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Academic representations of ‘race’ and racism in psychology: Knowledge production, historical context and dialectics in transitional South Africa

Garth Stevens*

*Center for peace Action, Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, P.O. Box 1087,
Lenasia, Johannesburg 1820, South Africa*

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Abstract

The paper critically reviews thematic patterns and trends pertaining to constructions of ‘race’ and racism within South African psychology’s formal discourse between 1990 and 2000. It notes that clear differences emerge temporally with shifts in the socio-historical terrain of South African society, and it is the author’s contention that these manifestations relate directly to ideological, political, social and economic conditions prevalent in South Africa and within the global context. Political transformation and its associated perceived threats to economic, social and cultural integrity; the impact of globalization and neo-liberal ideologies; and the contested institutional dynamics underpinning ‘race’ and racism in postapartheid South Africa are all explored as potential factors contributing to these academic discourses within South African psychology. The study is a thematic analysis of the South African Journal of Psychology during this period and highlights the shifting ontological, epistemological and methodological frameworks as they relate to the study of ‘race’ and racism. Furthermore, it provides us with the basis to examine how academia dialectically engages with ideological contestations pervading the social fabric and mirrors material and historical shifts in the political and socio-economic landscapes of South Africa. The paper argues for a revisiting of critical understandings of ‘race’ and racism within the framework of modernity, a re-commitment to historical and materialist deconstructions of ‘race’ and racism and cautions against the potential contradictions within postmodernist understandings of these social scientific phenomena. However, it simultaneously acknowledges the changing social and economic relations upon which modernist theorizing has been premised and suggests a theoretical re-calibration that allows for the interface between the benefits of critical theory

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +27-11-857-1142; fax.: +27-1-857-1770.

E-mail address: steveg@unisa.ac.za (G. Stevens).

and postmodernism in order to begin to reflexively understand manifestations of ‘race’ and racism in the new global context.

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1. Introduction

During the turbulent apartheid years in South Africa, the social sciences and humanities displayed complex relationships to the social, political and economic status quo. Whilst always being characterized by internal ideological debate, disciplines such as sociology (Alexander, 1985), economic history (Saul & Gelb, 1986) and political science (Wolpe, 1988) all attempted to provide credible analyses of the relationship between racism and economic exploitation, and therefore an understanding of the prevailing intergroup relations in South Africa. On the other hand, several disciplines that could broadly be characterized as helping professions (including medicine, its allied professions and psychology) were all much less vociferous in their critique of the social, political and economic crisis facing South Africa and its populace (Baldwin-Ragaven, de Gruchy, & London, 1999). This was partly due to the historical conservatism of these disciplines, but was also due to their professionalization, the resultant guild mentality, and the associated economic benefits of supporting an oppressive social system (Nell, 1993). Psychology as a historical case in point was not only unable, but unwilling to examine reflexively the manner in which it had contributed to the formation and maintenance of these particularly brutal intergroup relations.

Moreover, psychology did not merely display a lack of commitment to critical reflexivity, but for the most part engaged directly in forms of knowledge production that invariably supported stereotypical notions of ‘race’¹ and therefore, also oppressive social relations in South Africa. During the early 1900s the discipline had already adopted a firm ideological position in relation to both knowledge production and praxis in South Africa. Several authors have highlighted the complicitous relationship between psychology and a white, racist, political hegemony that had emerged in postcolonial South Africa (Duncan, van Niekerk, de la Rey, & Seedat, 2001; Nicholas, 1993; Nicholas & Cooper, 1990). This was to have a fundamental impact on the very structure of the discipline and profession as well as the content that drove research and praxis for years to come. At the peak of the crisis in the South African social formation during the 1960s and 1970s, social psychology was also engaged in its own internal crisis of social relevance (Foster & Louw-Potgieter, 1991). This period witnessed alternative social psychological

¹The placing of words or concepts between single quotation marks generally indicates that its validity is being queried, and suggests that the meaning broadly ascribed to the concept or word is not accepted by the author. For a further explication of this process, see Duncan (1993).

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