Community social psychologies for decoloniality: an African perspective on epistemic justice in higher education

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Abstract
The decolonisation of higher education in South Africa is closely linked to questions of knowledge production. The epistemic violence of the colonial encounter has put into question the possibilities and modes of doing research in marginalised communities. In this article, I argue that praxis in community social psychology can lead to more relevant and just research methods, especially when rooted in liberation thinking. In the South African and African context, this requires an engagement with the particularities of Blackness and the Black experience. Drawing on examples of participatory action research projects with young Africans using Photovoice methods, and the establishment of the Black Academic Caucus at the University of Cape Town, the article shows the links between praxis and epistemic justice as exercised within the cultural practices of the university, and between researchers and participants from marginalised communities.

Keywords
Community mobilisation, decoloniality, higher education, participation, Photovoice, praxis

Introduction
Over the past few years, the conversation in higher education institutions in South Africa has shifted from the post-1994 transformation imperative towards a decolonial perspective. Students and worker protests are advocating for free and decolonised higher education. Beyond the rhetoric of demographic change, a decolonial stance advocates for epistemic justice as foundational to the activities of higher education. Higher education is not simply a space for the development of knowledge in the form of skills and capabilities to be applied elsewhere, but is fundamentally a space of knowledge production that shapes the societies in which we live.
In this article, I argue that epistemic justice emerges through praxis – praxis being understood in community social psychologies as the interface between theory and practice (Prilleltensky, 2001). Praxis promotes community participation and action in research endeavours in ways that foregrounds contextual concerns and the knowledges of those outside of the academy. This standpoint places higher education as an important actor in imagining a decolonised society where scholars can become active in generating the type of critical knowledge and leadership necessary for achieving social justice.

Praxis in the South African and African context is also intricately linked to conceptions of Blackness and the Black experience. Given the colonial and apartheid past, where categories of race were salient and instrumental in producing various forms of oppression, often legitimised through academic work, epistemic justice in our context cannot be divorced from an understanding of the Black condition. Blackness, in this article, is understood as experience, as colour and consciousness, rooted in the struggle against apartheid and colonialism. Blackness is also understood as raced, gendered, and classed given the intersecting structural oppressions that lead to multiple experiences of being Black (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1994).

This understanding of praxis for epistemic justice interrogates what community social psychologies might contribute to a decolonial African context, as well as what the knowledges that have emerged from the global south and liberation movements on the continent may contribute to the continued relevance of community social psychology.

Community social psychologies for epistemic justice: the weapon of theory

Real and lasting social change does not take place without theory. Theory crafts, guides, sustains, and legitimises social systems. In order to dismantle the social systems we live in, which are characterised by inequality and oppression, we need to advance our theories. In the context of higher education, these theories should emerge from the relationship between knowledge production and people’s lived experiences in different community contexts. The lives of those who are most marginalised by social systems can inform the forms of collective engagement needed to achieve a just and egalitarian society. The concept of praxis in community social psychologies denotes the relationship between theory and practice such that any discussion about the decolonisation of our societies is thought of in relation to peoples’ lived realities and the institutional contexts in which they emerge (Prilleltensky, 2001). It follows therefore that decolonisation is a process of change, both in thinking and practice, closely linked to academic institutions as locations of knowledge production.

Unpacking the relationship between theory and practice is important because it also tells us that when we can think of ‘others’ and create theories about the ‘Other’ as less than human, it makes it possible to act towards them in dehumanising ways. The Euro-American roots of psychology have historically prioritised thinking and practices that legitimised apartheid and colonisation through the body of research referred to as scientific racism (Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994; Richards, 2003). Psychologists espoused the hierarchical categorisation of people into race groups that posited African people as the least intelligent of all with associated images of laziness, ignorance, and irresponsibility (Kessi, 2011). The work of psychologists contributed to the legitimisation of slavery, colonisation, apartheid, and the genocide of millions of Africans and colonised people from the global south.

These events are arguably the most violent forms of domination in our recent history and have given rise to a global context in which multiple and intersectional forms of violence are commonplace. Economic poverty, health concerns, sexual violence, gender-based violence, ethnic conflicts, xenophobia, and racism are all manifestations of the historical power dynamics and the continued failure of our theories to contain and resolve these problems. These forms of violence are key issues
that universities should be addressing through alternative and relevant approaches to adult education. In South African psychology, the debate around relevance emerged among community psychologists in the 1980s (Seedat, 1998; Seedat, Cloete, & Shochet, 1988) and already highlighted the significance of community social psychologies in this endeavour.

