

Psychology in society? Addressing the academic/activist divide and the “magical boundary” of the academy

“...we tell ourselves and our students that everything is simultaneously political and theoretical, yet we seem to have a hard time connecting the two outside the university” (Blomley, 1994: 28)

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“The country we want to live in”: Psychology in society

A fairly recent South African text initiative titled **The country we want to live in: Hate crimes and homophobia in the lives of black lesbian South Africans** edited by gender and social activists Nonhlanhla Mkhize, Jane Bennett, Vasu Reddy and Relebohile Moletsane (2010) presents a stark and grim reminder that full and active citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa remains elusive for particular groups of people, living on the margins of society, whose lives remain unaffected by the much lauded constitutional gains and redress initiatives of a young democracy. Reflecting upon those haunting words: *“the country we want to live in”* incites me to ponder this country that we live in. I think about citizenship and belonging. I think about violence and its gendered forms. I think about feminist activism in South Africa and I think about my chosen profession, Psychology. What this title presents back to me is the promise of what a critical psychology project should be, must be. And so, I think reflectively not only about my rootedness in a profession that has historically strived to maintain a “magic boundary” between its intellectual, academic pursuits and broader society, but also about the different spaces and avenues that have critically and reflectively attempted to engage this dichotomy as a means of redress.

Since its inception 30 years ago, one of the defining features of **Psychology in society (PINS)** has been its dedication to engaging social issues and critical psychology work more generally. And yet, much critical psychology work that has published in the journal has gradually steered away from full engagement with the dynamics of a postcolonial society intersecting with broader global configurations of power. Inevitably then much focus has been on developing psychological analysis and commentary to social issues that have often entailed both intellectual and activist research and dialogue. More specifically feminist psychology

contributions are not only sparse but have increasingly come to reflect the growing tensions and challenges of feminist psychology more generally in engaging the configurations of gender and power in society. Ratele's (2003: 12) caution that a psychology that fails to reflect an "actual, living society" is part of increasing critical voices concerned with the silencing of the possibility of a "relevant" psychology that is attentive to the needs of society (e.g. Macleod, 2004; Sher & Long, 2012; Macleod & Howell, 2013;) and what such a psychology would look like. This call for relevance speaks to broader issues related to the magical boundaries that the discipline has historically erected between itself and the socio-political concerns and issues of the day, and predominantly continues to do in a post-apartheid context. Thirty years on, what is the state of feminist psychology contributions to **PINS**'s socio-political concerns of engaging society? While this space remains critical it also highlights some of the tensions and challenges that remain to be tackled by feminist psychologists if the practice of relevance is to be realised.

Challenges of a transformative academy and feminist research

While there has been some important theoretical focus on critical and transformative feminist practice and research over the years in **PINS**, these debates and engagements have however been quite minimal (for example, **PINS** 1997 – 2011 include limited feature articles specifically related to gender and sexuality). Contributions range from particular focus on relations of gender and sexuality such as intimate partner violence, attitudes toward homosexuality and as part of professional training to more emphasis on the micro politics, nuances, knowledges and psychosocial re/enactments of gender and sexuality. Part of the latter has included two special issues on Masculinity. The predominant silences and absences in the journal are reflective both of the relative isolation of feminist psychology in South Africa more generally as well as a growing tendency amongst some feminist scholars in the discipline to engage and collaborate outside of the disciplinary domain, publishing and sharing their work in more activist and radical spaces such as **Feminist Africa** and **Agenda**. These journals have been particularly embraced for their focus on collaborative dialogue between researchers and feminist activists across the continents. So what space for a feminist psychology that engages society beyond the commentary on social issues and that is reflexive about the theoretical nuances of gender and sexuality?

Perhaps as Macleod (2006) and Mama (2011) suggest *how* we engage the "tools" of feminist research constitutes one of the core entry points to engaging a feminist psychology that is actively relevant to engaging the structural networks of relations of power in society. Part of this task entails a critical reflection of the production of gender in feminist psychology that is in dialogue with a post-apartheid context, how gendered meanings are attached to different practices and processes of gendered citizenship. Emphasis beyond the relationships of gender that is extended to include active interrogation of gender as topic of inquiry must become a core priority. Given the marginal status of feminist psychology in South Africa, Macleod (2006) urges for an active intellectual activism that foregrounds both feminist theory and practice. Such a call I would imagine must involve revisiting theoretical and methodological conceptualisations of gender and relations of gender that have been at the heart of much socio-political transformations in the country.

Revisiting current social crises that incorporate the identities of gender and sexuality, such as gender-based violence for example, remains a critical avenue to reinvigorate feminist psychological research in the academy. Feminist scholar and activist Jane Bennett (2010) urges us to think "beyond" current understandings and conceptualisations of the relationship between gender and violence in wholly dichotomous terms (such as "victim" vs "perpetrator", "women", "men" etc) while simultaneously engaging the actual lived experiences and realities of subjects that are so

gendered. This is quite a complex and challenging task, and yet, perhaps useful to begin thinking about a transformative gender politics that is both relevant to current social crises, but also laying the groundwork for liberatory praxis that is not “trapped” in theories and language of binaries. In a different vein, both academic and activist research alike tends to emphasise and engage dominant relations of heterosexuality that is focused on relations of power. Active and pleasurable heterosexualities remain in the backdrop of these discussions and explorations. Engaging counter-heteronormative practices and activism requires more diverse theorisation of the dynamics of heterosexuality that both recognise dimensions of power and pleasure.

Unfortunately, academic feminist and activist work tends to circulate separately from each other and presents some of the challenges and disjuncture in feminist psychology in South Africa. This is especially contradictory given feminist research’s implicit orientation for engaging both the relationship between research and activism. The challenge thus remains to create knowledges that both engage our immediate and global contexts as well as sustain transformative action. Mama (2011) observes that the challenge of the feminist intellectual project must therefore necessitate being vigilant against isolation in the academy. Staying connected to grassroots movements that allow us to continuously and reflexively engage the structures and relations of power is critical in this task.

Conclusion

Bourdieu’s (2000) scathing critique of academic intellectual pursuits that remain distant from the socio-political realities within which they practice and produce is a critical reminder to the intellectual project of psychologists working to engage a different kind of practice in their discipline. We must address our own complicities in both creating and sustaining the “magical boundaries” that characterize our practice. These boundaries do not solely reside within the domains of the mainstream but are equally within the at times complacent domain of critical (feminist) psychology. Part of this complacency derives from the often explicit and at times implicit divide between academic and activist practice. And yet, we must also heed Bennett’s (2010) caution against the pitfall of deploying (the at times dichotomous) notions of “research” and “activism” in ways that re-inscribe relations of power both within and outside the academy. Collaborative work with activists reinvigorates a feminist psychology that is able to develop and engage methodologies and research agendas that are truly attuned to a “social psychology of an actual living society” (Ratele, 2003: 12).

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