

Narratives of everyday resistance from the margins¹

Abstract

*In this introduction and framing to this special issue on “Narratives of everyday resistance from the margins”, we make the case that narrative method and practice can contribute to a radical scholarship of psychosocial praxis. Critical scholarship is after all the mainstay of the **PINS (Psychology in society)** tradition since its inception in 1983 (Anonymous, 2014). To continue with this tradition of this critical theorisation, we reflect on themes contained in the five papers that constitute this issue and beyond, especially in relation to how these themes also link with similar global issues. We argue for conceiving of the collection of stories as agential narratives which contribute to a decolonial scholarship by centring lives positioned on the margins of post-apartheid South Africa. The stories told here recognise that the capitalist, racist and patriarchal orders which create abjection and poverty reside alongside lives permeated by joy and the search for meaning. The hallmark of the stories is a narrative of resistance and the refusal to accept inequality and injustice. We posit that the narrative frame is humanising and enables scholars to centre the everyday as a site for illuminating “wretched making” and the different ways of saying no.*

Introduction

When we first proposed this special issue to the editorial board of **PINS**, the editor responded that while he found the proposal compelling, he wanted the original intent for the establishment of the journal to be honoured. This is to

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say he wanted a radical and critical orientation to psychology in society. As community psychologists, our own work is inspired by progressive scholars of psychology published in early issues of **PINS** who spoke out about how the profession of South African psychology also colluded with the apartheid regime in oppressing black people. The voice of marginalised groups remained muted in the public discourses or was presented from a helpless/victimised point of view. For this special issue, we asked authors to listen out for the agency of the various subjects whose stories they had collected. Many of these subjects are often on the margins of our society. It is therefore important that narrative approaches are employed to explore various aspects of subjectivity which focuses more on personally experienced or lived aspects of social identity and social location (Blackman et al, 2008). The notion of subjectivity challenges traditional psychological conceptions that people are mechanically positioned to behave in a particular manner. In this paper we highlight the complexities of how subjective experiences of being positioned or positioning oneself, play themselves out in the everyday narratives of resistance. This view is inflected by our conscious awareness of the editorial injunction to engage in a radical and critical orientation to psychology. However, since narrative is a core concern of this issue, we have to begin by thinking about what makes narrative methods radical. For us, narrative is radical to the extent that it enables the surfacing of profound critiques of inequality and enables calls for drastic shifts in social conditions which perpetuate psychosocial wretchedness. We expand on these thoughts below.

In sitting with the important question of what matters about narrative at this time to warrant a special issue on narrative research, we begin by thinking about South African society 22 years into the post-apartheid period. One of the main considerations is that the moment of the big gesture (see **PINS 26**, the special issue on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2000; Stevens & Laubscher, 2010) has passed by with very little benefit for the majority of South Africans. Natrass and Seekings (2001) have warned of growing intra-race class inequalities, while Ndletyana (2014) has illustrated that inequality largely mirrors apartheid forms of race-based inequalities. Among those caught within the epicentre of inequality, in this issue we count those who are unemployed, widowed women from the forgotten rural spaces of the periphery, the increasing number of homeless youth, and young black lesbian women who bear the full brunt of toxic masculinities, patriarchal culture and a greedy capitalistic economic system.

We have had “enough” time of progressive legislation to make the claim that it has not fundamentally altered the lives of those who are marginalised by rampant capitalism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. It is against this backdrop that von Holdt (2013) describes the South African democracy as violent. It is characterised by new forms of violence alongside the reproduction of older patterns of violence. For von Holdt (2013),

the political elites appear to be at the centre in mobilising communities to engage in service delivery protests to gain control over state resources. It is through access to state tenders and contractors that some political elites accumulate wealth, creating a widening gap between the rich and the poor. As we write this, South Africa is in the grips of an economic recession; the inequalities between the wealthy and the poor are at an all-time high; 58 000 jobs were lost in the past year and unemployment figures have climbed to 30% (Statistics South Africa, 2017). In a province like the Eastern Cape, historically a mining labour reserve, the unemployment rate is at 44% (Statistics South Africa, 2017). Seccombe (2017) notes that mining, which has traditionally served as an employer of impoverished men who each support an average of ten family members, has shed approximately 70 000 jobs in the past five years. The **Business Day** recently reported that “AngloGold Ashanti, the world’s third-largest gold miner, could cut up to 8 500 jobs, or a third of its South African workforce, as two unprofitable mines reach the end of their lives” (Seccombe, 2017). Societal responsibility to save jobs and livelihoods has taken a back seat in the drive to appease global economic ratings agencies and the need to satisfy foreign investors. Moreover, the weakening of labour movements at the altar of political expediency and co-option has meant that those made poor are at the mercy of capitalist market forces.

