

JOURNEYING ON THE PATH OF PSYCHOLOGY WITH AN INTEREST IN GENDER STUDIES: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT

Errolyn Long

Department of Psychology
University of South Africa
longel@unisa.ac.za

In 2006 I embarked on a journey at the University of Stellenbosch for a BSc programme in Human Life Sciences. Nearing the end of undergraduate studies, I applied for honours in psychology and was accepted. While doing my honours, I felt a need to be more involved in the community of my home town. I volunteered at the local police station in Kraaifontein, Cape Town as a victim supporter. My role was to offer emotional support to victims of crime and trauma. At that point in time I thought the obvious routes for me in psychology would either be Clinical or Counselling Psychology.

After graduating with an honours degree in psychology, I decided to take a year's break from studies as I wanted to gain real-life experience before making further decisions about my academic career. I found myself exploring the job market and worked at a government hospital as an administrative clerk. The time I spent as a volunteer and as an employee at this hospital made me aware of the discrimination and violence women undergo in their daily lives. For example, at this hospital women who came in to have abortion were treated harshly by the staff because abortion was seen as morally wrong. To me, it was ironic how these services are legally provided by the government and yet women undergo discrimination for their choice. This is just one of the issues that troubled me when it comes to social inequalities and norms. It was there that my spark in research was ignited as I understood the purpose of research and how it can be used to understand and discover knowledge about social phenomena.

The work of Judith Butler speaks to my interest as her work delves into “doing” and “undoing” gender as well as gendered bodies. In addition, I am inspired by the work of Prof. Puleng Segalo as her research speaks to my interests. Just to mention a few, Prof. Segalo's work focuses on issues of gender, power and sexuality and she draws heavily

from critical feminist theories. It is the philosophical positions of these two researchers that I draw from when viewing gender inequalities.

I decided to apply for the Master's programme in Psychological Research Consultation at the University of South Africa (Unisa) for the year 2012. I completed my Master's dissertation in October 2014. My topic focused on the under-representation of women in senior management positions. I believe that the work produced from this dissertation offers a multidisciplinary perspective because it interweaves gender studies, organisational development, and psychology. It also offers relevance as South Africa continues to go through struggles of transformation.

After the successful completion of my internship at the Military Psychological Institute (MPI) (2013), I applied and wrote the national board examination for psychology on the 7 October 2015. My primary reason for registering with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) was owing to the influence research has on moving psychology into contexts where it can serve society optimally, by not only implementing a remedial approach, but also preventative and developmental approaches. This is where I hope to add my contributions when it comes to challenging gendered norms that continue to reverberate and be normalised.

In further embarkation of my journey as a research psychologist, I decided to enrol for my doctoral degree in 2015. After much reading, the work of two authors, namely Zimitri Erasmus and Mohammed Adhikari, inspired me to pursue a topic that focuses on the notion of coloured identity and the vagueness that still exists around the identity in democratic South Africa. These two scholars have written extensively on coloured identity and politics of the racial category. In the interest of gender studies, I focussed my doctorate on the construction of coloured women's identities in post-apartheid South Africa. The doctoral study undertakes a feminist decolonial approach which is inspired by the philosophical understandings of Maria Lugones. Lugones' work critically engages feminism from a decolonial perspective and succeeds in showing the interconnectedness of gender issues and coloniality. I am very excited about this work as it will add a fresh approach to the way in which coloured identity has been theorised in South Africa.

I am also in the process of publishing journal articles on the topic of my Master's dissertation. In order to publish I decided to co-author my first article manuscript with my supervisors. Drafting an article from my Master's topic was quite a challenge as this required me to be succinct and clear in my writing. It seemed like an impossible task but with planning and guidance from the co-authors and delegation of roles it became a product that could be submitted to a publisher. With two rejections of my first manuscript, I was despondent but now am motivated to keep trying. In response to a call for papers, I decided to rework the rejected manuscript and submit it to a journal. After much anticipation, the manuscript was accepted with minor changes.

In reflection, I have realised that disappointment and rejection are part of the learning process. I am grateful for the opportunities I have been given in building my

career as a psychology professional. For me, even though it felt like the process was a lonely one, I actually had the support and faith of loved ones, my supervisor and colleagues who were all cheering me on.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



ERROLYN LONG is a lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa. In addition, she is registered for a PhD degree. Her PhD topic is focussed on coloured women's identities using a decolonial approach. Her research interests are in gender and the workplace; gender and coloured identity; and gender-based violence.