

Overcoming Essentialism in Community Psychology: The Use of a Narrative-Discursive Approach Within African Feminisms



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Introduction

Given the history of race- and gender-based colonialism in Africa, racial and gendered power relations are key issues to be tackled in community psychology interventions in general, but also crucially in those dealing with gendered practices such as sexual violence, unsafe abortion, circumcision and virginity testing, for example.

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Fundamental to these interventions is how gender is understood and how womxn¹ and mxn are positioned as (non)gendered beings. Central, too, is an understanding of the ways in which womxn and mxn are positioned within these interventions and how these positionings play into or subvert historical and raced representations of African and Global South peoples.

A decolonial feminist community psychology approach understands individual experience as being embedded in, enabled and shaped by discursive and social power relations. It also understands that meaningful, transformative change is only possible once social practices and experiences are viewed in the context of social power relations. African feminisms are an example of an approach that could be taken up and used as a resource in decolonial feminist community psychology spaces.

African and Global South² feminisms have a strong tradition of critiquing mainstream Western feminisms³ for what Mekgwe (2008) terms the mal-representations of womxn (and mxn) of Africa and the Global South more generally. African feminisms have thus also been concerned with the challenging task of exploring and producing accounts of the complexity and multiplicity in womxn's (and mxn's) experiences of localised, multiple forms of oppression and the resistances enacted against them (Mekgwe 2008; Tamale 2011). In this chapter we show how the utilisation of a narrative-discursive method within African feminist theorising may be useful in achieving this task. We illustrate our argument with examples from two studies conducted by the second and first authors respectively: Zimbabwean womxn's narratives of abortion decision-making and health service providers' positioning of womxn who have had abortions (Chiweshe 2016); South African womxn's and healthcare providers' narratives of their experiences of the pre-abortion counselling healthcare encounter in the Eastern Cape public health sector (Mavuso 2018). By fusing these scholarships, the constraints and productive capacity of discourses and power relations are placed alongside a view of the individual as acting

¹We use the term 'womxn' and ('mxn') to disrupt normative assumptions about gender and sex, here taken to be socially constructed, which write gender and sex *onto* individuals. The term 'womxn' denotes and recognises all persons with the biological capacity to become pregnant (because the studies discussed here are around abortion), including transgender, intersex, womxn-identifying and mxn-identifying persons. We also use this term to foreground the experiences of womxn of colour, womxn from/living in the Global South, trans, queer and intersex womxn, and all womxn-identifying persons who have been excluded from dominant constructions of 'womanhood' and feminist praxis on the subject

²The term Global South refers to countries from Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia including the Middle East which face serious problems and challenges as a result of geopolitical processes of colonialism and imperialism. The term is however, problematic as it can homogenise various countries.

³Western feminism is also a potentially problematic term and to avoid any misconceptions its use here refers to feminism from the first world countries or the so-called Western world. When we use the term 'Western feminists' we are not trying to imply that the view from this part of the world is monolithic by any means but rather we are following in the footsteps of Mohanty (1991, p. 52) who states that, "I am attempting to draw attention to the similar effects of various textual strategies used by writers which codify Others as non-western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western" in reference to Western feminists.

upon and within the social world. Our approach enables, we argue, understandings of African womxn's experiences and resistances which are informed by definitions of racial identity and culture, womxnhood, and social reality as dynamic social concepts and practices. These kinds of understandings facilitate community psychology interventions that are relevant and 'emancipatory' as they stem from the multiplicity of participants' narrated experiences and the social and discursive power relations implicit in these narratives.

In the following, we discuss decolonial feminist community psychology as a transformative approach. We describe the specific decolonial approaches we used and the methodology deployed in our studies to provide a case for utilising a narrative-discursive approach within African feminisms, thus enabling a framework that reads similarities and differences, and oppressions and resistances in African womxn's experiences. We conclude by demonstrating, by way of a policy brief that has been developed into a step-by-step abortion counselling guide, how the results of a robust narrative-discursive analysis may be used to meaningfully impact on and improve the lives of those beyond our research participants.

