Science in Context (2023), **36**, 416–436
doi:10.1017/S0269889725100732

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social intervention in Curaçao: Using behavioral science technologies for social and economic development, 1969–1971

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Argument
This article examines how the American psychologist David McClelland advocated a quasi-colonial interventionist view to social science, shaped by his understanding of scientific progress, economic development, and social change. In the 1960s, he saw real-world experiments as a means both to test his theories and to generate knowledge efficiently and quickly—all with the ultimate aim of improving the human condition. While his primary focus was knowledge production rather than social transformation, his dual roles as professor and consultant carried an interventionist dimension, grounded in the belief that psychological measuring instruments could serve as tools for psychological training. By reconstructing this stance and the interstitial space McClelland created between academia and consultancy, I aim to show that his drive to intervene—exemplified by his company's work in Curaçao—stemmed less from a pre-scientific conviction than from a distinctive mode of scientific practice.

Keywords: neoliberal intervention; David McClelland; American motivation psychology; entrepreneurship training; Curaçao uprising; interventionist social science; neo-colonialism

Reflecting on several years of studying the psychosocial conditions for economic development and various attempts to spur it, the Harvard psychologist David McClelland concluded that studying and initiating social change had to go hand in hand. "These distinctions between basic and applied science, between observing and introducing social change really make no sense and are seriously slowing the accumulation of knowledge about society," he wrote in a 1970 article, candidly titled "On Introducing Social Change to Study It." For only if one tested a social theory in real life, he argued, rather than in a laboratory or by analyzing precedents in history, could one be sure of its validity. McClelland thought this was inevitable and nothing to be shy about: "We cannot escape involvement in one way or the other," he declared, adding that this stance also required the creation of "a new type of social research institution," given that university professors tended to be busy and students too inexperienced to carry out the "type of planned social change experiments" he had in mind (McClelland 1970b, 53). McClelland acted upon this conclusion by creating a consulting firm. The firm provided motivational training—which also served as a vehicle for research—and promoted social reforms as a form of business. Founded in the early 1960s, this firm was, by the end of the decade, involved in activities around the world.

McClelland's interventions foreshadow what, by the century's end, came to be widely known as "scientific" or "social" entrepreneurship—the growing trend of scientists commercializing their expertise to address social problems (Rosenbloom 1969; McClelland 1965; Offner 2019, 182,

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Shapin 2008, 210). His goal, however, was not to promote this as a means for profit-making in the face of dwindling government money for scientific research. Rather, his suggestion sought to encourage more efficient knowledge production, a streamlined way of doing science that promised to save time, be more rigorous, and lead to better results.

I use the case of McClelland and his consulting firm McBer & Company to explain how "interventionist knowledge" emerged in the field of American motivation psychology, how it was applied on the Caribbean island of Curaçao, and what the problems that arose in the process reveal about the type of intervention this ultimately constituted. I argue that McBer's mission on Curaçao, which started in 1969 and ended in failure only three years later, was an attempt to profit from a postcolonial struggle by promising economic growth and social transformation, while simultaneously using the island as a testing ground to validate the very theory behind these promises. As we will see, central to this endeavor was the belief that psychological measuring instruments could be repurposed as training tools.

The historiography on social engineering has portrayed behavioral scientists that have been involved in field and laboratory experiments since World War II either as commissioned experts working on behalf of the military and the CIA or as somewhat rogue academics whose work was of more cultural than scientific significance in Cold War America (Capshew 1999; Lemov 2006; Lattin 2010; Nicholson 2011). This is especially true of psychologists and psychiatrists, such as Stanley Milgram, Timothy Leary, Louis J. West, Donald E. Cameron among others. Psychologists acting independently of superior authority as their own initiators of social change have received much less attention. Though historians have touched on how psychological theories—including McClelland's—influenced development discourses (Herman 1995a, 66–69; Gilman 2003, 87–100) and examined links between the human potential movement and business consulting in the 1960s and 1970s (Weidman 2016; Emre 2018; Lussier 2019), the question of how psychological theories were actually translated into interventionist programs, and how implementation on the ground took shape, especially with respect to its failures and unexpected results, has remained largely under-explored.

While historical scholarship on the relationship between scientific knowledge and "the social" has focused on the spread of the former into various fields, especially education, healthcare, and workplaces (Ward 2002; Brückweh et al. 2012; Thomson 2012; Raphael 1996), this article explores how "the social" was conceived from a psychological point of view within the process of theory building itself, so that it could be targeted and worked upon by training individuals. In what follows, I discuss the Curaçao intervention within the longer history of applying science to social and political concerns. Specifically, I argue, it belongs to a transition between the social engineering of the first half of the twentieth century and the "social entrepreneurship" of the second, when the role of scientists in studying and facilitating social change was renegotiated.

The relationship between colonialism and science has preoccupied scholars in the humanities for several decades now. Historians have shown how colonial settings served as laboratories where social scientists could test theories about race, culture, governance, and society, and how colonial administrators often contributed to the process of knowledge production by applying and modifying Western ideas to their own, locally specific ends, sometimes in opposition to oppressive ideologies of their home institutions (Steinmetz 2023; Tilley 2011; Beinart et al. 2009; MacLeod 2000). Others have explored how human scientists grappled with reconciling their universal claims with the persistent challenges posed by difference and local resistance, exposing the unpredictability of scientists' work on behalf of colonial powers and the ambivalent, often limited usefulness of their techniques for governance and control (Linstrum 2016, 217–219). The following analysis brings this research into conversation with scholarship on welfarist and neoliberal ideas of development (Offner 2019; Schields 2023; Rosemblatt 2013). As I will argue, McClelland and his team's deliberate disregard for local circumstances in Curaçao should not be dismissed as mere oversight. Instead, it reflects a core principle of their approach to development as it grew out of their process of constructing theory. We will see how this approach ultimately

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took on a quasi-colonial character, seeking to reshape society under the guise of assistance while maintaining elements of paternalism and domination.

The article moves in three parts: first, an excavation of the interventionist impetus in McClelland's process of theory building; second, a reconstruction of McBer's social intervention on the Caribbean island of Curaçao; and third, a concluding reflection on how McClelland's conception of the social as a collective of trainable individuals relates to ideas of neoliberal governance.

1. The interventionist impetus in psychological theory of motivation

The impetus to intervene was at the heart of motivation psychology right from its start. Already in the interwar period, when psychologists began to focus their attention on what made people do what they do, the ultimate goal was not merely to understand and to theorizes, but also "to influence and control" (Young 1936, 2). This influence was sought in service of multiple goals—be they manipulating consumer behavior, increasing the efficiency of workers, or rationalizing the educational system (Thomson 1927, vii; Troland 1928, v–vii). It would take until the early 1950s for the "art" of influencing behavior (as Paul Thomas Young wrote in 1936) to be fashioned into an applicable science (Young 1936, 2). To be sure, psychology had demonstrated its practical usefulness already during the First and the Second World Wars by providing the military with tools for assessing and sorting soldiers as well as deceiving and interrogating the enemy (Herman 1995b, 17–47; Capshew 1999, 97–115).[1] How the animating motivation behind certain types of behaviors might be changed, however, especially without changing the environment, remained a puzzle.

