

# Student voices in studies on curriculum decolonisation: A scoping review

## Abstract

*With the decolonisation and #feesmustfall movements in higher education going mainstream it is essential that the voices of students continue to be heard and that they occupy a prominent role in the decolonial project. Additionally, it is crucial to understand how their voices have been portrayed, analysed, and framed within scholarly work. This paper presents a scoping review of literature on the voices of students about the decolonisation of the social sciences that may inform the transformation of the research in psychology curriculum. Of the reviewed literature, only 12 articles were identified as relevant, and these generated four themes: complex reactions towards decolonisation, decolonial content, and ways of teaching; the importance of critical engagement and reflections on decolonisation; challenges with disrupting whiteness within higher education; and demographic change at universities. The findings revealed useful insights that could assist in guiding conversations with students about decolonising psychology in the classroom, such as creating safe spaces where students feel comfortable taking social and psychological risks when expressing their uniqueness. Published work on students and academics co-creating a transformed curriculum is lacking, and further studies on decolonisation in higher education in the global South are needed.*

## Introduction

Decolonisation in psychology, as well as in other disciplines, is critical because of its deep colonial and apartheid roots. Colonialism and apartheid have shaped psychology fundamentally, and, conversely, the discipline has been complicit in perpetuating colonial domination and apartheid (Dudgeon & Walker, 2015;

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Long, 2016; Adams et al, 2017; Kessi, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Castell et al, 2018). The relationship between psychology and coloniality has continued under the guise of neoliberalism and has influenced the curriculum, curriculum development processes, and the regulation of the profession. The literature suggests that this coloniality and neoliberal influence within psychology has manifested in various ways.

In the first place, coloniality within psychology has tended towards an unjustifiable universalisation of psychological knowledge across contexts (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Part of this proclivity is driven by the political economy that supports this coloniality. Dudgeon and Walker (2015) warn that universalising psychological knowledge can be problematic, especially for black and indigenous communities where the nature of the connections with families, communities, culture, land, spirit, and ancestors is central to individual well-being. Thus, the incorporation of cultural and contextual aspects of life is considered a hindrance to the attempted universalisation of the structures of human psychological functioning. Adams et al (2017) assert that universalisation may benefit a privileged few, but it can contribute to broader social injustice. In many ways, this approach has acquired a normative status and has contributed to the rejection of other forms of knowing and to the privileging of traditional hegemonic psychology. Dudgeon and Walker (2015) call the cumulative effect of privileging the views of one dominant group and marginalising the views of indigenous cultures, cultural racism. Psychological research contributes to the reproduction of individualistic, universalistic, and decontextualised notions of human behaviour, through the practice of cultural racism, by turning a blind eye in the name of scientific neutrality and detachment (Chilisa, 2017; Barnes, 2018; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Zinga & Styres, 2019).

In the second place, Cooper (2014) points out that pre-democratic psychology in South Africa was segregated along racial lines. One of the implications of this segregation was that the best-resourced institutions and internship providers were reserved for white students. Additionally, psychology in South Africa colluded with the apartheid regime and thus contributed to the oppression of black people (Pillay, 2017) by organising people into race groups and categorising some as less intelligent, lazy, irresponsible and, consequently, less human (Kessi, 2017). In this way, psychology legitimised colonialism and apartheid, and contributed to widespread genocide (Kessi, 2017).

The advent of democratic rule in South Africa generated great hope and expectation regarding the future of psychology. Cooper (2014) suggests that there has been progress within psychology since the dawn of democracy, and the discipline has managed to overcome its bedevilled legacy. However, even as the racial demographics of psychology in South Africa began to change, black psychologists

trained in Western hegemonic psychology continued to conduct psychological research that rationalised oppression (Long, 2016). Transformation has been slow, and questions of relevance still dog the discipline (Long, 2017). These questions persist because psychology seems unable to take social problems, including HIV and violence, bedevilling the poor and some middle-income South Africans to heart as the discipline has a well-documented tendency for aligning itself with the well-resourced and the powerful (Long, 2017). In the same vein, Pillay (2017) holds that the ghosts of the colonial and apartheid past of psychology still need exorcising; after 1994, psychology was simply rebranded and remains inaccessible and irrelevant to most South Africans.

In the third place, Long (2016) states that the price that the newly democratic South Africa had to pay for readmission into the international community was the adoption of neoliberal ideologies. These ideologies influenced the political, economic, and higher education landscape. In the higher education sector, neoliberal ideologies meant placing individualism and free-market capitalism at the centre of psychological theory, research, and practice (Chiodo et al, 2014; Long, 2016). Long (2016) also suggests that the success that psychology achieved in the democratic dispensation was primarily due to psychology adopting the knowledge inspired by the neoliberal idea of a commercialised higher education landscape. Practically, this success involved not pursuing science for its own sake, but through strategic partnerships with the State, international funding agencies, and industry (Chilisa, 2005, 2012, 2017; Chilisa & Ntseane, 2010; Long, 2016). Thus, the curriculum, developed from this paradigm, does not necessarily equip students with the critical and analytical skills and creative agency to uncover and resist coloniality with psychology, imagine curriculum possibilities, and contribute to addressing the challenges many within local communities face (Long, 2017; Watkins et al, 2018; Long et al, 2019).

