# South Africa: Psychology's dilemma of multiple discourses (1)

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines, on a political and a psychological level, two central and contrasting South African discourses. Both are particularly evident in the anthropological literature of the 1980s, especially that which focuses on the issue of professionalization of "African" medicine (Kottler, 1988). This paper identifies the **similarities** discourse as the dominant anti-apartheid discourse and notes that it takes little account of the psychological factors which are identified in the **differences** discourse. The **similarities** discourse therefore leaves the **differences** discourse in an awkward space, suggesting as it does that those who are positioned within it aid the Government in its quest for separate development and inequality. This paper argues however, that the **similarities** discourse is also politically untenable leaving out, as it does, important psychological considerations. Since the **differences** discourse is frequently regarded as the progressive political stance outside South Africa important contradictions are apparent and the dilemma of difference is introduced. This paper attempts to tease out some of these contradictions and argues for further psychologically informed research in this direction.

### The Similarities Discourse

The **similarities** discourse is evident in for example, Alexander (1983), Boonzaier (1985, 1986, 1988), Boonzaier and Sharp (1988), Sharp (1980, 1985), and Sharp and West (1982). Each paper focuses on similarities; where differences are acknowledged they are ascribed almost wholly due to material factors. Little, if any, space is given to psychological considerations. In

discussions about the professionalization of African medicine the similarities between the two types of healing practices are emphasized. Boonzaier (1985), Janzen (1978) and Last (1981) argue that what patients **do** and **why** they do it is important. They point out that any divisions are in the eyes of the dividers: the practitioners. Patients do not see two clearly bounded "systems". They use them (and others) serially and simultaneously and professionalization will not change what the patients **do**. Patients' and healers' practices and beliefs in the various systems are not as different as is suggested in the literature. If differences are evident researchers must ask **why**. Failure to do so misleads; it plays into the hands of apartheid ideology and the socio-political disparity is not exposed; there are fewer practitioners of "western medicine" in less affluent areas and a lack of availability and high costs of transport (Westcott and Wilson, 1979). Different practices and belief systems therefore do not occur along the divide of Western / African as is suggested by the **differences** discourse. "(D)ifferent races and ethnic groups, unique cultures and traditions, do not exist in any ultimate sense in South Africa, and are real only to the extent that they are the product of a particular world view" (Sharp and Boonzaier, 1988, p.1).

**The Differences Discourse**
This second view is found in the work of Last and Chavunduka (1986), Ngubane (1988a, 1988b and 1988c) and Setiloane (in Lye and Murray, 1980). These authors argue from a position of an "insider", acknowledging similarities but explicitly stating that we are different. They name a range of different kinds of healers and argue that professionalization of African medicine must acknowledge them. Ngubane (1988c, p.11) points to "certain diseases of the African peoples' (whose) .. causes can be understood by indigenous healers only .. (who) may however be from any African people". She argues that "at a certain depth what is called "Zulu culture" is essentially continuous with other indigenous African cultures, more particularly in this part of the continent - the differences notwithstanding" (1988c, p.11). The focus of this discourse then is on the differences between "African" healers and others. Material factors are given little, if any place in the analysis but what appear to be psychological factors are evident, in references to "levels" of culture and similarities between African people.

**MULTIPLE AND CONTRADICTORY DISCOURSES**
Many of the arguments expressed from the **differences** discourse have been strongly criticized by the **similarities** discourse (e.g. Sharp and West, 1982; Sharp, 1985). Paradoxically, however, criticism has been levelled at "outsiders" who are also positioned within the **differences** discourse but who, unlike the "insiders" have pointed to differences in a negative sense: the backwardness of those about whom they write (e.g. du Preez, 1984, and Leatt, 1982). This differs from the way in which e.g. Ngubane (1988c) and Setiloane (in Lye and Murray, 1980) refer to themselves as "insiders"; point to

differences in a positive sense and indicate that this "inwardness" cannot ever be captured by an "outsider".

The **similarities** discourse argues that "insiders" have not remained untouched by "outside" influences. Setiloane writes in English (an "outsider's" language) and does so after years of exposure to social practices which are different to those experienced by the "insider" about whom he writes. But, such criticism does not allow for the possibility that for the individuals who express them, their difference is real. Attempts to decide whether these beliefs are right or wrong, false or real, are futile because the authors are ignoring the reality of subjective experience, being clearly positioned within different and contradictory discourses. The psychological "investment" each has in positioning themselves in one or the other needs to be more closely examined.

## POSITIONS, SUBJECTIVITIES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTMENTS
The conceptual framework offered by Henriques et al. (1984) introduces the notion of constructed subjectivities. The authors argue that the character of the subject is neither rational nor is it unitary. It has been socially and historically produced and has been exposed to existing power relations and the re-production of the system. This does not arise as a consequence of a passive subject as may be implied by the **similarities** discourse. There is always an active agency at work. It involves "emotional commitment" or a "psychological investment" (Hollway, 1984, p.238) in taking up a certain position in particular discourses and in relation to other individuals and groups of people. There is some pay off or reward for the individual's choices although satisfaction may not be apparent to the observer. While choices might not be rational or conscious, there is a reason for taking up any particular position, and it is this which is left out of the "political" discourses. Unless these ideas are taken into account, the **similarities'** discourse proponents will continue to be unable to understand how those who have **not** supported apartheid appear to have lent it intellectual support.