Redemptive narratives of reconciliation, renaissance, and Africa rising, are ringing hollow (Gqola, 2004; Von Hold et al, 2011; Stevens et al, 2013), as they fail to deliver on the promise to change everyday material conditions. There is some consensus about this at the national level. Socio-political tensions are evident within the governing class and the classes of wealthy and privileged are fearful of the crime wave fuelled by the despair of poverty (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2017). Racialised inequalities (Ndletyana, 2014) are laid bare by insurgent narratives of black nationalism which are driving fear into the white citizenry. Escalating costs of higher education and student resistance has shaken the security of the middle classes. The collective future of the country and those who bear the full brunt of these tensions, appears bleak. In this issue, we do not address the collective malaise of this moment. Rather, we seek to understand how ordinary women widowed by state violence and capitalist greed are making meaning of their losses and lives in the aftermath of devastation. We analyse their everyday lives in the wake of loss (see Kros in this issue). The meaning of Marikana looms large and small across the stories – centrally for Kros and Bradbury – but the shadow casts a pall over the lives engaged with by Langa and Canham. We trace the lives of township based young men as they grapple with their becoming men in an environment of unemployment and daily violence. What sense do they make of their lives when the expected trajectory of life fails to deliver on its promise that they will be breadwinners, heads of households, and present and supportive fathers (see Langa, and Bradbury in this issue)? We hone in on the accounts of black lesbian women as they live their lives within embedded scripts

of patriarchal homophobia, sexism, and familial and communal violence (see Canham in this issue). The authors are interested in recognising that abjection and poverty reside alongside lives of joy and searches for meaning. This means going beyond the simplicity of telling stories to analyse and examine insight that each narrative illustrates. The key argument in this analysis is that narratives do not “exist in a vacuum but are shaped by lifelong personal and community narratives” (Duff & Bell, 2002: 208). Given this, there is a conscious search for complexity which is enabled by narrative accounts of life that centre the messiness and non-linearity of living.

In every respect then, this issue is about the everyday and the lives of those cast as marginal and expendable in the national discourse. All papers are centrally engaged with the participants’ thoughts of the practises of everyday life. Everyday life is “the essential, taken-for granted continuum of activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds. It is the ultimate, non-negotiable reality and the unavoidable basis for all other forms of human endeavour” (Felski, 1999: 15). Narratives in this issue cover everyday lived experiences of pain, and suffering but as well as narratives of joy, celebration, resistance and subversion of dominant discourses, representing alternative views of living as a marginal subject.

Methodologically and theoretically, the narrative approach enabled us to access the everyday lived experiences and meaning making while simultaneously engaging and critiquing the social and cultural circumstances under which narratives are produced and reproduced. This is therefore a project about psychology in society. To centre the lives of those that are marginalised, we believe that they are best placed to speak for themselves. The narrative frame enables this. We do not do this in the tradition of “giving voice to the voiceless”. It is not possible or desirable to speak on behalf of the other. Using Spivak’s famous injunction that the subaltern can indeed speak, Kros (in this issue) states that black unemployed widowed women can speak. We assert that all marginalised people can speak and they do speak. It is through storying their lives that their voices emerge in the process of making meaning of their place in the world. Narrative enables them, and indeed us as researchers, to weave their stories into the broader social fabric of the national and indeed international moment of nervous anxiety (see Fine in this issue).

Enstoried lives and the co-constitution of narrative accounts

The turn to narrative is not new. Africans have consciously utilised storytelling to live and to make sense of their worlds across time. Narrative has therefore remained close to South African scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. The generative Apartheid Archive Project has indeed established its basis as a storytelling initiative (see for example, **PINS 40**, 2010). Our claim for this as a narrative issue is the very overt meta

and micro analytical orientation to narrative. This is to say, we think about storytelling as a means of living within the South African context today. Therefore, we not only tell stories ourselves, but we also reflect on story telling as form. For instance, photovoice as a form of collaborative storytelling is a participatory action research methodology used by both Langa, and Haynes-Rolando (discussed by Bradbury in this issue).

