

Feminist Community Psychology and the Advancement of Women in South Africa

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Abstract

In this presentation, I offer a brief personal reflection of my entry and introduction to psychology. I start from positioning myself to highlight how we do not come into institutions of higher learning and our disciplines as empty vessels but with histories that shape how we view the world. Drawing from social justice scholars and my earlier work, I point to how psychology needs to shift from locating 'problems' within individuals but instead acknowledge the structural imbalances that contribute to individual and collective dis-eases facing society. I go on to call for a decolonial feminist psychology that acknowledges the multiple oppressions faced by people in many formerly colonised nations such as South Africa, with a particular focus on women. I further show how visual methodologies such as embroideries offer the potential for epistemic justice and decolonial possibilities by centering community members as co-constructors of knowledge. I conclude by highlighting how hope carries the potential for psychological healing.

Keywords: decolonial feminist psychology, hope, embroideries, coloniality, social justice

Hello everyone! I would like to start by thanking the organizers of the ISTP conference. I'm thankful for the opportunity to come and share some of my thoughts and reflections on feminist community psychology and the advancement of women in South Africa.

By way of starting my talk, I would like to start by acknowledging and honoring my ancestors who came before me, who continue to live through me as their blood continues to flow through my veins. They suffered unspeakable forms of oppression and dehumanization because, among other things, of the color of their skin which was perceived to be a problem. Through my work I honor them. I acknowledge that I can only honor them if I take seriously

the wisdom, knowledges, and epistemologies rooted in my community, to center these in my quest for social justice.

I come to psychology as an outsider with the realization that the theories and practices in the discipline were structured in ways that alienate me and others like me from ourselves. One of the first black psychologists in South Africa, Chabani Manganyi, calls this process of alienation, "making strange" (Manganyi, 1984). We become strangers to ourselves through what we get taught, what we teach, and what we practice as part of our discipline as part of our profession.

With the realization of having become a stranger both to myself and my community, I took a step back and looked within my community as an effort to relearn the beauty, the possibilities, and hope that resides therein. This is where the work of decolonization becomes useful as a tool for me. It affords me the opportunity to look back and share that which has not been helpful in my academic journey while I create space and embrace epistemic wisdoms embedded in my community.

Toward a decolonial psychology

Decolonization allows me space to theorize from within and not rely only on borrowed theories to make sense of people's lived experiences. And here, I would like to echo the French psychologist Serge Moscovici (1972), who made the following assertion:

US social psychology has been, and still is before us, ahead of us, and around us... The real advance made by American social psychology was not so much in its empirical methods or in its theory construction as in the fact that it took for its theme of research and for the contents of its theories the issues of its own society. Its merit was as much in its techniques as in translating the problems of American society into psychological terms and in making them an object of scientific inquiry. (p. 18)

I can relate to what Moscovici speaks of here as someone who's had the opportunity to study in America. The opportunity to study in the global north where in many ways it was as if the theories were coming to life because one could see how the theories were developed within a particular context, and what happened was that these theories get transported to other contexts. These theories get transported to places like South Africa, where often in our work they do not get interrogated as much as they should, but instead get imposed and it's assumed that those theories will therefore be applicable to our communities even though they were developed elsewhere without any understanding of knowledge of African realities and cosmologies.

And these are some of the challenges that I have experienced in my own teaching, and in my own learning as a psychology scholar, and as a psychology knowledge developer. It is important to acknowledge and center situated theories as a way to make sense of the world from the places where we are located. So Moscovici's (1972) assertion for me is in line with Manganyi's (1984) notion of "making strange," highlighting the importance of looking within, and looking at your context as a starting point, as being very critical.

