

# Transforming psychology: English language in practice

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores transformation challenges in postgraduate psychology in the Clinical Masters programme at the University of the Witwatersrand. Although black students form the majority of students in the undergraduate psychology degree programme, this trend is reversed in postgraduate programmes throughout the psychology department, where white students form the bulk of the class and black students make up only a small percentage of the numbers. The research aims to offer a clear and coherent analysis of the underlying inequalities that underpin the racial unevenness between undergraduate and postgraduate psychology classes, while at the same time interrogating the very notions that serve to reproduce this uneven terrain. The research is conducted using both psychology lecturers, and students in undergraduate and postgraduate psychology programs at Wits, and is made up of a sample of twelve in-depth interviews from postgraduate students, undergraduate students and lecturers. These have been analyzed qualitatively, using a Thematic Discourse Analysis. Findings centre on the pivotal role that language plays in the subject of racial transformation, both as an indicator of socioeconomic status and as a barrier to the psychology profession. Language is explored for its ideologically bound nature and the ways that this manifests both demographically and institutionally in the University of the Witwatersrand.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis; language; psychology; socioeconomic status; transformation; Westernized

## TRANSFORMATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

The Department of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) offers a comprehensive psychology course that includes both undergraduate and

postgraduate studies. The postgraduate studies are divided into an Honours course that includes all psychology students, while the Masters class divides students into Clinical, Community Counselling, Research, and Educational psychology courses. Black students are adequately represented in undergraduate classes, comprising approximately 75% of the student body. However, in postgraduate courses this trend is reversed and black students make up between 10% – 40% of the student population, with the number of black students lowest in Clinical psychology (Wits Administration Office, personal communication, September 2013). New legislation compels the university to increase representivity of all racial groups in the postgraduate psychology programmes, with the view to improving racial transformation in the academic setting. Thus, this research study seeks to understand the barriers that prevent access to the Clinical psychology postgraduate course to black students at Wits.

The subject of racial transformation in South Africa is a complex and multifaceted one, referring in this context to a reconfiguration of society in which various racial groups are proportionally represented in the different professional and academic spheres (Badat, 2007). Although a diverse range of literature has been published around the topic, one consistently stressed notion is that of a transformation that is both demographic and ideological (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Badat, 2007; Jansen, 2012; Soudien, 2010; Waghid, 2002). What this means is that transformation needs to occur on multiple tiers simultaneously. It must include the demographic approach, which stresses more numbers of previously disadvantaged people being given access to employment and academic studies. At the same time true social transformation requires also the interrogation of the ideological assumptions that perpetuate structural social inequalities. As Soudien (2010, p. 4) suggests:

‘There are basically two main approaches to the [subject of racial transformation]: The first sees transformation as a demographic intervention around the imbalances of race, class, gender, language while the second approach argues that [true racial transformation] is about the nature of privilege and power both positions are crucial and need to be seen as informing each other.’

Soudien therefore stresses the need for an interrelated and holistic approach to transforming South African society into a non-racialized space of equal opportunities.

## **A Westernised Discipline**

Ahmed and Pillay (2004, p. 631), citing Seedat (1997) and Stevens (2001), suggest that the ‘criticism has been raised that psychology is a white, middle-class, Euro-American, ethnocentric endeavour and that it represents the worldview of the Coloniser’. This orientation to psychology as Westernised is supported empirically in the data (see excerpts from data analysis section), where it is conflated with socioeconomic status (SES), skin colour, class, money, language and culture. SES may be defined as a person’s class or social status based on his or her income,

occupation and educational level. However, it may also include indicators such as race, age, geographic location, language and ethnicity (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Soudien, 2010; Waghid, 2002). Evidence for this is also found in the data below where these (or similar) words or constructs have been used interchangeably by participants (see excerpts below). Due to the Westernised status of the discipline of psychology, and resulting perceptions of the profession as belonging to people of a higher social class, black people from advantaged backgrounds might be considered Western enough (with regard to their geographic location, language and culture) to gain access to the postgraduate psychology programme at Wits, while ostensibly white people from poor homes and a weak fluency in English would not (Jansen, 2012; Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004). In the data analysis section, I provide evidence that students in the sample orient to English-language proficiency as a key indicator of SES. This is a crucial element of my argument below that details English-language proficiency as the mechanism by which access is facilitated (or denied) to the Clinical psychology postgraduate programme.