Community Psychology and Decolonial Feminist Community Psychology

Community psychology as a discipline and field is expressly committed to the production of emancipatory theories and research. In other words, it is committed to bringing about meaningful societal change for communities that are shaped by injustices and inequalities. As Cruz and Sonn (2015) note, however, aside from critical approaches to community psychology, the discipline is still largely shaped by an understanding of people and structural systems that obfuscates socio-historical power relations. These power relations create and sustain the very oppressions and injustices that the discipline seeks to eradicate.

In order to avoid reproducing a community psychology that at best misunderstands and misrepresents the communities it means to serve, and at worst deepens the injustices and oppression faced by those communities, community psychology needs to be informed by approaches which are able to: make visible individuals' embeddedness within social, discursive and material power relations, incorporate a cognisance of historical representations of participants, and pay attention to moments of resistance and the bending of oppressive norms.

A decolonial feminist perspective has much to offer community psychology. Indeed, a decolonial feminist community psychology understands that individual experiences are enabled and shaped by social structures (Grabe et al. 2014). It also recognises that such an understanding is necessary in order to eradicate the social power relations that create individual womxn's experiences. We argue that applying an African feminist narrative-discursive approach to abortion research (and womxn's experiences more generally) not only follows the principles of a decolonial feminist community psychology, but also provides the means to achieve the emancipatory goals of a decolonial feminist community psychology. Through the use of an African

feminist postcolonial/poststructural narrative-discursive analysis, we demonstrate how womxn's individual experiences of understanding abortion as well as procuring an abortion and going through abortion counselling, are shaped by interacting patriarchal and economic power relations. We argue that this approach enables 'interventions' that are relevant, powerful and most importantly 'emancipatory' as they stem from participants' own voiced experiences and an understanding of how those voiced experiences are occasioned by social, discursive and material power relations.

African Feminisms

African (and Global South) feminisms share a historical (and to a lesser extent, contemporary) commitment to a just representation of those who have historically been, and still continue to be, mal-represented in academic knowledge production that remains skewed towards Global North resources and scholarship (Blay 2008). These mal-representations, which maintain the very systems that create oppression, tend to include an essentialised and rigid portrayal of womxn from/living in Global South countries which tends to be a negative one in which 'the Global South womxn' lacks agency, is dominated by those with whom they are in relationships of power and is consequently always already the 'oppressed victim' (Wilson 2011).

In attempting to correct these mal-representations, however, some African feminist approaches (see discussion in Salo 2001) have themselves produced essentialised and rigid accounts, albeit in different ways, of 'the African womxn's experience'. For example, some authors have written about motherhood as a defining value in African cultures (see Chilisa and Ntseane 2010) as opposed to mothernormativity, an organising normative expectation that governs societies (Tamale 2006). Such approaches notwithstanding, a strength of contemporary African feminisms is their commitment to shedding light on local realities as experienced by African peoples, particularly womxn and girls, and as shaped by "specific contexts, cultures and peoples" (Chilisa and Ntseane 2010, p.619). This has meant, in South Africa and other parts of Africa, an attunement to, and theorisation around, how oppressions may be raced, classed and gendered in intersecting and interacting ways (de la Rey 2001). In South Africa, for example, feminist efforts include an understanding of the raced and classed barriers to access to equitable healthcare and healthcare service delivery (including abortion, ante- and postnatal care), among many other concerns.

We argue that the narrative-discursive method we employ here allows for grounded analyses that expose the multiplicities of African womxn's lives, as well as the local and global power relations that serve to constrain or enable particular experiences. This method falls within the broad area of African postcolonial/post-structural feminist approaches, which we briefly describe below.

African Postcolonial/Poststructural Feminism

From a postcolonial/poststructural African feminist perspective, patriarchal power relations, domesticity and sexual politics are important ways in which womxn's oppressions are enacted and are therefore sites of resistance. Whilst acknowledging how patriarchy has been conceptualised in some African feminist theorising to refer to a monolithic overpowering structure which may lead to "a danger of ontologising male power, and assuming that human relationships are inevitably moulded by tyrannical power relations" (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, p. 2), an African postcolonial/poststructural feminist perspective understands patriarchy as a relational form of power where womxn are not mere victims of mxle oppression but are actively involved in challenging, contesting and in some situations perpetuating patriarchal power relations. What results is "an account of African gendered experience[s] that does not assume fixed positions in inevitable hierarchies, but stresses transformation and productive forms of contestation" (Bakare-Yusuf 2003, p. 3).

