1974) described this as the individual freedom realized in personal interdependence which focuses on the cooperative aspects of the interactions among humans.

Conviviality preaches incompleteness among various groups, individuals, and societies. For Nyamnjoh (2015), "if incompleteness remains the normal order of things, natural or otherwise in society, conviviality invites all to celebrate and preserve incompleteness and mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness." Conviviality does not only embolden humans to accept incompleteness, it drives humans to be open-minded and open-ended in their claims and articulations of identities, being, and belonging. It is much interested in the encounter and exploration of the world, especially with one another for the purpose of productive possibilities.

Nyamnjoh (2015) signaled a warning that conviviality in this regard should never be seen as a ploy to becoming complete, but rather a push that encourages humans to be efficacious in their relationships and sociality. This is synonymous with the emphasis of Martin Buber in his 'I and Thou' (I and Thou), where he emphatically established that all real living is meeting (Buber 1958). For conviviality to thrive among individuals, accommodation and conversation must be held paramount. In other words, a specialist becomes a learner and constructive critic solely in a learning society. Also, the dialogue continues to take precedence over conversion, and ritual influences are more compatible with the logic of conviviality than coercive aggression to dominate others' minds, bodies, and souls as well as their resources carelessly in a futile search for perfection (Nyamnjoh 2015).

It is fostered by the dynamics of mutual need and prospects of mutual gain. For instance, if one engages in a voyage, it would be agreed it takes a web of connections to get to one's destination. Better revised, if the students decide not to come to class, or the academics decide not to teach, what makes the university? Hence, conviviality is dependent upon a web of philosophical, social, physical, psychological, and cultural relations. Although frictions, challenges, and arguments may occur, conviviality believes in resolution anchored on mutual interests and mutual trust for meaningful relationships.

Conviviality scholarship promotes a competitive and complementary process of social cultivation through practice, performance, and experience in research, teachings, methodologies, and lifestyles rather than imposing what it means to be human or tolerating a single version of the good life in a world filled with infinite possibilities. Having briefly discussed what conviviality means to Nyamnjoh (2015, 2019), and what it means as convivial scholarship in this paper, it is expedient to examine the research trends in Nigerian higher education institutions over the years.

Research in Nigerian Universities

For clarity, by Nigerian higher education institutions, we refer to the emergence of both publicly (federal and state) and privately owned universities in Nigeria. The sole aim of establishing the first university in Nigeria, the University of Ibadan, was not basically for research – though implicit in the demands of Nigerians – but mainly for societal needs and agitations for representation (Okoli and Ewor 2016). It is fascinating to see the trends and developments in Nigerian higher education institutions over the years (see Okoli and Ewor 2016; Otonko 2012 for the chronology of Nigerian universities).

The period, 1960 - 1980 was not only the golden age of university education in Nigeria but also its remarkable moment in research. It was unanimously agreed by the World Bank, the National Universities Commission, the Nigerian Academic Staff Union, and industries that employ graduates, that in terms of quality and quantity of research output, Nigerian universities were one of the best in sub-Saharan Africa from the 1960s to the late 80s (Bako 2005).

The representation of Nigerian universities from the 1960s till now reveals the formidable commitment of Nigerian intellectuals to contributing to knowledge. The recent global rankings by Times Higher Education (2023) however featured only three Nigerian universities in the 1-1000th rank. Many studies have linked this to limited access to funds and grants from the government, and other associated factors (Bako 2005; Hountondji 2009). In this paper, we argue the existence of a missing link that addresses intensive collaboration addressing peculiar and Nigerian problems.

The focus of research being carried out in Nigerian universities must be centered on issues, demands, and problems that are of value to the Nigerian economy, society, and polity. A cursory look at what the undergraduate students submit as a thesis at their final phase in the university delimits the intellectual value of Nigerian varsities and adds no value to the problems in society (Becker 2015). Something tenable at this juncture is writing on concepts or examining issues that are not peculiar to the Nigerian polity or implementable but rather be abandoned. Then the question of why one has to write a thesis as an undergraduate or graduate comes in. To a great degree, a Ph.D. dissertation is an exception.

