

Societal Transformation: Gender, Feminism and
Psychology in South Africa

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In 1993 Gay Seidman predicted that South Africa may prove an exception to the rule that nationalist movements, once in power, typically fail to deliver struggle-era promises to end gender oppression. Some four years later we can say that in many respects the South African government has demonstrated its commitment to gender equality. Overall, the greatest strides have been made in the establishment of a legal framework and in setting up various structures for the advancement of gender equality. In this introduction to the Special Feature our focus is twofold: first, we use gender as a category of analysis to present a broad overview of societal transformation in South Africa since the first democratic elections in April 1994; second we review some of the changes in psychology since the launch of the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) at the beginning of 1994 (see Burman, 1994).

NATIONAL PROGRESS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Mechanisms and structures

The South African Constitution, adopted in May 1996 after a lengthy period of negotiation, includes a Bill of Rights which forbids discrimination on the grounds of gender, sex and sexual orientation, among other criteria. Not only does it protect equality through prohibiting discrimination, there is also provision for legislative and other measures designed to advance persons, or categories of

persons who suffer disadvantage. One of these measures is the constitutional requirement that a Commission for Gender Equality be established.

A specific motivation for the Commission for Gender Equality, as well as a number of other state institutions such as the Human Rights Commission, was to strengthen constitutional democracy. These commissions are independent of the government and are subject only to the constitution and the law. The purpose of the Commission for Gender Equality is:

- to monitor the achievement of equality of men and women by government and the private and public sectors
- to establish public education programmes on women's rights
- to investigate complaints on any gender-related issue
- to do research and make recommendations on policy matters pertaining to achieving gender equality
- to monitor/report on compliance with international agreements.

There are also a number of other structures that seek to facilitate, promote and monitor gender equality. These include:

- the Office on the Status of Women (OSW) located within government in the Office of the Deputy President. Its primary function is to ensure that government policies and programmes are formulated with respect to gender equality principles
- the Parliamentary Committee on the Improvement of the Quality of Life and Status of Women established to monitor the implementation of the government's commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action
- a gender unit or a gender desk in each ministry or government department.

As is evident from this list, there has undoubtedly been progress on mechanisms and structures designed to promote gender equality. Another arena in which there has been considerable progress is policy development.

Policy Approaches

The period since April 1994 has been marked by a rapid process of policy formulation across all sectors of governance; health, welfare, education and land are but a few. Soon after the elections, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), initially an African National Congress document, was adopted by the then Government of National Unity as the blueprint for the reconstruction of South African society. This document set the framework for policy development in the various sectors or line departments. Although the RDP clearly stated a commitment to non-sexism, and this was lauded by several women's organizations, there were problems with the approach to gender. These

problems were voiced in several forums and conferences (e.g. Agenda Collective, 1995; Budlender, 1995). Overall, in current policy debates there seem to be three approaches to gender:

- (1) a gender-blind approach in which gender inequalities are completely ignored and all issues are dealt with as if they affect women and men in exactly the same way
- (2) an add-on approach where women are treated as a separate, add-on sector together with other groups such as young, disabled and rural people
- (3) a 'women and children' approach where women are identified only in terms of their roles as mothers within families.

(de la Rey and Eagle, 1997)

The limitations of the gender-blind approach are obvious – indeed, it is clearly not an approach at all, rather it is an approach of omission. With regard to the add-on and 'women and children' approaches, the arguments of Frazer and Lacey (1993) are germane. They have argued that any type of politics that fails to adopt an integrative approach to gender runs the risk of glorifying the role of women in their separate sphere. Implicit within such approaches is a type of conservatism that may simply reinforce a view of reality that is split into separate domains of life for women and men. The observations of Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman (1995:179), although referring specifically to health, are perhaps more broadly applicable; namely that there is a tendency in policy to 'first and foremost link the well-being of women to that of children and the family, and at times to the health of a society'. This tendency contradicts the Beijing affirmation of women's rights as human rights – women should be regarded as important in their own right, not only in relation to their traditional roles as child-bearers and care-givers.