An African feminist post-structural/postcolonial approach (as we are defining it here) has much in common with a post-structural feminist discursive analysis which aims to "subvert the taken-for-granted discourses around ways of being and behaving that run through hegemonic discourses and preserve patriarchal power relations" (Thompson et al. 2017, p. 4). An important element in the African version is, we argue, the highlighting/foregrounding of (neo)colonialist power relations that are frequently neglected in other theories. Despite the end of formal colonialism, this approach views the position of womxn in many societies as being relegated to the position of the 'other' which mimics the one colonised subjects used to hold: that is, experiencing a politics of oppression and repression (Azim et al. 2009). An African feminist postcolonial/post-structural approach is particularly attuned to how African womxn are represented and is committed to researching (and producing knowledge about) the experiences of African womxn in ways that recognise the multiple oppressions and resistances in African womxn's experiences. It is also concerned with identifying and recognising the points of convergence and divergence in and between their experiences to avoid producing a homogenised account of the 'African womxn's experience' of any social practice or event. Like other approaches to African feminism (e.g. Blay 2008), an African feminist postcolonial/post-structural approach is attuned to and works to document and bring an end to African womxn's experiences of imperial/geo-political, raced, economic and gendered oppression (among others). However, it proposes that 'Africa' and 'womxn' are necessarily open signifiers to which meaning is attributed in particular situations. These meanings are variable depending on womxn's material conditions and their cultural, socio-historical, political and geographic locations. Thus, Blay (2008 p. 67) states that "the designation "woman" is not universal and therefore", 'women' "never experience their oppression in the same ways". Multiplicity, variability, and complexity are therefore foregrounded.

Regarding power, an African postcolonial/post-structural feminism necessarily views power as relational and dynamic. When viewed in this way, power is “negotiated and negotiable, assessed in relative rather than absolute terms, and rightfully framed within cultural, historical, and generational contexts” (Blay 2008, p. 69). In this way, an African feminist post-structuralist approach avoids representing African womxn as monolithically ‘oppressed victims’ or empowered, both of which are harmful in the experiences they render invisible. Furthermore, power is understood to be bound up in/with normative constructions of race, gender and sexuality (as well as other social locations). Thus, Tamale (2011 p. 16) argues that sexuality and gender “are creatures of culture and society, and both play a central, crucial role in maintaining power relations in our societies”, and de la Rey (2001) writes that race is a socially constructed powerful organising system which deserves attention in the South African feminist political landscape. An African feminist postcolonial/post-structural approach therefore explores systems of thought or discourses and the practices they (de)legitimise and (ab)normalise and analyses womxn’s experiences from this perspective.

Despite the explanatory and emancipatory potential of post-structural approaches, they have been criticised for either relegating the material⁴ to the realm of non-significance (if discursive and social processes constitute social realities) or being unable to meaningfully incorporate the material, and its relationship to the discursive and social, into their accounts (see Burkitt 1999 and Rahman and Witz 2003 for discussions on this). This criticism has led to debates about whether post-structural approaches do, or can, allow for the visibilisation of social realities, with some arguing that this is indeed the case (Burkitt 1999). This is made possible in two ways: (1) by understanding, as we do, that the relationship between materiality and the social is one wherein both are mutually constitutive of and constituted by the other in a dynamic sense (an example of this is Foucault’s analytics of bio-politics in which both the individual body and population politics are intricately interweaved with knowledge, discourse and power (Foucault 1977)); (2) by applying data collection and analysis methods (such as the narrative-discursive approach and Macleod’s (2016) framework of supportability⁵) that make materialities, as they are experienced and made relevant by participants themselves, visible.

⁴Materiality as a concept is variously understood in the feminist literature as referring, perhaps most notably, to economic conditions and resources and to lived experiences of being a body (the embodiment literature speaks to this), but also to objects (nature, tools, buildings and structures, and technological objects), space and time, and non-discursive practices (Rahman and Witz 2003).