Another observation is the limited collaboration among university researchers, communities, and academics. It is relatively uncommon among the "gown" to see a specialist in sciences collaborating with a specialist in humanities, or among the localised specialists in the "town." Does collaboration really exist in the Nigerian milieu? Or, is there such an enabling milieu for one to thrive or discover vanguard? Collaboration among disciplines, communities, and institutes remains limited at heights and sundry. Hence, it calls a fortiori Nigerian graduates to attempt disseminating findings or translating findings into

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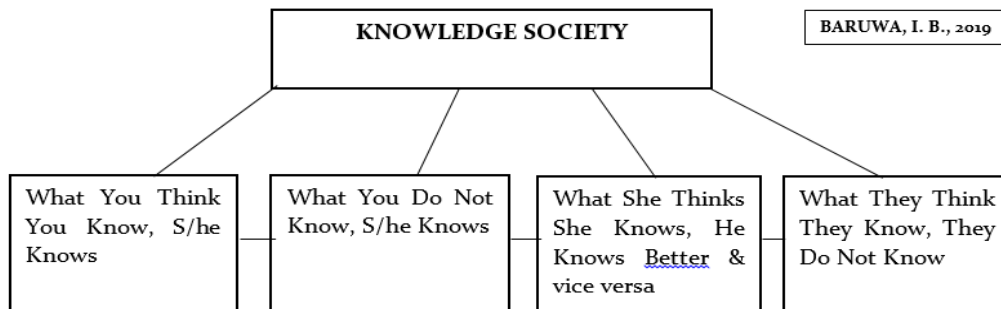
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Knowledge-Society

The ultimate aim of Figure 1 (knowledge society) is not to indulge in the epistemological arguments considered by Baruwa (2019) in his study, but rather examine knowledge (episteme) in itself vis-à-vis convivial scholarship. For Buber (1958), learning has been considered to be one of the becoming characters of the act of knowing, hence why he compartmentalised learning into two parts namely; knowledge of self and that of reality. He asserted that, for knowledge to take place, an individual must explore and experience both self and reality, which is categorized as 'pure dialogue' (Baruwa, 2019). Baruwa (2022) in his parlance similarly argued that knowledge is not static, and therefore calls for validation.

Figure 1. Knowledge Society



Drawing on the contributions of philosophers, it could be argued that knowledge comes from a place of 'doubt', a place of skepticism (Descartes 1641). Convivial scholarship in this realm provides the enabling milieu for one and all to thrive, basically for the purpose of reaching out to a pure dialogue. For Baruwa (2022), the above framework is a pictorial summary of a knowledge society. He asserted that knowledge comes in different phases; what one knows, others may know also; what one does not know, others may know. He identified the third grid as a preference for language and lastly argued that the essence of knowledge in his choice of words in grid four comes from the realm of knowledge being in its continuum (Baruwa, 2022).

He contended that an ideal individual must be willing and overly interested in seeking knowledge (inquisitiveness); must be capable of being receptive and critical (receptiveness); must learn to be accommodating in matters of other's attitudes, cultures, opinions, behaviours, environments, experiences, and qualities (openness); and lastly, must be able to invent and/or collaborate with others for newness (novelty) – (Baruwa, 2019; Baruwa and Shutaleva 2022; Baruwa, 2022). The truism of convivial scholarship lies in the above. It is pertinent to note that constructive criticism and doubt are viable masterpieces for achieving the end result of what one knows or what another knows on the basis of discovery.

Conviviality for Cutting-Edge Research

Knowledge could be categorised into two main groups, explicit knowledge, which encompasses concepts, facts, and theories, and tacit knowledge, which involves those things that allow one to actually do things. While this section introduces the readers to the two, the latter forms the body of this article, which focuses on how the former – explicit knowledge – could be put into use considering the Nigerian milieu.

Nelson and Orey (1991) noted that learning includes involvement in the real practices of the culture, and goes beyond mere thought and action, or a specific physical or social environment, or just absorbing a corpus of factual knowledge. The skill and aptitude to ask the proper questions, which necessitates a careful and critical situation of one's study subject within current knowledge, are fundamental to research. This highlights the need to draw from and contribute to that knowledge in terms of theory, research methods, problems, and discourse. It also calls for an insider's understanding of the local context and the involvement of local actors in the creation of knowledge about their realities and problems to the greatest extent possible. For instance, a student who reads and produce the content at their disposal could be seen as a regular student, unlike a student who internalises the content taught in class, sees their dimensions to it, and thereby relate it to their immediate and global societies.

Cutting-edge research in this context could be described as the advanced stage of research with emphasis on interconnectedness, solely not for personal gains, but rather identifying what ought to be and what it is, for the benefit of all. The paper opines that the higher education institutions in Nigeria cannot only rely on its theoretical underpinnings without emphasis on praxis – one devoid of rhetorical flourish.

The attributes of any competent researcher will involve listening to, drawing on, interacting with, and informing the work of peers in ways that edify the scientific community and knowledge society at large. All of the nuances are, however, easier to observe than to put into practice because, like all other domains of existence, knowledge creation is characterised by power dynamics that are frequently more vertical and oppressive than horizontal and egalitarian. Some studies have described this characterization as the overarching effect of the aggressive expansion of capitalism (popularly known as neoliberalism) on the Nigerian education system (Chukwu 2021; Ochwa-Echel 2013).