The three points outlined above suggest that radical change is required within the discipline of psychology. This radical change must begin with critically reflecting on the colonial history of psychology, challenging the myth of the superiority of the ideological formations of Western epistemology and be followed by an imagination of decolonial possibilities for the future (Oelofsen, 2015; Amosun et al, 2018; Bhambra et al, 2018; Maldonado-Torres et al, 2018; Watkins et al, 2018; Meda, 2019; Naude, 2019). Various stakeholders inside and outside academia should collaboratively develop these new possibilities (Távora & Moodley, 2017; Naude, 2019; Reiter, 2019; Uleanya et al, 2019). Segalo and Cakata (2017) suggest that this radical change must allow multiple voices to shape the future of psychology; this approach could go a long way in dismantling the perception that only Western forms of knowing are valid and viable.

Students are a critical group of stakeholders whose voices are often neglected in matters of curriculum development and educational innovation (Tamburro, 2013; Amosun et al, 2018; Watkins et al, 2018). The authors of this paper have a particular interest in the decolonial future of psychology triggered by the student protests that came to be known as the #feesmustfall movement where students demanded, among other things, the decolonisation of higher education. The original aim of our study was to explore the idea of decolonisation within psychology with a focus on the role of students' voices in bringing about transformation, particularly in relation to the research curriculum in psychology. As advocated by Ramose and Baloyi (2020), this transformation is necessary to allow for epistemic and social justice in teaching research methods in psychology in the South African higher education space. Therefore, this scoping review aimed to explore the literature on students' experiences of decolonising the psychology (and research in psychology) curriculum. However, our initial search rendered minimal articles in the area of psychology; thus we decided to broaden the scope to include the experiences and voices of students across the spectrum of social sciences, focusing on students' experiences of the introduction of decolonial content and ways of teaching within their traditional classrooms. With the decision to broaden the scope of the review, we explored the decolonisation of the curriculum and the voices of students within a wider context, as expounded in the section that follows.

## **A broader perspective on decolonisation of the curriculum**

There appears to be a broad acceptance that institutions of higher education, as critical sites for knowledge production and potential instigators of social change, should be reflective of the epistemological complexities of communities in which they are located (Oelofsen, 2015; Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016; Becker, 2017; Maistry & Lortan, 2017; Maldonado-Torres, 2017; Salami & Okeke, 2017; Pete, 2018). Furthermore, there appears to be an acceptance of the need to challenge the myth of Western epistemological superiority and disrupt the belief that Western frameworks are the only viable means to create knowledge (Chilisa, 2012; Heleta, 2016; Maistry & Lortan, 2017; Amosun et al, 2018). Acknowledging Western bias within academia and critiquing this bias is a necessary precedent for decolonising the higher education curriculum.

Decolonisation is a vibrant, complex, rich and, in many ways, a contested space. In part, the contestation centres on several critical points. Firstly, the contestation relates to the overall significance of decolonisation. Some scholars view decolonisation as a critical flashpoint in marginalised peoples' struggle for liberation and human dignity (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Barnes, 2018). Others have been less enthusiastic and have raised the possibility that decolonisation could be a momentary fascination that has limited value (Cloete & Auriacombe, 2019). Secondly, the contestation has focused on defining decolonisation (Long, 2017; Costandius et al, 2018). Thirdly, an important

area of contestation concerns the possible positioning of the Western canon relative to indigenous epistemologies within a decolonised university curriculum (Cloete & Auriacombe, 2019; Reiter, 2019).

Despite the contestations, there appear to be definite emergent themes that mark the theory, praxis and intended outcomes of decolonisation, which give insights into the nature of decolonisation and its potential value (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Chilisa, 2017). It appears that decolonisation can be understood as an event and as a process that aims to disrupt the legacy of colonialism to reclaim and revalue indigenous ontology, epistemology, culture, and heritage, and place these at the centre of future theory and praxis within academia and broader society (Chilisa, 2012; Van der Westhuizen, 2013; Magoqwana, 2018; Mheta et al, 2018). The focus of this future theory and praxis would be to address the challenges that people in specific contexts face (Chilisa, 2012; Long, 2016, 2017).

Some decolonial scholars have also suggested that the broad acceptance of the need to decolonise has not led to any widespread, concrete and meaningful change in the higher education curriculum (Heleta, 2016; Long, 2017; Bhambra et al, 2018; Zwane, 2019). Mbembe (2016) argues that the only thing that seems to have been achieved since the dawn of democracy in South Africa is the commercialisation and commodification of higher education where students have become passive consumers of information, and their success in this system depends on their ability to regurgitate this information as accurately as possible. The steps that have been taken towards decolonisation have been mostly ad hoc, performative, lacking in substance, and unsustainable (Long, 2017). According to Zwane (2019), there is a lack of institutional will; South African universities appear to be paying lip service to decolonisation and have been hypocritical when it comes to its application.

Also impeding a meaningful conversation on decolonisation may be the strict adherence to the audit culture, which includes standardised assessments and normalised professional practices to meet accreditation requirements (Watkins et al, 2018). Maldonado-Torres (2016) adds that decolonising the curriculum is challenging if universities insist on uncritical participation in the definition of excellence through Western standards, and on the teaching of students to think and act within the standards of a domesticated middle class within a capitalist neoliberal context. Urson and Kessi (2018) refer to the perception that adherence to Western-inspired standardised assessments and normalised professional practices means higher standards of education. By contrast, the transformation and decolonisation of university curricula and research have been linked to the perception of lowering of educational standards and scientific rigour (Urson & Kessi, 2018; Cloete & Auriacombe, 2019).