⁵Macleod (2016) introduces the construct ‘unsupportability’ as one which, unlike the oft-used term ‘unintended’ (often conflated with ‘unwanted’) locates pregnancies within social, structural and individual contexts which are seen to intersect.

A Narrative-Discursive Approach in African Feminisms

African feminists have recognised the importance of analysing narratives (see, for example, Kashyap 2009) and discourses (see, for example, McFadden 2002) in highlighting gendered oppressions. In our work, we have combined the strengths of these kinds of analyses: the more micro-analytical work enabled by narrative analyses, and the more macro-analytical labour enabled through discursive analyses. In the rest of the chapter, we demonstrate how using Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive method enables the kind of African feminism elucidated upon. Within our work, discourse is understood as both constraining and productive in constructing objects/social practices and particular selves which relate to objects/social practices in particular ways (Foucault 1972). Ultimately, discourse acts upon individuals in ways which render individuals knowable and governable, whether in constraining or productive ways (Foucault 1977). Critical discursive approaches, including Taylor and Littleton's narrative-discursive approach and Davies and Harré's (2001) positioning theory, extend this understanding of discourse to allow for individuals to 'act upon' discourse making the process of subject formation a bidirectional one. Thus, individuals use discourse to position themselves and others in particular ways. However, the ability to do so is constrained and made possible by the availability (and dominance) of particular discourses. This understanding of discourse and the relationship between discourse and individuals is captured in the concept of discursive resources.

Discursive resources may be understood as culturally-specific features of talk which are made available by and within an individual's socio-cultural context or community (Reynolds and Taylor 2005). They constitute an individuals' discursive environment and thus shape what can be said and in what ways. However, as the word 'resources' implies, within a narrative-discursive approach, these features of talk may be actively drawn upon and used by individuals for specific ends and goals, for example, to position themselves or others in particular ways, or to justify a practice, defend against expressed or anticipated criticism and so on (Reynolds and Taylor 2005). As Taylor (2015, p. 10) states: discursive resources "amount to a historically accrued but ever-changing pool of meanings, associations and even patterns of words which pre-exist talk on a topic or issue and shape what is (and is not) sayable and said about it". Discursive resources include ideas, images, assumptions and expectations about objects and social practices. In our extension of Taylor and Littleton's approach, we view discourses, as well as narratives, as resources to be taken up by speakers in their talk and writings (Taylor 2015).

Within Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative-discursive approach, narratives are "a construction, in talk, of sequence or consequence" (p. 95). This highlights two aspects of narratives. The notion of 'sequence' implies a temporal ordering of events and may be communicated minimally through words such as "and then" or through references to time (past, present and future). The concept of 'consequence' refers to

causality which is attributed to an event or experience by individuals during their talk. The presence of either or both constitutes a narrative. What is distinct about a narrative-discursive approach, say from other narrative analyses, is that narratives are conceptualised as both a resource and a construction (Taylor and Littleton 2006). In other words, narratives are told by individuals but may also be drawn upon, alongside discourses, to construct other narratives.

Adapting Taylor and Littleton's (2006) approach, two kinds of narratives need to be distinguished: canonical narratives and micro-narratives. Canonical narratives, or grand/meta-narratives, are common stories with familiar plotlines and structures, such as the hero narrative (a situation of crisis requires intervention, which the hero then resolves through brave action) (Reynolds and Taylor 2005). Canonical narratives tend to reflect or speak to normative expectations and understandings of social reality and the way things are or should be (e.g. the motherhood narrative, which views womxn as progressing, at the right time, through pregnancy and birth into a state of blissful motherhood).

In contrast, micro-narratives are localised, small stories which are often constructed in the context of question and answer interactions, such as the research interview (Blommaert 2006). Micro-narratives, therefore, tend to be highly specific not only to cultural and socio-historical contexts, but also to a specific event or experience, making them temporary (O'Donovan 2006). Indeed, it is this specificity and relativity which enables and makes visible disruptions of normative expectations (Lyotard 1979 as cited in O'Donovan 2006). When narrative is understood as both construction and resource, then, the interaction of the micro and macro is illuminated in individuals' negotiations with discourses, canonical narratives, as well as the materialities of their social realities.

