PHAMBILI WITH THE SPIRIT OF SELF-REFLECTION

Kgamadi Kometsi
Department of Psychology
University of the Witwatersrand
P O Wits 2050
South Africa

The qualitative methods stream of the recent PsySSA conference (15-18 August 2000) attracted some of the most interesting papers and presentations of the event. This was particularly important, given the heated verbal exchanges of the AGM which threatened to distract attention away from the academic aspect of the conference. Of course there were a lot of titles on the programme of the qualitative methods stream that promised to be good, but which only made it as far as the programme itself, and never got presented, for whatever reason.

One of the qualities of the presentations in this stream, that maintained interest in those who attended, seemed to be the diversity of the topics covered. Some of the presenters located their papers generally within the broad ambit of the critical psychology approach, whereas others could be identified as actively *using* critical psychology principles given that they contained some "evaluation of the theories and practices of psychology, in terms of how they maintain an unjust and unsatisfying status quo" (Fox & Prilletensky, 1997:3). It is against this understanding that critical psychology, as an approach, will be used as a frame for this commentary.

During the period between the seventies and eighties, conditions in South Africa were such that it was inevitable that at least some psychologists would begin to seek ways of practising psychology that were alternative to mainstream (Euro-centric) models. Although oppression in this country predates this particular period, it could be said that resistance by Black people against racism and all that it stood for reached yet another peak here, within the field of psychology. Importantly, children became strong participants of the resistance, a development which a science of the humanities as psychology was (and is), could not ignore, particularly seeing that even they, the children, were not spared from the brutality of the security forces. It is encouraging then that the internal inquiry (i.e. inquiry about psychology by psychologists) has continued up to this point, where alternative ways of thinking about psychology and the society in which it is practised, are flourishing without the fear that such forms of inquiry might damage the legitimacy of psychology as a discipline itself.

Fox and Prilletensky (1997) see the overarching aim of critical psychology as being to change both psychology and societies. Obviously, one should not expect that any given paper framed within the critical psychology approach would address itself to only one of these objectives of change, i.e. only psychology or society. In fact, several of the papers presented in the Qualitative Methods stream can be said to have addressed one aspect more than the other, whereas others seemed to maintain a balance between theoretical analyses (and therewith, theoretical enrichment) and practical challenges which have immediate applicability for the groups of the oppressed.

For instance, Tamara Shefer's *Ordering gender: Revisiting the role of psychology*, contributed to a deeper understanding of how psychology helps police those who deviate from the social prescriptions of gendering. This policing function is reminiscent of how in the US, those slaves who rebelled against their master were found to meet the diagnostic criteria for a classifiable psychiatric illness (Fernando, 1989). The shift, as in practices of racism in the general South African society, seems to be towards subtle and insidious ways in which psychology, whether intentionally or otherwise, supports the oppression of some groups. Against this subtle and sometimes inadvertent practice, we have seen the development of more complex political forms of analysis, which aim to reveal, as Tamara Shefer's paper itself does, the ways in which the behaviours and responses of the oppressed are not simply mechanical, but complex, and which detract from basic cause and effect kinds of explanation. Such responses reflect how oppressed groups have not allowed themselves to be completely emasculated by the processes and forces of oppression.

Along the same lines, Grahame Hayes' presentation cited a number of cautionary points against critical psychology becoming "too tame" (or to continue the analogy, emasculated). Additionally, he offered a few Marxist concepts around which he believes critical psychology could usefully regain a desired critical vigour. The whole process of ensuring that critical psychology remains adequately invigorated is an imperative, particularly so given that certain of the criticisms levelled against mainstream psychology have resulted in a move of this profession closer to the poor and previously (and currently) disadvantaged people in this country.