## **Language and Psychology**

The privileging of the English language in psychology is described by the roots of the discipline located in a Westernized tradition (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Pillay & Kramers, 2003; Seedat, 2007). However, language in psychology is both an ideological and a pragmatic concern (Muller & Cloete, 1987). Ideologically, language practices are rooted in a colonial historicization of our country which were entrenched during the apartheid regime (Cock, 1980). In addition, the privileging of the English language in psychology encourages an ideological orientation to the discipline as Western. Language has been used as a tool of oppression both in the production of privileged forms of knowledge as well as through other discursive practices (Burman & Parker, 1993). Today, in post-Apartheid South Africa, English-language proficiency is often the basis for excluding those from lower socioeconomic classes (Pillay & Kramers, 2003). Such exclusion is problematic in psychology for two reasons: firstly, it constrains selection to a small applicant pool of diverse students; secondly, it perpetuates a discipline that trains for and serves a particular clientele, which affect the delivery of psychological services to our population (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004; Pillay & Kramers, 2003). Since the majority of clinical psychology graduates cannot speak the African languages which are the first language of the majority of the population, this imbalance does create pragmatic concerns and is detrimental to the availability of health-care in our country, where a significant majority of our population has little or no access to mental-health-care facilities. This inaccessibility of psychological services on a large-scale further reinforces its exclusivity to a Westernised population, creating a cycle of ideological underpinnings and real-life consequences to which it is near impossible to gain entry (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004).

Language is an enormous obstacle in gaining access to Masters in Clinical Psychology, predominantly due to verbal fluency as a criterion for selection, a challenge for those for whom English is not a first language. Waghid (2002) suggests that one of the hallmarks of a racially divided society is uneven access to higher education (see also Jansen, 2012, and Soudien, 2010). Although substantial gains have been made in terms of formal access where policies are in place that promote equal access to education, the question of epistemological access remains problematic and suggests that perhaps an apartheid legacy of uneven access permeates our present institutions by indirect means, such as SES, language or financial standing. As Ahmed and Pillay (2004, p. 639) suggest:

‘One of the major issues is that historical disadvantage precedes selection processes and this may play a crucial role in why so few [students] apply and why of those who do apply, only some are deemed “suitable.” Our attempts at equity and redress fall far short therefore, if we confine our explanations to the implicit assumption that equality of opportunity exists in the post-apartheid period.’

Ahmed and Pillay (2004), in a study on the plight of clinical psychology in South Africa today, have suggested that there is an enormous need in our country for psychologists who are fluent in African languages (see also Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004; Pillay & Kramers, 2003; Soudien, 2010). Statistics indicate that 78% of our population is black but, more importantly, just under half of these (46.3%) live in non-urban areas (Statistics SA, 2013). It seems fair to assume that a proportion of this population might prefer access to psychological services in African languages – however these statistics are at odds with the fact that the majority of registered psychologists are white and treat their patients in English or Afrikaans (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004). This indicates a deep chasm between the needs of the country and the practices of many higher education institutions, suggesting that the privileging of English language must be revisited in order to ensure that psychological services are available to all citizens in their language of choice, and not merely to an urbanized, upper-middle class minority (Painter & Terre Blanche, 2004). In this regard, universities are accountable not only to their students but also to the larger population which they aim to serve (Jansen, 2012; Moletsane, 2002). Producing professionally competent individuals who are unable to engage with the needs of their population is at best of limited value and at worst perpetuates ideologies of inequality and discrimination (Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; Jansen, 2012; Moletsane, 2002). As Soudien (2010, p. 16) suggests, multilingualism, the ability to speak multiple languages, is a key factor in promoting inclusion and access in psychology as well as a way to serve ‘the whole population and not only segments of it.’ A brief look at our demographics suggest that practicing psychology in languages other than English is absolutely crucial in ensuring fair access to all citizens (Pillay & Kramers, 2003). For the purposes of this research report, language is thus conceptualized as both underpinning the inequality that presents at postgraduate psychology level, and

contributing to the inadequate supply of African psychologists available to treat our population today.