Narrative theorists agree that storytelling maintains sociality because stories involve tellers and hearers and because we make meaning of our lives in relation to others (Squire, 2013). The others may be an imagined audience. For instance, we write this as an attempt to convey understanding with an imagined audience in mind. For Bruner (1990), humans have an inborn need to tell and make sense of stories. He argues that humans are *homo narrans*. Even psychoanalytic researchers who claim that unconscious experience escapes narrative accept that psychoanalysis is an attempt to make enstoried meaning (see for example, Frosh, 2002). On this point, Frosh et al (2003: 39) argue that “there is no such thing as the individual, standing outside the social”. It is clear that contemporary applied psychoanalytic theory sees the subject as both social and psychological, with behaviour influenced by the interplay between “external” social and “internal” psychological processes (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). This suggests that meaning making is a reconstitution of internal experience rather than a direct translation. In telling a story then, the meaning originally assigned to it may change over time depending on the context in which the subject finds themselves.

When we think of the testimonies of widowed women whose husbands were killed, we must be attentive to the ways in which meanings may shift in each account. This is in part influenced by the interlocutors involved. The women address a judge and prosecutors to convince them of the reality and pain of their loss and the material destitution they have suffered as a consequence. They also speak to impress upon them that their husbands were murdered in cold blood by an unjust system motivated by capitalist greed. Their accounts illustrate the psycho-social elements of narrative. As a researcher interested in the social context, Kros highlights spoken personal testimony as these accounts provide access to the social realm (see Squire, 2013). The women who spoke at the Farlam commission are also conscious of the fact that they are narrating the pain of families which include mothers, children and other dependents of the murdered men. These family members are not afforded the opportunity of public grief even if the entire world has access (through film, newsreels, and YouTube) to the moment of the death of their loved ones. Aware of the historical significance of the massacre, they are documenting their version for posterity. They are doing political work by articulating a version of events among many other interpretations including contesting ones by the police and big business. To be sure, these women may narrate different versions of events to their children when they are asked to explain where

their fathers are. When Bradbury's (this issue) women students talk to young men about their lives, the identity of the hearer matters for what is said and how the story is narrated. The listener is therefore a crucial partner in determining the narrative thread and the meaning making (Squire, 2013).

Langa has worked with the young men of his study since they were boys. This longitudinal exposure has allowed him to witness the transformation that comes with transitioning from being teenagers to adulthood. However, the transformation enabled by narrative is made visible by the nurturing approach that Langa adopts with the young men. He co-constitutes their stories in ways that illustrate the dialogic nature of narrative. The young men hold him "accountable" for their lives as he navigates their lives with them. In the absence of fathers, his (periodic) interest in their lives means that they are able to hold a more or less constant image of a black man who cares about them. The young men influence Langa's rendering of their lives. He tells a tender tale of black young men within a context of the dominant representation of young township based black men as characterised by toxic masculinities (Cock, 2001). In contrast, as black lesbian women, Canham's interviewees have a different relationship to him. Their relationship was fleeting and he was different to them in many ways including in his gender identity. Their narrative accounts have an educational element in that they attempt to school him on their lives. As an "outsider," they required him to understand their stories so that he portrays them correctly. As a sexual minority whose public lives are portrayed through a narrative of victimhood, they needed him to move beyond unidimensional accounts. Mindful of the fact that their stories would be read by various audiences, they insisted that Canham capture their victimhood and their joy.

Narrative complexity during times of despair

The ability and commitment to hold complexity even during times of despair is required to honour the lives of those we work with. This is difficult but even more important during moments of hyper visible despair. The economic, political and social climate of South Africa and the world is characterised by despair. Economies are deep in recession and shedding jobs thus making the lives of the working class tenuous. Judith Butler (2006) describes this as a precarious life that we live with anxiety and instability. Events of the world remain unpredictable with political, social and economic changes occurring within short periods of time. Access to global media enables news in any part of the world to travel rapidly, thus contributing to the creation of worldwide anxiety and despair. In Fine's analysis of the articles in this issue, she is particularly attuned to this global mood of despair and how it articulates with the gloom in the not so post-apartheid South Africa. Others have observed the localisation of the globe through the extensive reach of multilateral organisations such as the World Bank, aid organisations, and mega churches which entrench the dominance of the neoliberal world order (see for example,

Parker, 2014). The consequence is that homophobic religious sentiments of western evangelism are exported to the far reaches of the globe and inequality is widened when economic ranking agencies force governments to scale down on interventions meant to support the impoverished. The ownership of natural resources on the African continent is transferred to wealthy foreign investors and management is outsourced at the colonial metropole. Mirroring empire, Lonmin is headquartered far away from the dangerous and murderous site of extraction of platinum in the colony. The result is financial “prudence” such as mine closures ahead of promoting local livelihoods. The consequence of this rabid capitalist accumulation is that communities and individual lives are devastated. The police open fire and kill dozens of miners when they withdraw their labour in protest for a living wage (see Kros in this issue).