The approach we used highlights the importance of resistance not only to understand womxn's experiences but also as an important aspect of feminism's emancipatory goal of eradicating all forms of oppression. Using a narrative-discursive approach within an African feminist framework makes resistances visible. By studying narratives, which are voiced experiences, in a way that is informed by scholarship on discourse and power, possibilities for alternative ways of being, feeling and thinking can be made visible. This visibilisation may be achieved through an exploration of participants' micro-narratives and narratives as sites where social structures (discourses, canonical narratives and power relations), material conditions, and individuals meet and interact. By analysing individuals' (micro-)narrative constructions of their experiences, then, ways of representing and understanding social practices, events and objects, which may conform or run counter to hegemonic understandings, are made visible through individuals' voiced experiences. In the next section, we draw on our two studies to demonstrate the usefulness of an African feminist narrative-discursive approach.

Our Studies: Abortion Decision-Making and Pre-Abortion Counselling Experiences

Our first study used a Foucauldian postcolonial African feminist approach, read through a narrative-discursive approach, to explore Zimbabwean womxn's and health service providers' narratives of abortion decision-making. The data for the study were collected from three sites in Harare, Zimbabwe. The three sites were Harare Hospital, Epworth and Mufakose. Because Zimbabwe currently has restrictive abortion laws, womxn's abortion decision-making narratives could only be accessed retrospectively. Thus, the 18 womxn (six at each site) who participated in an adaptation of Wengraf's (2001) narrative interview method had (clandestinely) terminated pregnancies in the year prior to data collection (2013–2014). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six service providers (two nurses at Harare Hospital, two village health workers in Epworth and two nurses in Mufakose). The six service providers who were interviewed were recruited precisely for their experience in working with womxn who have terminated pregnancies [for a fuller explanation, see Chiweshe (2016)].

One of the main findings of the study was that when narrating their abortion stories, the womxn spoke in a socially-sanctioned manner. One of the discursive resources employed by the womxn, was a discourse of 'shame/stigma'. Shame and stigma, which were seen to be important in determining what makes a pregnancy unsupportable, and also an abortion complicated, can be viewed as a way of sanctioning what is allowed and what is forbidden in the particular context. Shame and stigma are used to discipline womxn's bodies regarding their sexuality – making pregnancies unsupportable by shaming womxn who get pregnant outside marriage and also those who have an abortion. This sanctioning is attached to gendered understandings – womxn being responsible for ensuring that pregnancy occurs only 'within' a heterosexual conjugal relationship and womxn accepting their reproductive role should pregnancy occur.

In their interview talk, then, womxn spoke of how they were caught in a double-bind, where the circumstances of a pregnancy could be viewed as shameful and abortion was also viewed as stigmatised/stigmatising. The double-bind creates a dilemma concerning what is culturally and morally acceptable, with both keeping a pregnancy under certain circumstances (single parenthood, relationships outside of marriage, fatherless children) and proceeding with an abortion being seen as morally reprehensible. While both options were depicted as bad, womxn proceeded with an abortion because it could be hidden, whereas a pregnancy could not. The fear surrounding community members finding out about the abortion meant womxn did not present for post abortion care if they experienced complications. Here it is precisely the double-edged nature of shame/stigma ('incorrect' pregnancies and abortion) that contributes to the regulation of womxn's reproductive behaviour. Society is seen in the womxn's micro-narratives as having the means (through stigma/shame) of disciplining those who act contrary to the social norms.

In their micro-narratives, womxn also drew on the ‘conjugalised fatherhood’ and the ‘masculine provider’ discourses. Both these discourses construct gendered ideals of sexuality, motherhood and masculinity. The ‘masculine provider’ discourse shows the operation of domesticity where womxn are expected to be economically dependent on mxle partners while providing gratuitously the necessities of productive and reproductive social life (Tamale 2003). The operation of both these discourses within the womxn’s narratives meant that marriage (which was assumed always to be a heterosexual union) was seen as the expected aspiration of womxn as well as being the appropriate place for reproduction. Accordingly, mxn’s role was that of financial provider for the family, with the absence of a male provider rendering the pregnancy unsupportable.