## **Staff Representivity**

The selection of students who are fluent in African languages is ultimately dependent on a selection panel that will understand them. As Jansen (2012, p. 4) puts it, “transformation, from demography to admissions to lecturing staff, must be addressed” – a point emphasized by Soudien (2010) with his suggestion that staff representivity is a crucial element in transforming an institutional climate, since currently students are taught largely by a staff body that does not share their language, culture or history (Moletsane, 2002; Waghid, 2002). Although a representative staff body will not guarantee transformation within a discipline, it will certainly go a long way in encouraging it (Muller & Cloete, 1987). However, one of the difficulties inherent in attaining a representative panel in this case is the fact that there are presently insufficient numbers of black lecturers in the Wits psychology department. This makes an impact on two levels: the first, that selection processes are more difficult for black students facing a predominantly white panel; the second, that the lack of black psychologists tends to reinforce the discipline as a white one. Both of these factors contribute to the tight structure of privilege and access so difficult to penetrate in the Clinical MA programme.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample and method**

For my report, I have chosen to focus on the Masters in Clinical Psychology (Coursework and Research Report) since my data evidenced that this degree was the one that most interviewees oriented themselves to in our discussions, and the one that seems to be the most widely used in terms of stereotyping psychology as a discipline:

*...that discourse of Clinical psychology is strong so strong*

*[Lecturer 1]*

The final sample includes 12 in-depth interviews with lecturers from the psychology department, as well as with psychology students in both undergraduate and Clinical psychology postgraduate programmes. All undergraduate participants are black, and their year of study is indicated after their name when any excerpts are quoted in this research from their interview. Postgraduate students included both black and white Clinical Masters students at Wits, and their race is indicated in any excerpts used from their interview data. Academic staff (lecturers) is both black and white, but their race

is not indicated in the research report for purposes of anonymity, and their interview data is indicated using their participant number only. Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting and included the researcher and the interviewee. The interview followed a semi-structured approach that included six open-ended questions but also allowed room for interviewees to express their own thoughts and opinions on the topic of transformation in the psychology department. All participants signed an informed consent form and were told they could terminate their participation at any point with no negative results. The ethical guidelines of confidentiality and anonymity are preserved in the final report (Wassenaar, 2006).

I have analysed the data on two levels simultaneously, and have presented my final analysis as such. This analysis can be termed a Thematic Discourse Analysis. The first level of analysis is content-related and is concerned with the identification of themes oriented to in the interviews. These themes loosely structure the analysis. However simultaneously analysis occurs on a more critically discursive level, where the words, sentences, beliefs of the interviewees are not presented in an absolute manner but are rather probed for their underlying assumptions (Burman & Parker, 1993).

## **Analysis**

An originary insight that I gained from interviews with students was that the black students that did get accepted to the degree were “advantaged” black students (students of high SES), suggesting that discriminatory practices may be more class-oriented than race-oriented. Evidence for this was borne out in these interviews, where it emerged that a classist element to underrepresentation was oriented to by participants and contained a multiplicity of factors in its construction, so that references were made to money, language, geographic location and race, and all of these were generally used to refer to an individual’s SES. Nevertheless, this study’s focus is on the role of language in facilitating entry to a Westernised discipline and thus my data analysis focuses on the discursive and thematic discussions of language that appear in the data set.

## **A Westernised Discipline**

The first step in identifying class-based differentiations in the data must be grounded in empirical evidence of perceptions of psychology as a Western or white profession. The following excerpts were taken from interviews from five students in first year all the way to Masters level psychology, and suggest that there is a strong identification of psychology as a racially exclusive profession.