The focus on praxis translates into approaches to knowledge production that promote the participation of marginalised communities in research projects. Such orientations to research create meaningful conduits between the academy and lived experience, and can mitigate the epistemic violence often produced and exercised against those who are researched. Research that links Black people with violence, women with irrationality, the poor with ignorance, or young people with deviance, are examples of how scientific research can re-inscribe processes of inferiorisation and control. Scientific ideas about the ‘other’ translate into popular or common sense knowledge in ways that reproduce forms of discrimination and oppression that are most often racialised, classed, and gendered. Science therefore needs to be de-mystified as providing objective and neutral accounts of the social environment where different populations are the objects of scientific inquiry. Instead, by treating people as subjects in research projects, by capturing their understandings and experiences as pivotal in the process of knowledge production, theories can emerge as weapons of epistemic justice.

**African theories of change: adult education, community and racial oppression**

Looking back at guiding principles from liberation movements across the continent, many insights can be drawn from African adult education and community development theories for the project of nation-building and decolonisation. In the Arusha Declaration of 1967, 6 years after independence, President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania outlined Tanzania’s national policy of self-reliance, the aim of which was to counteract the exploitative system left by the colonisers. The implementation of the policy was carried out through reforming the education system towards a programme of Education for Self-reliance, designed to forge ‘attitudes of mind which are conducive to an egalitarian society’ (Nyerere, 1968, p. 16). He further stated that ‘The first function of adult education is to inspire both a desire for change and an understanding that change is possible’ (Nyerere, 1968, p. 29). These reforms sought to reinstate the local values that had been wiped out by the colonial regime and eliminate elitism and feelings of superiority that were instilled by colonial education. This was supported in practice by the Ujamaa Villageisation Programme (Nyerere, 1967). Ujamaa means community and involved a villageisation programme characterised by a community where co-operation and collective advancement were presented as the rationale of every individual’s existence under the guiding principles of freedom, equality and unity (Ibhawoh & Dibua, 2003). Senegal, Ghana, Zambia, and Guinea, among other African nations, embraced similar approaches to decolonisation.

Across the African continent, values of community self-reliance and self-determination were heralded as key to a decolonising framework. At regional level, policies of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) (now the African Union) reinforced the agenda of a collective Self-Reliance. In 1990, in the OAU declaration on The Political and Socio-Economic Situation in Africa and The Fundamental Changes Taking Place in The World, African leaders agreed that

( . . . ) in the face of an often excruciating external debt burden . . . we were guided by the principle of collective self-reliance and self-sustaining development. ( . . . ) We are now more than before determined to lay a solid foundation for self-reliant, human-centred and sustainable development on the basis of social justice and collective self-reliance . . . (Organization of African Unity, 1990, p. 1)
These pronouncements highlight African forms of socialism and the importance of the education system for decolonising African society and, in particular, the role of education in changing attitudes or mindsets to address elitism and feelings of superiority. Furthermore, the values of community, cooperation and self-reliance, which are key to community social psychology, constitute the bedrock on which social change and social justice were theorised as possible and where people in communities were seen as active participants in this process. The fight against racism and imperialism, also highlighted in AU declarations at the time, speak to the global nature of racial oppression and the need for a strategy that is simultaneously localised and global. Fundamentally too, is the significance of shifting power relations in ways that translate into real material gains for those who continue to suffer the legacies of colonialism and apartheid. African thinker and revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, in his 1966 address The Weapon of Theory said,

Always remember that people are not fighting for ideas, nor for what is in [people's] men’s mind . . . National liberation, the struggle against colonialism, the construction of peace, progress and independence are hollow words devoid of any real significance unless they can be translated into real improvement of living conditions. (Cabral, 1966)

Reviving these ideas is key for informing the decolonial agenda in higher education and societies at large. They allude to the intersecting dimensions between (adult) education, community, and Blackness, thus informing the role of community social psychologies for social justice on our continent.