The 2015 and 2016 student protests that broke out across the country highlighted the fundamental issues students faced in higher education institutions. The protests came to be known as the #Rhodesmustfall and the #feesmustfall movements, and they catapulted the conversation on transformation and decolonisation of higher education into the mainstream and made it socially relevant (Becker, 2017; Meda, 2019; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020). The #Rhodesmustfall movement grew from students' disenchantment with colonial figures and cultures that marked university life at some higher education institutions. The flashpoint of this movement was the demands by students for the removal of the statues depicting Cecil John Rhodes and other colonial figures at universities and in public spaces (Costandius et al, 2018). The #Rhodesmustfall movement captured the nation's imagination and, as students brought to the fore additional issues that plagued higher education, the movement evolved into what would come to be known as the #feesmustfall movement. The crux of the #feesmustfall movement was the protestation against the increasing cost of university tuition and demands for a reduction or overall cancelling of university fees toward free higher education (Carolissen et al, 2015). Other issues included the need for a decolonised curriculum, the low number of black South African scholars, questionable quality of learning and teaching to ensure meaningful opportunities and success, outsourcing of staff, and an immediate solution to students' shortage of accommodation (Costandius et al, 2018; Meda, 2019; Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020).

A critical outcome of the protests was that it provided a space for students, as one of the affected stakeholders within higher education, to engage on what a decolonised higher education would look like and how to bring it about in order to overcome Western bias in higher education (Oelofsen, 2015; Amosun et al, 2018; Maldonado-Torres et al, 2018). Távara and Moodley (2017) suggest that engaging with students is critical, and when this occurs within a safe space, it can create opportunities for students to contribute to changing the higher education landscape. A classroom as a safe space can be understood as a metaphorical space where students feel comfortable enough to take social and psychological risks by expressing their uniqueness (Iversen, 2019). Practically, safe spaces are operationalised by negotiating discussion guidelines and ground rules used within the classroom and outside. The idea of safe spaces is based on the notion that when people feel safe, they may share in ways that they otherwise would not (Iversen, 2019).

Safe spaces and inclusiveness around decolonisation are essential because, as Cornell and Kessi (2017) point out, universities can still be violent, exclusive, and isolating places that impact students in fundamental ways. Madden and McGregor (2013) caution that it might be challenging to create safe spaces within institutional contexts marked by contradictions around decolonisation; in such instances, it may not be safe

for students to be vulnerable and to speak. Therefore, before entering spaces where decolonisation is deliberated, it is prudent to consider the context, the people, time, and place, and how these may shape critical engagements and reflections (Madden & McGregor, 2013). Proponents of safe spaces within academic contexts hold that safe spaces promote an inclusive and effective learning environment that facilitates development for all students (Byron, 2017). Critics of safe space practice suggest that safe spaces enable students to avoid exposure to information and perspectives with which they disagree, branding the discomfort that comes with disagreement as trauma and providing the basis to avoid critical thinking (Byron, 2017). Safe spaces are contested and contextual; contemplating the meaning, practicalities and limitations of safe spaces involves a reflexive process. Therefore, establishing safe spaces is an outcome of contextual negotiations which can be marked by conflict (Hartal, 2018).

With the decolonisation and #feesmustfall movements going mainstream, and growing interest in decolonisation from academics and funding institutions both locally and abroad, it is essential that the voices of students continue to be heard and that students continue to occupy a prominent role in the decolonial project. Additionally, it is crucial to understand how their voices and experiences have been framed within scholarly work. Thus, this paper presents a scoping review of the literature on the voices of students, as students are critical stakeholders in the higher education sector and the curriculum. Furthermore, the paper explores students' experiences of decolonial content and ways of teaching. The purpose of this exploration was to draw insights from students' voices and experiences across the social sciences broadly and articulate how these insights could potentially be employed to inform future processes of decolonising the research in psychology curriculum.

## **Methodology**

A scoping review was used for this study. Scoping studies “examine the extent, range, and nature of research activity, determine the value of undertaking a full systematic review, summarise and disseminate research findings, or identify gaps in the existing literature” (Levac et al, 2010: 1). To the knowledge of the authors of this paper, systematic reviews on the topic of student voices about the decolonisation of university curricula have not yet been conducted, and it is thus necessary to map the breadth and the depth of the field and summarise the current research in order to identify gaps.

Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework for conducting a scoping study was used, following six steps: (1) identifying the research question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) selecting studies, (4) charting data, (5) collating, summarising, and reporting results, (6) consulting. The sections that follow outline the application of these steps in the study.

### *Step 1: Identifying the research question*

Although our study focused on psychology, we extended the scope to the broader social sciences as a cursory search of the literature on student voices revealed a limited number of relevant sources. The research question formulated for this study was: What themes can be identified in the studies of students' voices on decolonising the social sciences that can inform the transformation of the research in psychology curriculum?

### *Step 2: Identifying relevant studies*

Electronic databases available through the relevant university's library (EBSCOHost, PsycInfo, PsycArticles, Humanities Source, Academic Search Complete, Scopus), and Google Scholar, were searched by this paper's authors and a research assistant. Various combinations of the following keywords were used: Student\* OR University goers OR undergraduate\* OR postgraduate\* AND Perspectives OR voices AND Psychology OR Humanities OR Social sciences AND Decolonisation OR Decolonisation OR transformation AND Curriculum OR higher education. As the extent of the literature was expected to be limited, no date restriction was placed on the searches. We identified 12 articles as relevant and placed them in an online shared folder. The reference lists of these articles were then searched to identify any additional literature. Sixty-one further articles were identified and added to a spreadsheet listing the details of all the articles. Four duplicates were identified and removed. A total of 68 articles remained for possible selection for the scoping review.

