A male perspective of psychology from the Rainbow Nation

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This perspective piece aims to provide a current snapshot of the psychology curriculum as experienced by a male middle adulthood student in South Africa. A short declaration of my lived experience is followed by a review of literature relevant to the topics of feminism, masculinities, individual identity, community development and gender diversity. I discuss the questionable ethics of adopting various ideas coming from Western sociology and social justice activism, used to train Generation Z adolescents in counselling techniques. From my audience perspective, I reflect on the impact of including catastrophising theoretical material on young females, males, and people of colour who enter psychology with the best intentions; to learn how to help others. There is a bias in psychology today towards feminine traits which may ostracise the young male student at a time we when need more male counsellors. Concurrently, the inappropriate use of foreign theories may be driving away people of colour who are seeking emic solutions to their environment. There is a danger that we are fuelling the radical 'decolonise' advocates, which will further devalue psychology in developing communities. I advocate for material in the curriculum to allow for a balance within male psychology, science-based theories, and humanist values rather than identity politics and victimology. This discussion happens in the context of lower resilience in Generation Z, evidence of social contagion through social media, evolving masculinities, identity confusion, rising mental health challenges, and calls for decolonisation of education.

Keywords: adolescents; counselling; decolonisation; gender diversity; male psychology

There is a conflict of visions playing out in politics, society, and education, marked by Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, currently being exacerbated by COVID-19. Many are left questioning what is going on in our developed communities. This question has led to an abundance of theory and literature on the topic, offering us an array of explanations, excuses, and dire warnings. Many liberation movements have splintered into sub-groups of grievances using hybrids of moral philosophy from feminism, race equality, and human rights ideals. As a male adult, with my own business and no prior formal education, concerned about the future, the question gripped me in my early 40s.

I veered into the world of social media to find answers. I quickly realised that in 2016, social media provided weak, polarising answers to the big questions. I delved into sociology, hoping for the study of human behaviour to provide solutions. Here again, I would be disappointed; I found progressive ideology and technocratic elitism that left me feeling manipulated (Henning, 2012). It was after reading Stephen Pinker's book *The Blank Slate* that I finally sensed an intuitive truth behind human group behaviour. I finished the book in January 2019, put it down and picked up my phone to find a way to study psychology further. I was 46 years old, owned my restaurant and married with no children. I wanted to help others who may face what I have overcome, but I also wanted to delve deeper into human behaviour to enrich the second half of my life.

I registered with a private college for a full-time undergraduate psychology degree. The programme aims to qualify us as honours graduates in counselling with practical counselling experience in a condensed course of four years. This programme is a result of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) realising we urgently need more psychologists, especially counsellors in a nation ravaged by chronic, generational trauma.

This perspective paper will investigate some of the answers I found to the question: what is happening to our Western, developed societies? I also propose an idea that the tacit vilification of men in sectors of psychology represents a drift toward progressive ideology at the expense of mental health best practice, further neglecting males who need help and ostracising males who would enter psychology. With that in mind, I will unpack a few hot button topics we cover in our curriculum, how they are presented and how the adolescent students interpret them. I will discuss if we, as the adults in the room, are doing more harm than good by moulding these young students to a world view based on victimology and fear.

I give some detail on my life to be transparent about my possible bias. I write this paper with the utmost respect to my College and its dedicated educators and administrators who have presented these issues with professionalism and passion, always allowing other opinions and creating an open atmosphere of learning, engagement, respect and growth. It is the atmosphere at this College which allows me to engage with these ideas.

Development, meaning, and experience

This paper is my perspective on themes in psychology being taught in South Africa in 2020, although they are common globally, in most Western higher education institutions. First, I present my heritage and give relevant lived experiences before I attempt to reflect on the material I have encountered in my studies. My goal is to advance the discussion on the utility of various theories in training counselling psychologists, the impact they have on Generation Z adolescent students, especially males who are a minority in counselling. I aim to highlight the discrepancy between the lack of male student psychologists and the apparent need for more males in counselling psychology (for more detail see Bedi et al., 2016; Westwood & Black, 2012). This deficiency seems to be gaining attention lately as male psychology modules are now being proposed in universities, male mental health groups are popular, and we finally have a formidable resource in the *Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology* (Barry et al., 2019). These developments come as I began questioning my decision to study psychology after encountering some of the political ideology while being a male student at the age of 46 in a young, multicultural, sensitive atmosphere.