Against this backdrop, examples from participatory action research (PAR), drawing on Photovoice methodologies, will show how praxis in different community contexts can produce the type of knowledge that challenges the epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) of academic practices and propose new ways of seeing and doing within a social justice agenda. Thereafter, the experiences surrounding the establishment of the University of Cape Town (UCT) Black Academic Caucus (BAC) will illustrate another example of praxis – how a community of Black scholars came together to articulate a vision for a decolonised institution by recognising the link between the need for academic theories of change in the various disciplines in which they are located and how these are made possible and/or are constrained by the practices of governance of the institution.

**Participation and community mobilisation: examples from praxis**

Photovoice methodologies illustrate how people can become mobilised into collective social action with the view of developing processes and theories of change (Kessi, 2013; Seedat, Suffla, & Bawa, 2015). In a Photovoice project, participants are asked to take photographs and write stories about the assets and challenges that exist in their community. In doing so, they prioritise community needs and aspirations from their own perspectives and in conversation with researchers. The participatory nature of Photovoice methods also demands that the photographers (or participant-researchers) invest themselves in the lives of people in their communities by, for example, spending time with and getting to know the individuals who become the subjects of their stories.

The following examples illustrate in a very potent way how community members understand forms of violence and oppression that exist in their communities.

Mandla,¹ a 12-year-old boy from Langa township in Cape Town produced this photo-story, called the Fence of Disgrace (see Photo 1). Mandla says,

> Behind this fence dirty things and shacks are filthy . . . On the right side of this fence, things are beautiful and on the left, things are dirty. This is the fence of disgrace.
This story powerfully questions the problem of inequality and the power relations that lead to disparate living conditions, illustrated here within a community, but symbolic of global inequalities and injustices. For Mandla, people’s lives are not simply affected by a lack of resources, but by the injustice that poverty and wealth can exist side-by-side. It is the fence that is disgraceful, alluding to a system of historical segregation in which particular communities are being barred from access to resources. The story allows us to understand poverty as a form of historical and politicised violence rather than explanations that have to do with the laziness, ignorance, and irresponsibility of Black people.

This second story (see Photo 2) is about mental illness and describes the need for communities to build networks of support. The man in the photograph is a fisherman from Dar es Salaam. The photographer tells the story of how his friend died at sea when they were lost on their boat for over a month. When he returned, the trauma he had experienced led him to substance abuse. Subsequently, his family abandoned him and he now lives on the streets. Instead of a victim-blaming discourse that stigmatises the drug habits of Black men in our societies, this story tells a dignified story of a man’s life. It demonstrates how environmental factors, such as the precariousness of working conditions and the lack of social networks or collective forms of support in communities, have an impact on people’s well-being.

In Photovoice projects, photographs, and stories are typically showcased in public exhibitions with the aim of raising awareness among key stakeholders such as community leaders, policymakers, government officials, academics, and practitioners of various kinds (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). The participatory nature of Photovoice projects thus entails a process of dialogue and reflection not only between the participants themselves, participants and the researcher, but also with community members and various stakeholders as a whole. These activities allude to the development of critical consciousness, which occurs in ways that promotes community mobilisation around issues of social justice.
In the projects I describe, participants who were from both Tanzania and South Africa raised the issue of racism as key in this process of critical consciousness during focus group discussions. Maisha from Dar es Salaam says,

. . . because of the racial discrimination . . . that was the beginning of the mistreatment and because we were mistreated and then we started mistreating each other, it moved from men to women to children, we created a wrong belief from there and finally we came to mistreat ourselves. (Maisha, 15)

And Thabang from Soweto says,

To me, racism affects me in a good way. Because I get to build my self-esteem too. You see, you don’t get to grow if you are not given challenges. And challenges are not there to destroy but to build us, you see, if we let challenges destroy us, then what are they really meant for. (Thabang, 18)?

Racism is described in these narratives as both oppressive and productive, illustrating how experiences of Blackness are pivotal in the development of consciousness and the possibilities for action and social change. These narratives that emerged through praxis, involving community participation and action and critical consciousness, represent insightful contributions to the challenges we face and the types of theoretical and practical interventions that are needed to address various forms of violence and build healthy communities.