Knowledge production for cutting-edge research should be one that takes preeminence in a world of interconnecting global and local hierarchies informed, considering factors such as race, place, culture, class, gender, and age, without a schism or dichotomy of any. The Nigerian higher education institutions tend to reward knowledge reproduction more than it rewards knowledge production through creative and innovative thinking, which if rightly imbibed in the curriculum and educational praxis could lead to cutting-edge research, even as critical mindedness is promulgated in scholarly rhetoric, organizational missions, and vision statements.

We have also realised that there is a strong emphasis on writing than on asking critical or provoking questions that could challenge humans to be dynamic in their approach, especially in a typical teaching-learning process. It is understandable why Nyamnjoh (2019) asserted that the tendency appears to be driven by a highly commercialised output-oriented publication business, where quantity is confused with quality, and knowledge creation is greatly commodified. This also corroborates the claims of Chukwu (2021) and Ochwa-Echel (2013) on the commodification of higher education in many African countries.

A case to be cited here is that of Obafemi Awolowo graduate of the Department of Computer Science, who built an android watch that tells time in the Yoruba language (TechMirror, 2020). For her, the ideas came as a result of extensive research, through consultations with friends. This watch remains the first ever indigenous watch face application on the Google play store, but the question is: do Nigerian higher education institutions have a flexible and dynamic curriculum that accommodates cutting-edge moments for researchers to thrive globally?

Nigerian universities must rightly keep abreast with the paramount mission of promoting multi- and transdisciplinary research informed by relevant experiences of Africans. This largely requires intentionality in challenging and dissecting accepted ideas, techniques, and research utilising fundamental presuppositions that define such theories and procedures. If consistent, such deconstruction of current concepts, rules of engagement, procedures, and processes of a convivial scholarship will protect Nigerian universities from the dangers of intellectual bandwagonism that arise when Nigerians uncritically participate in research and debates on topics conceptualised by others outside of their cultural, political, historical, social, and geographical contexts.

Efficiency, applicability, theorisation, conviviality, and involvement in academia and beyond are prioritised in cutting-edge research in this context. It stresses the foregrounding of linkages, processes, and continuities against piecemeal-nature research with a lack of integration and synthesis. In order to avoid study findings that would suggest that African communities dwell in binaries, this article proposes the deconstruction of current ideas and practices in university curricula

and advocates the inclusion of relevant subject matters in its research.

This paper further argues for conviviality-scholarship in the value of collaboration, and humility in knowledge production, and highlights the magnitude of the intellectuals. Every Nigerian university should strive to support cutting-edge research and mentor emerging scholars so they can establish a research culture and become outstanding scholars whose work is informed by and firmly anchored in a supportive and inclusive epistemological order (Baruwa, 2022). This aspiration should be reflected in the contouring of all networks, including academics, researchers, and analysts. Modalities in this sense should encourage senior (demonstrated and track record in qualitative and quantitative methods) and junior researchers to work together in a spirit of mutual learning and co-construction.

Towards a Paradigm Shift for Nigerian Universities

It is imperative to consider some lessons from Socrates' public role in philosophy and thereby propose a holistic radical paradigm shift for Nigerian Universities as a viable alternative for launching the country at the forefront of 21st-century global development.

Philosophy as a practice begins with a grumpy old man named Socrates, being put to death in his time for pestering his fellow citizens about the nature of justice, courage, and other such virtues. His unflagging attempt to engage Athenians in dialogue exemplifies both the nature of human inquiry and the public role philosophy plays today (Wendland 2019). His interest was basically in the pursuit to lead everyone, peers and strangers into a deeper understanding of the world around them, by asking provoking questions to encourage reflection, draw out the unwarranted assumptions of an accepted view, and possibly posit something new to those who think they really know and those who do not know, that he was even regarded as the wisest man in his time (Baruwa and Baruwa 2022).

Human beings cannot see everything and death speaks to a certain limit on the apprehension of reality, thus, human knowledge of the world becomes limited to a particular perspective on things, which in turn brings about the reality of compartmentalisation, which exists in various disciplines today. A physicist may subtly note, using a rose as an example that it is made up of a particular collection of particles and the forces that interact with them, whereas a chemist can describe its fundamental constituents. The habitat that a rose needs to thrive may be described by a biologist, and its market worth can be determined by an economist. Its beauty may be depicted by an artist, and a lover should recognise its romantic value. Each of these perspectives teaches something about a rose, but none of those explains all there is to know. So, to expand human appreciation of the world, there is a need to accept the incomplete nature of knowledge, question perspective, and adopt alternative points of view.

This paper calls for a transdisciplinarity approach, which can be expressed either cognitively, by examining, for example, collaboration in publications, the links academic units make with other disciplines, other knowledge production sectors, or a combination of both approaches (Onwuebele 2021). It is believed that when these are combined and utilised on the basis of convivial scholarship, there will be a greater concern for cutting-edge research, tailored toward solving practical problems in present-day Nigerian society.