Using these ideas in order to understand the investments of the similarities / differences authors, the theoretical orientations informing each discourse should be located. Within a hermeneutic framework our historical positions and our investments cannot be transcended. Thus, the best that can be done, faced with such a dilemma, is to interpret in such a way as to give access to our past and continually open up new possibilities for the future (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Both the **similarities** and the **differences** discourses attempt to do this. This makes their differences difficult to understand. A semiotic notion of a "landscape" might help to clarify this. Sless (1986, p.31) argues that although researchers and the object of study are always located within the same landscape it looks different depending on the position from which it is viewed. When the position occupied changes "so does the scene, and as certain views become visible, others disappear". The authors mentioned so far

have come from different backgrounds, have trained at different universities at different historical times, and have been schooled within different theoretical frameworks. Consequently different experiences and personal qualities have been projected (2) into the landscape, a process which has considerable influence on the manner in which it is perceived and described. This helps to explain the different pictures painted by, e.g. Boonzaier and Ngubane.

The **similarities** discourse, apparently informed by notions of political economy (e.g. Sharp, 1980) and critical theory, actively attempts to unveil and debunk beliefs, looking not only to analyse the surface but the deeper structures as well. The aim of critical theory is to reflect upon the systems of constraints produced by humans and "in these terms purports to be guided by emancipatory interests". It has a political reference in that it is concerned with power relationships and does not merely involve disinterested observation (Foster, 1983, p.52). The **similarities** discourse is extremely persuasive but disappoints because whilst it focuses on material social factors it fails to consider intra-psychic structures and processes.

The **differences** discourse does not involve disinterested observation either. Seated within a humanist framework, such researchers aim at promoting human development. Their research looks at innovative concepts and aims for maximum co-operation between researcher and researched. The researcher is free to admit and know her biases, may be highly personal, speculative and holistic (Reason and Rowan, 1981, p.48). These characteristics are particularly obvious in Ngubane (1988c, p.14) whose paper also illustrates a dilemma of "relevance" similar to that which has faced psychology over recent years and which is discussed later. Ngubane (1988c, pp. 9-10) demonstrates powerfully how invested she is in the **differences** discourse. She describes her personal path into the anthropological discipline and the problems of being an "indigenous" anthropologist, explicitly bringing herself into the landscape:

> "(She is frequently asked what she is) doing among Europeans and Americans who regard peoples like (her) own as primarily of exotic interest.. What (is she doing) .. in the company of these former colonialists whose forebears conquered and oppressed (hers)? ...(Is she) not contributing to the intellectual support for apartheid by emphasizing indigenous cultural differences and backwardness on the part of the majority population?" (1988c, p.12).

The future of anthropology as a discipline lies in

> "encodement, a need which reflects and springs from the morally integrating power of culture at these deeper levels ... The system of

concepts and values embodied in a culture, although usually implicit and open to change, nourishes a sense of identity and of possession of a heritage. This endows the people belonging to that culture with self-confidence and the kind of pride that makes for collective survival despite conquest and ensuing deprivations" (1988c, p.12).

She also asserts that:

"the demand for anthropological research will come from the people themselves rather than from the European and American middle-class intellectuals who formerly provided its public.. (and that there is a need for) ..painstaking assessment of the effects on the traditional cultures of the long years of apartheid, and the direction of resulting change" (1988c, p.13).

Ngubane (1988c, p.14) argues that this must be carried out by the "indigenous practitioner" who is more accountable and less readily able to "leave the field of research behind for academic discussions back home in the comforts of the Common Room, or in the affluent South African suburbs".

It is noteworthy that humanist research is not value free but is a political enterprise (Reason and Rowan, 1981). However, Ngubane (pers. communication) sees politics as a separate issue. This is unexpected because there is a strong flavour of Black Consciousness in much of what she says and it is inconceivable that any research can be apolitical.

For the similarities authors, politics is not a separate issue. However, it is problematic to presume that if differences are ignored because they are assumed to be untrue (or politically unsound) they will go away. For political reasons, the argument of the **similarities** discourse is extremely important: change will not come from little pockets of differently positioned groups with different aims, psychological investments etc. but from a coherently organized movement. However, differences **do** exist and because there are psychological variables involved, change will not come about by simply introducing a new discourse which trivialises these differences. Paradoxically then, whilst the intention might be to "force people's consciousness in order for them to free themselves from complexes and prejudices so as to become simply, we repeat, simply people" (in Alexander, 1983, p.11), the similarities idea as it stands will not bring about change. The psychological variables need serious consideration because those individuals who **feel** and perceive themselves as different, but who incidentally do not see themselves as having "complexes" nor any "prejudices", will not position themselves in the **similarities** discourse. In denying the existence of the different subjectivities pointed to, the **similarities** discourse assumes that the **differences** discourse is about being "black and inferior" or "white and superior". Yet this is not so, those

subscribing to the **differences** discourse are **not** in favour of apartheid ideology nor do they feel "inferior":

> "..it is irrelevant if the Government is telling Zulu people that they are bounded by their own special culture which is peculiar to them. They know who they are essentially, so at one level can indeed be Zulu, yet at a deeper level are Africans with a world-view or orientation common to Africans in general; while in a more external sense they are also South Africans" (Ngubane, 1988c, pp.11-12 ).