Importantly, then, womxn’s narratives also spoke to the ways in which the materialities of their lives, namely the economic (which sometimes interacted with the patriarchal) conditions of their lives, necessitated abortion. Thus, participants discussed how continuation of the pregnancy would result in lost opportunities: being unable to complete their education and become economically independent as continuation of the pregnancy would necessarily mean marriage and economic dependency on their mxle partner; or needing to stop working in order to take care of the resultant child. Participants also spoke of how poverty meant that there were no economic resources to support continuation of the pregnancy and parenting.

While womxn in this study drew on hegemonic discourses of masculinity and femininity, and also hegemonic discourses which construct abortion as shameful, we also view their narratives as resistance against these hegemonic discourses around abortion and womxnhood. As the second author argues (Chiweshe 2016), the very act of speaking, and in great detail, about having had an abortion was itself an act of resistance – a resistance against the injunction, underpinned by the discursive and legal prohibition of abortion, to not speak about abortion and therefore to appropriately portray shame about having done the undoable and unspeakable. By speaking about having had an abortion, the womxn went against hegemonic discourses which construct the ideal womxn as always already a mother, and demonstrated how abortion is part of (some) African womxn’s realities. The health services providers drew from a moralistic religious and cultural discourse to construct womxn who have abortions as immoral and evil. By drawing from these hegemonic discourses, the health service providers took on disciplinary roles through stigmatising those who went against societal norms.

Our second study drew on an African feminist post-structuralism and Foucauldian scholarship on discourse, knowledge and power and applied this to a narrative-discursive approach in order to explore womxn’s and healthcare providers’ narratives of their experiences of waiting room interactions and pre-abortion counselling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 30 womxn and four healthcare providers who were recruited from three public hospitals in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa where abortion legislation is liberal (an abortion can be requested up to 12 weeks of gestation, and thereafter under particular conditions). Womxn were asked about their experiences of the counselling (information provision and decision-making aspects) and their experiences of interacting with

other womxn and healthcare providers while waiting to receive counselling and/or their abortion procedure. Healthcare workers (two nurses, and 2 volunteer counsellors) were asked about their experiences of providing counselling (information provision and decision-making aspects) and their experiences of interactions with womxn in the waiting room (Mavuso 2018).

Through moralisation discourses, abortion was predominantly constructed by womxn and healthcare providers as immoral, with some participants drawing on a religious discourse to construct it as sinful as well. Womxn were thus positioned (and positioned themselves) as deviant and as committing a wrongful act while healthcare providers positioned themselves as saving womxn from abortion. For healthcare providers, the immorality of abortion was tied to some providers' expectations of the embodiment of shame where womxn were expected to be visibly ashamed, through their posture, facial expressions and demeanour, of what they were about to do. Using an awfulisation of abortion discourse (Hoggart 2015; Wahlström 2013), abortion was constructed as risky, dangerous and harmful to both womxn and foetus. This positioned both womxn and the foetus as vulnerable and under threat and as needing to be saved from this threat. Notably, however, the construction of abortion as threatening to the foetus carried the implication of positioning womxn as a threat to, instead of protector of, the foetus. The risks of abortion stated by healthcare providers included a risk of contracting cancer, risk of infertility, as well as the certainty of mental or psychological ill-health.

Importantly, some participants challenged normative discourses around the immorality and shamefulness of abortion. Thus, one healthcare provider normalised and rationalised womxn's embodiment of happiness which is significant in going against the normative expectation that womxn should not only feel sad and ashamed but should visibly embody this before, during and after having an abortion. Related to this, and equally important, was that some womxn constructed a micro-narrative of 'We were chatting/sharing stories' in which womxn described how their embodied experiences of being together in the waiting room and sharing their stories about abortion led to feeling comfort, solace and strength, and to a normalisation of abortion as part of the everyday. For some womxn, these conversations provided a counter discourse to the awfulisation of abortion, moralisation and pronatalist discourses drawn upon by healthcare providers in their counselling practices. To the extent that womxn also took up these discourses during interviews, experiences of these waiting room conversations may also have enabled womxn to not only begin to view abortion differently, but also may have mitigated against the shame, guilt, and emotional difficulty which is produced by dominant constructions of abortion (Kimport et al. 2011) and which was experienced by some of the womxn in this study. The micro-narrative of 'We were chatting/sharing stories', then, highlights how materiality, in this case referring to embodiment, may shape, in a transformative and subversive way, taken-for-granted discursive and social practices (i.e. not only how abortion is constructed but also the experience of obtaining an abortion).