*... if we look back, psychology has been a Western thing  
I think there’s that perception that you’re just not gonna get in there’s still people who  
feel like, no, that’s a white thing, that’s for the white people*

*... traditionally psychology is seen as a white person's degree, and not even degree, a white person's profession um its only very recently that that black people kind of like um more open to the whole idea of psychology and psychologists*

*[Masters' student, black]*

*But then in psychology, people will consider it mainly White people*

*[Third year 1]*

*... imagine when you imagine a psychologist most of the time you imagine a white person. Ya*

*[First year 2]*

## **Socioeconomic Re-Imaginings**

After establishing the construction of psychology as a white person's profession, the next phase of the analysis involves looking at the ways that entrance to the profession is gained. Crucial to an analysis is the establishment of the interchangeability of the terms of 'whiteness', 'Westernized', 'high socioeconomic standing', 'advantaged', on the one hand; and 'poor', 'disadvantaged', 'black', 'townships', as strongly evidenced by the data, in which both black and white participants orient to these distinctions matter-of-factly as unassailable truths. The following excerpts suggest ways that whiteness and the access to the discipline that it bestows are accomplished. Some of the sharp parallels drawn upon in the data are supported in the literature review (see above).

*you do have to be of a higher socioeconomic status I think, definitely everyone in my class is, not everyone is wealthy but um no I don't think anyone is like you know at the poverty line at all um and I think practically you have to be because it's a really expensive year it is possible that people are disadvantaged purely because they don't have the finances or or you know – I don't wanna say they didn't have the right upbringing because that's any – any degree if you just don't kind of meet the criteria then you don't meet the criteria*

*[Masters' student, white]*

In these two excerpts, studying a Masters in psychology is described as requiring a 'higher socioeconomic status', then defined as a type of middle-class status, as well as being linked to a specific type of upbringing. It is important to note that 'disadvantaged' people are described as not having the 'finances'. These two instances reiterate the interchangeability of the concepts used.

*... especially to historically white universities that you know they're not gonna take you, you know, they would rather have a white person rather than a black person*

*Ya, it's almost as if someone that I knew from Limpopo who was not as advantaged as I have been who had come to the interview, first of all they would have struggled with the language they would have struggled with even a lot of things and I think because of that you right I agree with that, that more advantaged black people make it and that's a problem (laughs)*

*[Masters' student, black]*

*It's almost as if you need to afford to take the risk*

*[Masters' student, black]*

Being able to 'afford to take the risk' is another orientation to high SES, which suggests that it is not just money required, but a certain ability to gamble with one's money, implying a certain type of luxury.

*...they did grow up in townships but they do have like a really good grasp of you know the English language and they've always had um you know all of them have travelled and so it definitely is a higher socioeconomic standing*

*[Masters student, white]*

This excerpt equates higher SES with English language proficiency, while drawing a contrast between the "township" and English language proficiency; another example of the interchangeability of the concepts (poor – township - uneducated – poor language fluency; high SES – travelling – wealth – English language proficiency)

*I grew up in an era where if you could speak English then you were like part of the higher culture and even your friends you know you get people who really respect you that much because you can speak English*

*because there is some sort of mockery if you can't pronounce some words in a certain way or you can't speak a certain way*

*[First year 1]*

There is a strong orientation to English language proficiency as a thread running through much of the data, suggesting that an ability to speak English 'like a white person' increases one's perceived SES by including one in the 'higher culture'. This is a key point in my analysis and forms the central argument for English-language proficiency as a crucial mechanism by which students are accepted into the Clinical Masters programme.



*you'll find that black person and speaks English and who is referred to as a coconut and you probably know they don't really see colour, they identify more with white people than they do with us, probably because they speak more English*

*[First year 1]*

## **Language and privilege**

High SES is thus a complexity of constructs, such as wealth, upbringing, white culture, and English language proficiency. Going further into analysis, this link between SES and language is borne out in selection processes, where a crucial element of the selection process is a verbal presentation to a panel of lecturers and psychologists, a daunting task for anyone, but exacerbated for those for whom English is not a first language. Inevitably, students with a poor grasp of the language do not make it through (as evidenced by data in lecturer interviews). Furthering an understanding of the transformation problem requires us to delve into the ideological underpinnings of English as the uncontested medium of instruction and treatment in psychology:

*Psychology has its own language, and it's English. (laughs) and that's hard*

*[Masters' student, black]*

This insight suggests that the discipline itself is constructed in such a way that its English-ness is intrinsic to it, a factor which explains the largely unquestioned link between English and psychology evidenced by both lecturers and students in the data:

*...doing psychology work in another language **but you do also have to be conversant with English***

*[Lecturer 5]*

*I think there probably is a disadvantage because it is reliant on language*

*[Lecturer 2]*

This last comment by a lecturer on the selection panel indicates the taken-for-granted assumption that English is a critical factor in gaining entrance to the course. This particular point reinforces the central argument regarding verbal English-language proficiency and its role in the selection process.