In this talk, I draw from the work that myself and some of my colleagues have conducted. I therefore acknowledge that I echo and represent multiple voices even though I do not claim to speak for any of my colleagues and collectives that I co-create knowledge with. I also

draw broadly from spaces that have similar histories of oppression, spaces like Aotearoa. And I borrow from teachings of scholars based in Aotearoa, such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith who engages the importance of indigenizing research methodologies. I also look at Latin America and embrace scholars such as Maria Lugones who has been instrumental in centering the importance of attending to decolonial feminism, Paulo Freire who has theorized on the importance of centering the voices of the oppressed and the marginalised, and Ignacio Martín-Baró who like Paulo Freire challenges systems of oppression and draws the discipline of psychology towards social justice work. All these scholars offer insights on the ways in which we could practice a psychology that speaks to the realities of people. A psychology that acknowledges the histories, the intersectionalities and collective traumas and suffering, while at the same time acknowledging the critical moments of resistance and hope. This is a psychology that has the ability to respond to challenges confronting our communities without being quick to situate the problem within the individual and instead taking seriously the structural, multi-dimensional sources of oppression that confront us as a result of colonialism and continue today through the process of coloniality.

Coloniality is the way in which colonialism shifts from the formal colonial conquering of people and their lands and resources to manifesting through the everyday inequalities that face people revealed via the current capitalist system that devours and seeks profit at all costs. For example, lack of good quality health systems that I'm sure many of us can relate to depending on the different context that we find ourselves in. It has become even a bigger problem in the context of COVID 19. The pandemic made the inequalities to become more visible—the access to health systems and the quality of healthcare people get is interlinked with resources people have (i.e., who can afford private healthcare and who cannot). So during moments like these with the pandemic these disparities become even more visible.

In a context like South Africa, in the past recent years we have seen the call for the decolonization of education but also the call for a curriculum that speaks to people's lived realities. Likewise, the importance of access to quality education regardless of someone's background or access to resources for education; that education be a right and not a privilege. Many communities suffer from perpetual restlessness as the world around them is structured in ways that suffocate and deny them their humanity. We therefore need a psychology of the everyday. A psychology that is grounded in ensuring that social justice and human dignity are at the center. We need a decolonial feminist community psychology which visibilizes the intersections of oppression and challenges us to create and think collaboratively and from where we are situated, so as to re-imagine a possible just future. I draw from the wisdom of Martín-Baró (1989) who challenged us to do work that moves beyond theory and engage in the praxis of fostering psychological well-being and collective consciousness. Work that seeks social consciousness, active resistance, and progressive social change in communities affected by institutional violence, repression, and social injustice.

A decolonial feminist psychology

The decolonial impulse in psychology at this moment has manifested across a variety of domains, perhaps most notably psychological theory and approaches to research methodology. Decolonial theory has helped us to deepen our understanding of how not only those of us who reside in former colonies, but citizens of former colonial powers and of countries that were not directly involved in colonization continue to live in the political,

economic, ideological, and emotional aftermath of a world dominated by the principle of western superiority.

In the context of South Africa, this multidimensional aftermath can be seen in the persistent racial disparity. According to Vice (2010), the gap between the past and the present is bridged by South Africa's famous history of perplexing injustice and inhumanity. She claims the effects of apartheid can be seen in the visible poverty, in the criminality that has affected everyone, in the child beggars on the streets, in the de facto racial segregation of living spaces, in who is serving whom in restaurants, shops, and houses. Vice further maintains that there is no need to explicitly racialize this narrative because we already know who the servant is. Apartheid's effects are best measured by looking at the status of the 'Other', despite the fact that depicting crime as impacting everyone, shows a potential fear of political correctness. It is important therefore to critically look at race as one of the important units of analysis in our psychological theorising.

To do this work, there is a need for embracing the broad field of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary critical social theory and activism including, for example, critical race theory. I argue that we all need to think about the dynamics of what we teach, what we theorize, and the methodologies we use in our work. Decolonizing psychology involves generating products that speak boldly across time and imagination, documenting what is, but more than that provoking the radical imagination for what might be. Decolonizing praxis in psychology begins in the struggles of local communities and reveals the entangled circuits of power, of dispossession, and of resistance that link us. A decolonizing psychology has further ethical obligations to invoke a justice of redistribution and recognition, refracted through an intersectional lens, rooted in epistemologies of struggle and care and love, and focuses on a new imaginary of solidarity and justice.

It is therefore critical to note that the classic struggles of power, authority, representation, and potential for epistemological violence hover still as the next generation of work moves psychology toward a more radical decolonizing project. At this point, I would like to turn from decolonizing psychology more broadly to zooming in on the importance of taking a feminist lens in our approach. And to this end I draw from decolonial feminism.