Womxn's micro-narratives also spoke to how the materialities of their lives shaped their decision to have an abortion. Thus, womxn spoke about how the economic realities of their lives (such as being the sole economic provider and being

unable to stretch already strained economic resources, or needing to complete their education or be available for an upcoming job, or being unemployed and economically reliant on their mxle partner) necessitated abortion, even in the face of directive counselling practices which delegitimised (through the provision of information on foetal development or the use of foetal models and photographs, for example) abortion as an appropriate way to resolve the pregnancy.

An African feminist post-structural/postcolonial approach demands a rethinking of what we understand about gendered and raced experiences. Our two studies highlight the variability and complexity of womxn's experiences of thinking about and procuring abortion in legally liberal and restrictive settings. Contrary to discourses which construct abortion as antithetical and foreign to African cultural systems, our data points to an understanding of how abortion may be an important part of reproductive decision-making in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In our Zimbabwean data, womxn spoke about how cultural expectations (such as not having another child while one child is still breastfeeding) not only complicated pregnancies but also necessitated abortion. Womxn also, however, spoke about how Shona culture stigmatises womxn who have abortions.

Both our studies highlight how Tamale's (2006) concept of mothernormativity as an organising system may operate oppressively to disallow and/or stigmatise abortion. Thus, in both studies, abortion was highly stigmatised, being constructed as abnormal, immoral and shameful. Our South African data particularly shows how mothernormativity may be drawn upon (through foetal personhood construction) during pre-abortion counselling to position womxn as always already mothers who are expected to protect and nurture their child, and therefore as 'bad mothers' in the event of an abortion. The ways in which culture and gender were negotiated by the participants in our two studies implies that continued efforts are needed to re-imagine understandings of womxnhood, racial and cultural identity so as to enable womxn's access to safe abortion (where the concept of safety extends to include freedom from stigma and the distress it causes, and freedom from directive counselling).

The findings of research studies (including our own) on womxn's reasons for abortion necessitate an understanding of abortion as an expression of, and a means of ensuring, womxn's reproductive autonomy. Patriarchal power relations may mean that womxn may not be able to negotiate whether to have sex, whether to use contraception and therefore whether to have children and how many. When womxn become pregnant, (access to) safe abortion becomes an important means of controlling reproduction. An African feminist postcolonial/post-structural approach to the womxn's experiences, as we have discussed here, demands that abortion is understood as an expression of/means for womxn's economic autonomy in a context of patriarchal power relations. Participants' own descriptions of the material (i.e. economic) conditions that occasioned abortion reflect the often intertwined patriarchal and economic oppressions womxn may face in their journey to abortion. Thus, for some of the womxn in our studies, abortion was a means of avoiding economic dependency on their mxle partner. Furthermore, and as Macleod (2002) notes, the intertwined and historical nature of economic and patriarchal oppressions means that womxn are often forced to choose to either continue with the pregnancy (and parent or place for

adoption) or be economically productive and independent but not both. Some of our participants were similarly constrained by these oppressions.

Lastly, the different legal contexts of our two studies and their implication in terms of the data produced, further highlights the patriarchal oppressions womxn face at the level of policy and legislation. In our Zimbabwean data, restrictive laws on abortion meant that womxn had to terminate their pregnancies using unsafe and potentially dangerous methods, a decision which participants framed as a choice between two undesirable options: an unsupportable pregnancy and/or (deepened) poverty on the one hand, and the possibility of serious ill health or death on the other.

Transforming Pre-Abortion Counselling Policy

Through one of our studies which explored womxn's and healthcare providers' experiences of pre-abortion counselling, and a partner study which analysed recordings of the pre-abortion counselling sessions, we were able to make visible the discourses and power relations underpinning the counselling practices as well as the narratives or voiced experiences of womxn who participated in the counselling sessions.

