

Humility and fear: Meditating on a theme

Nkosiyomzi Haile Matutu¹

Hub for Decolonial Feminist Psychologies in Africa, University of Cape Town

The theme of the 24th Psychological Society of South Africa Congress, “listen with humility... act with integrity” instilled much fear in me as I contemplated responding to an invitation to present at a symposium that would be part of the congress. My discomfort stemmed from the knowledge that it had been deemed necessary to centre the invocation: “listen with humility” and “act with integrity”. I wondered who it was that needed to be reminded to listen in such a manner. Were these not psychologists, is that not **what they do** in any case? From which worlds do these people come that such petitions needed to be made? Why was it necessary that the kind of listening we were being asked to practice be of the humble variety? If there was no humility in how people listened before, how did they listen before this moment?

REFUSING TO LISTEN WITH HUMILITY... WHILE ACTING WITH INTEGRITY?

While I cannot speak for all students, the position of the black student within the discipline of Psychology is made difficult by the weight of our history within it. The artist Buhlebezwe Siwani speaks of the fear that is etched into the mind of the black child (The Narrative, 2018). As a method of survival, we were taught to fear. To be fearful of authority and those who lord over us. Faced with these personages, we would recoil and attempt to take up as little space as we can. In this way, we become non-threatening, the perfect students. The danger of this conditioning comes where our cultural understanding of being in the world becomes a vehicle for agency-destroying fear. The notion of respect for elders transmutes into deference for those in positions of authority.

The idea of humility is not foreign to my sense of being. Neither is the idea of acting with integrity. It is after all expected of me as a Xhosa man to act with honour and integrity. This is what distinguishes me from a child. However, in the context of engaging with a discipline that I have for the longest time held with deep suspicion, the demand that I ought to do what I have been socialised to enact in my engagement with others seems to me as threatening as the necklaces² that donned the necks of ‘impimpi’ in 1980s KwaZakhele, Port Elizabeth. From the beginning, I had to position myself in relation to what was being addressed in the theme. I became aware of the differences between my worldview and that of the people who had to listen with humility. Given that I have for the longest time been listening to Psychology speaking **at me**, I was convinced that the work I was coming to share required that the profession should listen to what I had to share, even if for a few minutes. I noticed a similar determination among all the young researchers I listened to at the congress.

¹ Please direct all correspondence to: Mr Nkosiyomzi Haile Matutu; Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, Cape Town, 7701; E-mail: MTTNKO001@myuct.ac.za

² Editors’ note: Necklacing refers to an act of direct violence that was used against people deemed to be ‘impimpi’ during the apartheid era. As editors, we were concerned with how the metaphor could potentially trivialise (in a similar way to when rape is used as a metaphor) these acts of physical violence. However, we hope that Matutu’s use of necklacing to refer to his pain and discomfort at the conference serves to make visible and palpable the harm caused by symbolic forms of violence, as well as make clear the difficulties of talking about symbolic violence without reference to direct violence.



INQUNQU IMAMELE...

This being my first conference, I believed that if I were to leave the congress more enlightened it would be principally thanks to the speakers in the programme sessions that I curated for myself as means to affirm my work and to broaden my thinking. It was in fact, the responses from the floor, as it were, that moved me to do something. This is not to say that the speakers had nought to give, but rather that participants' responses to the numerous presentations told me more about the state of our discipline than what was often said from the podium.

FROM THE PODIUM TO THE FLOOR...

Within my rather curated experience of the congress, the following instances stood out: first, the plenary programme centered African Psychology. The overarching concern among all the speakers here was our relationship with those with whom we do research (i.e. our research participants). Starting the congress in this unapologetic tone laid the foundation for the questions we would ask ourselves as we moved between venues: why did they frame that work in that way? Who was it written for? What were they assuming about those participants? Secondly, our problems with engaging with culture in meaningful ways was brought to the fore. So too, the estrangement of black scholars who return to communities that do not recognise them – having been duly enculturated into Western ways of thinking about psychological phenomena. Lastly, our inability to engage with not only the relational ontology of African Psychology, but also our failure to understand the implication of how we frame our research questions, was highlighted in the plenary roundtable.

As a student interested in ethical conduct in research settings, I approached the various forums with a heightened sensitivity on how research subjects were handled. For the most part, there seemed to be an awareness that our methods and approaches are integrally 'choices' and that we ought to hold ourselves accountable for how we choose to represent those with whom we do research. At times presenters purposefully worked outside the silos that evolve into disciplinary closets (e.g. Boonzaier; Helman; Segalo; Peters; van Niekerk); others sought to disrupt the very process of 'doing research' (Mahlo, Baloyi, & Sodi; Matutu). There were instances where the sessions were so charged that we all realised we had tapped into a moment, a place we could not come back from: knowing that we cannot continue to render as strange what to some is most familiar. One attendee posed a question to a presenter: "why did you choose to use a colonial frame to analyse this data?" The name of the presenter is not important. However, that exchange revealed to us how our discipline's monolingualism and inability to engage with difference leads not only to what Musila (2017) refers to as epistemic (dis)articulation, but points to the danger of essentialism when confronted with 'the other'. This, and other exchanges like it, pointed to the differences in how scholars took their politics. Gone were platitudes and polite smiles, what we had in that moment was sincerity and discomfort. I like discomfort. It is how we enact our integrity. We felt it when Dlamini and Ratele laid bare the reality of black psychologists as 'safe bets', so too when Calata illustrated how a cultural analysis of African epistemology could be splendidly undertaken while pointing to the value of genuinely 'knowing' the subject of research not as artifice, but in the true sense that one may arrive at through the prism of language.

A CONGRESS WITHOUT END

The congress has shown us why we should not rest in comfort as we re-imagine the realities of the life worlds of those who are 'made strange' by our discipline. We should stop at nothing short of coming out of our collective disciplinary closets towards an epistemically aware consciousness. This position gathers more urgency when we consider, as Kessi and Boonzaier (2018) have argued, that the philosophies we draw on to explain social phenomena are a choice.



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