Derek Hook and Michelle Vrdoljak's presentation *Fear and loathing in Northern Johannesburg: The security Park as heterotopia* presented a fresh way in which to see the *place* and *space* of the security parks as affording its residents some complicated socio-political rights, which are not overtly expressed in their marketing formulations. As they imply, security parks present an alternative way to hold on to the "political status quo" which was characterised by processes of exclusion, separation and avoidance. Such analyses or ways of looking at social developments can go a long way in contributing to the "never again" principle influencing the lives of most South African who have seen and learned about the atrocities of the previous political order. It is developments like these (i.e. security park real estate), which whilst veiled by an exercise of democratic rights, gain the

eventual potential to hamper the very same democratic development of South African society. These developments - despite some internal heterogeneity, as discussed during this presentation - afford the residents of security parks common set of social values (or what one might refer to as "organising principles"), which in this case rally around the perceived failure of the government to protect citizens against crime. Given the different explanations offered to explain why the crime rate "has increased" so much, it seems important to balance out people's need to flee into formations such as the security park *with a need to contribute crime combatting ideas* that would benefit others as well, particularly when the majority of these others are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. (This is particularly so when one considers that it is has been institutionalised (and racialised) forms of advantage and disadvantage which have made it possible for some people (an impossible for others) to afford living in security park estates).

Another paper that was presented in quite an innovative way was that of Anthony Collins. He used story-telling as a method to present this paper, with a black woman telling the story of *How the social psychologist got his facts*. There were some important comments made during the presentation about why he chose to present in this particular way, utilising a black woman as a storyteller. This mode of presentation served as a powerful means by which the paper was able to satirises psychology, and draw attention to certain of its follies.

A few universities also presented views on the structuring of their community psychology training courses. Most significant of these were the developments at the University of the Witwatersrand, where community psychology has become a separate stream of training, autonomous from their clinical training stream. This presentation, led by Megan Hooper, is specifically referred to here because it became a rallying-point around which similar developments at other universities were discussed. A brief review of the development of community psychology will clearly point to how this sub-discipline contains a critique of traditional psychology. Community psychology carries the interests of the disadvantaged in its practice, managing to reach beyond the walls of a consultation room between a psychologist and a usually white, middle class, client. Hooper's presentation both examined, and reflected upon, the history of community psychology, as a sub-discipline, both in some ways independent of, and interdependent with, mainstream psychology. The presentation also reflected on how the process of individuation still dominates in much psychological practice today. Importantly however, such suggestions are not to be read as arguing that community psychology need be completely divorced from mainstream psychology. Psychology needs these specialised streamlets, or sub-disciplines, to show its responsiveness to crucial, socio-political issues impacting on the lives of a variety of people, in disadvantaged community groupings or otherwise.

Hooper's presentation pointed to the difficulty that characterises acceptance of an additional socio-political role that psychologists can play in the process of healing. Different to the customary neutral position that a psychologist was reportedly expected to assume, psychologists today are called upon to actively

engage sources of distress which lie outside the confines of the intrapsychic processes of an individual. And this not a minute too early, as for decades, systemic theories (and other related approaches) have pointed out the inextricability of the human condition and behaviour from its socio-political context. An extension hereof points to the futility of extricating clients from their contexts for assessment, diagnosis and treatment purposes. Megan Hooper and her colleagues bravely related the contradictions in "trying to transform" psychology training and service delivery when the majority of service providers in this field are white, and the marginalised and poverty stricken majority are blacks.

It would be useful to compare these attempts at transforming psychology in South Africa to the developments in transforming psychology in the US, where blacks (read as part of the disadvantaged group) themselves were in the forefront of these developments (e.g. challenge against the Black self-hatred idea). In that case, traditional views in psychology, particularly those which disadvantaged blacks, were successfully challenged, and were done so in such a way that the disadvantaged group could own. It can be hypothesised then, that this way of empowering the disempowered (i.e. when the disempowered are active in their own empowerment), is preferable to the situation when the re-empowerment of the oppressed is managed by others, for the latter risks perpetuating dependence.

Constraints on space here do not allow for the more detailed discussion of all papers presented at the qualitative methods stream of PsySSA. Suffice to say for the time being that the way in which psychology as a profession encourages (through events such as the Qualitative Methods Conference) such self criticism can only serve to strengthen its value as a relevant discipline in our time.

REFERENCES.

Fernando, S (1989) **Race and culture in psychiatry.** London Tavistock/Routlede.

Fox, D & Prilleltensky, I (eds) (1997) **Critical psychology: An introduction.** London: Sage.