Decolonial feminism forces us to look back at the role that colonialism, slavery, and in the context of South Africa, apartheid, played and continue to play in how we do and engage notions of gender and how we define the private and public. Looking back at the process of colonization assists us to make meaning of what it means to be gendered, to be classed, and to be racialized beings.

The imposition of Western gender order dehumanizes the colonized and perpetuates what Quijano (2000) calls the "coloniality of gender" (p. 378). In her work on decolonial feminism, Lugones (2007) reminds us that it was colonialism which introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies, and ways of knowing—as the colonized, black women are subject to the most extreme sexual and gender violence attended to the dehumanizing practice of the coloniality of gender that Lugones speaks of. The violence happens at both the micro and the macro level. So it happens in the home, it happens in the streets where women do not feel safe, it happens in the workplaces, and various other spaces that women occupy in society. A decolonial feminist approach asks us to take these intersections seriously. Intersections of history, of politics, the private, the public, to

acknowledge that gendered violations do not happen in isolation (Segalo & Fine, 2020). It is often not an individual experience as it affects the collective.

A decolonial feminist approach asks us to shift away from only positioning suffering as an inward experience but acknowledging it as both inward and outward at the same time. The discipline of psychology has generally been guilty of theorizing mostly from an individual perspective, often ignoring the importance of context, almost as if human beings are separated from their environment in the ways in which it affects their very existence. A decolonial feminist psychology therefore proposes a radical shift from the linear and binary modes of thinking that present gender, and gendered violence in binary ways. We need to acknowledge that who we are now as gendered beings is as a result of the colonial past which has pitched people against one another. The colonial state not only categorized men and women in specific gendered ways, but also created different access of privilege and power in relation to this.

In her enunciation of decolonial feminism principles, Lugones (2010) calls for an approach to gender that is not individualistic but considers gender in relation to the community. Gender as understood here is not fixed. She further argues that part of the task of resistance of a coloniality of gender involves shifting from such an individualistic approach that separates our sense of being and doing from our communities. Communities, rather than individuals, enable the doing one does with someone else not in individualist isolation. A decolonial feminist community oriented psychology approach is necessary.

And what this kind of approach does is that it recognizes the role and meaning of community to individual well-being and sees these two modes of connection as inseparable. The community and the individual, and the individual being part of the community and not existing outside of the community or separate from the community. So this interconnectedness is critical to acknowledge, is critical to take note of as we engage the ways in which we connect and engage with one another and how we are affected by the challenges of the everyday.

Understanding how gender structures itself in our everyday lives requires an engagement with social, political and psychosocial dimensions of gender in terms of such connections. Understanding these everyday struggles requires us to think of the possibility of a decolonial community psychology. Decolonial community psychology is in line with Chabani Manganyi's (2013) psychology of the everyday life, a psychology for and about ordinary people, ordinary women and men, a psychology that aims at advancing our society into a non-racist and humane society. Manganyi calls this a “public interest psychology” (p. 287).

We need to ask ourselves a number of questions. We need to ask within the context of South Africa, which is where I'm based, what would a public interest psychology look like? Within the context where you are based, what would a public interest psychology look like? And in the context of gender-based violence more specifically, where do these men who brutally abuse and kill women come from and what is the role of communities in responding to challenges of gender-based violence? So we need to shift from only looking at the individual, as I've indicated. Shift away from looking at the man who is the individual who commits the crime but engage the ways in which we are socialized as a people, we are socialized as communities—how our communities produce such people. How structural

violence breeds violent citizenry. How colonialism and apartheid dehumanized people and created psychologically wounded people whose humanity was stripped away from them.

We need to look at these challenges holistically while at the same time holding perpetrators accountable for their actions. We are quick to treat the symptoms. For example, we are quick to arrest the perpetrators who are later released from incarceration to the very same community that they came from, to the very same community members that they violated. And we do this while the real issues remain firmly rooted. So, imagining a way to respond to gender-based violence, for example, has to take seriously the role played by patriarchy, the role played by capitalism, by coloniality, and the historical baggage that many of our communities continue to carry. As Thomas Teo (2019) reminds us, understanding of the world, of society, and of sub-cultures allows for change. And the truth of this idea cannot be decided in neutral reflection but in personal thought and activism. So how much do we understand our communities? What are the histories of the communities that we conduct our research in? What level of engagement and how deep and in depth is our engagement with the communities that we are part of, with the communities that assist us in our knowledge production in our theorizing?