*so if it is possible for someone somewhere who's god-sent **who can come and um give us words to use for psychology** ... so I think it would be helpful just to get the basics if not the big words the Freudian terms even the smallest words*

*[Masters' student, black]*

This piece of data indicates that the study of psychology in English is an impediment to many psychologists who would like to practice in rural communities or with a non-English-speaking clientele. As one Masters student put it,

*one of the things that I've always wanted to do is to go back to the rural areas and base psychology to take – to bring psychology back home*

*[Masters' student, black]*

This comment suggests that there is a market for psychological services in non-urban and non-English-speaking areas, and that this market is suffering for the fact that psychology is taught in English. The following excerpt might give us insight into why this is so, since it indicates that this student views the clinical population as largely white and thus it is suitable that training should be offered in English. According to a white Masters student:

*I suppose if the majority of the clinical population is white*

*[Masters' student, white]*

This suggests that perhaps the program has not adjusted suitably to the reality of the population that requires psychological services; it has so long been constructed as something available or desirable to the upper classes, that at great cost to our population we have not yet modified this perception. Even when this Masters student was challenged about her previous assumption, and was asked about how she would navigate a career that would serve a predominantly black population as its clientele, she answered:

*I: Do you have any ideas how you'll cope with it?*

*S: In all honesty I haven't thought that far*

*I: Do you think that when you – when you like see yourself in the future you see yourself like do you see yourself mainly with like a white clientele?*

*S: Ya*

*[Masters' student, white]*

In the face of the above evidence, it seems that the discipline has not adequately reshaped its parameters to suit the needs of the country it serves. Some of its modes of instruction may thus be outdated and inefficient and may require some rethinking. This insight links to an earlier question mentioned in the introduction to the report that seeks to interrogate the underpinning of English-language privileging to the discipline. It seems plausible that these strong links would extend beyond the practical domain and perhaps into the ideological, so that transformation cannot lie in pragmatic solutions alone and must be constantly supported by deeper structural changes. Evidence that psychology has its ideological underpinning in a specifically Western philosophical framework, as supported in the literature review as well as in the following assertion by a lecturer and panelist in the university:

*Psychology had very much its roots in philosophy science you know at certain point in Europeans history but I suppose you know I don't think I know enough*

*[Lecturer 3]*

This indicates that the practice of continuing to teach psychology in English is not arbitrary but is rather seen as intrinsic to the nature of psychology itself, which is why practices that may improve the practicality and efficiency of service delivery have not been introduced. It is important at this point to garner evidence for the suggestion that this English-language bias in the verbal component of the course has implications beyond service delivery, but rather for access to the program itself. Data from interviews with lecturers certainly seems to support the view that low English-language proficiency is detrimental to one's chances of getting into the program.

*It's much more about the issue of language that students are not admitted on the basis of the presentation that they fail to present themselves they fail to engage eh with a particular topic eh ehm in comparison to their white uhm counterparts and because of thet eh they tend to be given eh low eh ratings ya*

*[Lecturer 1]*

This evidence empirically supports the assertion that a lack of proficiency in verbal English language may hinder access to the program. Another orientation towards racial profile is supported in further data:

*...and it's more the white people who are – who are more equipped*

*[Masters student, white]*

This indicates that white people, due to their perceived higher SES and its attendant conflation with high English-language proficiency, might stand a higher chance of being selected for the program. A psychology lecturer emphasizes this point with the following excerpt:

*Those who come from model c's uhm private schools they are well prepared for such eh debates such discussions they feel free to interact in- in those eh uhm you know spheres you know whereas those from eh disadvantaged backgrounds struggle to express themselves in-in such a situation*

[Lecturer 1]

This comment orients to quality of education to connote a similar conception of SES. Based on previous evidence that suggests the interchangeability of such terms, it may be assumed that both these references, to race and to education, connote a certain SES constructed in various ways by various participants.