### *Step 3: Selecting studies*

The authors independently considered the 68 articles in the online folder and recorded information about each one that met the following inclusion criteria:

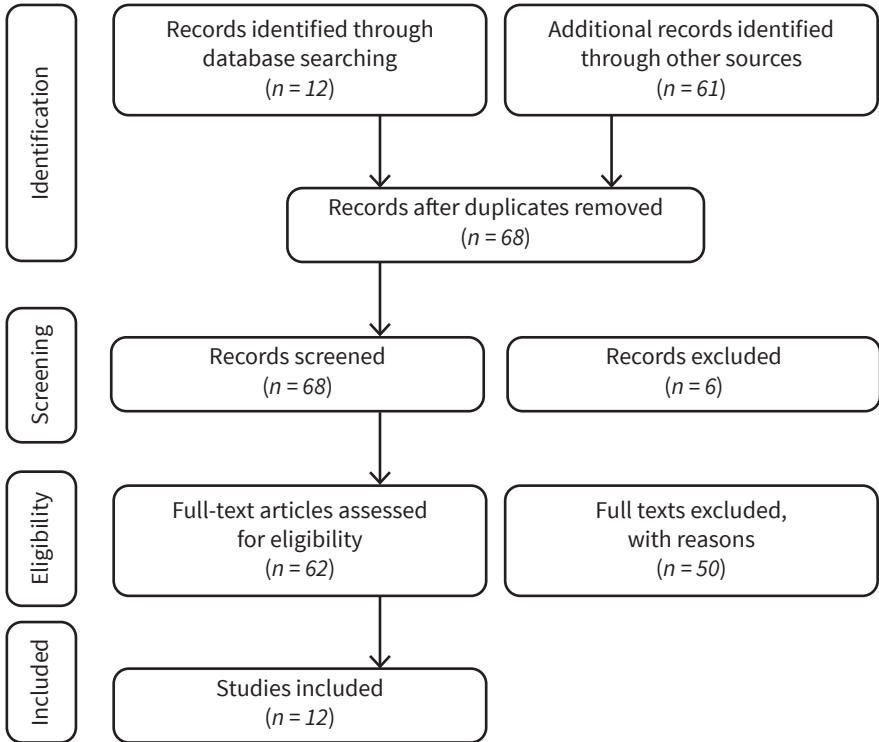
- Published in an academic journal in English
- Related to disciplines in the social sciences and humanities
- Reported findings of primary research on students' voices with regard to curriculum transformation and decolonisation

Articles that were not related to the social sciences and humanities were excluded ( $n = 6$ ), and then the full texts of the remaining 62 articles were assessed for eligibility. Articles that did not make student voices the focus of study were excluded ( $n = 50$ ). A total of 12 articles remained for inclusion in the scoping review.

### *Step 4: Charting data*

The details of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process are presented in the PRISMA decision diagram depicted in Figure 1 (Moher et al, 2009).





**Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram for the scoping review process of student voices in the literature on decolonisation of university curricula**

Information about each article was recorded in a spreadsheet following the guidelines of Peters et al (2015):

- 1.) Author(s)
- 2.) Date of publication
- 3.) Name of journal
- 4.) Title of article
- 5.) Discipline
- 6.) Country of the author(s)
- 7.) Methodology used in the study
- 8.) Number of participants
- 9.) Summary of content

### *Step 5: Collating, summarising, and reporting results*

The data, in this case the articles that met the inclusion criteria, were analysed using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). The process of thematic synthesis involved three stages. Firstly, we summarised the texts of the studies and extracted their findings, and, secondly, we coded the findings of each study. With each new study, we developed new codes as needed and added them to the existing list until no more codes were generated. In total, 48 initial codes emerged. Table 1 provides three examples of coding the findings of texts. Thirdly, with every finding coded, we created themes to describe the meaning of the groups of codes. In the end, this process yielded four themes (see the findings section) that portrayed students' voices about decolonial pedagogy in the social sciences.

**Table 1: Examples of coding the findings of texts**

<b>Author</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Findings of text</b>	<b>Coding</b>
Silva & Students for Diversity Now	2018	For the subordinate (marginalised) students, being part of the (Diversity Now) project created an opportunity to validate experiences and their voices as opposed to having it silenced and stifled.	A feeling of validation from marginalised students
Alemán & Gaytán	2017	Some of the students who felt they were not directly affected by these (decolonisation and cultural awareness) debates indicated that the issue of race was irrelevant to earning their degree and/or making a contribution to their future.	Students resisted becoming involved in the debate because it was irrelevant to earning their degree.
Kessi	2018	The first speaks to the shift from transformation to decolonisation. Students described transformation as problematic because it was elusive, technocratic, and based on demographic change. To them, the concept of transformation was devoid of real content and was oblivious to the day-to-day experiences of people on campus.	Shifting away from transformation to decolonisation

### *Step 6: Consulting*

We presented an earlier version of this paper at a conference on the topic “Unsettling paradigms: The decolonial turn in the humanities curriculum at universities in South Africa” that was held in July 2019 at the University of Pretoria. We asked the audience for feedback about the literature we had found and for ideas about what we could add given our research question and inclusion criteria. The audience firstly highlighted the need to engage in critical discourse about the articles we had selected, especially regarding the authors of these articles. Secondly, they suggested

that the implications of our findings for the discipline of psychology should receive consideration. We reflect on these two issues later in this paper.