It must be noted, however, that participatory initiatives do not always generate successful outcomes. Participation can also re-inscribe relations of power in certain encounters (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The interventions of powerful international aid agencies, for example, under the guise of working towards community participation and empowerment can have contradictory effects. Such top-down approaches to change tend to adopt technocratic systems (Seckinelgin, 2012) that seek to control the rationale, course and outcomes of participatory
interventions, thereby undermining the possibilities for critical consciousness and creative and innovative action. These institutions also rely on racialised representations of global poverty (Dogra, 2012) to justify the use of western knowledge, expertise, and cultural practices in African communities and communities in the global south (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Kothari, 2006).

I argue therefore that the idea of praxis for community social psychologies cannot be divorced from the decolonial imperative – this means an engagement with Blackness as a key arbitrator in the pursuit of epistemic justice. Engaging with Blackness presents possibilities for mobilising communities to deconstruct their own internalised beliefs, as well as become critically conscious of the agendas of powerful actors.

The higher education context: a South African example

The case of decolonisation in South African universities is an interesting and complex one. The apartheid legacy gave rise to different types of universities: historically White-English (or liberal) universities, historically White-Afrikaans universities, and historically Black universities.² In the case of historically White universities, the racial climate has been slow to change. Indeed, these universities, as spaces where alternative theories should emerge, are themselves plagued by racist representations. Representations of Black students and Black academics as lowering the standards of the university are still commonplace (Kessi & Cornell, 2015). This cannot be divorced from the largely western-oriented curricula and research practices. It is therefore important that the decolonial project focuses on the cultures and practices of these key institutions.

In a Photovoice project, aimed to mobilise Black students at UCT around these issues, students spoke about their experiences of isolation and alienation in the institution, often couched under the banner of ‘feeling black’. In this Photovoice project involving Black students at UCT, participants were asked to take photographs and write stories about the assets and challenges that exist in their community. In doing so, they prioritised community needs and aspirations from their own perspectives and in conversation with researchers. In this extract from one of the stories, a student says,

Maybe I always knew I was black. And perhaps I always knew there were white people. I never really cared about it though. It never really impacted me in any way. The thing is, I grew up in a township. We never did see any whites, let alone interact with them, unless we went to town . . . Fast forward a few years and I find myself in Cape Town, a student at UCT as a fresher . . . and for the first time ever in my life I was confronted with the cultural capital that comes with being white, or familiar with the white world. Thus, for the first time ever in my life, I felt black, I knew I was black . . . and suddenly for the first time ever in my life too, I felt inferior . . .

This photo-story, called Out of Focus, conveys one student’s sense of not belonging at UCT. The student is blurred in relation to the campus buildings that are in focus (see Photo 3).

I Think My Name is UCT is another example of the erasure of the Black experience through the metaphor of the missing student card (see Photo 4).

Fundamentally, what transpires across these realities is that a decolonial imperative for society at large is closely linked to the daily experiences of Black people in our institutions. Furthermore, that Blackness is still framed as a contradiction to academic excellence. These deep-seated attitudes and beliefs run the risk of erasing the theoretical and methodological contributions of Black scholars in higher education that could generate change.
The UCT Black Academic Caucus

The UCT BAC was set up to tackle some of these issues. BAC is currently an influential community of Black academics at UCT. However, it was not always so.

In the year 2012, a few academics from across departments and faculties met to discuss the situation on our campus. Stemming out of this meeting there would be a series of social and
networking gatherings, the focus being on establishing a network of Black academics to provide each other with psychological and career support, as well as exploring the possibilities for joint projects with the aim of building a decolonial African institution.

Later that year we acted, for the first time, as a collective. We came together to draft a joint submission against the proposed changes to the affirmative action policy. Following this submission, the circumstances surrounding the appointment of the Dean of Humanities, the first African Dean to be appointed in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT, marked another moment that renewed our eagerness to come together as Black academics.

Towards the end of 2013, we held our very first group workshop. In preparation for the workshop, we read from Professor Ntsebeza’s article on the ‘Mafeje affair’ (Ntsebeza, 2014). The experience of Mafeje, a Black South African professor and intellectual who was rejected by the institution is telling. Drawing lessons from this experience and our own, the workshop emerged with a strategic framework for our engagement with decolonisation. We identified four key strategic areas of intervention, namely research, curriculum, staffing, and institutional culture. The workshop and its outcomes provided us a strong and solid foundation on which we would later build our organisational and leadership structure.