The Importance of Hope

So, what are some of the ways that we can do this work? The work of pushing forward a decolonization agenda. So, in the midst of despair, in the midst of perpetual police brutality, in the midst of gender-based violence, of desperation of uncertainty, of having to deal with intersecting injustices and everyday struggles that affect people disproportionately, we need to pause and acknowledge that there continues to be glimmers of hope.

Hope as being the key word here, because when we think about the injustices, when we think about the everyday challenges that confront people, can we really speak about the possibility of hope? But I believe that it is hope that assists us to continue doing the work that we are doing. It is with a hope that what we do and how we do it has the potential to bring about change. That the work that we're doing has the potential to lead us to psychological healing. So having glimmers of hope is very useful because it propels us, it fuels us to continue going forward in the work that we're doing.

The work done by activists and everyday women in their homes and communities offer radical possibilities on how we can imagine confronting the crisis of gendered violence. It is important for communities to pull together to assist one another and hold space for one another. There continues to be collective efforts that serve to cater for the well-being of fellow human beings and these are critical points of possible healing.

Psychologists in particular, in the academy more broadly, as sides of responsibility and as sides of response-ability—the ones with the ability to respond, we have to always tie the symptoms to histories. We have to name the ruptures. We have to theorize the various struggles from the context wherein they occur. We need to look particularly at the idea of home. Home as part of the community. Homes as the ones that build communities. But acknowledging that homes are both spaces of care and sometimes there are spaces of violence as well, deeply affected by the market in the state. We have the responsibility to mobilize with communities under siege. But also we have to break loose the bounds of

theory that forces us to see through particular lenses only, but instead to broaden the lens and not allow theory to determine and to limit.

Working from a decolonial lens: Embroideries

So, now moving to the ways in which we work with communities using a decolonial lens. How do I work decolonially with the community? And here I would like to focus for a moment on the importance of method because for me method is interlinked with theory and one sort of bleeds into another. Theory and method work together. So drawing from Aotearoa, in her extensive work on decolonizing methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2015) argues that when indigenous peoples become the researchers and not merely the researched, the activity of research is transformed. For Smith, decolonization is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices. Method is important as it represents a set of conventions on how knowledge is gathered and codified. Smith (1999) goes on to argue that

there are numerous oral stories which tell of what it means, what it feels like to be present while your history is erased before your eyes, dismissed as irrelevant, ignored, or rendered as the lunatic ravings of drunken old people. (p. 29)

Using a decolonial approach means being committed to producing research knowledge that documents social injustice, that recovers subjugated knowledges, that helps create spaces for the voices of the silenced to be expressed and listened to, and that challenge racism, colonialism and oppression. To this end we have to consider alternative methods of conducting research and for me in my work in particular, one such alternative is visual methodology and a visual method called 'embroideries.'

So, how do I engage with decolonial theory in my work? In my work, I ask how might we engage critical psychology, scholarship, theory, practice differently? How might we engage these otherwise? Now that we know and cannot deny the steady stream of racialized, engendered violence that runs under our feet. How do we theorize pain, social injustice, and collective suffering (Segalo & Fine, 2020). So, I'm interested in the critical project of decolonizing knowledges, which involves contesting what liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (1989) calls, "the institutional lie" (p. 8)—where we are told, or where people are told that their stories do not matter. The collective master narrative that speculates, that gets told about people and about politics. Even in the language of struggles, one can hear the dialectics of colonial and colonizing discourses. Decoloniality is thus an unfinished iterative project. To decolonize is to look within and undo or rework the colonizing, oppressive structures from the inside out and then look again from the outside in.