It may not surprise the reader that integrating into first-year higher education, as a business owner, a capitalist, cisgender, heterosexual male was not easy. My cohort is mostly female between 19 and 23 years old who eyed me suspiciously for the first few weeks. There is a ratio of one male to three females

in the students and educators, not unlike most aspects of psychology today (Bedi et al., 2016; Westwood & Black, 2012). I am old enough to be my classmates' father and the educator's sibling. However, I proceed with enthusiasm because I am aware of the privilege of having access to higher education. I respect them for choosing psychology when other, less personally challenging options exist. When I was my classmates' age, I had already been thrown out of school at 15 and left alone to fend for myself after my abusive, emotionally detached father moved out. I had to grow up overnight and get a job or face humiliation by going for help to the misandrist female matriarchs in my Italian family.

Development on being South African

After decades of race-based oppression under apartheid, we emerged as a free democracy in 1994. However, not all Whites benefited from Apartheid to the degree that Dutch or British immigrants did. Many immigrants to South Africa after World War II barely spoke English, or the Dutch-derivative language Afrikaans. Italians and other post-war immigrants were enemies of South Africa during World War II, seen as ignorant, although skilled, cheap labour by the ruling Afrikaners and upon arriving in South Africa 'faced the hostility of former settlers' (OECD, 2018) who came before the wars.

Consequently, many second-generation Italian immigrants of post-World War II Europe grew up ostracised by most white Afrikaners. The apartheid system stoked classism within the White community, albeit far less aggressively, than it did between Blacks and Whites. A careful reading of the records reveals many European immigrants' escaped the tyranny and race-based politics rising in Europe, culminating in the spectre of Hitler (Zukowski, 1996). I believe this would later contribute to the liberal wave of White resistance to apartheid I witnessed, that would challenge apartheid from within the borders (Henkes, 2016). For a detailed history, you can read the respected writer Marriane Thamm's article *The Conscience of White South Africa* (Thamm, 2015) where she summarises the contribution of White activists, many of them children of those post-World War II immigrants, in the anti-apartheid movement during apartheid.

Due to mental health problems running through my family and an abusive dysfunctional father, I grew up in various degrees of relative poverty, at times, even starvation. My parents divorced when I was 8 years old; my mother had been coping with my father's beatings for 13 years by then. Ultimately, she would have a complete schizophrenic break and leave us for good when I was 13 years old. She had spent her whole life trying to find a safe place for us but could not continue as; even her own family blamed and ostracised divorced women with no education or skills. She would spend the next 34 years in poorly managed mental institutions and later, old-age care homes. Medication only stabilised her behaviour; she was never socially functional again. At 8 years old, I had to be rescued from absolute poverty; we were living in a tin shack shooting pigeon for food. I attempted suicide at 13 because I had no support; I was abandoned to a boarding school, and usually left there over weekends, even on holidays a teacher had to find someone in the family to come and get me. At that boarding school, I later realised, I was being groomed for sexual abuse by a male teacher. Luckily, I avoided the abuse by being removed from the school, only to be put into a worse school. At 15, I was brutally attacked by my father in front of my matriarchal, detached grandmother. After escaping across town covered in blood, I was attacked again by my older, remorseless brother in front of my girlfriend. In this incident, I believe I narrowly escaped fratricide because he only stopped when my girlfriend intervened; he had no empathy for me. I became an adolescent alcoholic at 15 and was dismissed from high school before I could finish the final year, even though I was a higher-grade student. I would later discover I endured attention deficit disorder (ADD), exacerbated by poor diet, my whole childhood.

Nevertheless, I survived adolescence; I welcomed the end of apartheid after decades of horrific violence which threatened me personally; I was near to an explosion in Johannesburg which devastated a five-block radius when I was 14 years old. After Mandela's election in 1994, I felt that the nation and I were being reborn into an era of hope and peace. I persisted with the only talent I had – creating fantasy art paintings, which got me accepted into a prestigious advertising agency at 19. This would take me away from the crime and drugs in my environment. Later, I would leave advertising on moral grounds; the illegal drugs and immorality in deceptive marketing were eating away at my soul. At 29 years old, utilising a private loan from a wealthy client, I purchased the restaurant business I managed at the time. I have owned it for 20 years now and I have been happily married for nine years.