## **Trustworthiness of our findings**

As the aim of a scoping review is to provide a general impression of the available literature on a topic without assessing the quality of the evidence, we did not examine the methodological merits of the articles we included (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al, 2010). Further, as the body of literature on our research topic was small we did not want to exclude articles at an early stage. We suggest that future systematic reviews on the topic fully assess the quality of studies that are included.

In reflecting on the lack of quality assessment as a limitation of scoping review methodology (as it may affect the use and relevance of findings), Levac et al (2010) propose several ways of legitimising the use of a scoping review. In accordance with their suggestion, we used a systematic team approach to conduct the study. At the beginning of the process, we met to discuss the scope of our inquiry, the purpose of our study and our inclusion and exclusion criteria. We independently considered each article in the online folder and recorded information about each article that met the set criteria. Thereafter we shared and compared our spreadsheets. The first author of this paper identified 13 studies for inclusion and the second author 10. We discussed our inclusion and exclusion decisions and agreed on 12 articles that would form the basis of the review. If, during the analysis phase, we were unsure whether an article fitted the scope of our study, we discussed it. As recommended by Levac et al (2010), we used a qualitative analysis method (thematic synthesis) to summarise information in the articles. The first author recorded the themes identified and refined them based on ongoing discussions with the second author. Thereafter we considered the broader implications of the themes for transforming the research in psychology curriculum. Finally, we consulted with a group of stakeholders as described earlier (see Step 6: Consulting in this paper and also Levac et al, 2010).

## **Findings**

We present the findings in two sections: the characteristics of the studies reviewed; and themes identified from analysing students' voices as reported in studies on decolonisation of the curriculum.

### *Characteristics of the studies reviewed*

The characteristics of the 12 studies we analysed are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Characteristics of the studies reviewed**

Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Discipline	Country	Participants	Methodology
Alemán & Gaytán	"It doesn't speak to me": Understanding student of color resistance to critical race pedagogy.	2017	<i>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</i>	Education	USA	13	Interviews, focus groups and electronic survey
Castell et al	Critical reflexivity in indigenous and cross-cultural psychology: A decolonial approach to the curriculum?	2018	<i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i>	Psychology	Australia	44 (Round 1) 23 (Round 2)	Critical reflexivity exercise
Chiodo et al	Implementing an intercultural psychology undergraduate unit: Approach, strategies, and outcomes	2014	<i>Australian Psychologist</i>	Psychology	Australia	113	Evaluation survey
Clark et al	A qualitative study of Australian undergraduate psychology students' attitudes towards the teaching of Indigenous and cross-cultural psychology at one university	2013	<i>Focus on Health Professional Education: A Multi-Disciplinary Journal</i>	Psychology	Australia	9	Focus groups
Costandius et al	#Feesmustfall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch university students' and lecturers' reactions	2018	<i>South African Journal of Higher Education</i>	Education	South Africa	32 lecturers (survey) 28 lecturers (seminar) 11 lecturers, 6 postgraduate and 39 undergraduate	Case study methodology (survey, seminar, and photograph-based workshops)
Kessi	Photovoice as a narrative tool for decolonization: Black women and LGBT student experiences at UCT	2018	<i>South African Journal of Higher Education</i>	Psychology	South Africa	13	Photovoice and participatory action research

**Table 2: Characteristics of the studies reviewed ...continued**

Authors	Title	Year	Journal	Discipline	Country	Participants	Methodology
Madden & McGregor	Ex(er)cising student voices in pedagogy for decolonizing: Exploring complexities through duoethnography	2013	<i>Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies</i>	Education	Canada	2	Duoethnography
Meda	Decolonising the curriculum: Students' perspectives	2019	<i>Africa Education Review</i>	Education	South Africa	10	Open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews
Razack	Decolonizing the pedagogy and practice of international social work	2009	<i>International Social Work</i>	Social Work	Canada	Unspecified	Anecdotal narratives from classroom discussions
Silva & Students for Diversity Now	#WEWANTSPACE: Developing student activism through a decolonial pedagogy	2018	<i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i>	Psychology	USA	45	Participatory action research
Wane et al	Walking the talk: Decolonizing the politics of equity of knowledge and charting the course for an inclusive curriculum in higher education	2004	<i>Canadian Journal of Development Studies</i>	Social justice and social work	Canada	3	Vignettes
Zinga & Styres	Decolonizing curriculum: Student resistances to anti-oppressive pedagogy	2019	<i>Power and Education</i>	Education	Canada	Unspecified	Anecdotal narratives from classroom discussions

As indicated in Table 2, the earliest article we analysed was published in 2004, with 10 of the articles being published in the last six years. The authors of these articles were based in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United States. Nine of the 12 studies reviewed originated in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

The articles included in this review were grounded in various social science disciplines, including psychology, education, social justice studies, and social work. Eleven of the 12 studies used a qualitative approach, and methods used included focus groups, interviews, open-ended questionnaires, duoethnography, and participatory action research. The other study followed a mixed-methods approach and obtained data from a class discussion and an evaluation survey. Two of the qualitative studies used anecdotal narratives and obtained data from an unspecified number of participants who had taken part in classroom discussions. In the remaining studies the number of participants ranged from two to 113.

