PINS, 2019, 58, 50 –70

Why decolonialising feminist psychology may fail, and why it mustn't: The politics of signification and the case of 'teenage pregnancy'

Abstract

The calls to decolonise psychology and feminisms are a demand for action in overcoming past and current (neo) colonial injustices. Decolonisation has, however, been complex owing to the plurality, mutation, and masking of (neo)colonial systems. Within this context, decolonialising feminist psychology may fail. Homing in on the politics of signification, we argue that the colonial roots of many signifiers that serve to perpetuate gendered power relations are masked through their taken-for-granted status within psychology. We illustrate the latter through discussion of "adolescence", a signifier premised on colonialist thinking regarding individual and societal development. While gross forms of colonialist thinking regarding adolescence have disappeared, the "threat of degeneration" implicit in the concept remains. Drawing on critical work on "teenage pregnancy" in South Africa, we show how young womxn's reproductive health is impacted by the entrenchment of the threat of degeneration in educational and health responses. This discussion illustrates why decolonising feminist psychology must not fail. Alternative signifiers that serve the purpose of social justice and care should be foregrounded. These joint tasks (critique of (neo)colonialist signifiers and the enactment of transformation through foregrounding alternative signifiers) should underpin decolonising feminist psychology praxis.

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Keywords

feminism; decolonisation; adolescence; pregnancy; teenage pregnancy; signification.

The current, repeated, calls for decolonisation, emanating from a range of spaces, are a demand for action in overcoming past and current (neo)colonial injustices.

Given the visible and gross injustices perpetuated by colonialism, these calls appear as self-evident in moving towards equitable societies. Theory, praxis, knowledge production and political actions that serve to undo the legacies of colonialism are much needed.

In this paper, we speak to the potential in interweaving decolonisation, feminism and psychology. We argue that there are many reasons why decolonising feminist psychology may fail. Key amongst these reasons is the failure to attend to the politics of signification: how the cementing of particular signifiers as taken-for-granted within systems of understanding – in particular those with which psychologists engage – enables continued gendered (neo)colonial power relations. While certain signifiers have been thoroughly critiqued (for instance those used to differentiate along the lines of race, particularly in derogatory terms), the (neo)colonialist roots of others remain masked. To illustrate this point, we discuss the gendered (neo)colonial roots of the signifier "adolescence", and its implications in terms of understandings of "teenage pregnancy".

We argue that two of the fundamental tasks of decolonalising feminist psychology are to: (1) interrogate (neo)colonist signifiers that serve to perpetuate gendered power relations that oppress womxn, in particular black womxn, in overt and subtle ways, and (2) bring into being, or foreground where they exist in marginalised spaces, alternative signifiers that serve the purpose of social justice and care. While such labour cannot hope to undo gendered (neo)colonial power relations in their totality, we conclude by talking through how such labour may be useful in the endeavours with which decolonising feminist psychology must inevitably engage.

Why decolonising feminist psychology may fail

Despite the simplicity of the idea of decolonisation, it has, in fact, been an extremely complex task. The disassemblage of (neo)colonial legacies has proven complicated, not only because of entrenched power relations and systems, but also because of the plurality of these systems, and their ability to adapt to new circumstances. Decolonisation has been hampered by the continued success of coloniality, on multiple levels, to turn its victims into perpetrators and opponents into participants in its ongoing construction (Mpofu, 2017). For example, the "Africanisation of colonialism" (Le Grange, 2018: 9) occurred when the logic of coloniality remained within systems of power, or when demographic changes - such as African people in positions of authority - were not accompanied by shifts in the fundamental systemic mechanisms instituted by colonialism.

The complexity and slipperiness of (neo)colonialism referred to above are part of the reason decolonising feminist psychology may fail in its endeavours.

Decolonising feminist psychology may also fail because of the significant labour required to insert decolonisation into feminism and feminism into decolonising endeavours. Scholars from a range of contexts (see Tamale, 2006; Zine, 2008; Arvin et al., 2013) have long decried the hegemony of Euro-American styled feminism and the necessity of writing back to the metropole. Similarly, scholars such as Gayatry Spivak (2005) and Chandra Mohanty (2003) have worked hard to insert gender analyses into postcolonial theory.