To clarify why I am telling you this unfortunate story; I am painfully aware of the harsh realities of poverty, gender and class injustice, and I fully supported the transition to constitutional democracy in 1994. I would have called myself a feminist metrosexual when I was younger. However, circumstances forced me to change. Owning a business made me deal with people on two levels: as the service provider host, and as the employer. Somehow, during my 20 years of owning a restaurant I became a confidante to everyone; from the CEO client to the newly arrived undocumented migrant from another African state who faces xenophobia in South Africa (Schierup, 2016). My transition to middle adulthood in this environment took place as I was developing the stages mentioned in psychology. *Post-formal thought*; that life is ambiguous and contradictions are common, and *reflective judgement*; reasoning through the dilemmas of current affairs, religion and relationships (King & Kitchener, 2004). I read *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (Hollis, 2006) and began to embrace the potential in later life stages. Finally, reading *The Blank Slate* (Pinker, 2016) pushed me to grasp psychology with both hands and make the *midlife correction*; changing my goals after reviewing my values to find meaning later in life (Newton & Stewart, 2012).

Discovering psychology

After overcoming some awkwardness as a middle-adulthood student, I bonded with my adolescent cohort and embraced the curriculum material. Discovering my life-stage traits within the developmental models defined in psychology is empowering, while also helping me relate to the adolescent students with patience and empathy, skills I had neglected. Learning the successful approaches and theories in counselling is exciting and deeply rewarding, we really can help people. The requirement to read academic literature forces me to engage with the material, to which I would not typically expose myself. As a result, I modified some ideas I had before I began this process.

However, I noticed the themes of the progressive ideology embedded in various theories presented as empirical fact. Specific material has stood out for me: feminism, masculinities, individual identity, community development.

Gender diversity

I find the curriculum to be mostly psychology with a dash of sociology, a feeling shared by a few of my classmates. South Africa is a nation birthed by colonialism, brutal wars and group identities struggling to survive against the challenges of a developing country. I accept the curriculum in psychology is established by a national body which has broader social justice concerns, optimistically in line with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the progressive constitution of South Africa (Motshekga, 2011). The debate around psychology in South Africa is mired in its history as the enabler of racist policies through IQ testing and race theory, as detailed in *Decolonising Psychology in South Africa* (Clay, 2017). It is an unfortunate legacy of psychology in South Africa that a psychologist, Hendrik Verwoerd, was the chief architect of apartheid (Clay, 2017). In contrast, Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870–1950) was Prime Minister of South Africa on two separate occasions and was a contributor to the League of Nations which later became the United Nations (South African History Online, 2019). Smuts coined the term *holism* and collaborated with Alfred Adler, who, ironically, is the founder of individual psychology, which aims to address feelings of inferiority (Nicholas, 2014). I highlight these contrasting figures as it seems to be what is happening in psychology today. The focus has moved away from any positive themes, shifting from 'do no harm' to psychology's potential as the activist role in social justice. The activists aim is to 'translate useful theoretical resources into meaningful psycho-political practices' (Pillay, 2016). Psycho-political? Nowhere in my admission forms did it say I was registering for 'psycho-political' training.

Pillay goes on to lay claim to the humanist ideal while turning psychology into a political force to end capitalism and the perceived exclusion in academia, in post-apartheid South Africa (Pillay, 2016). With sincere respect for other people's moral beliefs, I counter this perspective on our society's ills, in the age of rising inequality, with economist Thomas Sowell who eloquently analyses these issues in his book Wealth, Poverty and Politics: 'People, who have acquired academic degrees, without acquiring many economically meaningful skills, not only face personal disappointment and disaffection with society but also have often become negative factors in the economy and even sources of danger, especially when

they lash out at economically successful minorities and ethnically polarise the whole society they live in,' (Sowell 2015, p. 85).

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With this quote, I hope to bring us back to the realm of positive, politically neutral psychology. I want to reset the activist direction taken by Pillay, and papers I have encountered. The agenda of activist academics directing adolescent students into political activism is unethical. Adolescent students enter the system naive and malleable, trusting the adults in the room. The activist is fuelled by notions of creating a utopia of equality by discarding decades of the intellectual capital and experience which are embedded in most areas of modern psychology. I do not deny that older forms of psychology had a role in oppression and injustice. By a review of the literature, let me attempt a justified perspective of topics which concern me in the context of South Africa today.

Feminism

Stephen Pinker wrote an assessment of feminism today in *The Blank Slate* (2016), he paraphrased Christina Hoff Sommers; *equity feminism* is the classical liberal idea rooted in individual human agency and humanism, which calls for gender role equality (Pinker, 2016, p. 341). I support this position, and I live it daily in my marriage and my business. I believe men need to be educated in this idea and its potential for equality which empowers men and women. *Gender feminism* is in opposition to classical liberalism, choosing a social constructionist, postmodern, radical view instead; declaring that infants are socially conditioned to gender roles of power, dominance, and submission. It rejects the individual and proposes we can only act as groups (Pinker, 2016). Pinker goes into detail about the biological realities of gender development, which I will come back to later.