Nigerian universities are not as convivial in practice. Disciplines frequently promote introversion and in consequence, neglect the consilience and unity of knowledge in the borderland (Baruwa and Baruwa 2022). Inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary dispositions are more often asserted than practiced in recent years, as academics remain quill-rooted in their own fields like porcupines and leopards.

The *homo academicus* is just as much a creature of habit as the *homo ignoramus*, despite their attempts to distinguish themselves via science and reason. The lack of academic conviviality in universities implies that the creation, placement, and use of knowledge are processes that are far from being impartial, objective, and disinterested. Conviviality in knowledge creation means integrating sidestepped popular epistemologies shaped by popular worlds and notions of reality as well as seeking discussions and cooperation across disciplines in the traditional sense (Kockelmans 1979; Landiyanto 2018; Nyjamyoh 2015).

Granted the intricacies of popular conceptions of reality and in view of the frontier reality of many an ordinary African, nothing short of convivial scholarship would do justice to the legitimate quest for activation of African potentialities. Senayon (2010) claimed that it is hard to criticize globalization in a totalistic manner by blaming it solely on the expansion of Western imperialism, instead emphasizing the ways in which the abstractions of space and time may be used as tools for understanding the present. He argued for the relevance of localisation amidst globalisation, and further stressed in one of his guest lectures in the Faculty of Education, University of Ibadan, that there cannot be globalisation without localisation.

In his essay *Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies*, Hountondji (2009) also

argued for an autonomous, self-reliant process of knowledge production and capitalization that allows people to independently find the answers to their own questions in order to satisfy the social and economic needs of African societies. It is that scholarship that sees the local in the global and the global in the local by bringing them into informed conversations, conscious of the hierarchies and power relations at play, at both the micro and macro levels of being and becoming (Nyamnjoh 2015; Baruwa and Baruwa 2022). Hence, Nigerian universities must also critically engage in invigorating the missing link existing in the indigenous epistemologies of the curriculum.

Drawing from the position of UNESCO, universities should create mutually beneficial partnerships with communities to facilitate sharing and transmission of appropriate knowledge (UNESCO 2009). There is a dire need for a policy re-orientation that will integrate the principles of convivial scholarship, decolonisation of African education, all-encompassing as a framework for Nigerian universities to the development of producing cutting-edge research at various levels, and in various fields of interest, towards community engagement, development of the country and immediate communities. This calls for localised conversations of a truly global nature on competing and complementary processes of social cultivation through practice, performance, and experience without pre-empting or foreclosing particular units of analysis in a world in which the messiness of encounters, and relationships frowns on binaries, dichotomies and dualisms (Nyamnjoh 2015).

FINAL REMARKS

Buber, in his philosophical parlance, once argued that the origin of all conflicts is that people do not say what they mean, and do not do what they say (Buber 1958). Possibly, if the untapped roles of the alumni, including those in the Diaspora, can be tapped, without solely depending on assistance from the government, and if great synergy from Nigerian universities could be put into use, not only as a citadel of learning but disposers and inventors, then, it is believed that the sparse enrolment of foreigners in Nigerian universities could become a bygone. In the same manner, Nigerian universities could emerge competing with top-ranked universities, in providing cutting-edge research through the identified indefatigable tool of convivial scholarship in the contemporary milieu.

We began with the concept of conviviality as espoused by Nyamnjoh and briefly examined its origin. We dug further to describe the trends of research in Nigerian higher education institutions over the decades and introduced the readers to what we conceive as the problem, that is, the absence of collaboration among academics from different faculties and practitioners in the community. We also argue that the essence of the university is to bridge the teaching, research, and community services for the fullness of humanity and deconstruct the existing Westernised theories in the curriculum in order to accommodate the peculiarities of Nigerians, culture, and history.

We also advocated for epistemic and ontological humility in our actions and thoughts hence the advocacy of convivial scholarship. It is believed that the deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts, theories, methods, and thoughts will pave way for Nigerian faculties, schools, institutes, university management, departments, and academics to address the research gaps – population gap, intervention gap, comparison gap, outcome(s) gap, setting gap, contradictory evidence gap, knowledge void gap, action-knowledge gap, conflict gap, methodological gap, evaluation void gap, theory application void gap, empirical gap and philosophical gap identified in many studies (Miles 2017; Müller-Bloch and Kranz 2015; Robinson, Saldanha, and McKoy 2011), thereby minimising duplication that is wasteful of financial resources, researcher's time and efforts of scholarly and policy communities.

This article also acknowledges the need to support human creativity and intelligence (i.e., human capital) in educational systems by pursuing conviviality and open educational access, introducing sentient, genuine, and supernatural alike, not as a ploy of becoming perfect - a grandiose fantasy - but rather to make people more effective in interpersonal interactions and sociality.

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