These efforts are further complicated when the discipline of Psychology is added into the mix. Decolonising feminist psychologists point to how Psychology as a discipline and praxis, for the most part, bolsters individualistic, masculinist, cis-gendered, White, middle-class, post-capitalist, and global North ideals (Kessi & Boonzaier, 2018; Boonzaier & van Niekerk, 2019). As argued by Kurtis and Adams (2015: 388), "The liberatory impulse of feminist psychology falls short of its potential … because of its complicity with neocolonial tendencies of hegemonic psychological science".

Critique of the "Western" locatedness of Psychology has been accompanied by calls to Africanise psychology. These calls have highlighted the importance of developing a discipline of Psychology that is grounded in African epistemological and ontological assumptions, knowledge production, and praxis – an important aim. However, particular renditions of an African Psychology have been critiqued on three fronts, for: (1) endorsing the mainstream project of psychologisation, in other words, focusing on the individual in knowledge production, (2) inciting individuals to self-manage socially-produced risk in praxis; and (3) an essentialising bent, since "African" is often framed in racially and culturally exclusive ways (Long, 2018). Static and homogenised understandings of, in particular, raced and cultural identities or bodies are seen as limiting decolonisation as they fix the colonial imaginary of raced binaries (where markers of social difference are reified) (Escobar, 2002).

Part of the success of Psychology as a (neo)colonial discipline is that it, in most of its forms, subscribes to "a belief in the value of economic development, industrialisation, rationality, science and technology" (Brock, 2006: 159). These implicit values are the lynchpin around which the global spread of the discipline has occurred (Long, 2016), with Psychology resonating powerfully with established and emerging social elites (Long, 2018). At the same time, the power to represent the "non-Western" "Other" resides, in the past and presently, primarily with psychologists working in Europe and America (Bhatia, 2002). The exporting of Euro-American universal psychology "as is" for the consumption of "Third World" psychologists has led to what Montero and Christlieb (2003) call "symbolic colonialism".

Given these complexities (which we can only touch upon here), what are the implications of conjoining "decolonising", "feminist" and "Psychology"? We acknowledge that the reform of structural issues is essential, such as the provision of human and material resources to conduct, publish, disseminate and teach research that is of Africa, and by Africans. But these efforts may fall short if this research does not respond to the reality that: (1) many of the most basic psychological signifiers are problematically (neo)colonial; and (2) the continued deployment of these signifiers may have significant negative consequences, especially for groups already marginalised through (neo)colonial power relations.

To illustrate this argument, we present our case study of the signifier "adolescence" and the consequences in terms of understandings of "teenage pregnancy". In the following section, we describe the concept of signification. Using this as background, we present our case study in relation to the politics of signification. We outline the colonial roots of the signifier "adolescence", and its continued use to suggest a threat of personal and social degeneration. We describe how this signifier underpins work on "teenage pregnancy", and the implications of this insight for decolonising feminist psychology in the area of reproductive health. We highlight how alternative signifiers may be deployed to undermine gendered (neo)colonial signifiers, and the implications in terms of the political, epistemological and methodological challenges faced in decolonisation efforts.

The politics of signification

De Saussure's work, on which much post-structuralist writing is based, examined the relations between the means of expression (sound or written word - signifier) and the concept or meaning (signified) (Coward & Ellis, 1977). He surfaced two important, and inter-related, insights. The first is that there is no necessary connection between signifier and signified. De Saussure rejected the idea that words gain their meaning through being direct representations of things: the signified world may be divided up and labelled in various ways by the signifier. There is nothing "in nature" that decrees that a signifier must articulate a certain signified. Instead, there is an appearance (based, we would add, on particular power relations) of equivalence between the signifier and signified (in our case example, between the signifier "adolescents" and the signified – people of a certain age). The signifier, hence, has an active function in creating and determining the signified (Coward & Ellis, 1977), or, in current discursive psychology parlance, constructing social reality.

The second important insight was that signifiers gain meaning through a system of difference with other signifiers (Coward & Ellis, 1977). Thus, for de Saussure the

structure which creates both signifiers and signifieds is a system of difference. It is that that gives signifiers and signifieds signification. Neither the signified nor the signifier pre-exist the other: "the signifier cuts out or articulates the signified only by relations entered into with other signifiers" (Coward & Ellis, 1977: 3).