Coming to grips with this question became a matter of broader public concern when Americans learned about Nazi atrocities in Europe. This led to widespread interest in better understanding how people could be capable of such deeds, especially in view of reported fascist tendencies among Americans themselves that claimed "It Can Happen Here" (Anonymous 1939; Churchwell 2018, 227–284). While social scientists and psychoanalysts began to study the "national character" in search of "authoritarian" tendencies within American society—"-authoritarianism" increasingly being associated also with communism (Cohen-Cole 2014, 40–48; Adler and Paterson 1970; Shils 1954)—academic psychologists steeped in behaviorism sought to render psychoanalysis "scientific" by testing its concepts experimentally (Hornstein 1992, 258). Common to both groups was the conviction that what people said about themselves could not to be trusted, and that ways had to be found to reveal what truly drove them.

That was also what interested David McClelland. Born in 1917 to Methodist parents in Mont Vernon, New York, he would later become a Quaker who studied psychology and sociology, with an initial interest in memory and learning. His focus on the study of personality would only come about during the Second World War, when the American Friends Service Committee tasked him with selecting suitable relief workers to be sent overseas—a job that not only sharpened his interest in what people were truly up to, but also helped him avoid the draft. In 1941, after receiving his doctorate from Yale University, one of the strongholds of behaviorist learning theory in the 1930s and 40s, he intended to be "tough minded i.e., experimental about a tender-minded subject i.e., human motivation," by establishing a research position of motivation psychology that would combine behaviorism with psychoanalysis (McClelland 1984, 12). Between 1947, when he assumed a professorship at Wesleyan University, and the publication of his most influential book, *The Achieving Society* in 1961, a new psychological concept took shape, the concept of "achievement motivation." It sought to explain why people strive to do well, but ultimately also how economies grow.

[1]The parallel movement in economics brought about an arsenal of interventionist technologies which came with similar figures of interveners and similar ideas about "practicality." See the contributions of Zoé Evrard, Andrés M. Guiot-Isaac, and Mary S. Morgan in this issue.

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Abridged versions of *The Achieving Society* were translated into German (1966), Spanish (1968), Japanese (1971), Portuguese (1972) and French (1974)[2] and later cited by eminent development economists, albeit mostly skeptically (Hoselitz 1961; Hagen 1962, 106; Higgins 1968, 241–249; see also Hettne 1983, 249). Together with its sequel, *Motivating Economic Achievement* (1969), written together with David G. Winter, it became a foundational text for the emerging subject of "Entrepreneurship Education," which proliferated in American business schools in the early 1970s (Katz 2003; Burgin 2018; Timmons and Spinelli 2009, 43). Both books made McClelland known outside the United States, and a sought-after expert on unconventional ways to stimulate economic activity. *Time* magazine, in an April 1969 review of *Motivating Economic Achievement*, wrote that McClelland could "teach business success" by sowing "the seeds of entrepreneurship ... with almost ridiculous ease" (Anonymous 1969). It was promises like this which prompted Curaçao's Chamber of Commerce to turn to McClelland for help in stimulating its faltering economy. Local authorities of the former Dutch oil colony saw psychological changes in individuals, rather than structural changes to an oppressive system, as a promising approach to reducing unemployment while pacifying a society that, in May 1969, had just experienced the most disruptive labor uprising in its history.

Since the early 1960s, the social sciences have increasingly expanded the concept of the laboratory into the wider world, using methods such as focus groups, fieldwork sites, and the observation of consumer behavior in "natural" settings (Lemov 2006, 238–241). Meanwhile, the Cold War context had already facilitated the use of islands as remote laboratories, offering unique opportunities for unrestricted experimentation and rigorous testing that would have been impossible at home (Erickson et al. 2013, 107–109). The Curaçao intervention was part of this trend. But it also went further by explicitly venturing into the political sphere and seeking to transform an entire society. Furthermore, since McClelland's team had come to the island by invitation and not on their own initiative, the intervention gave the impression of a consulting job rather than a scientific experiment. Before returning to the Curaçao intervention, I will explain how the theory-building process made the engagement scientifically appealing to McClelland.

The problem of circularity

The work in Curaçao grew out of a longer methodological development rooted in what I will call the problem of circularity. To understand how McClelland's study of human motivation would lead to social intervention by the early 1960s, one must understand how he sought to get around this problem. He began his "need analysis research," funded by the Office of Naval Research, by asking a question of both theoretical interest to psychologists and practical importance to the military: Do needs influence perception? Does, for example, a hungry person with a strong need to eat, say a naval aviator dumped in the ocean, perceive things differently—like the color of a rescue flag—from a person who is satiated?[3] Answering this seemingly simple question meant finding out whether there really was a connection between needs, imaginations, and perceptions that constituted a "motive" or "motivation," as psychoanalysts assumed. And studying this observationally, rather than inferentially, meant "to arouse human motives experimentally and to measure the effects on phantasy" (McClelland 1955b, 402). This was, in effect, a kind of psychoanalysis in reverse, achievable by means of test technologies developed in previous decades, such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), where test subjects write stories about a series of pictures, the evaluation of which supposedly reveal their inner selves.

[2]These translations were partially funded by the United States Information Agency, see Papers of David McClelland, Harvard University Archives, HUGFP 145, Box 104, Folder: The Achieving Society Correspondence [1959–1978].

[3]That was in fact what the Office of Naval Research hoped to find out, see Edwards, Lynn. 1978. "A Psychobiography of David C. McClelland." An Honors Thesis at the Department of Psychology and Social Relations, Harvard – Radcliffe Colleges, David C. McClelland collection compiled by David G. Winter, Harvard University Archives, HUM 270, Box 1, Folder 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This, however, raised a deeper issue: how to define a motive in the first place? Since psychological constructs determine the way in which the origin of mental phenomena is explored and the resulting findings influence their definition, psychologists risked circular reasoning—a problem of much theoretical debate between the 1940s and 1960s (MacCorquodale and Meehl 1948; Bechtoldt 1959; Nunnally 1967, 93–94; Clark 1983; Lovasz and Slaney 2013). One way to escape this problem is to demonstrate that a presumed psychological phenomenon emerges early in life and can be found cross-culturally. The problem of circularity, in other words, can be overcome by naturalizing the phenomenon under consideration and universalizing the way it would be measured, so that it can be "found" around the world. As should become apparent later, within this very problem lay dormant a practical opportunity: the chance to refine and enhance what could be measured through training.

And that was exactly what McClelland did. By defining "motivation" in general behaviourist terms as a learned association between a stimulus and a response,[4] he could arouse anything he took to be a motive experimentally to study its effect on fantasy. Doing this with a bodily need like hunger by letting people fast (stimulus) to make them seek out food (response) did indeed reveal that needs influence perception, as test subjects' TAT-stories showed.[5] Doing the same for a psychogenic need such as the urge to do well (McClelland's definition of achievement[6]) by counting the frequency with which certain types of imagery in the thoughts of a person appeared, required McClelland to first determine what kind of stimulus might cause it. By linking the "need to achieve" to feelings of helplessness, he proposed that its development was a natural part of growing up—becoming self-reliant and overcoming helplessness. The acquisition of achievement motivation, therefore, had to be both family-specific and universal, a function of specific ways of upbringing as well as normal maturation. Demonstrating that this was in fact the case required experiments in the field.