So in an attempt to answer some of the questions I have posed thus far, I shall now move to my work, to the visual methodology that I use in my work. I believe that knowledge production is an ongoing process that happens during moments of encounters with each other. I work with community women who use their knowledge of making embroideries to tell and share their complex lived experiences. Visual methodologies, like the embroideries that the women I work with use, foster participation. The making of personal and collective

embroideries empower and give voice to those who may otherwise not be heard. They offer a different approach that takes seriously the women as knowers.

The women I work with acknowledge their suffering and the various forms of violence that they have experienced in the past, some of them who have grown up during apartheid, but they also at the same time show how they resist it and how they continue to resist and ways in which they build survival strategies through collective remembering. But also re-imagining. The making of embroideries shows in practice how decolonial feminism can be possible through advocating for love and care where one's humanity is embraced first and foremost. For me, this process of making embroideries as a form of speaking back is part of decolonizing.

Decolonization is a humanizing project, one that deems important the creation for a space for healing. It requires us to acknowledge people's woundedness before attempting to work with and alongside one another. So some of the theoretical and methodological implications of using embroidery as an engaged form of community practice is that it allows for cross-referencing the act of doing in the form of embroidery with narration, embroidery is centred as a form of storytelling. And it opens up spaces between other art forms and enables women who survived substantial assaults against their material, social, and cultural bodies to reclaim their identity and their sense of agency, reconstituting discontinuous subjectivities and repositioning themselves through telling their own stories.

Theoretically, embroidery deepens our understanding of the subjective experience of suffering. And methodologically, it reveals a narrative approach and analysis that searches for hidden transcripts, transcripts of resistance, transcripts of aftershocks, and also transcripts of the unsayable. The unspeakable atrocities that people have gone through in the past but in many ways people are still going through in the present as well. So, these unsayable stories, scripts, manifest themselves through marks that are left on people's bodies through the psyche from the trauma that people have experienced.

Embroidery as a methodological approach seeks explanations of how we know what we know and highlights the value of what we know. In other words, key epistemological questions—it creates a space for these. Some of the key themes in my work are the power of silencing. What does it mean to have histories erased and/or not acknowledged? And this is something that I mentioned earlier referring to Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999; 2015) and her highlighting the importance of oral stories, the importance of telling our stories. But in my work, I don't focus on oral stories literally, but I focus on the ways in which stories could be told through art forms such as embroidery. And what are the counterforces of not having someone listen to you, which in turn forces you to be silent?

So, as we continue to theorize and attempt to make meaning of our individual context and other contexts more globally, it is critical to do so with what Thomas Teo calls, "epistemic modesty" (Teo, 2019, p. 31). So instead of self-assured statements of generalizability, we practice humility in acknowledging the multiple sides where knowledge resides when knowledge is produced. And take such knowledges as legitimate, as useful for us in our quest and in our theorizing within psychology. So taking a decolonial standpoint allows us to acknowledge the multiplicity of knowledges and theorizing. We need to be humble and

embrace the possibility of indigenous knowledges, of indigenous wisdom, and what they can offer us as scholars and what they can offer us as researchers and us as students.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by echoing Thomas Teo (2019) once more as he warns us that the critique of colonial psychology, where the call is to adopt a decolonial approach, and the support for indigenous psychologies also requires going beyond decolonization as metaphor, as a noble innocent project. But that we need to understand all of these as being part of a struggle for intellectual and social justice at home, wherever we may be, and abroad.

So colleagues, I would like to pause here and hope that I have offered us some thoughts and ideas in terms of what decolonization can offer us, what decolonial feminism can offer us, what a decolonial community psychology can offer us. That as we continue in our quest to look for a psychology of the everyday, a psychology that takes seriously people's experiences, challenges, struggles, and suffering—that we acknowledge where people are situated. And that we embrace the multiplicity of all the different spaces where knowledge can be produced and the different knowledge systems and cosmologies that can only enrich the work that we do.

And with this, I would like to thank you for the opportunity and thank you for listening. I thank you.

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Her scholarship focuses on the post-apartheid struggles that women engage in - in freeing themselves now from the shackles of patriarchy. In addition to being a rated scholar by the South African National Research Foundation, Professor Segalo has won several performance awards at institutional, national and international levels. She has dedicated her work toward the advancement of women in South Africa at the level of economics, education, and also their deep psychological sense of purpose and community.

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