The relations between signifiers are, within Western metaphysics and the logic of modernity, frequently binary and hierarchical (Derrida, 1976, 1978; Lugones, 2010): white versus black; man versus woman; human versus non-human; civilised versus primitive. This "categorial, dichotomous, hierarchical logic" is, as asserted by Lugones (2010: 742), "central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality".

Derrida's (1976, 1978) approach to language, which builds on de Saussure's work, is one of "deconstruction", a project that seeks to undo the above-mentioned binary logic. One of the mechanisms is fore-fronting what Derrida calls "undecidables". "Undecidables" undermine both the understanding of signifieds as directly connected to signifiers, and the binary polarities that seek to solidify signifiers in particular relations to each other. "Undecidables" slip across both sides of an opposition but do not properly fit either. Examples include the virus or the zombie (Collins & Mayblin, 1996), both of which are neither alive nor dead, neither living nor non-living, but are simultaneously both (thus alive and dead, living and non-living). As they cut across both categories, they cannot be decided.

"Adolescence" is an example of an "undecidable": it slips uncomfortably across the child/adult binary. The adolescent is neither child nor adult, but also simultaneously both. During this phase, according to the logic of "adolescence", the urges of childhood battle against the movement towards adulthood. However, as the history of the signifier "adolescence" shows, it is not only this binary that underpins "adolescence" and gives it meaning; it is also the "primitive/civilized" binary, as shown in the next section. Furthermore, the signifier is not gender neutral. The end goal of the transition through "adolescence" is the white, middle-class, civilized male – something towards which young black womxn are invoked to strive, but from which, through their very embodiment, they are tacitly excluded.

"Adolescence" as a signifier

As outlined in Macleod (2011), the signifier "adolescence" emerged within "Western" society in the early 1900s. Within a period of about 20 years, "Americans … considered adolescence a special developmental stage between childhood and adulthood, and perceived young people in ways that would have seemed astonishing only fifty years earlier" (Luker, 1997: 35). This historical process alerts us, psychologists, to the fact

that the attachment of the signifier "adolescence" to the signified – people of a certain age – is not necessary or inevitable.

Stanley Hall's (1904) work is credited with initiating the psychology of "adolescence". He viewed "adolescence" as a time of transition. In particular, he asserted that ontogeny (the history of the individual) recapitulates phylogeny (the history of humankind)[1]. Put simply, he believed that the developmental transition of humans from childhood to adulthood plays itself out in a similar manner to the transitional stage that humankind went through to move from "primitiveness" to "civilization". At the same time, a number of sociological trends entrenched the psychology of "adolescence" in the "West": increased consciousness of and segregation according to age; the rise of mass schooling; and the outlawing of child labour (Kett, 2003).

"Adolescence", thus, was popularized as a teen-age specific phase, comprising of change in the emotional and social functioning of an individual and coinciding with the physical changes of puberty. The transition would, however, involve conflict, or "storm and stress" – in the same way as the (so-called) transition from primitiveness to civilization for humankind was fraught with difficulties (such as primitive urges threatening the establishment of civilized behaviour). The "primitive-like" characteristics of childhood, it was believed, competed during this "developmental phase" with the requirements of civilized behaviour characteristic of adulthood (Kett, 2003). This conclusion, stemming from the "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" theory, led to a call for a moratorium on the assumption of adult responsibilities to give young people time to develop respect for the orderliness required in adult life (Kett, 2003).

Turning to Africa, "adolescence" came into being "because of massive economic, institutional, and social changes brought about by Western colonial and economic expansion and by the move toward a global economy and society" (Caldwell et al., 1998: 149). The transition to adulthood heralded by the social event of marriage was replaced, through the process of colonialism, by the concept of "adolescence" as a form of transition. One of the main mechanisms of this was through the introduction of schooling: education taking place in age-segregated classrooms with a designated teacher, and being assessed via examination. Schooling introduced "the anticipation of a period adolescence in which young people were still dependent and unmarried" (Caldwell et al., 1998: 140). Another mechanism was Christianity, which brought with it disapproval of both initiation rituals and early marriage. Missionaries emphasized

[1] This phrase was initially used by biologist Ernst Haeckel in expounding the theory of recapitulation, which stated that the development of an animal embryo goes through stages resembling successive stages in the evolution of the animal's remote ancestors (Ohno, 1995).

that young people should attend school and marry (monogamously) at a respectably mature age (Caldwell et al., 1998). In addition, the introduction of an economy based on money created the need for young people to attend school as they needed the skills required to earn money in particular occupations.