However, in my readings and lectures, the critical differences are not clarified. They are obscured by the opaque language, not so much in textbooks, but in journal articles. We are presented with general feminism; the liberation of women and some suggestion is made that it allows for progressive changes in gender roles. The gender feminists would have us reject the science of biology and assume the patriarchy is a vast underground network of male sociopaths hell-bent on raping and enslaving women; we are simultaneously told to manage 'catastrophising' in counselling, yet we allow it in the educational material. The distinction between these two opposing feminist movements is not made clear or even mentioned, neglecting an opportunity for moral psychology education. The student is left with current hashtags like *men-are-trash* and readings bemoaning oppressive patriarchy used to prop up capitalism. I have seen their reactions; they are mostly confused, defensive and filled with fear.

This is what we offer young students? Especially young females learn this upon entering the real world, at least as it exists in higher education. This victimology is presented as an empirical fact during the fragile *identity versus identity confusion* stage proposed by Erikson (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2017). Are we not duty-bound, as the adults in the room, to equip children and adolescents with the tools to navigate an already torrid world of social media and pornography which depicts them as objects subject to abuse and violation? Could we not educate them on the humanist ideals in equity feminism, thereby providing them with a resource of pride and individual power to face the world as adult psychologists? Meanwhile, the young boys are left feeling guilt, like unwitting members of an oppressive male cult.

Masculinities

The modern boy has a morass to navigate before he achieves adulthood; he is a pariah in the contemporary world of feminine ideals and gender role confusion. Boys are flooded with testosterone in utero. As they mature, they are more likely than girls to be hobbled by ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and dyslexia. Less well known, they are also more like that girls to endure colour blindness which distorts their academic progress, anorexia nervosa from identity conflict, autism and high

energy levels with no outlet (Arnett et al., 2017; Barry & Owens, 2019; Gurian, 2011; Stoet, 2019; Supplee et al., 2011; Sweeting et al., 2015; van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2019; Whitmire, 2010).

Boys must choose an expression of masculinity once they reach puberty, best suited to their environment. The discussion of masculinities is limited at college. As a representative example, the writings of sociologist Raewyn Connell are often cited in our curriculum. Connell is a sociologist specialising in 'large scale class dynamics'; she transitioned from a man to a woman late in life and as a teacher; 'emphasised student control of learning processes'. She is cited up to 98,000 times regarding her work on gender and was the author of *Masculinities* (1995; 2005), by all accounts a detailed dive into the topic, albeit from someone with her gender identity conflict and a declared political agenda. I have struggled to understand the rationale used by Connell and other gender theorists, not for lack of trying. As described by Ridge (2019, p. 209), some avenues of theory eventually 'collapsed for want of evidence'. I defer to social and cognitive scientist Dan Sperber. Sperber (2010) proposes the *guru effect* which states; by using deliberately opaque language and broad terms 'authors come to be overestimated, often ridiculously so, not in spite but because of their very obscurity [in their language]' (Sperber, 2010, p. 592). As an expert on cognitive anthropology and linguistic pragmatics, Sperber (2010) explains that many intellectuals benefit from an 'epidemiological mechanism' (p. 592) which leads them to levels of authority unsupported by rational arguments. I suggest that this 'obscurity' is particularly dangerous if taught to a cohort of adolescent counselling psychology students.

However, I must concede to the 'hegemonic production of knowledge'; Connell's 1985 paper, using her previous gender-neutral name; Connell (1985) is a pivotal piece on gender roles for the time. The idea that men, like women, can choose new roles in a society free from predetermined gender-based categories is the best thing to happen to men since the cessation of global wars which cost so many disposable men's lives (Farrel, 2019). However, Connell's paper also affirms the Marxist ideology of class and power relations in gender identity and descends into denial of biological roots of gender behaviour (see Connell, 1985). The use of this type of material in a psychology degree should be presented as sociology theory and balanced by readings on the scientific, evolutionary basis of gender expression. For example, statements like 'gender are the socially-constructed role' (Graaff & Heinecken, 2017, p. 622) are used a lot in South African papers aiming to explain the epidemic rates of gender-based violence (GBV). To be fair, in one South African study, they found 'violence was present in 50% to 60% of marital relationships' (Peacock & Levack, 2004, p. 174). However, In an education setting, we must evaluate a theory 'because it asks us to filter our answers through a structural theory' (Ridge, 2019, p. 210). We must ask: what is the goal of the theory?