### ***Themes identified from analysing students' voices as reported in studies on decolonisation of the curriculum***

We identified four themes from the analysis of the findings of studies that examined students' voices about the decolonisation of the social science curriculum. The themes are presented in the sections that follow.

#### *Theme 1: Complex reactions towards decolonisation, decolonial content and ways of teaching*

Some studies' findings were that students had complex reactions regarding decolonisation and a decolonial approach to teaching. These complex reactions could be attributable to the fact that modern classrooms are postcolonial spaces in the sense that they are occupied by a mixture of students from colonised and colonising communities (Razack, 2009). Students' reactions ranged from fully supporting to strongly resisting decolonisation. Furthermore, the studies showed that initial reactions could evolve with time and come to contribute to greater knowledge and self-awareness. We begin our discussion of the theme of students' complex reactions by giving an account of the perspective of the students who appeared to support decolonisation. Thereafter, the focus shifts to the perspective of the students who appeared to resist the decolonial project.

Kessi (2018) found that the students who supported a decolonial project also advocated a decolonisation process that went beyond recruiting demographically representative academic staff and students. According to these students, the current curriculum was too European and suppressive of indigenous voices. They indicated a need for a curriculum that foregrounded ethnic content and created space for

students to study indigenous knowledge unencumbered. Clark et al (2013) found in their study that students appreciated decolonial content, which they described as interesting, enjoyable, and relevant. Students in Meda's (2019) study pointed out that decolonisation was not about rejecting Western epistemology outright but about developing and using contextually relevant academic content. The students in Kessi's and Meda's studies seemed to regard decolonising the curriculum as representing true liberation from oppression and dehumanisation. In Wane et al's (2004) study, the students who advocated decolonisation displayed critical awareness of the apparent influence of institutional power structures. They expressed the opinion that the inherent power associated with some forms of knowledge and perspectives needed to be challenged because profit was the driving force behind the production of knowledge. They implied that academic capitalism led to an emphasis on so-called universal knowledge over alternative knowledge systems (Wane et al, 2004).

Various scholars reported that students resisted decolonisation. Firstly, Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) encountered resistance among students which manifested in expressions of disinterest and dismissal, and in descriptions of the content of decolonisation as biased, divisive and irrelevant. Similarly, the students in Alemán and Gaytán's (2017) study experienced the content as irrelevant to their present and future professional and personal development. Notably, the students in Chiodo et al's (2014) study reported that the focus on decoloniality and intercultural awareness taught them that all white people were racists and could not be befriended. Chiodo et al's students also criticised decolonial content for being subjective and discriminatory towards white students and/or people. Similarly, some students in Clark et al's (2013) study regarded decolonial content as subjective, lacking in evidence, and discriminatory, whereas others described it as being unconnected with the rest of the subject theory and practice. Still others commented that there was a need for more integration and collaboration between disciplines.

Some studies reported that several students had psychological reasons for resisting decolonisation. Some students found decolonial content confrontational and eliciting feelings of pain, anxiety, guilt, and general psychological discomfort (Clark et al, 2013; Madden & McGregor, 2013; Alemán & Gaytán, 2017; Zinga & Styres, 2019). Chiodo et al (2014) stated that students encountered feelings of anger, annoyance and frustration because decolonisation efforts took them out of their comfort zones. Alemán and Gaytán (2017) also encountered resistance to decolonisation among black students in the United States. These students' resistance was based on the fear that some issues were too painful to engage in critically. Clark et al (2013) found that there was a perception that white students might struggle to understand and connect with the multiple themes relating to the pain of disenfranchisement; therefore they might need

additional assistance to connect the dots. According to Madden and McGregor (2013), some students sidestepped the issues of decolonisation to avoid feelings of discomfort and being implicated and held responsible. However, the findings of Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) suggested that students dealt with persistent exposure to decolonial material by becoming more willing to confront and work through the different emotions they experienced and to explore and assimilate values and belief systems that were new and different to their own. By accepting a feeling of discomfort, students came to perceive it as an indispensable part of learning and not necessarily a sign of cultural incompetence.

*Theme 2: The importance of critical engagement in and reflections on decolonisation*

Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) reported that some students in their study had come to an appreciation of the importance of critical engagements that characterised decolonial pedagogy. At first, their students appeared to experience varying degrees of difficulty with critically engaging in and reflecting on decolonisation, but, through making an effort, they began to clarify the meaning of decolonisation in their context. The students in Meda's (2019) study viewed decolonisation from two broad perspectives: firstly, as an infusion of indigenous knowledge into the curriculum of mainstream higher education, and, secondly, as the transformation of higher education. Decolonisation as an infusion of indigenous content relates to the development of a contextually relevant curriculum, a curriculum that breaks free from what the students called a "curriculum of the colonisers." As a transformation endeavour, decolonisation relates to changing the demographics of academic staff and students in historically white institutions of higher education. Transformation further involves the use and promotion of indigenous mother-tongue instruction at higher education institutions in their entirety (Meda, 2019).