It was precisely at this moment that McClelland's research began to lead him towards a particular way of thinking about economic growth and social change. Crucial to this shift in focus was his reading of Max Weber and the idea that what the German sociologist had described as the "spirit of capitalism" at the beginning of the century might in fact be linked to what he, fifty years later, had defined as "achievement motivation." Translated into English by the sociologist Talcott Parsons in 1930, Weber's *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* was to become McClelland's jumping off point for thinking about why civilizations wax and wane. "In terms of recent research on human motivation," McClelland and his colleagues wrote in a research report to the Office of Naval Research in October 1954, "it would appear not too far-fetched to associate the new 'spirit of capitalism' e.g., 'the irrational sense of having done his job well' with an increase in achievement motivation."[7] In other words, if self-reliance was at the core of both his concept of achievement motivation and Weber's spirit of capitalism according to "his" Weber, then people with strong achievement motivation might be particularly inclined to go into business. In terms of the nation as a whole, this might then lead to economic growth driven by entrepreneurial activity.

[4]More precisely, as a learned association between a stimulus and a change in feelings that would be remembered and thus evoked by the recurrence of the same stimulus. McClelland's technical definition was: "A motive is the redintegration by a cue of a change in an affective situation" (McClelland et al. 1953, 6).

[5]The assumption that food-getting behaviour is a *learned* response to food deprivation was at the time a well-established fact (see Young 1949).

[6]His technical definition was "competition with a standard of excellence," which he first used in February 1952 after a long period of trials with different definitions that cannot be recounted here. See D.C. McClelland: Need Analysis Research Project. Annual Technical Report (15.2.1952), p. 3, US Naval Research Laboratory, Ruth H. Hooker Research Library. See also his use of the definition in the final report (McClelland et al. 1953, 111).

[7]McClelland, David C., A. Rindlisbacher, Richard DeCharms: Religious and Other Sources of Parental Attitudes Toward Independence Training. Technical report 28.10.1954, p. 4, Need Analysis Research Project, ONR 172–363, Contract N7 onr 463, Defense Technical Information Center, Accession Number: AD0046312, online: https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/046312.pdf. last accessed, April 1, 2023).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The utter naiveté of this highly simplified understanding testifies both to McClelland's lack of any deeper knowledge about economics and the prevailing belief in the 1960s that development equaled economic growth (Speich Chassé 2013, 155–179, 210–221; Hosseini 2003). The implication of the conceptual parallelism between Weber's "spirit of capitalism" and McClelland's "achievement motivation" was that demonstrating that independence training did indeed produce the latter rather than just being correlated with it could now be part of a much larger project of explaining, and potentially even accelerating, economic and technological development. In a paper titled "Some Social Consequences of Achievement Motivation," which he presented at a symposium at the University of Nebraska in 1955, McClelland drew the following picture (see fig. 1):

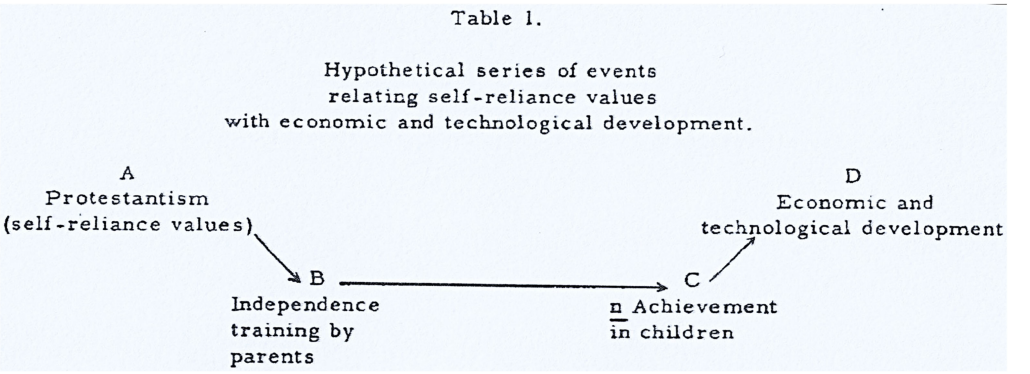


Figure 1. Hypothetical series of events relating self-reliance values with economic and technological development, in McClelland 1955a, 45.

Each link in this highly "hypothetical series of events" would have to be experimentally proven or disproven.[8] Suffice it to say that when, in the same year, McClelland applied to the Ford Foundation for funding to do exactly that, he felt confident enough to promise that his research would provide "a better understanding of economic growth than we now have through Marxist or alternative interpretations of history."[9]

In December 1957, McClelland expanded on these ideas at MIT's "Conference on Community Development and National Change," which brought together advocates of "community development" and "modernization theory." The former emphasized grassroots empowerment, while the latter favored expert-led government programs to drive economic growth and democracy (Immerwahr 2015, 61–65). As the only psychologist present, McClelland set himself apart by promoting development through individual training. In his pre-circulated paper, he argued that an "essentially passive people" would not respond to new incentives with increased industriousness, as modernization theorists suggested.[10] Instead, he believed it was necessary to reshape individuals' motivational structures so that "they will force changes in the system."[11] While modernization theorists saw development as a rational, investment-driven process, McClelland stressed that economic growth ultimately depended on

[8]See also Held 2024, chapter 8.

[9]David McClelland, "Achievement motivation and economic development," p. 10, 1955, Grant 05500211, Reel 17, Ford Foundation Archives, Ford Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

[10]David McClelland: Community Development and the Nature of Human Motivation. Some Implications of Recent Research. p. 18, Background Paper Conference on Community Development, Sponsored by Center for International Studies, Endicott House, December 12–15, 1957, Grant 05800400, Reel 0081, Ford Foundation Archives, RAC.

[11]David McClelland: Community Development and the Nature of Human Motivation. Some Implications of Recent Research, p. 18.

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irrational psychological forces strong enough to overcome immense structural barriers. Summarizing his view, he stated, "underdeveloped countries must develop a strenuous, more achievement-oriented attitude toward life, whether they like it or not, if they want economic development."[12]

In 1957 McClelland thought this could only be achieved by changing people's values through a large-scale propaganda campaign, a process that would have been in line with what modernization theorists proposed. As soon as he realized that achievement motivation could be developed through training, however, he changed his mind and moved away from the need to replace "traditional" values with "modern" ones. "It does not seem to be necessary for a man to change his fatalistic attitude or his religious beliefs or practices to become an energetic entrepreneur," he would later write. "If he believes in himself, if he is motivated to change things, then he is undoubtedly an expert on how to carry out change within his social framework and within his traditional beliefs" (McClelland and Winter 1969, 349).

This shift in McClelland's understanding of how achievement motivation emerged was shaped by earlier psychological research demonstrating that motivation could be actively cultivated. Russell W. Burris had shown at Indiana University in the late 1950s that achievement-related fantasies could be elicited and reinforced in college students, leading him to argue that motivational psychology holds great significance for educators (Burris 1958, 3). McClelland extended this approach by turning his central measuring tool, the TAT, into a training device. If people were taught how a TAT-story was scored for achievement imagery, they could practice thinking in precisely such terms—and, ultimately, act accordingly. "There is no reason," he explained, "why any testing device cannot be turned into a teaching device" (McClelland 1969b, 10–11).