I believe this distraction to progressive theory devalues the tangible issues involved and implies a level of power, control and choice by the male perpetrators which they lack in South Africa, otherwise, we would not have the highest suicide rate (Demissie & Clayton, 2018; Seager, 2019; van der Merwe, 2019). In his introduction to *gamma bias* in the *Palgrave Handbook of Male Psychology* (Barry et al., 2019), John Barry recounts how, during a seminar on clinical psychology in the 1990s, the topic of high male suicide rates was 'glossed over' (p. 87). I am sorry to report that this scenario repeats itself in 2020. Gamma bias represents the gendered cognitive distortion matrix (Acharya & Relojo, 2017)which minimises the suffering of males in society. I stress the injustice of male suicide being glossed over, while all four of the males in my class have attempted or seriously considered suicide already, all of us before our 21st birthdays.

We already know South African men face a 'complex interaction of social, cultural and family dynamics' (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015, p. 253). Ramphele (1990), long before she attempted national politics, presciently wrote how men in South Africa are already dehumanised and 'feel threatened by loss of control over the only people [women] who cushion them against their perception of total powerlessness' (p. 13). Perhaps men's presentation of masculinity is related to their survival strategy.

Graaf and Heinecken (2017) provide other possible causes of GBV in South Africa that are worth mentioning in this discussion: the legacy of apartheid, income inequality, militarised hypermasculinities, and gender inequality. Nevertheless, they too, ignore the biological factors. Crucial to this discussion, Pinker (2016) notes: 'the usual suspects for understanding violence are completely unproven and sometimes patently false' (p. 310). To be clear, research is abundant in proven, measurable biological and

neurological differences between male and female which are glossed over in the discussion around gender expression (Barry & Owens, 2019; Pinker, 2016; Studholme et al., 2020). I suggest we connect GBV and other antisocial behaviour by men, with the suicide rate by men, if we are to address many of our chronic social ills permanently. Currently, in South Africa, rape, GBV, suicide, gangs, murder, joblessness and human trafficking of men are entirely out of control (Allais, 2013). Simultaneously, women and children are at the mercy of men with nothing to lose, creating a crippling environment of traditional patriarchy where any well-meaning development programmes fail, leading to children being stunted in their development, and sustaining the deprivation trap (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010; Hemson, 2006; Mbambo, 2012; Onwutuebe, 2019; Tariquzzaman & Hossain, 2009).

Being a man

On a personal note, in my 47 years of being male, I have also struggled with masculine identities. I would agree with Ridge (2019) that there 'is not… multiple masculinities, but multiple interpretations of masculinity' (p. 219) which, I believe can be transient in men with developed emotional intelligence. Having had no good male role models in childhood, I used male teachers or movie heroes to construct an idea of the 'masculine hero prepared to use violence in a just cause' (Pinker, 2016, p. 310). When I was younger, I relished the opportunity to express anger through violence in the name of a just cause. The lack of positive male role models is a known factor in multiple developmental problems in boys, even causing them to reject fatherhood themselves (Farrel & Gray, 2018; Kail & Cavanaugh, 2017; Spjeldnaes et al., 2011; Stoet, 2019). Many years spent failing to meet these unrealistic standards; of provider, role model, emotional but tough man, possible father and business owner caused me, like many other men, to question myself and slip into periods of depression and resignation. I questioned my sexual gender preference for about two weeks after my first intimate heterosexual experience, but I soon discovered the pleasure of heterosexual sex, although I rejected the overt sexuality expressed by many men. Following that, I struggled with traditional macho masculinity, equating it with my violent, detached father.

Consequently, I embraced the metrosexual identity for many years, developing orthorexia (a form of obsessive-compulsive eating, usually resulting in anorexia) through vegetarianism, which I believe I used to avoid seeing my father in the mirror. I became a business owner at 29 years old and began to express domineering masculinity fuelled by my newfound power as an employer. By age 32, I realised that it was not a successful strategy in my personal life or my business. I was attracting all the wrong people. I began a change to humanist ideals, eating better and approaching each person with unconditional positive regard, which I later learned is successful in counselling psychology (Corey et al., 2017). This new awareness allowed me to re-engage with my father, and I managed to build a relationship with him in his last ten years which almost made up for the previous 32 years of detachment. I cannot stress enough what I learned from this: the importance of adult men engaging with their fathers no matter what the past sins of the father were. We cannot be complete, wholesome, wiser men if we have not faced the man who brought us into this world.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to debate toxic masculinity. Instead, I will highlight the excellent work being done by male-run programmes which seek to assist men around the world to develop *positive masculinity* (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Graaff & Heinecken, 2017; Hoang et al., 2013). There is *Respect UK*, which provides support for people who use violence in their relationships*; Men's Shed Worldwide*; working to provide a supportive space for older men; *The Lions Barber Collective*; who use hair grooming as an opportunity to 'recognise, ask, listen and help men' in a mental health crisis.