This does not mean, however, that "adolescence" was (or is) the same in Africa as it was (or is) in Euro-American contexts. Nevertheless, its underlying ideologies have taken firm root in Africa. Firstly, because the transition to adulthood (civilization) is always at risk of being derailed by child-like (primitive) tendencies, there is a constant threat of personal and social degeneration. Secondly, an imaginary wall is constructed between teen-aged people and adults (which mimics the separation constructed by colonialists between "primitive" people and "civilized" people). Thirdly, the transition to adulthood is wrested from social processes and becomes an individual achievement (Macleod, 2011).

This linkage of individual and collective development-in-time allows for the threat of degeneration to occupy our talk of "adolescent" development: there is always the potential for this process to be derailed and for the transition to full adulthood to be incomplete. As Lesko (2001: 51) states, "Teenagers cannot go backward to childhood nor forward to adulthood 'before their time' without incurring derogatory labels – for example, immature, loose, or precocious". If "adolescents" engage in "adult" activities such as sex and reproduction, they are charged with causing a number of social consequences, as discussed below. In addition, the linkage (individual and collective development) allows for the subtle racialisation of a threat of degeneration: it is not only the less developed, but also the more primitive (in modern language, read less educated, poorer, more 'vulnerable') who are always in danger of disrupting or undermining the stability of those who are developed or civilized (Macleod, 2011).

The signifier "adolescence", thus, has strong (neo)colonial roots. Despite this, it is deployed as a self-evident signifier in much psychological work, including in Africa. Adolescent development is presented as a key phase of development in Developmental Psychology courses[2]; journals are dedicated to the study of adolescence[3]; and major interventions are targeted at adolescents, in particular so-called risk reduction interventions around drinking, smoking, and sexualities[4].

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[2] See, for example, the chapter on adolescence in a widely used South African first year textbook: edited by Swartz, de la Rey, Duncan, Townsend & O'Neill (2016).

[3] For example, **The Journal of Child and Adolescent Mental Health**, published by NISC, "publisher of premier African scholarly research products that promote African scholarship to a global academic audience" (https://www.nisc.co.za/aboutus).

[4] See, for example, the **Paediatric – Adolescent - Treatment Africa (PATA)**, whose aim is to "improve paediatric and adolescent HIV prevention, treatment, care and support in sub-Saharan Afica" (http://www.peers2zero.org/pata/wp-content/uploads/2017/06 Peer-led-Services-Promising-Practices.pdf).

We argue in this paper, however, that the deployment of the signifier "adolescence" has implications beyond simply denoting a group of people (young people) within particular social spaces. Claims of threats of degeneration become naturalised; arguments for interventions to prevent or reduce such degeneration are bolstered. Take, for example, the following abstract by Fatusi & Hindin (2010: 499):

> *"Adolescence is a period of transition, marked by physical, psychological, and cognitive changes underpinned by biological factors. Today's generation of young people – the largest in history – is approaching adulthood in a world vastly different from previous generations; AIDS, globalisation, urbanisation, electronic communication, migration, and economic challenges have radically transformed the landscape. Transition to productive and healthy adults is further shaped by societal context, including gender and socialisation process. With the evidence that young people are not as healthy as they seem, addressing the health and development issues of young people, more than ever before, need concerted and holistic approach. Such an approach must take the entire lifecycle of the young person as well as the social environment into context. This is particularly critical in developing countries, where three major factors converge – comparatively higher proportion of young people in the population, disproportionately high burden of youth-related health problems, and greater resources challenge".*