Protests against mining operations due to environmental concerns and poor wages are a common feature worldwide. For example, citizens of Peru, Brazil, Guatemala and other parts of the world have been protesting against big multinational mining companies for decades. Native Americans have recently protested for months over the proposed Dakota pipeline, which would lead to the desecration of their ancestral land. Many of these protests like in Marikana also led to violence with the deployment of the police by the state to maintain so called “law and order” which has generally supported big business. In the process of maintaining social order which only benefits the rich at the expense of the poor, the police deprive citizens of their liberties, including the right to protest against unjust systems that affects their daily lives. As a consequence, many people live precarious lives with a foreclosed sense of security and future. Young black men who complete school find that the promise of education is not forthcoming as they are unable to find gainful employment (see Langa, and Bradbury in this issue), homelessness proliferates, and black lesbian working class women bear the brunt of homophobia and capitalist exclusion. They are prevented from realising their full rights promised in the human rights regime in which our legislation is framed (see Canham in this issue). We live during a time of despair.

Narrative methods which elicit stories are able to tap into this despair. But they do more. They enable a complexity which is closer to the realities of everyday life. Lives lived during times of despair are no less complex than those lived in the world’s metropolitan centres. All the papers highlight the agency of the people living in the wake of capitalist subjugation. The widowed women whose husbands were murdered in Marikana attended the hearing at the Farlam commission and insisted on inserting their voices into the narrative of the massacre. They contested narratives of political elites, capitalist interests represented by big business, and culpability narratives propagated by a violent and capitalist infiltrated police service. Some of them replaced their dead husbands on the platinum mines and others contain grieving children and parents in the distant

homelands. The young men that Langa, and Bradbury, write about are highly functional and well integrated into their communities. They lead meaningful lives in which they negotiate the meanings of fatherhood and sexual identities, relationships with their parents and community members, and they explore meanings of work in the context of a jobless economy.

Black lesbian working class women live in the intersection of multiple oppressions. But the cohort of women that Canham spoke to insisted that they are more than any form of oppression. They wanted him to know that they are lovers, they enjoy dancing, they find joy and security in socialising as groups and they create alternative spaces where they express themselves in ways that are affirming of who they are. Our claim is that this complexity in the accounts of the communities that were studied was enabled by the narrative methodology adopted. The personal narratives enabled an analysis which linked the personal story to the big story narratives of our time (Phoenix, 2013). This is starkly represented in the paper of the women widowed in the Marikana massacre. It is also present in how black lesbian women's personal "small" stories (Bamberg & Geogakopoulou, 2008) interlink with the "big" story (Freeman, 2006) of violence against working class lesbian women.

Humanising through tracing international circulations of narratives

Fine (in this issue) makes an important intervention when she draws attention to South African parochialism in the analytical lenses adopted by the authors. She illustrates that if neoliberalism underpins the classed despair of poverty in South Africa, the same neoliberalism must be traced and pursued to all the locations where it wrecks its havoc. In this way, she illuminates the similarities that impoverished South Africans share with brown and black North and South Americans. She reminds us that the effects of state and corporate greed in South Africa have similar consequences for the people that mine the depths of Chile. This analysis gives scholars and activists a frame for thinking about the logic of global inequality, its local manifestations, and the solidarities which might emerge among those made wretched. It has the potential of humanising people by highlighting the similarities that result from dehumanising global forces. In a critique of the papers in this issue, Fine calls for an interpretive courage which reads the local in relation to the global: "I yearn for a bit of interpretive courage to reach beyond the local, whereby these authors knead and stretch the wisdom that their essays radiate, for those of us laboring with narratives of trauma, desire, resistance and injustice in contexts quite distinct from South Africa have much to learn from these theorists."

Without the space to hear each other's stories of local resistance, we might be unable to aspire to the creation of a united global front of resistance born of the recognition that Nigerians, Brazilians, Indians and South Africans share similar struggles. Narrative

enables the articulation of a human voice from which we might recognise ourselves and our global humanity. Mignolo (2009) reminds us that the role of the socially conscious scholar is to strive towards a humanising epistemology. Our claim here is that we are offering a humanising project which centres the stories that make us human. The stories simultaneously recognise the ways in which groups of people are dehumanised as well as the agency of people which allows them to claim their voice to resist and humanise themselves.

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