How did this work? McClelland defined achievement motivation as a "concern over competition with a standard of excellence" (McClelland et al., 1953, 111), or, more simply, as the desire to perform a task well. If a story elicited by a TAT image—such as the one shown in fig. 2—was found to contain such a goal, for instance, expressing the aspiration to master a task

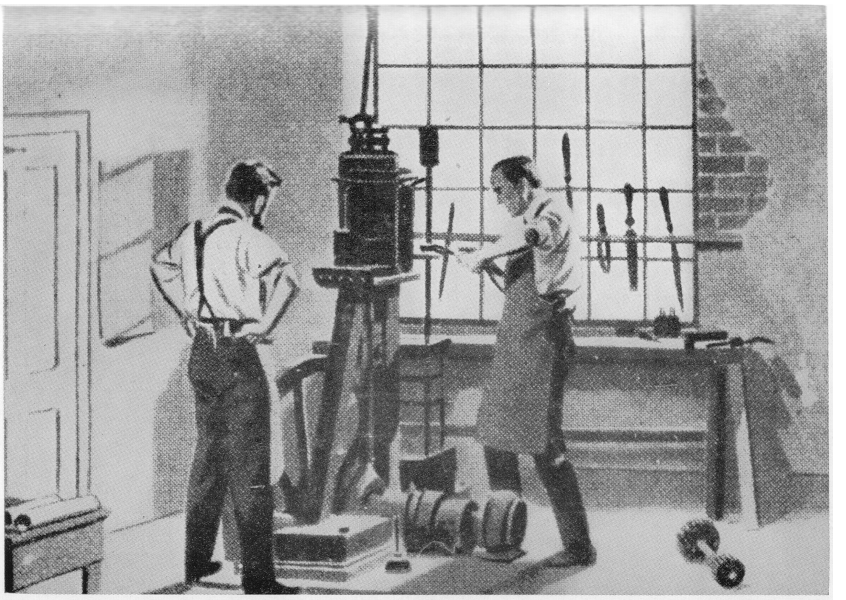


Figure 2. A TAT image used by McClelland to evoke achievement motivation. McClelland et al. 1953, 111.

[12]David McClelland: Community Development and the Nature of Human Motivation. Some Implications of Recent Research, p. 46.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

by becoming a surgeon, inventor, or artist, the text was further analyzed for specific subcategories related to this objective. This included assessing whether instrumental activities were linked to the goal (like studying hard), whether the character anticipated the expected outcome (positive or negative), whether internal or external obstacles had to be overcome (like fatigue or lack of resources), how the protagonist described their emotional state upon achieving the goal (pride or shame), and whether they sought help from others. Each identified text element was coded with a value of 1 per text and summed with all other elements, yielding the final achievement score. Once students became familiar with this way of imagining success, they could attempt to write stories with even more achievement-related goals than before (McClelland et al. 1953, 148)—thus actively practicing achievement-oriented thinking, which would ultimately shape their real-world actions. What was once a problem of circular reasoning—the fact that a psychological construct both defines and is defined by its measurement—turned out to be a practical opportunity. If the factors shaping the construct could be identified and influenced, then learning about them could actively enhance the very phenomenon being measured.

Trying this out in a real-life experiment would not just corroborate McClelland's theory of achievement motivation, but would potentially open up the possibility of spurring economic growth. It was the combination of these two prospects that made him want to go into applied work. After all the theoretical work undertaken up to this point, in the late 1950s he "still wondered if in fact there was not some other explanation of all the evidence" he had gathered, concluding that "the ultimate test of my hypothesis appeared to be an experiment." If achievement motivation really was a key factor in economic growth, he wondered, "should I not be able to produce an instance of rapid economic growth by increasing [the need for achievement] in a selected group of businessmen?" (McClelland 1970b, 51).

McClelland undertook an initial attempt to do just that in 1964 in Kakinada, a small town near Hyderabad in India. However, the experiment largely failed. The U.S. Agency for International Development, which had initially supported the project as a potential alternative to the massive aid advocated by modernization theorists for economic "take off," withdrew its backing, doubting the program's effectiveness. While the fifty-two entrepreneurs trained in Kakinada with another grant secured from the Carnegie Corporation did increase business investments and create 135 jobs, McClelland ultimately deemed the program "less than successful," as he lacked the resources to definitively link these outcomes to his training (McClelland and Winter 1969, 364, see also Held 2024, 315–323). It was a start, but to truly validate his ideas, he needed a real-world laboratory—ideally isolated like an island.

2. Social intervention in Curaçao

After his experience in India, McClelland founded a consulting firm, so as to be independent of the whims of funders such as USAID and do research "as economically and efficiently as possible."[13] In November 1965 he proudly announced to the readers of *Harvard Business Review* that "Achievement Motivation Can be Developed" and that his Human Resources Development Corporation, founded "in the classic pattern of the American free enterprise system," was offering its training services to a global audience willing to pay (McClelland 1965, 178). By the end of the decade, profiles of the organization, later renamed McBer & Company (hereafter "McBer"), appeared in prominent places like *Time* magazine, *Think* and *Forbes* (McClelland 1969a, Anonymous, 1969, McClelland 1969c), prompting Curaçao's Chamber of Commerce and Industry (hereafter "Chamber"), in May 1969, to take notice and invite the company to the island. The Chamber hoped that McBer might be able to help spur Curaçao's faltering economy.

[13]David C. McClelland to David Mayer of the United States Agency for International Development, March 12, 1963, p. 1–2, David C. McClelland papers, Archives of the History of American Psychology, CCHP, box M2888, folder 4.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The sources of the following reconstruction provide the psychologists' and consultants' perception of what unfolded.[14] I also draw on a report from 1970—when the intervention was still underway—found in McClelland's papers at Harvard.[15] This report presented the intervention as "the most ambitious field test of training based on McClelland's motivation theory" to be analyzed and learned from.[16] It did not question the overall goal of bringing about far-reaching social change as naive before embarking on their journey, nor did it include the views of those trained. However, these texts help us reconstruct the particular kind of interventionism McClelland described in "On Introducing Social Change to Study It."

Understanding the fate of the Curaçao intervention requires considering the particularities of its postcolonial condition. The Antillean island of Curaçao, located about forty kilometers north of Venezuela, had been discovered by Spain in 1499 and conquered by the Dutch in 1634 (Oostindie 2014; Oostindie and Klinkers 2003; Anderson and Dynes 1975). Since the second half of the seventeenth century, it had served the Dutch West India Company as a slave depot. The vast majority of the approximately 140,000 inhabitants at the end of the 1960s were descended from former slaves and were Black (Oostindie 2014, 241–242). The White minority who emigrated to Curaçao mainly from the Netherlands were the descendants of seafarers, entrepreneurs and military personnel, as well as later immigrants from Portugal and Eastern Europe. The majority of the Black, mostly Catholic population worked for the oil refinery built on Curaçao in 1918 by the British-Dutch company Royal Dutch Shell, which was the island's largest employer. Meanwhile, the White, mostly Jewish and Protestant minority was employed in government administration, the nascent tourism industry, or the management of large companies (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 47–49). Although Curaçao became independent from the Dutch Crown in domestic affairs since 1954, foreign and defense affairs were still the responsibility of a governor appointed by The Hague. Curaçao did not achieve full independence until 2010 (Oostindie 2014; Oostindie and Klinkers 2003, 60–62, 65, 69, 96–102; Anderson and Dynes 1975, 24–45).

Due to increasing technical innovation in Shell's refinery since the mid-1950s and the outsourcing of jobs to subcontractors who paid significantly lower wages, by the mid-1960s the number of jobs required by Shell had been more than halved, leading to unemployment, particularly among the Black, unskilled workforce.[17] Competition from the Amerada Hess refinery on Saint Croix together with the growing importance of the Middle East for Europe's oil needs weakened the once-dominant role of the refinery on Curaçao further (Schields 2023, 87).