The popularity and success of these groups represent a new age of men awakening to the potential of a life lived with a self-defined, socially responsive 'readings of masculinity' (Ridge, 2019, p. 207). 'My two decades of research has convinced me that the male brain and the masculine approach to life are vastly under nurtured in our culture' (Gurian, 2011).

Individual identity

In counselling psychology, we allow for the unique identity of the client, even a child at school-going age, to emerge, and we are encouraged to affirm their chosen identities (Corey et al., 2017; Meyer, 2010a). Within the therapeutic environment, this is ethical and allows us to create a bond with the client, respecting their individual path. However, there are contradictions in the curriculum. For example, the theory of *intersectionality*, benevolently presented as an approach to understanding a person's identity as a result of converging identities, roles and circumstances (Beattie et al., 2018). Further inspection reveals the grievance-based political goals of this idea unifying 'power and privilege [and] oppression' (Beattie et al., 2018, p. 239), while simultaneous advocating counsellors use their power to direct individuals through social justice counselling (Crethar, 2008). This theory suggests we are merely members of our allocated, politically convenient groups and cannot have individual agency without creating a victim to the individual agency (Shefer, 2016). As an adolescent in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, I was witness to the change in South Africa, which aimed to have individuals judged by the content of their character not the colour of their skin, as equals. We wanted to free our countrymen from politically convenient categories. Now at 47 years old, I hear how we can imagine new sub-categories which can be useful for political goals (Ramphele, 1990). The change in South Africa required the abandoning of race categories, and optimistically, the class categories which fuel prejudice. Intersectionality would have us sub-divide into new groups of victims all with a new claim on some new common enemy, undoing the efforts of previous generations. Anyone with knowledge of South Africa's long, bloody struggle to democracy will find this obscene and woefully ignorant of the achievements already made by the previous generation.

Nevertheless, utilising an individual agency is advocated in counselling and community psychology (Butchart & Seedat, 1990). There seems to be a political-activist agenda at play alongside, but not complementary to the best-practice tools essential to successful counselling psychology. Intersectionality appears to be a political tool to unify the victim against the oppressor. This oppressor is allocated by the latest trend, which would only be useful in what has been called the global industry of victimology (Ramphele, 1990).

Community development

Community development is a fundamental goal in a nation like South Africa. Rural areas were held back by apartheid for five decades. Community psychology practises within this area of community work. Initially, the module Community Development appears to be a practical approach based on a learning curve from the efforts of nations and NGOs working to improve the developing world, and people living in poverty (Ansari et al., 2012; Bradshaw, 2007; Bruursema, 2015; Nesamvuni et al., 2016; Swanepoel et al., 2016). Here again, ideologies infiltrate to conflict with nationalist and political goals which are usually a cover for corruption (Ake, 1996; Hope & Chikulo, 2000). Gender-based programmes which use Western feminist, moral ideals have already created havoc where people are living in poverty, depending on the culture of the community, sometimes causing the deaths of those it professes to help (Balasubramanian, 2013; Posso & Zhang, 2017). In Africa, we do have a conflagration of culture and gender roles which act to perpetuate the cycle of GBV, HIV, and poverty (Dunkle & Decker, 2013). While we have a progressive constitution on paper, we have a disconnect with the rural community (Wlokas et al., 2017). Governments' goals seem to conflict with best practice in community development approaches. Further investigation, concerning South Africa, gives us a picture of corruption and traditional patriarchy. This combines to hobble development and keeps rural areas locked in the deprivation trap (Ake, 1996; Hope & Chikulo, 2000; Thwala, 2010); 'with few exceptions their rule has been notable for oppression, corruption, social disorganisation, the demise of the development project, and growing poverty' (Ake, 1996, p. 153).