The use of these three approaches in policy documents has been uneven across sectors. There has been recognition that South Africa needs a more coherent national strategy on gender and, consequently, a national policy on gender is being formulated. Beyond a national gender policy, there are other ongoing strategies which seek to ensure that gender equality is not simply a matter of documentation but a de facto reality.

A very important initiative in this regard is the Women's Budget. This is a joint initiative undertaken by non-governmental organizations, research institutes and one of the committees on finance in the national parliament. The project tracks expenditure on women through the budget allocations and seeks to find creative and rigorous ways to value the economic and social contribution of women. The objective of this project is to stimulate and support the integration of gender into planning, budgeting and expenditure.

The role of civil society

Success in achieving gender equality depends not only on the state and structures of government but also on civil society. The structures in civil society, women's groups, community-based organizations, religious bodies, unions, non-governmental organizations and professional bodies (such as the PsySSA) can all function as a means for citizens to exert an impact on social development, especially for those who are poor and marginalized, of whom most are likely to be women. In this period of societal reconstruction from 1994 to date, there has been widespread support for a model of society in which strong civil society organizations work closely with the government based on a general agreement that translating South Africa's constitutional mandate into a social reality will take the combined efforts of organizations in civil society and government (*Parliamentary Whip*, 1997).

Overall, though, moves toward gender equality have mostly been in legislative change, the creation of gender structures and policy documentation. The real challenge still lies ahead in turning these steps into real changes in the daily lives of the majority of women. The alleviation of poverty and violence against women remain the two biggest challenges. This year is an election year in South Africa. Delivery and implementation are likely to be the key challenges facing the next government.

Professional Organization of Psychology

At the launch of the PsySSA at the beginning of 1994, a small group of women met to discuss strategies for gender equality in the new organization. An immediate result was seen at the general meeting when a statement prepared by this group was read just prior to the voting. It was an appeal to members to ensure sufficient representation of women in the new executive structures. The first elected president was Rachel Prinsloo, a black woman. Whether the statement had any impact on this outcome is not known.

In the women's lobby group, there were lengthy discussions on whether a division on women and gender should be formed. This was taken a step further at the next annual congress in 1995, when there was a meeting to discuss a draft constitution for a proposed division on women and gender studies. Although all members present expressed support for such a division, a divisive issue proved to be the status of men. Some women strongly believed that membership of the division should be restricted to women only, whereas others vehemently disagreed. As a way forward, a decision on this issue was postponed until after the formation of the proposed division. Cheryl de la Rey, who chaired the meeting, agreed to distribute a circular to obtain the 50 signatures, from women only, required by the constitution for the launch of a division.

By the 1996 congress, the 50 signatures had not been obtained. By this time, de la Rey's enthusiasm had also waned, partly as a result of some of the responses

received. It appeared that support for the proposal did not necessarily coincide with a feminist perspective. Some of the 29 women respondents had expressed their support based on a rather traditional view of women as a separate and different sector. Since then there have been no further developments on this issue. Women, however, are numerically well represented in the various organizational committees. But this is not a sufficient indicator, as gender equality is not merely about headcounts of women versus men. Numbers are crucial but power operates in ways far more complex and obscure.

A recent issue in PsySSA has brought to the fore the enormity of the historical challenges that continue to divide us. The event was the election of candidates for the Professional Board for Psychology, the legislative body that controls and regulates the practice of psychology in South Africa. Only one black candidate (male) was elected; the other 11 are all white, three of whom are women. An analysis of the pattern of voting clearly shows that race was used as a criterion by PsySSA members in deciding whom to support. Most of the members are white, as is reflective of the demographics of psychologists in South Africa. In response to the outcome of the vote, many black psychologists expressed dismay and questioned the commitment of white psychologists to the broader process of societal transformation. Black feminists (including Cheryl de la Rey) have been among those black psychologists who have expressed their concerns. This raises a number of complex questions: how can the spotlight be focused on gender when race is a focal concern, how can both race and gender be addressed when there are so few black women psychologists, and not all are feminist?