The frustration associated with this was all the greater, as in the previous decades Curaçao had experienced a boom unusual in the Caribbean thanks to the oil industry, the fruits of which had predominantly benefited the White elite. Added to the structural disadvantage of the Black lower class was a generally felt unease about the persistence of a colonial culture, especially about having to learn Dutch at school, thus being forced to abandon the locally spoken Papiamentu, a fusion of African, Dutch, Portuguese, Hebrew, and English influences that has shaped the culture of the island (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 49). Although led in 1954 by a Democratic Party dedicated to

[14]I draw on a scholarly report by David E. Berlew and William E. LeClere (Berlew and LeClere 1974). The former was a student of McClelland's, and the latter an independent consultant from Washington, D.C. Both were responsible for the intervention on-site. Another source is a scholarly commentary on their report, written by David C. Korten (Korten 1974), a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Business. Third is a reassessment of events ten years later, again by Berlew and LeClere, co-written with Victor Pinedo, Jr. (Berlew et al. 1979) who at the time of the invention was vice president of Curaçao's Chamber of Commerce and later became a consultant himself. He then reflected on the interventions in a publication of his own publication, which I will draw upon as well (Pinedo 2004).

[15]The report, whose author is unknown, was apparently intended for publication in *Psychology Today*, as indicated by a handwritten note on the first page: Report on the Curaçao Intervention 10/6/1970, author unclear, #3764, McBer, McClelland Papers at the Harvard University Archives, HUGFP 145, Box 60, Folder: Curaçao [Netherland Antilles] Stuff - SR [Social Relations] 2180 [1966–1971].

[16]Report on the Curaçao Intervention 10/6/1970, author unclear, #3764, McBer, p. 2.

[17]The labor force fell from 11,000 in 1952 to about 4,000 in 1969 (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 55–56).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the concerns of the working class, many Blacks felt poorly represented politically (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 39–67). Attempts by the government to lure foreign investors to the Antilles via a wage freeze in order to create new jobs met with rejection.

At the end of the 1960s, this situation came to a head, culminating in a revolt that shook the whole island.[18] After a failed attempt to negotiate a wage increase for one of Shell's subcontractors that paid its workers less than Shell itself, 800 workers from the Curaçao Federation of Workers (CFW) went on strike, soon to be joined by Shell's better-paid workers and dockers. On May 30, 1969, protesters marched to the center of Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao, to force the government to resign. While the initial demands were economic—most important being equal pay for equal work—the spectrum of criticism soon broadened to include the continuing colonial conditions. Calls for respect and recognition were political demands for equal treatment and an end to discrimination. When police fired on peaceful demonstrators—injuring one leader and killing another—the strike turned violent. White-owned businesses, particularly exploitative ones, were looted or set on fire. A Dutch newsreel showed downtown Willemstad resembling a war zone.[19] In response, Governor Debrot sent 300 Dutch marines to reinforce the police, sparking protests in the Hague condemning the move as a colonial invasion (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 83). Outside observers, particularly the Black Power movement in the USA, framed the events as racial conflict, though a later investigation disproved this (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 166–169).[20]

When McBer's David E. Berlew, a former student of David McClelland in charge of the operation,[21] arrived in Willemstad in September 1969 for an initial meeting with Curaçao's Chamber of Commerce, the situation had largely calmed down, not least because the central demands had been met (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 90, 100; Oostindie 2014, 252). However, the semi-autonomous status of the Antillean island had remained unchanged.[22] More importantly, the problem of underemployment, one of the main triggers of the protests, along with poor wages in the oil industry, also persisted. Around 550 new unemployed people were added to the 8000 or so in 1969 (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 41). The Chamber approached McBer because it hoped to bring about a reconciliation between capital and labor through behavioral psychology rather than politics.[23] This objective was already more than just training entrepreneurs to create new jobs. The resonating expectation of defusing a class and race conflict that had grown over many decades also contained a socio-political implication that by no means escaped David Berlew. The original request to McBer mentioned a "small-business development program" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 30). However, in his pitch to forty government, society, labor, and business representatives—invited due to the project's political implications—he also discussed "various forms of group training, and 'psychological education.'" The subsequent meeting "went well beyond the business development needs of the chamber," as Berlew noted in his report. It also touched on areas of application such as "community and organization development," which lay beyond spurring the economy (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 31).

Berlew presented the fruits of behavioral psychology research as useful tools—he literally spoke of "new behavioral science technologies" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 30)—to "cur[e] their problems" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 31). And to underline the decidedly non-political thrust of

[18]On the events of 30 May and its consequences, see Schields 2023: Chapter 4, also Sharpe 2009 and the website of the Nationaal Archief Curaçao on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the revolt in 2019, https://www.curacaohistory.com/.

[19]See the Polygoon Hollands Nieuws report "Onlusten in Willemstad, Curaçao" 23rd week, 1969 https://openbeelden.nl/media/59355/Hevige_onlusten.en.

[20]This was the case, for example, in the further coverage of the New York Times in June to December 1969.

[21]David E. Berlew had already been part of McClelland's India mission. In addition to being a Senior Lecturer at the Sloan School of Management at MIT, Berlew worked as a consultant for McBer. See McClelland 1961, 151, footnote 1.

[22]The riots of 30 May 1969 did not go down in history as a "revolution," but as a "revolt," or simply as "*Trinta di Mei*," but are nevertheless known as a "watershed in Dutch Caribbean history" (Oostindie 2014, 250).

[23]Literally, the president of the Chamber described his first concern with the words: "to encourage Antillians *to become associated with* existing business" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 30, emphasis added).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

these psycho-technical solutions, he presented himself in all seriousness as a "technologist" "who did not know much about their specific situation, but who was knowledgeable about some new social or change technologies which they should know about." (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 30–31) Not knowing much about the local situation was put forward as a sign of objectivity and independence rather than a disadvantage or deficiency.

The consulting and training offer made by McBer three weeks after Berlew's pitch promised to "accelerate the social and economic development of Curaçao through the better utilization of the island's human resources" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 32). After the first visit to Curaçao, the project team[24] was excited to "help the island solve its problems," adding that the atmosphere of crisis had made islanders "eager" to try out new ideas and approaches (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 31–32). Here was an opportunity, as David Korten, the professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Business, noted in his critical commentary for the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* that many in the profession secretly dreamed of: a society manageable enough that a small group of consultants could have a big impact—"a ready-made laboratory. What an attraction!" (Korten 1974, 55).