The abstract starts with a clear statement of the transition to adulthood being marked by individual maturation in a range of domains. The next sentence connects this personal transition with social issues, which, the reader is informed, are substantially more challenging than they were previously. This statement is designed to invoke concern in the reader. These two sentiments (adolescence as transition, and challenging social conditions) pave the way for the unsurprising conclusion that "young people are not as healthy as they seem" (we presumably should not mistake their youthful appearance for health). To prevent the personal degeneration suggested requires, thus, "concerted" efforts that, of course, would need the commitment of public resources. The use of public resources is, therefore, justified because of the threat of social degeneration that would result from "unhealthy" young people. The generality of the initial statements implies that "youth-related health problems" are global. It is only later in the abstract that the intersection of (neo)colonial racialised geographical hierarchies and the discourse of "adolescence" are revealed. It is "developing countries" that have a "disproportionately high burden of youth-related health problems". The "[t]ransition to productive and health adults" in these contexts, thus, requires significant effort "more than ever before"; "concerted" and "holistic" efforts are needed.

Importantly, in the context of feminist work, the signifier "adolescence", while appearing to apply equally to all, is, in fact, not gender neutral. Stanley Hall had in mind the development of the civilized boy in outlining his theory of "adolescence" (DeLuzio, 2007): the quintessential end goal was the White, middle-class, heterosexual, civilized male who displayed self-control, adjustment, self-direction, and the capacity to preserve and extend the gains made by the civilized races. The white middle class female, on the other hand, emerged as "the quintessential and perpetual adolescent … [in which] 'feminine' traits such as physical and mental volatility, emotionality, altruism, and religiosity" (DeLuzio, 2007: 104-105) were displayed. As outlined by Fine and Macpherson (1994), these racialised and gendered contradictions have continued long after the publication of Stanley Hall's work: differentiation between womxn on axes of race, sexual orientation, location, class, and ability are subtly infused in representations and practices regarding young womxn. To illustrate this, we turn in the next section to the question of "teenage pregnancy".

"Teenage pregnancy": Undecidability and a threat of degeneration

On 26 March 2012, Carolyn Mbelwa and Kahabi Isangula from the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health posted an article on the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) website entitled: "Teen Pregnancy: Children Having Children in Tanzania". The title of the piece alerts us to the fact that the authors a re speaking about teenagers. In the subtitle, however, these teenagers are positioned, in no uncertain terms, as "children". But in being pregnant, they are taking on the adult function of mothering (having children). As such, they are a conundrum – "children having children", a paradox that is illogical, a contradiction. They are undecidables.

The authors of this article go on to state that: "Adolescent pregnancy is a worldwide problem. In Sub-Saharan Africa, an increasing number of girls are becoming mothers by the age of 18 years old" (Mbelwa & Isangula, 2012: 1). The threat of degeneration is clear here: "adolescents" becoming mothers (in increasing numbers) is a "problem". The threat of degeneration is not simply individual (for example, high drop-out rates from school), however, but also social: "Teen pregnancies mostly end up contributing to many other public problems both socio-economically and health wise" (Mbelwa & Isangula, 2012: 2): "In conclusion, Tanzania is among the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa facing 'multiple' consequences of teenage pregnancies" (Mbelwa & Isangula, 2012: 13). The narrative presented in this paper, thus, is clear: adolescent womxn, in refusing (whether intentionally/agentically or not) the premises of "adolescence" (as a transitional period that should not include adult responsibilities), are contributing to social disintegration.

These authors are not alone in their use of the phrase "children having children" or in suggesting that there are dire social consequences to early reproduction. The United Nations Economic Report on Africa (2016: viii), entitled "The Demographic Profile of African Countries", had this to say about "teenage pregnancy": "Children having children continues to be a sad reality in Africa". Indeed, the phrase "children having children" surfaces at regular intervals in a range of geographical and communication spaces (see Macleod (2011) for more examples).

The overt paradox presented suggests that the reader should find this situation untenable: something that requires action. Required action is, however, not neutral, but is targeted at particular "marginalised" communities. The racialised logic that underpins (neo)colonialism finds much traction in the signifier "adolescence". It is black and poor teenagers (in both global North and global South countries) who are most at risk of deviating from the "proper" adolescence-as-transition pathway. Writing from the United States, for example, Merrick (2018: 1) indicates that "Images of pregnant black teenagers and single black mothers are plentiful in the media and popular culture … the pervasive focus on black adolescents … tap(s) into middle-class beliefs about indiscriminate, promiscuous sexual activity as well as judgments of these young people's disregard for their futures and those of their babies".