Feminism and Psychology: Teaching and Research

These questions are not new. Levett and Kottler (1998) describe in great detail how in the late 1980s and early 1990s, while apartheid existed, psychologists who firmly positioned themselves within what Kottler (1996) identified as the anti-apartheid 'similarities' discourse, focused on trying to illuminate racism and class oppression and the consequences of these practices on their teaching, research and academic publications. At the time, although there was much posturing and 'public speak' about feminism and gender oppression, little was being taught formally about any of these issues at universities. Feminist ideas were introduced to students only as a strategy in the context of teaching conventional psychological theories and courses which were compulsory, e.g. developmental psychology. Some gender-conscious psychologists did take up feminist concerns in their teaching and research, but mostly at the level of unpublished postgraduate research dissertations, none of which was available in the public arena. Feminist concerns were considered peripheral; they had no serious impact on the discipline or practice of psychology in South Africa for a variety of reasons (see Levett and Kottler, 1998). Beyond psychology itself, the term is still considered by many to be Western-centric, white, elitist and middle-class. There are many black women,

for example, who prefer the use of the term 'gender activist' (Benjamin, 1995). Thus, from its early usage in South Africa, the meaning of feminism continues to be subject to contestation.

Four years after the election of a government that has introduced the kinds of changes we mention earlier, we expected to find evidence of an emergent and lively space for feminist issues in South African psychology. We called for submissions to this Special Feature from universities, research institutes, and from those working in applied settings. We invited potential contributors to consider how psychological and feminist theories have or have not been used in South Africa and the implications of this for the future of feminism and psychology locally. We said we would consider questions about whether or not there is now space for feminist thinking in South African psychology and whether or not gender issues are likely to be found in places other than in the margins of the texts where mainstream psychology is being taught and practised.

Introducing the Papers

Acknowledging much of what we have said earlier about the absence of a focus on gender issues in courses taught at tertiary institutions in South Africa, and the way in which South African psychology has been historically dominated by white, middle-class men, Shefer, Potgieter and Strebel reflect on a gender course taught in the Psychology Department of the University of the Western Cape, a historically black university in Cape Town. Their conclusions suggest that although the course has the potential to challenge dominant ideological constructions of gender, there are powerful discourses that can potentially prevent this – a form of new wine in old bottles in the cultural realm.

Richter and Griesel briefly describe the current gender profile in South African psychology which indicates that there are many more women than men entering the profession but that there remain quite dramatic differences between men and women in income levels and in the structure of their professional activities. They demonstrate the impact of gender on professional work and the way women with professional ambitions appear to make strategic choices to balance their occupational aspirations with expectations of their domestic responsibilities. Whether this is the only reason is not clear.

Zietkiewicz and Long argue for the usefulness of post-structural feminism which can allow for multiple forms of identity while providing the space for individuals to be located in similar ways in relation to particular discourses, and consequently common action. They argue for temporary coalitions as a strategic political act in order to take advantage of the commitment of the government to address women's oppression.

In exploring the relationship between gender and mental illness through the use of a case record of one woman, Swartz explores the relationship between gender and mental illness and the limits of archival material in recovering the experience of women suffering from mental illness in the Cape at the turn of the century. She

argues that case records in particular are often silent about critical aspects of the patient's experience. That this has implications for us in South Africa in the present day is obvious, as Swartz points out: we face the massive task of rewriting South African history in ways that appropriately give voice to silenced stories, to women's own perspectives on their own experiences of mental illness. Swartz argues that this challenge goes well beyond the South African scene. In concurring with her we will suggest that the task of giving voice, collecting women's own perspectives and rewriting South African history goes well beyond the issue of psychiatric discourses and practice – into academe and all other areas of psychology and its reproduction.

In many respects, the outcome of our call for submissions reflects our historical complexities. Relations of knowledge production in South Africa have not changed sufficiently since 1994 to enable us to produce a Special Feature representative of the women of South Africa. Nearly all the papers submitted for this Special Feature were written by white women. Authorship is still dominated by white academics, mostly men, with very few women (black or white). Reversing this pattern of dominance is a long-term endeavour. Those of us who have entered academe find ourselves inhabiting a space between exclusion and full inclusion. There are ambivalences and tensions in this positioning – to succeed in becoming a voice of authority, we have to collude and participate in a knowledge/power system that is racialized and gendered in ways that minimize that very possibility (de la Rey, 1998).

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