That this interpretation of the mission was also shared by local elites becomes apparent in the memoirs of Victor Pinedo, then vice president of Curaçao's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Pinedo had very likely made contact with McBer in the first place, since as the son of pro-American Antillians he had already come into contact with McClelland's theories during his studies of psychology in the USA (Pinedo 2004, 1–5, 64–67). Himself a victim of the 30 May riots—his father's Coca Cola factory had been attacked by the strikers (Anderson and Dynes 1975, 87)—he thought that achievement motivation training would benefit "the entire nation" (Pinedo 2004, 1–5, 65). At the core of the turmoil, he claimed, was simply a problem of motivation.[25] His reasoning shows how easily a problem of power could be framed instead as psychologically solvable. Pinedo wrote retrospectively on the basis of a survey conducted at the time:

> "What happened?
>
> People rebelled and protested with violence.
>
> Why did they do this?
>
> Because the company treated them as if they were incompetent.
>
> Why did the company treat them this way?
>
> The company said that they were not as productive as were their conterparts [sic] in more developed countries.
>
> What was the basis of this assertion?
>
> The company told them they lacked motivation." (Pinedo 2004, 65)

The solution: "we decided to study motivation and see how we could help the Antilleans become more motivated at work" (Pinedo 2004, 65). Not only did this argument repeat the oil industry's justification, as if it were not interest-driven, but the claim that the overwhelmingly Black workforce in the oil industry was not as productive as workers in more developed countries also reproduced the colonialist cliché of supposed "Black laziness" (Gronemeyer 1991). Such laziness, Pinedo thus implied, could only be remedied by turning Black laborers

[24]The group included David Berlew and freelance consultant William LeClere, both responsible for field implementation, as well as David McClelland and David Kolb, Harry Lasker, Ronald McMullan, Norman Reynold and Roy Thompson. See Berlew and LeClere 1974, 32, footnote 2.

[25]The book describes the events of 30 May 1969 as a natural disaster against which one could protect oneself with the right corporate management, as if it were an all-destroying flood. Interestingly, it is precisely the unrest that appears there as the birth of management consultancy. Pinedo literally writes: "It all started in Curaçao. After the uprising . . . " (Pinedo 2004, 65).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

into White Europeans through motivational training. As David Korten would also put this point, "it would help make 'them', the Blacks, more like 'us', the European business community" (Korten 1974, 54).

In order to avoid being rejected by the laborers to be trained, McBer's project team decided to set up a foundation named "Fundashon Renovashon" literally "Foundation of Renewal." Its steering committee included representatives from government, labor, business, and society, although no details of its exact composition and number are given in Berlew and LeClere's report (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 32). It remained obvious that "The consultants' only real base of support in Curaçao was the Chamber" (Korten 1974, 54).

What was the intended focus of the intervention? It initially consisted of two four-day demonstration programs, held in October 1969, aimed at introducing approximately fifty "leaders and men in decision-making positions"[26] from business, labor, government, churches, and political groups to the concept of achievement motivation. That was followed by a three-week training program for future motivational trainers, conducted over a five-month period from February to July 1970, held for twenty carefully selected participants—individuals, as the report states, "who might normally be excluded from such positions, e.g., unemployed persons, leadrs [sic] from the barrios; secondary school dropouts, self-employed ... union leaders, teachers, mothers, social workers, businessmen, industrial employees, and government bureaucrats."[27] Third, a five-day community development workshop was held for thirty participants in January 1970, and fourth, an economic forecast was conducted using locally available data to estimate expected economic growth. The core of the program lay in the second and third components.

The three-week training program began with a theory phase, in which the participants were introduced to McClelland's procedure for measuring the achievement motive with the TAT and learned how to code stories for achievement imagery. In the next phase, the participants had to write short stories that contained as many formulations of wanting to do well as possible. This was coupled with repeated self-reflection and planning sessions, self-study and goal setting courses—answering questionnaires like "Who am I?" and "Am I an achiever"? "Where do I want to be in two years"? The participants were thus to learn "achievement thinking" over time, according to which they would eventually act. The tools used in the program included games, paper and pencil exercises, outside readings and tests, but also therapy like group sessions, where participants discussed their personal and business growth plans, all of which McClelland had detailed after his first experiments in India (McClelland and Winter 1969, 45–78). As the report on the Curaçao intervention found in McClelland's papers explicitly states, "There was no effort made to tailor the programs to Curaçaon culture .... All participants were bilingual, most spoke at least four languages and training was in English."[28]

One problem with training future entrepreneurs in this way, however, was a lack of business opportunities on the island. Berlew and LeClere were aware that this situation might lead to large scale disappointment, frustration and even violence. "We would be trying to raise expectations and levels of aspiration during an opportunity famine"—a set of conditions that, as McClelland had already pointed out, "can lead to violent revolution" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 38).[29] It was this argument by which McBer's consultants felt justified to initiate comprehensive structural change in addition to the actual motivational training. The "Community Development Workshop," which consisted of a group of thirty people specially appointed by the Fundashon

[26]Report on the Curaçao Intervention 10/6/1970, author unclear, #3764, McBer, p. 5.

[27]Report on the Curaçao Intervention 10/6/1970, author unclear, #3764, McBer, p. 7.

[28]Report on the Curaçao Intervention 10/6/1970, author unclear, #3764, p. 5.

[29]In the referenced article, McClelland put it even more compellingly: "High achievement and greater opportunity to achieve must go together if violence is to be avoided." McClelland 1971: 13.

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Renovashon, therefore drew up a so-called "Outlet Program" under the direction of the project team, which contained a catalogue of reforms to be implemented over the next five years. The handpicked participants in this workshop included corporate leaders, bankers, representatives of political parties, trade unions and credit unions, and a few government envoys. "Black Antillean leadership," however, Berlew, LeClere and Pinedo wrote in their evaluation published nine years later, "was probably underrepresented, and the political Left was totally unrepresented." (Berlew et al. 1979, 179).

In addition to all social groups not being equally represented, or not being represented at all, the "group of thirty," which was now de facto planning the future of the entire island, also did not see its task as a political process but as a technocratic problem to be solved. The question "What would you like Curaçao to be?" was considered a task to be solved by consensus on the first day of the workshop. The second day was about "Identifying Obstacles and Testing Collaborative Strategies." The third day was an exercise "in which a real community problem is identified and solved." The next day four "action teams" were formed and the fifth day a list of goals was drawn up for the teams to follow in the next five years. Action Team 1 committed itself to the creation of new jobs, Action Team 2 to the expansion of the tourism industry, Action Team 3 was to work out an education reform plan and Action Team 4 was to reform the existing social system, old-age and orphans' pensions, unemployment and health insurance, following the example of the Netherlands. Berlew and LeClere included the following overview in their published report (see fig. 3):

Design of Five-Day Community Development Workshop

Day 1 *Articulation of a Shared Dream*	**Day 2** *Identifying Obstacles and Testing Collaborative Strategies*	**Day 3** *Dynamics of Community Problem Solving*	**Day 4** *Forming Action Teams and Developing Commitment to Results*	**Day 5** *Planning for Action*
Morning:				
Projection to 1975: What would you like Curacao to be? What are facilitating factors? What are obstacles? What priority actions and decisions must be taken soon?	Reaching consensus on obstacles to collaborative community problem solving	The Critical Situation Exercise: An exercise in which a real community problem is identified and solved. The process of problem solving is intensively analyzed.	Identifying priority action steps Defining commitment	Goal setting and planning in action teams Group review of action team goals and plans
Afternoon:				
Reaching consensus on strengths	The dynamics of competition and collaboration	Same as morning	A model for goal setting and planning	Replanning by action teams Closing
Evening:				
Analysis of leadership Dream sharing	Free	Introduction to community goal setting	Establishing individual priorities Forming action teams	

Figure 3. Design of Five-Day Community Development Workshop, in Berlew and LeClere 1974, 40.

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The overall growth strategy pursued in this way promised to create 5215 new jobs over a period of five years, mainly by expanding existing businesses or founding new ones (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 38). In addition to a one-week motivational training course, the trainees selected for this purpose were also to receive "business-skill training" at a "Small-Business Development Center" to be established for this purpose at the Chamber. In addition, and most importantly, graduates of the training were promised a loan for the realization of their business project if they presented a business plan that was considered realistic, irrespective of their individual creditworthiness.