Recently, Stats SA (2018) indicated that the highest rates of teenage pregnancies in South Africa occur among young womxn from African and Coloured[5] communities. This, according to Mkwananzi (2017: 47), "is due to poverty and unemployment being higher amongst Africans and coloureds in South Africa, which leads to much higher levels of teenage pregnancy in these populations". This association (race and socio-economic status with "teenage pregnancy") enables the expression of concerns regarding a range of supposed social consequences of early reproduction. For example, poor black teenagers are depicted as wilfully conceiving in order to access the Child Support Grant. This is evidenced in Mbulaheni et al.'s (2014: 64) statement that the Child Support Grant promotes teenage pregnancies in rural secondary schools: "Teenage girls engage in unprotected sex in order to fall pregnant because they want [the] child support grant. Some teenage girls admire their peers who are getting child support grant and engage in unprotected sex hoping to get pregnant". These kinds of assertions persist despite the lack of evidence that the Child Support Grant incentivizes pregnancy and the fact that it may indeed assist with longer spacing between births (Rosenberg et al., 2015).

In Macleod (2011), I (Catriona) outline research detailing the consequences of early reproduction. While some of these are seen as consequences that affect the individual

[5] We use these racialised signifiers in the manner in which they are deployed in the reports. Our own preference is to utilise the signifier "Black" in the Black Consciousness sense of the word.

young womxn only (for instance psychological stress as a result of an abortion), most are viewed as social consequences (such as perpetuating the cycle of disadvantage through early childbearing). Even those that are viewed as personal consequences are depicted as carrying a social cost (for example, the provision of welfare support and antenatal care). Although the overt colonialist language of degeneration is lost, the implication that young pregnant or childbearing womxn are contributing to social decline is clear.

The politics of signification have real effects in the personal and social lives of individuals. The threat of degeneration enabled by the undecidability of "adolescence", the linkage of individual and collective development, and the masked association of "adolescence" with (White) femininity has implications in terms of youth sexuality education, and the uptake of reproductive healthcare. We discuss these implications below.

Implications of the threat of degeneration for youth sexualities and reproduction

Many authors have called attention to the way that young people, and particularly young womxn, are taught about sex and sexuality. It is argued that many sexuality education programmes, such as the Life Orientation curriculum that was introduced in South African schools post-apartheid, are steeped in a "danger and disease" discourse that frames sex as an activity characterized by disease, victimization, violence and morality (Macleod, 2009; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). The most salient message is that having sex will inevitably lead to teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, regret and exploitation. Noticeably absent from this approach to sex education are the positive aspects of sex, including pleasure, desire and sexual exploration (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Connell, 2005, Allen, 2007); as well as discussions of belonging and citizenship within sexualities and reproduction (Macleod & Vincent, 2014). Importantly, in this context, the emphasis on danger and disease serves to communicate the threat of degeneration directly to young womxn, and to remind them that they are responsible for ensuring that such degeneration does not occur.

The suggestion of degeneration that accompanies early childbearing is clear in the literature. "Teenage pregnancy" has been linked to a number of adverse outcomes such as the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty; maternal and infant morbidity and mortality; the disruption of schooling; poor child outcomes; sexually transmitted diseases; and welfare dependence (Bonell, 2004; Macleod & Tracey, 2010; Macleod, 2011). These tropes are well-established, despite the fact that well-designed research that factors socio-economic status, in particular, and other variables into the study is equivocal regarding the outcomes. To quote Geronimus (2003: 881),

well-designed comparative studies find that these outcomes are "slightly negative, negligible, or positive".

Particularly within the South African context, Mkhwanazi (2012) has shown how the construction of "teenage pregnancy" as a social problem is also linked to concerns about the moral degeneration of society and older generations' perceived lack of authority over young people. For the most part, teenage mothers are considered deviant, irresponsible, immature and single-handedly responsible for society's moral degeneration. This belief illustrates how understandings of teenage sexuality are still deeply entrenched in a "threat of degeneration" discourse that directly links individual development to the development (or lack thereof) of society as a whole.