Rather than applying Western elite progressive ideals on deprived rural communities, the determined community development work would be well advised and more effective by increasing the social capital. The literature assures us that communities building social capital can 'facilitate the actions of individuals in them' (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2015, p. 62). I discern social capital here as distinctly opposed to the victimology of identity-based theories. Social capital can be refined into *cognitive*; trust, sharing and reciprocity between members of the community, and *structural* social networks and patterns of civic engagement (2015, p. 63). This approach values individual agency and the circumstances of the

community while holding those with power accountable for violations of trust. As long as orphans are being used as child slaves in deep rural areas to fetch water from dry river beds (Mbambo, 2012), we cannot afford to be distracted by imported lofty ideological goals. We should be sceptical of theorists who never have to face the real-world consequences of their theories, applied inappropriately on cultures which have not had the privilege of economic development (Ake, 1996).

Gender diversity

The gender debate has polarised our society. On one side, we have well-meaning gender diversity advocates who would have LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. On the other side, we have those who feel it is a degradation of the traditional norms in society and rally against its acceptance. Studies are showing broader acceptance of LGBT rights in developed liberal societies (Kosciw & Gay, 2014; Meyer, 2010b; Twocock, 2019). However, this sexual liberalisation is not happening in South Africa (Butler et al., 2003; DeBarros, 2018; Mitchell & Nel, 2017; Müller, 2017; Reygan, 2016). The resistance to sexual and gender diversity is well known in South Africa and exists at all levels, from minors to national political leaders (Mitchell & Nel, 2017). Studies in South Africa suggest that acceptance of radical Western gender diversity ideologies is unlikely. There is open defiance of the liberal laws in our constitution which has allowed same-sex marriage since 2006 (Anderson, 2018). Legally, the rights of LGBT protect individuals in South African law, but practically they are victimised, raped and even murdered daily.

Aggravating this conflict of goals are the new ideas coming from the West, which enter higher education first. As described by Reygan (2019), in South Africa 'poverty, inequality and exclusion are often rightly understood in terms of race, class and gender' (p. 90); this is well-meaning but highbrow theory while we have LGBT adults abused because of their HIV status in hospitals (Müller, 2017). I cannot help being sceptical; we have critical leadership, cultural and economic challenges before we can start turning children into gender diversity advocates at school. Their parents are struggling to survive in absolute, generational poverty. We may be increasing their risk. As formidably discussed in *From psychology in Africa to African psychology: Going nowhere slowly*, Makhubela (2016), I too worry we will be participating as 'accessory to domination' (p.1) by adopting lofty Western, or colonial ideals while ignoring emic, locally respected solutions. This respectful approach would have the added benefits of increasing the cognitive and structural social capital for South Africans, thereby disarming the blanket rejection of science by the 'decolonise' radicals, which aims to remove Western influence. An increase in social capital appears to be the key to arresting corruption and allowing people living in poverty to lay claim to their heritage which is being squandered by politicians (for more detail see Hope & Chikulo, 2000). We, as South Africans, should be adopting science-based developments free of Western cultural and ideological influences on progress in a society as fragile and diverse as South Africa.

There are new brave voices in this debate. Research is improving our knowledge of gender de-transitioning and the effects of social media on social contagion as described in *Irreversible Damage* (Shrier, 2020). This book details how young girls are lured by the trans trend on social media to transition permanently to boys, often undergoing detrimental chemical and surgical intervention to their development (Shrier, 2020). Another controversial book *The End of Gender* (Soh, 2020) by sexologist and neuroscientist Debra Soh, clarifies the science behind gender and warns of the pressures to comply with the narrative of gender being socially constructed. We should consider that 'research continues to accumulate, showing that gendered power flows in different directions, mediated by other factors, like ethnicity' (Ridge, 2019, p. 210).

Further, although I accept that gender-roles are locked in problematic traditional practices, thereby keeping communities locked in poverty, the community development literature does not support irresponsible disruption to traditional cultural norms (Ake, 1996). As described in a short paper discussing the difficulties a Namibian male faced when trying to study psychology, Plattner (1999) reminds us that intellectuals living in developed areas tend to romanticise rural customs and traditions. 'Individualism is often declared to be selfish and egocentric, while the restrictions of collective norms are overlooked' (Plattner, 1999, p.475). Collective norms are called *Ubuntu* in South Africa, which denotes unique, almost mythical traits to African society. However, Makhubela (2016) alerts us to the contradiction; Africans cannot exclusively claim this worldview. After all, this can only prove that African experiences are

universal experiences, shared by other human beings and not as unique as some in the current African psychology discourse would want us to believe (p. 9).