These findings will be used in the training of healthcare providers who provide pre-termination of pregnancy counselling. Based on the above-mentioned research, the first and last author and another co-author initially put together a policy brief which identifies counselling practices which were found in the research to be: harmful to some womxn; emotionally burdensome to some healthcare workers providing the counselling; or useful to both womxn and healthcare providers (Mavuso et al. 2017). In producing the policy brief, we made no assumptions about womxn's essential experiences of counselling or termination of pregnancy, but highlighted, based on the stories produced in the research, how divergent the womxn's experiences of the pregnancy and counselling are and how, given this, flexibility is needed in the counselling encounter. Noting the discourses drawn on by the participants in describing their experiences (e.g. awfulisation of abortion; moralisation of abortion), we recommended counselling processes that serve to undermine these discourses (e.g. normalising abortion as a standard medical procedure). Thus, the methodology that we used in our research allowed us to integrate personal narratives and social dynamics in our recommendations for abortion counselling.

This policy brief has been developed into a step-by-step counselling guide for healthcare workers providing abortion counselling. The intention is that it will be used to train healthcare providers and be implemented to provide abortion counselling that does not produce the very harm that counselling expressly sets out to alleviate or prevent. The result of deploying a critical African feminist narrative-discursive approach within decolonial feminist community psychology praxes is that abortion counselling may be re-imagined in a way that helps both womxn who receive coun-

selling and those who conduct counselling. This is because it is based on an analysis which avoids essentialism and homogenisation, and because it brings the individual and the social together and enables an analysis of the interactions between the two. Although the programme is in its early stages and no evaluation has been conducted, we are confident that the integration of our theoretical approach, our narrative-discursive methodology into the recommendations, guidelines and training material will bear some fruit in terms of providing pre-termination of pregnancy counselling that empowers womxn in their reproductive lives and bodily integrity.

Conclusion

The field of community psychology is in no way homogenous. Indeed, there are community psychology approaches, such as decolonial feminist community psychology, that locate themselves in a context of the social structures in which individuals and communities live and struggle. However, the discipline is still in some ways troubled by approaches to knowledge production that do not take full account of the historical and social processes that produce and shape individuals' and communities' everyday experiences of oppression, nor of the ways in which individuals and communities actively shape historical and social processes and in so doing enact resistances against their myriad and intersecting oppressions (Cruz and Sonn 2015).

Feminist praxis too has been critiqued. Much feminist knowledge production has been historically, and continues to be, founded on homogenising and essentialising assumptions about womxn from/living in the Global South and North (Mekgwe 2008). Using our studies, we showed how a theoretical and methodological synthesis could produce the kind of qualitative analysis that registers similarities and differences in individual experiences. This work highlights experiences in the context of the discursive, social and material power relations that enable and shape those experiences, as well as registering resistances to hegemonic power relations. Thus, we described how we interweaved an African feminist framework with Taylor and Littleton's narrative-discursive approach; the former is oriented towards the ways in which the experiences of womxn from/living in African countries are represented and which understands power as not only relational but dynamic, while the latter makes visible patterns (similarities and differences) in participants' voiced experiences and the social realities in their experiences. This synthesis, we argued, enacts decolonial feminist community psychology principles and therefore enabled, firstly, an understanding of how discourses around gender, sexuality, reproduction and abortion as well as patriarchal and economic power relations shape experiences around abortion, and, secondly, how individuals act upon the conditions of their lives as a result of taking up, negotiating or resisting these discursive, social and material power relations. The result was a socially situated account of the variability and complexity of participants' abortion experiences.

By way of an example of a policy brief and healthcare providers' step-by-step abortion counselling guide, we showed how interventions which are both relevant

and emancipatory are possible when they start from the myriad and complex experiences of individuals and communities. These experiences can only be accessed through theoretical and methodological approaches to knowledge production that are steeped in an understanding of historical, social and discursive processes which shape individuals' lives and are in turn shaped by individuals. Applying this to community psychology will ensure not only that the field maintains a critical, self-reflective outlook but that it also achieves its emancipatory and transformative goals.

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