It was not long after these events that we made another joint statement, this time in response to our Vice Chancellor’s public statement, which had concluded that Black staff lacked in capacity, among other arguments. This time our joint statement was made public, thereby drawing public commentary, support and inquiry from different quarters inside and outside the university. This was a turning point in our efforts as many more came to join our organisation.

These strides and our own individual lectures in our courses also began to plant the seed in the student milieu. While we cannot claim direct credit for the specific actions that would spawn the student protests in the following months and year, members of the BAC sowed the seeds of that protest. We had ignited in the students a critical thought and reawakened among them the dormant desire of an African university resonant with their lives and experiences. It too, the student movement, when it took off, contributed immensely to the energies that characterise our organisation today. During the occupation of the UCT administration buildings, renamed Azania House by the Rhodes Must Fall movement, Black academics stood in solidarity with the students, facilitating conversations on decolonial theories, and contributing to the vision of a free decolonised education system that prioritises African thought.

Throughout this whole period, we began to crystalise our conceptualisation of what we mean by Blackness, and the Black experience in academia and at UCT in particular, drawing from the liberation heritage of our country, the African continent and the global environment. Fundamentally, education and the university, as cultural instruments and expressions of a society, would have to radically change to represent and resonate with the African and Black person who lives, learns, and teaches in today’s South Africa.

For an organisation that is as young as ours, we have already developed the ability to mobilise and gain support within and beyond our institution. We adopted our constitution in November 2015 and held our first annual general meeting on 5 April 2016.

From the beginning we have been involved in various actions in the media, protest action, symposia and research projects. Our protest actions have included leading a march in collaboration with the academic union in 2015, and the silent protest in March 2016 to remind others of the multiple forms of violence that exist on our campus following the arrests and brutalisation of students. Our research projects include the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on the situation and experiences of Black academics in the institution.

BAC members are also chairing various task teams for transformation, including the institution-wide curriculum task team endorsed by the Vice Chancellor, which has initiated a process of
curriculum review across the institution. There have been numerous requests for consultation from all sectors of the institution, and we have started to build networks, alliances and partnerships within and across institutions with the student movements, Black alumni, and worker organisations.

Our participation in decolonisation efforts is, as a result, varied. We have established alliances with progressive groups in the institution, as well as management. We engage in protest action, as well as co-operate in the formal processes of institution-building. A key example of this is when one of our founding members was appointed as the special advisor to the Vice Chancellor in 2015. These diverse and sometimes contradictory engagements are a source of continued critical reflection on how to achieve the changes we want to see. The need to balance the participation in university structures without losing sight of the need to resist some of the underlying hierarchies is one that is hotly debated within our organisation.

Nevertheless, our achievements so far were possible because we, individually and collectively, had come to the realisation that our common experience of racism is what brought us together and that change is a collective process. We understand that our individual career trajectories are closely linked to our collective and critical participation in research projects, institutional discourses and practices, and protest activity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that a decolonial higher education will emerge through praxis—the relationship between academic knowledge and the knowledge of people located in communities on the margins of society. If not, then there is little hope that our universities can have any relevance in this society. What I have proposed, therefore, is that community social psychology in the South African and African context must emerge from and be rooted in the Black and African experience and milieu. This I premise on the conviction that the decolonial turn can only proceed if and when informed by participating in that experience.

These examples of participation by specific communities in different praxis sought to show how we are able to decolonise our institutions and society. Emerging out of these experiences is not only a consolidation of our lived reality, but also the development of concepts and consciousness through self and collective critique – including a critique of long-held ideas and theories – and creative forms of action, towards the creation of a credible body of knowledge that represents us; not us as ‘the other’.

In this sense, praxis means the interpretation of lived experience, the fact of Blackness, and the just world we imagine; and therefore, an interface between our lives, our efforts towards resistance and our imagined ideals, wherein through collective self-determination, contradiction and cooperation, a conscious sense of praxis – a decolonised education and society – constitutes a new point of departure.

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms have been used throughout.
2. Other universities include mergers and new universities that have emerged since 2000.
5. Rhodes Must Fall (RMF) is a student movement that began at the UCT in 2015 calling for the removal of the statue of Cecil John Rhodes, a symbol of colonial power.
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