## THE DILEMMA OF INTRODUCING PSYCHOLOGY

This paper has argued that the **similarities** discourse ignores psychological factors. The question of how to include them in a manner which does not contradict the existing picture, however, poses a dilemma which has not been addressed by psychologists.

At first this seems remarkable but in fact it is not surprising; mainstream positivist psychology has been seen to play a powerful role in maintaining existing social relations. Talk of different perceptions between groups of people according to whatever is the current terminology (i.e. "race", "ethnicity", "culture") in South Africa, like the **differences** discourse, will have been seen to endorse the distorted philosophy and policies of the Government. Thus no politically minded psychologist has chosen to take this course. Instead, without challenging the **similarities** discourse, psychologists have raised problems within the discipline itself, asking how psychology might be made more relevant to present day revolutionary and post-apartheid South Africa (e.g. Dawes, 1986; Berger and Lazarus, 1987). Assumptions have been made that psychological practice and theory must be re-moulded (e.g. Perkel, 1988) or even abandoned (in Foster, 1986).

Some psychologists have discussed the South African crisis at various points in the mid 1980s and have noted that there are a range of possible theoretical frameworks to explore in order to "carve out the foundations of a practice which contributes towards the real, not imagined, social arrangements in which full human lives may be lived" (Foster, 1986, p.65). But there has been little attempt to apply these theories.

Foster (1983) demonstrated that by applying different theories interpretations of the data will differ and it would be useful to take up these ideas again. For example, whilst Tajfel fails to adequately address the notion of power (Foster, 1983), his ideas remain important and useful, particularly with respect to the different group perceptions and categorizations which have described. Whilst it is important to note that researchers should be brought into the picture, it must also be acknowledged that there exist multiple discourses, psychological investments and different positions that may or may not be taken up, for

whatever reasons. These factors must be considered and the issues at stake in the various discourses must be understood. But, to do so is likely to cause discomfort. "Relevant" psychologists who seem to be positioned within the **similarities** discourse have not been prepared thus far to tackle this kind of analysis because of the implications (but see Swartz, 1990). This has had important consequences and little benefit seems to have been derived from working with knowledge which is censored or based on particular "criteria from within the realm of political rhetoric" (Swartz, Gibson and Swartz, 1988, p.9). Ultimately, this has moved researchers in the social sciences away from two important aims of critical theory and hermeneutic enquiry to which, after all, many of the authors mentioned seem to subscribe. First, from the standpoint of the critical theorists there is a need to change society but also a need to be reflexive about "its own status and that of its interpretive categories.." (Harre and Lamb, 1984, p.62). Secondly, such a discourse does not allow for a worthwhile hermeneutic interpretation which seeks to "critically examine any fore-knowledge of the world and the phenomena we encounter there.. with the aim of coming to a deeper comprehension of these phenomena ..." (Harre and Lamb, 1984, p.133). We have yet to achieve this kind of deeper comprehension of the psychological phenomena we are confronted with in present day South Africa.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to understand and to challenge the "political line" put forward by the **similarities** discourse (and the dominant anti-apartheid discourse), arguing that it needs serious and competent psychological input of the kind put forward by Henriques et al. (1984). It has also challenged and tried to understand an ideology which states that it is not political but personal, "factual" or "real". The logic of the first discourse appears clear - the false consciousness of the labeled must be removed. "Culture", "race", "nationality", "tribe" are all constructions and as such they have aided the State in its quest for separate development and inequality. But, such a view leaves the **differences** discourse in awkward spaces. For these reasons, the **similarities** discourse has also become politically untenable (particularly since the **differences** discourse is frequently regarded as the "progressive" political stance outside South Africa: Welsh/Basque/Irish "otherness" and difference) (3).

The dilemma of difference has been introduced in this paper while challenging the ideas of the **similarities** discourse which postulates the falseness for individuals of the very real (to them) existence of different categories and the strong sense of belonging. Psychologically speaking it seems obvious that a large proportion of the population is psychologically invested in being and feeling "Zulu" or "African" and different to "other" South Africans. Whilst it is not an enviable stance, those who position themselves within the **differences** discourse have re-introduced into the arena an

important variable that will not disappear. It is a variable which should be given more serious consideration both in constructing a "political line" and in research carried out by all social scientists - anthropologists and psychologists alike.

*Footnotes:*

(1) Thanks to Don Foster for his commentary on the first draft of this paper. Thanks also to Deirdre Moyle and Ann Levett for their editorial assistance and commentary on the final draft.

(2) The concept of projected readers indicates that the author has a preconceived idea of his or her reader and refers to the way in which authors project into anticipated readers aspects of themselves. These are influenced by the position from which the author views the landscape (Sless, 1986).

(3) Don Foster (pers. communication).

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