In addition to clarifying perspectives on the meaning of decolonisation, critical engagement and reflection appear to serve several other purposes. Firstly, Costandius et al (2018) found that the critical engagements between students and academic staff around decolonisation and the #feesmustfall movement appeared to bring these groups of stakeholders together and gave academic staff insights into the lived experiences of the students they were teaching. Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) referred to experiences of engagement with students that created space for real learning because academic staff and students could engage emotionally and react sincerely and to the point. Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) further suggested that the process of engagement created greater cultural awareness among the students. However, Alemán and Gaytán (2017), who confirmed that there was greater awareness among students, were unsure whether this new awareness created a shift in consciousness from a paternalistic perspective to a more critical reflection on privilege and positionality.



Secondly, Silva and Students for Diversity Now (2018) found that, for marginalised students, engagements and moments of reflection created opportunities to validate their experiences and voices which had been suppressed and silenced in the past. Thus, through deeper self-reflection, students derived fulfilment and satisfaction from the learning process (Silva and Students for Diversity Now, 2018). Thirdly, Zinga and Styres (2019) confirmed that the deepening of critical reflections enabled the students participating in their study to develop more trust in the classroom as a safe space and to experience increased feelings of fulfilment and satisfaction with their learning. Consequently, students felt safe to bring their personal experiences to their engagement, which had the added effect of enhancing their learning (Silva and Students for Diversity Now, 2018; Zinga & Styres, 2019).

Conversely, Clark et al (2013) found that some of the undergraduate students in their study struggled with the process of critical self-reflection that decolonial pedagogy invited. These students regarded decolonisation as irrelevant to the curriculum, struggled to see how politics and history influenced psychology, and considered the history and politics of science as belonging to other disciplines. Clark et al (2013) posited that these students preferred a positivist approach to knowledge as this approach was solutions-focused and more relevant. It also appeared that some of these students preferred a psychology that was sanitised from its historical and political baggage (Clark et al, 2013).

According to the students in some of the studies, there were specific pre-requisites for enhancing critical reflection and engagement. For example, the students in Castell et al's (2018) study emphasised a need to display empathy, openness and sensitivity during moments of critical reflection and engagement. On the other hand, the students in Meda's (2019) study indicated that they wanted to be actively involved in the design, development, and dissemination of the new decolonised curriculum. Additionally, these students highlighted a need for close collaboration between like-minded faculty members, students, and the community. They also pointed out that technology and the internet provided an opportunity to accelerate the decolonisation of the curriculum. Online technology could be used to communicate indigenous knowledge to students and the broader global community (Meda, 2019).

### *Theme 3: Challenging and disrupting whiteness within higher education*

This theme centred on the issue of whiteness within the higher education landscape. According to Hlatshwayo and Shawa (2020), whiteness can be understood as an epistemic idea that is symbolic of embodied capital and all the privilege, social protection and histories that are still accessible to some students. Having explored the issue of whiteness in higher education, Alemán and Gaytán (2017) suggested that most

students had never considered issues around whiteness and invisible privilege, and discussions relating to these issues created tension and anxiety. Furthermore, Alemán and Gaytán (2017) and Castell et al (2018) observed that white students appeared to experience the most difficulty with engaging in issues around decoloniality, whiteness and invisible privilege. The deliberations between students and academic staff around decolonisation and the #feesmustfall movement, as reported in Costandius et al (2018), also highlighted this lack of awareness about issues of whiteness and invisible privilege, which contributed to the tension between students and white academic staff. This tension increased when the voices of marginalised students took centre stage during critical reflections and engagements (Silva and Students for Diversity Now, 2018). Some of the students who participated in Alemán and Gaytán's (2017) study expressed empathy towards their white counterparts who might struggle to connect with and relate to decolonial material.

Costandius et al's (2018) study showed that the relationship between academic staff and students within predominantly white universities was affected by student protests and by discussions centring on decolonisation. Some of the students in their study indicated they would appreciate the active involvement of their predominantly white academic staff who, at times, appeared not to care. These students expressed the need for academic staff to take a stand, be allies, and act in solidarity with them to dislodge whiteness and the Western knowledge system (Costandius et al, 2018).

#### *Theme 4: Demographic change at university*

In analysing the studies included in the review, we identified that students wanted changes in the bodies in academia, for example, the inclusion of more people of colour in institutions of higher education (Wane et al, 2004; Kessi, 2018; Meda, 2019). According to Wane et al (2004), the students felt that decolonial material would be taught better if educators represented different social locations, races, sexual orientations, and abilities. The students in Meda's (2019) study were of the opinion that there should be a focus on demographic change as part of decolonisation. However, Kessi (2018) found that some students regarded the focus on demographics as insufficient because it did not consider the day-to-day lives of people of colour on campus. Many of them experienced violence and isolation on a daily basis.

### **Implications for decolonisation of the higher education curriculum**

As previously stated, the scope of this review was broadened to include all social sciences because relevant literature focusing on psychology was found to be limited. In the preceding section we presented the findings of the reviewed studies that investigated student voices and experiences relating to the introduction of decolonial content and teaching methods across the social sciences. The insights from this

scoping review could be potentially useful to academic staff teaching psychology who intend to incorporate a decolonial approach in the classroom. The findings demonstrate that a decolonial approach to higher education is often met with complex reactions from students, ranging from displaying discomfort, resistance and aggression to embracing and advocating decolonisation. Frizelle (2019) suggested that discomfort and complicity (both individual and collective), led to social injustice, and that the acknowledgement and recognition of the existence of discomfort and complicity could be healing and transformative. For this discomfort to be transformative, academic staff and students could be supported, emotionally and intellectually, through the introduction and practice of safe spaces (Távora & Moodley, 2017; Frizelle, 2019).