This problematizing of "teenage pregnancy" has implications for the challenges with which young womxn have to contend on a daily basis (Kossler et al., 2011; Macleod, 2016; Macleod & Feltham-King, 2019). In their study, Alli et al. (2012) found that young people were hindered from making informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and were also reluctant to visit healthcare facilities due to fears of being scolded, judged, punished or asked difficult questions by nurses. As a result of the stigma attached to youth sexuality, nurses also restricted the information they provide to young people regarding sexual and reproductive health for fear that it might promote promiscuity among this age group (Wood & Jewkes, 2006; Alli et al., 2012).

South Africa has some of the most progressive sexual and reproductive health laws within the African continent. Sexual and reproductive health services are provided free of charge in most public hospitals, while the Choice on Termination of Pregnancy Act (No. 92 of 1996) (otherwise referred to as the CTOP Act) allows womxn to access free medical termination of pregnancy services. This includes young womxn under the age of 18, without the need for parental consent. Despite this, Geary et al. (2014: 5) noted that in half of the clinics they studied, "the right of adolescents from 12 years of age to legally access health services, including TOP, HIV testing and treatment and contraceptives, without parental consent did not appear to be being upheld".

Similar challenges are evident within the schooling context as well. In an effort to promote education and ensure that pregnant and parenting learners are not excluded from or discriminated against in school, the government intervened by introducing policies such as the *South African Schools Act* [Act No 84] (Department of Education, 1996) and the *Measures for the Prevention and Management of Learner Pregnancy* (Department of Education, 2007). Both documents make it illegal to exclude pregnant learners from schools. However, studies focusing

on the educational outcomes of pregnant and mothering teenagers point to a situation wherein the social and cultural environment of school presents numerous challenges for young womxn's continued success at school (Chigona & Chetty, 2008; Bhana et al, 2010; Chohan & Langa, 2011; Morrell et al., 2012). These studies show that it is not uncommon for pregnant learners to experience explicit mocking, belittling, scapegoating and marginalisation by both teachers and their fellow classmates. Morrell et al. (2012) argue that "teenage pregnancy" is especially unwelcomed in schooling environments because pregnant learners disrupt the normative binary between adults and children that is crucial to the responses of educational authorities. Furthermore, "teenage pregnancy" is commonly understood through the "discourse of contamination" within educational contexts, a discourse that stems from the intersection between ideologies of reproduction and understandings of childhood/"adolescence" (Bhana & Mcambi, 2013). From this perspective, pregnant learners are thought to be a "bad" influence and a source of contamination to both other learners and the reputation of the school. In light of this school governing bodies may use their own interpretations of policies to expel young womxn (Morrell et al., 2012).

Foregrounding alternative signifiers

We turn in this section to the second of the tasks we proposed should underpin decolonising feminist psychology: bringing into being, or foregrounding, alternative signifiers that serve the purpose of social justice and care. Using our case – the construction of "adolescence" and "teenage pregnancy" – as an example, we speak to two possibilities as outlined in the work conducted by researchers at the Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction (CSSR) research programme at the University Still Known as Rhodes.

Much of the work conducted at the CSSR uses a reproductive justice conceptual framework. Reproductive justice implies an intersectional approach that locates analyses of health and reproduction within context. It forefronts, firstly, the intertwining of individual and social processes, and, secondly, the complex interactions of power relations that cohere around various axes of discrimination. Actions, services, and interventions that promote justice and equity around reproduction and health are sought (Roberts & Kaplan, 2016; Ross & Sollinger, 2017).

Within this framework, we have made a number of proposals for different signifiers. In Macleod (2011), I (Catriona) argued for a change in focus from the signifier "teenage pregnancy" to "unwanted pregnancy" on the basis that this allowed for services and support to be provided to both younger and older pregnant womxn who found their pregnancies problematic. A question asked of me, however, when presenting this work

was, "Unwanted by whom?"[6]. This set us off on a new avenue of enquiry – one in which the intertwining of individual and social processes is foregrounded. In Macleod (2016: e386), I introduced the signifier "supportability", which was described as follows:

> "*Supportability' is conceptualised, in this model, as the capacity of a woman to carry a pregnancy in such a way that she experiences positive health and welfare. 'Supportability' is multifaceted, referring to the combination of a woman's physiological, emotional and cognitive capacities to carry a pregnancy, which are enabled or constrained through the micro-level and macro-level 'support' that she receives. In other words, 'supportability' is intricately interweaved with, and can never be separated from, 'support'. […] '(un)supportable' refer[s] to the individual physiology, cognitions, emotions and behaviour of the woman that defines the pregnancy in personal terms, and '(un)supported' refer[s] to micro- and macro-level spaces that provide the foundation for the woman's experience of the pregnancy".*

This has since been taken up in the CSSR to speak through questions of abortion, and womxn's pregnancy journeys.