*...you're being interviewed in English for goodness sake you know, they ask you, tell us why you want to study psychology, you may say it beautifully in your own language, but having to now think about saying it in the right way, in an English way, **in a way that they will get it**, it's just its a whole lot of pressure*

[Masters' student, black]

This student orients to both the difficulty of verbal presentation in English language, in a pressurized situation, as well as an orientation to a 'they' (presumably the panel) that has to 'get it'. In the data offered, it seems that the onus of the presentation being 'gotten' is on the part of the candidate, and not the selection panel. There may be room to question the implied power that a selection panel holds in this process and the ways that orientations to this power by the candidates affect the types of presentations that are given.

*...doing psychology work in another language **but you do also have to be conversant with English***

[Lecturer 5]

## The Panel

The data thus far suggests a strong orientation to the need for high English-language proficiency, owing in part to a selection panel made up of largely English-speaking lecturers. Thus, a closer look at the selection panel itself is required. The data shows that there may be some conflicting perceptions of the panel, with students registering a certain homogeneity in the committee, and lecturers or panelists perceiving it as diverse.

*Most of them [selection panel] were white. The black people that were there were people that were coming from the hospitals like um the representatives from the hospitals that Wits has a – Bara and all your other hospitals that were there for the selections, those were the black people, and I think most of ya – really, there were not a lot of black people even in the interview*

*[Masters' student, black]*

*And you can also ask yourself, who's sitting on the board of people who select, who's making the decisions ... you know so I think it depends who sits in the position of power and who decides...*

*[First year 1]*

These two excerpts from both undergraduate and Masters' students show that the selection panel is seen as a powerful group of individuals, who are made up of mainly white academic staff. However, the following excerpts from lecturers indicate a contradictory perception of the panel as made up of diverse academic staff:

*I: So they've got a broad number of people from various backgrounds doing the selection process?*

*R: So ja, ja so you have people who are specifically academic who are involved in the academic and and skills training and skills training and you have people also from the internship or practical institutions*

*...*

*I: Do they have an equal say as the academic staff or?*

*R: Ja*

*I: Alright so it's quite balanced?*

*R: Ja its quite balanced*

*[Lecturer 3]*

*...uhm because the selection team itself is diverse and the selection we've all been through selections ourselves uhm and it's- it's really important for all of us that we're fair uhm*

*[Lecturer 5]*

This data supports evidence that students may see the panel as quite homogeneous in its makeup, whereas the panellists perceive the panel as diverse and balanced.

## Summary

The argument presented above, both in the literature and the empirical data, follows the construction of psychology as a Western discipline and asserts the interchangeability of racial and socioeconomic language used by evidencing the ways that SES and race are constructed by the participants. Empirical evidence suggests that there are different ways to construct SES, including referring to SES in terms of race, ability to take risks with money, the luxury of studying for a long time, and the ability to speak English like a white person. The data then posits a certain privileging of a certain type of individual in the program, and provides evidence for the position that people of high SES are those privileged during the Masters Clinical selection process. This discussion leads seamlessly into the topic of language as a means for privileging the Westernised population, and suggests that English is ideologically linked to the discipline of psychology, an assumption that remains largely un-interrogated despite its obvious impracticality in our context (Waghid, 2002). The privileging of English-language proficiency during selections is noted as a particular disadvantage to those for whom it is not a first language, and a possible need to include this distinction in future policy-relevant recommendations. My focus is on language as a barrier both ideologically and pragmatically in the discipline. One of the most prominent disadvantages of this barrier is that the type of individuals allowed into the program are in a sense quite homogeneous, resulting in students of similar SES and social class being granted entry into the program. Thus, the first and most crucial step on the long journey to meaningfully implemented transformation entails the difficult task of exposing deep-rooted questions about psychology, questions that this analysis has brought into the open, yet that seem to be festering just below the surface. In addition, true transformation of the discipline requires the rigorous implementation of pragmatic changes that will transform both the nature and the demographic structure of clinical psychology in the country.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE



**Daniella Rafaely** is a PhD student in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand. Her research interests lie in the field of critical psychology and sociology, with a focus on rigorous empirical analysis in a range of discursive methodologies. Her research focuses on childhood as an historical construct and traces the ways that it is discursively produced and deployed in social settings, and the methods by which morality is reproduced as a social institution in daily interaction.

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