Hardly any of these lofty goals were achieved. Of the twenty motivational trainers trained by McBer, eighteen received a training certificate in July 1970 – an event hailed as a landmark and reported on in Curaçao's press and television (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 42). Only three to four of them, however, subsequently showed a marked interest in training small entrepreneurs or potential entrepreneurs (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 46). Probably because there was not much to be earned from them. Instead of the 1060 people they had intended to train and the 5215 new jobs they were to create, only 550 people received motivational training until the premature termination of the entire training activity, of whom just seventy-nine went through the newly established Small-Business Development Center and thus qualified for the loan program (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 44). Thirty of them subsequently decided to start a business, with nine of them going bankrupt within the first few months. Of the sixty-nine new jobs created, at least nine immediately disappeared from the labor market. When the banks learned of this bankruptcy rate, they cancelled their special loan program, which meant that those who had been trained from this point on lacked the means to become self-employed, as they now no longer received any loans. Those who returned to their old jobs often came into conflict with their superiors.

Three years ahead of schedule, in March 1971, the Fundashon Renovashon suspended its training activities because it lacked the necessary money to continue its work. The foundation was subsequently dissolved. The Chamber, which had originally agreed to support the outreach and on whose donations the entire program was based, no longer felt willing to continue funding the actual implementation phase after McBer's departure. Rather, they now expected results in turn, and not a renewed request to fund further rounds of training (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 47).

Eight months after McBer left Curaçao, the entire development project had come to a standstill. The "group of thirty" from the Community Development Workshop did not meet again, although the action teams each achieved some results. An Economic Development Corporation was set up to push for new jobs, and a "Social Science Institute" was run for three months in the summer of 1970, attended by 400 students (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 43; Berlew et al. 1979, 174–175). The defunct Fundashon Renovashon was replaced in May 1971 by a "private training enterprise" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 45), in which some of the men trained by McBer joined forces to offer training themselves. Thus, ironically, one of the few start-ups mentioned in Berlew and LeClere's report that survived in the long run was itself a consulting firm that offered its services not only in Curaçao, but also in Venezuela (Berlew et al. 1979, 175). However, this failed to generate new jobs, and Curaçao's unemployment rate continued to climb after 1969 (see fig. 4). The oil shocks of 1973–74 and 1979–80 further worsened the situation, forcing thousands of Caribbean families to flee economic hardship for the Netherlands (Schields 2023, 19, 151–153).[30]

[30]For the development of the labor market in Curacao, see the workshop report prepared for the Netherlands Economic Institute by J. de Koning, J. C. Jansen, L. Sendar, and C. Th. Zandvliet, "Arbeidsmarkt en onderwijs op Curaçao: Problemen, oorzaken en beleidsaanbevelingen. Samenvatting ter gelegenheid van de workshop onderwijs-Arbeidsmarkt 27 april 1990" [Labor market and education on Curaçao: Problems, causes and policy recommendations. Summary on the occasion of the Education-Labor Market Workshop April 27, 1990]. Available at the Digital Library of the Central Bureau of Statistics Curaçao, https://digitallibrary.cbs.cw/CBS0000194/00001/1j.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press

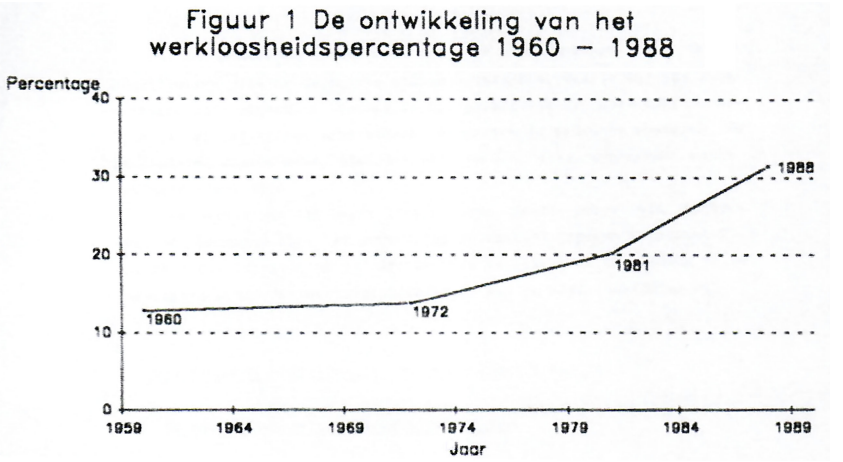


Figure 4. Evolution of the unemployment rate 1960–1988, in de Koning et al. 1990, 2.

How did the psychologists themselves explain the failure of their mission? In addition to the sheer contingency of events outside their sphere of influence, such as the devastating fact that the banks cancelled their special loans program, they pointed to differences in culture, which, according to Berlew and LeClere, had caused their psychological techniques to fail. "As Americans, we never really understood this strange combination of the European and the African," they condescendingly explained (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 51).

One factor they emphasized was that "the locals" understood their techniques not as tools for self-improvement but "as something that gives people increased mental powers to control the direction of their life." They emphasized that the prevalence of "voodoo culture" on Curaçao had helped with gaining acceptance, as the Americans were recognized without hesitation as "masters" by virtue of their "magical" knowledge (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 51). But imparting this knowledge had also divided islanders. Berlew and LeClere recalled that during their initial visit to Curaçao, when they introduced their training program to a gathering of forty community leaders, they unintentionally sparked a new sense of competition among the groups. "In a culture where power needs are exceptionally high, where the word of the expert is revered, and where belief in the occult is still alive, we described a powerful 'new technology' and promised them control over it" (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 51). As a result, they concluded, many individuals interpreted achievement motivation training through the lens of power, applying achievement strategies to pursue power-driven objectives. Not recognizing this in time was, as David Korten concluded in his commentary for the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, "the single most important mistake of the consultants in this case" (Korten 1974, 58–59). Five years later the three leading consultants conceded: "We were probably naive to think that because McClelland's achievement-motivation training worked in India and the United States that it would work in the Curaçaon culture" (Berlew et al. 1979, 177). "Subsequent research suggests," they strikingly added, "that until a certain ego level is reached by trainees, achievement-motivation training is difficult if not impossible" (Berlew et al. 1979, 177).

Reinterpreting what had gone wrong as a problem of "ego development," turned a structural disadvantage of low-skilled, predominantly Black workers into an individual psychological maturity problem. The psychologists argued that in a culture where "power needs" were exceptionally strong, there was a tendency to seek hierarchical structures, as individuals with a high desire for "personal power" reinforced their own strength by diminishing others (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 50). "Socialized power," Berlew and LeClere wrote with reference to an article by David McClelland, aimed to support others in achieving their goals (Berlew and LeClere 1974, 50).

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In his 1970 article "The Two Faces of Power," McClelland distinguished between "personal power," which he believed gains strength by weakening others, and "socialized power," which he argued aims to influence group members to work toward shared goals. By labeling the former as "childish" and "primitive," he suggested that the latter was mature and "positive" (McClelland 1970a, 36, 41). Applied to Curaçao, this meant that social inequality was not the result of structural exclusion and economic disadvantage, but the expression of psychological underdevelopment that could be remedied—again—through training. "Advances in scientific psychological techniques," he concluded his article, provide "society with new techniques for developing the socialized and effective leaders that will be needed for the prosperity and peace of the world of tomorrow" (McClelland 1970a, 47).