The findings of some of the studies suggested that students advocated for the appointment of demographically representative academic staff (Wane et al, 2004; Kessi, 2018; Meda, 2019). In line with this idea, Barnes (2018) propounded that having demographically representative academic staff would ensure that academic contributions were made by a group of people representing a diversity of voices and not only Western voices (speaking for local people). Further, Maldonado-Torres (2016) argued that it was essential to have black bodies in academia because these bodies could contribute to resolving questions that existed in institutions steeped in Western ideology. A study finding of Kiguwa and Segalo (2018) was that students who were not confident articulating their views in English were more likely to seek assistance and supervision from racially identical academic staff. Thus, Alemán and Gaytán (2017) highlighted the advantage of having academic staff with whom students could relate. Nevertheless, having demographically representative staff might not be enough to achieve decolonisation because apartheid and colonial legacies might remain entrenched (Cornell & Kessi, 2017; Zwane, 2019).

Moreover, despite demographic changes, some black students might still experience the curriculum as exclusionary and might feel out of place and unable to relate to the curriculum (Carolissen et al, 2015). Therefore, Carolissen et al (2015) suggested that even though it was essential to ensure representativity, there was also a need to think beyond the numbers or merely paying lip service to cultural issues. Academic staff and students needed to understand the complex ways in which Western epistemological domination played out in the curriculum and in everyday university life. Only through an understanding of history, culture, and institutional context could decolonisation be achieved through critical and reflexive conversations between students, staff and broader society (Carolissen et al, 2015; Kessi, 2018).

The findings from the review raised the issue that the positioning and privileging of some of the students who participated in the studies partly determined the students' diverse reactions to discussions about decolonisation. Alemán and Gaytán (2017)

posited that positioning and privileging could influence deliberations and stifle conversation. In support of this view, Madden and McGregor (2013) stated that the relative power discrepancies between academic staff and students as well as staff's management of power relations could also influence the dynamics of interaction.

Another issue that came to the fore in the studies reviewed was that white students tended to have some difficulty connecting with decolonial content in the class and that they exhibited various forms of resistance to such content (Madden & McGregor, 2013). Thus, Razack (2009) proposed it was worth considering challenging white students to reflect on the ways they occupied positions of privilege. Watkins et al (2018) regarded such reflection as an essential process because decolonisation required a radical shift in the consciousness of many students, especially those raised in privileged contexts. As students begin to explore their histories of privilege and are exposed to the colonial ideas that have placed them in either a dominant or subaltern position based on race, place of birth or education, they may find themselves unsettled (Clark et al, 2013; Madden & McGregor, 2013; Silva and Students for Diversity Now, 2018; Urson & Kessi, 2018; Watkins et al, 2018). Thus, a critical awareness of the various subjectivities within the classroom and how these subjectivities could contribute to rendering the context unsafe for authentic reflection is essential (Razack, 2009; Kiguwa & Segalo, 2018). Furthermore, an awareness of how these positionalities contribute to the production of racialised spaces in classrooms is essential (Alemán & Gaytán, 2017; Watkins et al, 2018). Costandius et al (2018) and Watkins et al (2018) suggested that academic staff could assist students with this critical reflection by acknowledging struggles, confronting colonial ideas, and acting in solidarity to support decolonisation.

In summary, the literature on student voices about curriculum decolonisation in the social sciences offers some broad suggestions to those who want to engage in changing research in psychology: be mindful that there may be complex reactions from students ranging from supporting to resisting the process of change; create a safe social and psychological space in the classroom for students to disclose their reactions and work through their (perhaps shared) discomfort; advocate the appointment of demographically representative academic staff; encourage dialogue among academic staff and students about the complex ways in which Western epistemological domination plays out within a curriculum and everyday university life; challenge white students to reflect on how they occupy positions of privilege; and explore opportunities for students to co-create the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Primary research about student voices on the decolonisation of university curricula in the social sciences and psychology is limited. The current body of literature suggests

that academic staff in various parts of the world recognise the need to re-imagine social sciences curricula, including the psychology curriculum, and render them inclusive and reflective of the context where they are applied. This is evidenced by the amount of relevant scholarly work emerging from different countries; however, more research should be a priority. The bulk of the studies that formed part of this scoping review focused on students' experiences of the introduction of decolonial content in the classroom. According to some studies, the introduction of decolonial content was primarily initiated and driven by academic staff and often without the express support of institutional administrative structures. Academics' efforts are essential, but it seems that traditional power structures, where academic staff prepare the content and students receive it, are still in place. In our review we did not find evidence of students and academics co-creating a curriculum; this area potentially offers an opportunity for future growth towards achieving the reformation of higher education.

Most of the studies included in this review were conducted in Canada, North America, and Australia. From a broader perspective, this is indicative of the amount of scholarly work on decoloniality that is done in the West. Considering the financial and political power that the West wields in academia, there may be a risk that the decolonial project could be co-opted, appropriated and reduced to fit pre-existing Western epistemological and ontological frameworks (Watkins et al, 2018). Furthermore, knowledge and education have been commodified and commercialised in recent years. Therefore, there may be a need to develop an approach to the curriculum that contributes to creating critical consciousness and social justice rather than to creating a shiny new toy to put on the academic shelves of world universities (Mbembe, 2016; Watkins et al, 2018).

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