In Macleod & Feltham-King (2019), we introduce the signifier "reparative justice" to understand the support that young pregnant womxn may need. Using five case studies of young womxn presenting for antenatal care in the Eastern Cape public health sector to illustrate the arguments, we highlight the need for social repair where support is lacking and inequities or injustices occur. We use Ernesto Verdeja's (2008) critical theory of reparative justice in which he outlines four reparative dimensions (individual material, collective material, individual symbolic, and collective symbolic). Reparation within the individual material dimension applied to early pregnancies means the facilitation of autonomous decision-making regarding the outcome of a pregnancy and a commitment to non-judgmental healthcare provision. The collective material dimension refers to the provision of legal, state-sponsored healthcare and educational/workplace resources to make pregnancy and birth safe and supportable for all womxn. The collective symbolic dimension means paying attention to public discourses about, and social attitudes towards, "teenage pregnancy" and mothering. Finally, the individual symbolic dimension implies an understanding of individual lived experiences of early pregnancies, abortion and birth within the social and structural dynamics of particular contexts.

Why decolonising feminist psychology must not fail

We have argued in this paper that decolonising feminist psychology may fail for a host of reasons, key of which are the often masked gendered and (neo)colonial

[6] Thank you to Kevin Durrheim for asking this question.

underpinnings of particular signifiers. Within an understanding of the politics of signification, we indicated that decolonising feminist psychology should: (1) interrogate gendered (neo)colonist signifiers, and (2) bring into being, or foreground, alternative signifiers that serve the purpose of social justice and care. As indicated in relation to the signifiers "adolescence" and "teenage pregnancy", gendered (neo)colonial signifiers have the potential to perpetuate oppressive knowledge production and intervention practices. It is for this reason that decolonising feminist psychology must not fail.

While the first of these tasks (interrogation of signifiers) is important in surfacing oppressive praxis, significant labour must also be spent on the second task. Thus, for example, the CSSR is currently undertaking research to develop a questionnaire and qualitative workbook utilising the supportability framework. It is envisaged these instruments could be used at a health district level to: (1) understand the personal and contextual circumstances of maternal health and well-being, and to hone interventions to local specifics; and (2) evaluate the progress made in maternal health promotion against the initial assessment. At a provincial, state or national level, they could be used to understand differences and commonalities across health districts, and to direct resources in an optimal manner according to the patterns emerging in the health districts. At a healthcare delivery level, the evidence generated from the tools could hone clinical and healthcare practice to womxn-identified factors around support, health and wellbeing during pregnancy.

Lugones (2010: 742) writes, "Decolonizing gender is necessarily a praxical task. It is to enact a critique of racialized, colonial, and capitalist heterosexualist gender oppression as a lived transformation of the social". We argue that the two tasks that we have presented for decolonising feminist psychology perform exactly the praxical task envisaged by Lugones: they provide the dual requirement of critique and enactment of transformation.

This does not mean that the surfacing of new signifiers will obliterate (neo)colonial power relations. Decolonising feminist psychology signifiers should serve social justice and care ends, and may reduce dividing practices that exclude and marginalise particular people. Nevertheless, in the politics of signification, no signifier is exempt from partitioning the world in particular ways. Ongoing interrogation of signifiers, including those surfaced by decolonising feminist psychologists is necessary. Are there dangers, for example, to utilising the signifier "supportability"? What are the implications of such a term? Are there possibly contradictory ways in which the signifier may be put to use – for example to categorise poor womxn's pregnancies as unsupportable, and therefore as less in need of healthcare provision? These and other

questions are ones that the CSSR will continue to tackle as we envisage a future in which (neo)colonial, racialized and gendered power relations are reduced in favour of equity and justice.

Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to Christine Hobden for very useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This work is based on research supported by the South African Research Chairs initiative of the Department of Science and Technology and National Research Foundation of South Africa [grant number: 87582].

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