A re-evaluation of ideology would mean we would review attempts to use Western theories to sexual and gender diversity in education and instead develop emic approaches. These methods can be based on science, which can still be sensitive and respectful of the culture and circumstances and allow them to find their path.

A duty to do no harm

As students, we adopt the ethics of 'do no harm, which implies that we should put the needs of the client first and work to put aside our personal biases and moral values. The aim is to remove coercion and judgement from the therapeutic environment, thereby allowing the client to feel safe, accepted, supported and free to grow at their own pace (McLeod, John & McLeod, Julia, 2011). While, as a student, I accept that the learning experience must be challenging and have moments of discomfort, I wonder if theories like intersectionality and diversity have strayed into harming Generation Z adolescent students rather than preparing them for the therapeutic relationship. They did not sign up for social justice activism; arguably, this generation is ill-prepared to rationalise the complexities of society's ills. Are we prioritising the ideology of a few adults over the healthy development of these adolescents into useful counsellors?

As it is, we have a fiery debate about the utility of Western psychology in Africa (Makhubela, 2016). In a later paper, Makhubela (2018) rails against 'liberal ideology' (p.1) enforced by Western knowledge systems. Potentially, his piece successfully dismantles the value of diversity in favour of decolonisation in South African Universities. He begins by declaring the 'farcicality and impossibility of strategies, attendant ideologies' (p. 1), referring to the ideals of diversity, multiculturalism and the *Rainbow Nation*, which was introduced by Nelson Mandela at his inauguration as first democratic president in 1994.

We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both Black and White, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity - a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world (Mandela, 1994).

I mention Makhubela's 2018 paper not because I agree with his argument for decolonisation; I do not, but instead to show that weak western theories have their antithesis in reactions like what Makhubela (2018) calls radical 'decolonisation… a refusal to participate in the structures of our subjugation' (p. 17). This assumes perceived power and oppression structures, theorised by various activists, are deliberate and work to sustain this 'subjugation'. Fortunately, there is resistance to these radical 'theoretical and practical dead-ends' (Long, 2016). I am advocating for caution when importing ideas hatched in safe, prosperous societies that do not merge productively with the conditions in countries like South Africa. As a secondary effect, I am concerned that adolescent students are confused and conflicted by the mixed messages in the contradictory theories presented. Further, we may be driving away potential counsellors by alienating well-meaning, but not 'activist' males and students of colour.

In particular, I notice the males in my cohort, myself included, struggle to motivate ourselves against the tide of feminine and feminist characteristics embedded in psychology. As proposed by Westwood and Black (2012), counsellors should develop feminine and masculine nurturance in their counselling skills (p. 287). The issue of transference and countertransference, in particular regard to males counselling females, does not get enough attention. I want to engage with the risk of eroticised transference to pre-empt problems I may face in practice, as many other male counsellors already have. The issue is briefly noted in the curriculum, but the risk to male counsellors is 'glossed over' (for more see Alvarez, 2010; Blum, 1973; Guttman, 1984; Jackson, 2017). There is a bias towards feminine traits in society and for counselling. I would have masculine nurturance skills and the male perspective addressed in one module. This approach would welcome males into psychology and provide a resource to men seeking male-friendly therapy.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted to build a picture of psychology as perceived by an adult male student in South Africa. In this process, I have pointed out the contradictions and incoherence of clashing ideals in the material we are exposed to. Along the way, I have mentioned the male experience in psychology. This opinion is generated from my observations but also from discussions with other adolescent male students and a few of the female students who have cause to defend equality. The bias toward feminine material is not unique to my college (see Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006; Westwood & Black, 2012), although thankfully, the atmosphere here is respectful and interactive. However, it cannot be disguised from the material and leaves the males feeling powerless to challenge theories. I have suggested to my colleagues that they add male psychology literature to their onsite library to mitigate this effect. Finally, I am concerned about incoherent ideology, which threatens to devalue the field of psychology in developing societies, with its conflicting and incompatible theories. I suggest this is what is 'going wrong' in developed societies, as evidenced by the COVID-19 lockdown riots, but also by the rejection of all Western ideas by radical decolonises, and the failure of psychology to attract men to counselling. As the adults in the room, we may be alienating people of colour and males, yet advocating for more inclusive practices at the same time. This is causing erosion of trust and is a tragedy leading to the abandonment of the most vulnerable in developing societies to untried, untested, and unscientific methods. Rather than distract those with good intentions, we are duty-bound to nurture them to face up to mental health, gender-based violence, gender equality and ultimately the poverty which fuels it all.

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