For McClelland, the intervention had been an illuminating experiment in service of theory development, as it had pointed to a factor—power—that he had previously missed and that from then on he would be focusing on, resulting by the mid-1970s in a whole new book on the psychology of power (see on this shift Hoffarth 2020). As can be seen from other contributions to this issue, the interveners themselves often benefitted from their interventions, even when they ultimately failed in achieving their aims.[31] For the affected people in Curaçao the intervention and ultimate failure of McBer might have continued colonial dominance with the help of local elites. For McClelland—cynically—it turned out to be just another learning opportunity. After all, what mattered most to him was not the context in which something was tried out but the generalizations that could be drawn from it. Social change experiments for him were about "providing data that the academics can use to revise their theories" (McClelland 1970b, 53).

3. Conclusion

Given the political nature of the events in Curaçao, McClelland's psychological theory of personal and national development, along with the actions it inspired, must be understood not just as a contribution to motivation psychology, but also in relation to broader social and political contexts. Both need to be seen within a broader context of an emerging discourse on neoliberal governance. Central to this approach is what scholars of neoliberalism have called "responsibilization," a re-framing of societal and economic problems in such a way that their solution appears achievable through individuals working on themselves (Pyysiäinen et al. 2017; Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004; Hamann 2009). I want to end by reflecting on how McClelland's interventionism fits in between the "social engineering" of the first half the twentieth century and the "social entrepreneurship" of the second, and in doing so think about how it relates to the transition from developmentalism to neoliberalism (Sirohi 2019, 1–3).

The conventional narrative dates the paradigm of "social engineering" between the 1890s and the 1960s (Etzemüller 2009; Hirdman 1997) and the onset of "social entrepreneurship" to the late 1960s, early '70s (Shapin 2008, 209–213; Baker 2022). The former overlapped with developmentalism of the 1950s and '60s, which involved the state mobilizing science to create plans for "modernizing" society, most prominently exemplified in modernization theory. The latter overlapped with neoliberalism as it involved individual entrepreneurs identifying social ills as business opportunities. McClelland's interventionism, however, was neither about wanting to modernize society per se (given that achievement orientation turned out to be compatible with traditional values),[32] nor driven by a desire to make more money. Rather, he founded his consultancy to gain autonomy in a university setting that in his eyes was marred with inefficiency. McBer & Company was the type of social research institution that he thought was needed for

[31]See, for instance, the articles of Zoé Evrard, and Niki Rhyner.

[32]Nils Gilman and Steffen Dörres Gilman 2003, 97–100. Dörre 2017, who have grouped McClelland among the modernization theorists, have missed his bracing critique of it as soon as he had found a way of teaching achievement motivation, see Held 2024: 304–309.

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scientific progress. His interventionism, then, was less about mobilizing science to improve society as it was about using society as a laboratory to advance science. While this marked a shift away from social engineering, his development approach, rooted in achievement motivation training, closely aligned with a vision of progress emerging around the same time at the Mont Pèlerin Society—one that framed development as distinct from modernization (Plehwe 2009).

Take, for example, Peter T. Bauer, a developmental economist at Cambridge University (later London School of Economics), whose quarrel with state-led economic growth was rooted in the same premise as McClelland's. Writing for *Fortune* in May 1958 against what he called "Economic Growth and the New Orthodoxy," Bauer warned that large-scale modernization plans aimed at industrialization would bring stagnation rather than an increase in economic output (Bauer 1958, 198). Much like McClelland, he believed that what counted most was the "entrepreneurial spirit," the lack of which, he explained in his book *The Economics of Under-Developed Countries* (1957), was a "serious barrier even to limited change and growth" (Bauer 1957b, 106). Where that spirit was absent among a people, Bauer suggested foreign entrepreneurs could be used to set an example (Bauer 1957a, 106–107), just as McClelland had argued that developmental aid should be "provided on a business-to-business rather than a government-to-government basis" so that the "underdeveloped country" would "get the benefit of the ablest American businessmen." The focus, in any event, should be on "the entrepreneur and the productive enterprise—rather than on aid to health, welfare and agriculture" (McClelland 1961, 435–436).

Within this broader intellectual context, McClelland's interventionist stance illustrates how psychological theories of motivation both aligned with and, at times, actively reinforced neoliberal development strategies. As Jessica Whyte has shown, neoliberal economists like Walter Rüstow and Peter Bauer not only accommodated colonialism in their thinking but, in some cases, explicitly endorsed it (Whyte 2019, 209–218). Although McClelland harbored doubts about the moral justification of his actions abroad, he ultimately justified them on grounds strikingly similar to those used by neoliberal thinkers to defend foreign rule: such actions could only succeed—according to their understanding of "success"—if they had the consent of the people involved—according to their understanding of "consent." While historians of neoliberalism have explored how neoliberal thinkers engaged with various psychologies of difference, particularly in relation to human intelligence and race (Slobodian 2023), the intellectual affinity between psychological theories of motivation and neoliberal visions of development remains largely unexamined, even though they would ultimately inform them.

McClelland's influence extended into the redefinition of entrepreneurship. His research was cited as significant by his Harvard colleague Harvey Leibenstein in 1968 and later informed Israel Kirzner's neoliberal revision of the entrepreneurial concept (Leibenstein 1968, 79; Kirzner 1971, 194, 206). The fact that McClelland was invited to a 1980 conference at the Kiel Institute for the World Economy (Giersch 1981, 92–100)—alongside leading neoliberal economists—suggests that, even if not always cited directly, his ideas resonated within their intellectual circles.[33]

What was special about McClelland, however, was that his role as a consultant served that of the psychologist who had ventured into economics; it was supposed to serve theory development, even though his influence on consulting was to be much greater.[34] By repurposing the TAT from a psychological measurement device into a training tool, he aimed to enable individuals to internalize and develop achievement-oriented thinking. As I have shown, this shift helped resolve what initially appeared to be a problem of circular reasoning by turning it into a practical opportunity for intervention. However, its failure in the field ultimately stemmed from an implicit assumption about social change: that transforming individuals through training could replace direct engagement with the socio-cultural context, thereby avoiding the unpredictability and complexity of politics.

[33]See also Held 2024, 308–309.

[34]See, for example, the references to McClelland in Timmons and Spinelli 2009.

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McClelland, however, sidestepped this conclusion. He viewed the intervention as what it had always been to him—an experiment to learn from. While he may not have succeeded in changing society, he did succeed as a psychologist and consultant in transforming the lives and businesses of a few individuals, both in India and Curaçao. Conscious of his significance in this soon to be booming domain, he consoled himself in 1980 over his lack of recognition among economists by concluding that his knowledge would be fed back from practice into theory. "It is affecting business and in the end what affects business may influence economic theory" (McClelland 1981, 99). Above all, McClelland wanted to contribute theory, sharpened through practical interventions.

Acknowledgements. I would like to thank the two editors, Eric Hounshell and Verena Halsmayer, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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Cite this article: Held, Lukas. 2023. "Social intervention in Curaçao: Using behavioral science technologies for social and economic development, 1969–1971," *Science in Context* **36** (4): 416–436. doi:10.1017/S0269889725100732

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889725100732 Published online by Cambridge University Press