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# Epistemic decoloniality as a pedagogical movement: a turn to anticolonial theorists such as Fanon, Biko and Freire.

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## **CHAPTER 9.**

### **EPISTEMIC DECOLONIALITY AS A PEDAGOGICAL MOVEMENT**

#### **A turn to anticolonial theorists such as Fanon, Biko and Freire**

Linda Harms Smith

#### **Abstract**

The failure of decolonisation as a process to rid postcolonial contexts of the ongoing complexities and structural dynamics of coloniality has led to the emergence of a vibrant movement for epistemic decoloniality. In the South African context, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements arising in 2015 among university students were the result of deep discontent and anger about ongoing collective subjection to race based inequality, exclusion and colonisation. As in institutions of higher learning, social work was also still failing to transform and provide evidence appropriate African-centred education. A rallying call emerged in social work for a pedagogical movement of epistemic decoloniality developed from universities, academics as well as students, collective social work educational groupings and in textual discourses – decolonisation of social work education was an imperative. Dominant social work discourses based on Western, Eurocentric theorists and philosophers had posed a problem of contradictory intellectual and professional identities for social workers in postcolonial contexts. While some of these theories may be relevant and appropriate, they are presented as holding universal truth, presume African knowledge to be peripheral and ‘indigenous’, and are silent on issues of ongoing colonial, or in the South African case, apartheid power constellations both at structural and intrapsychic levels. Coloniality operates at levels of power, knowledge and being. The movement towards epistemic decoloniality is therefore more than the introduction of new theoretical content in order to ‘Africanise’ or indigenise. This chapter proposes a number of theoretical concepts derived from anticolonial theorists which inform understanding of intra psychic and psycho social dynamics but also of psycho political processes of change. Achieving decoloniality in social work knowledge and practice is an ongoing process which demands interrogation, engagement, experimentation and contestation. What is presented here is by no means exhaustive in this important pedagogical movement for epistemic decoloniality, and are intended to contribute to an emerging, transformative discourse.

## Introduction

The failure of decolonisation as a process to rid postcolonial contexts of ongoing complexities and structural dynamics of coloniality has led to the emergence of a vibrant movement for epistemic decoloniality. Tolerating inherent contradictions of a mainstream social work education in postcolonial contexts, being grounded in Western Eurocentric hegemony, without serious contemplation of coloniality and contextually relevant knowledge paradigms, is in itself an oppressive act. Unless the ideological process of professional subjectification (Therborn, 1980) includes appropriate theory for understanding the world, this contradiction leaves social workers unable to engage with, or account for, psycho-political realities of the postcolonial context in which they find themselves and to which they will respond as social workers.

In the South African context, the '#RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall' movements arising in 2015 among university students were the results of deep discontent and anger about ongoing collective subjection to race-based inequality, exclusion and colonisation. The removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes as a symbolic destruction of colonial iconography and one of 'demythologising whiteness', became the rallying call of this student movement (Mbembe, 2015). It had been acknowledged that institutions of higher learning were still failing to transform and provide evidence appropriate African-centred education (Heleta, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Within social work education a similar rallying call for a pedagogical movement of epistemic decoloniality developed from universities, academics as well as students, collective social work educational groupings and in textual discourses – decolonisation of social work education was an imperative (Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018BIB-033; Harms Smith & Nathane, 2018BIB-022; Qalinga & Van Breda, 2018). Dominant social work discourses based on Western, Eurocentric theorists and philosophers therefore pose a problem of contradictory intellectual and professional identities for social workers in postcolonial contexts (Harms Smith, 2014). While some of these theories may be relevant and appropriate, they are often presented as universal truths with the presumption that African knowledge is peripheral and 'only indigenous' (Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). Most importantly, they are silent on issues of ongoing colonial, or in the South African case, apartheid power constellations both at structural and intrapsychic levels. Writing about the alienating experience of the colonial student when encountering the intellectual history of philosophers providing accounts of the universe, Krumah (1964: 3) argues that the student omits to draw from his [sic] education and from the concern displayed by the great philosophers for human problems, anything which he might relate to the very real problem of colonial domination, which, as it happens, conditions the immediate life of every colonized African.

Therefore this chapter proposes the selection (among many) of a number of anti colonial theorists to enable the development of paradigms and world views for social work, as well as theoretical perspectives for understanding individual and social change in such contexts. These theoretical perspectives should form the basis of knowledge and practice at all levels with individuals and communities. They inform understanding of intra psychic and psycho social dynamics but also of psycho political processes of change (Hook, 2004; Harms Smith, 2013). The theorists include Frantz Fanon (1925–1961); Stephen Bantu Biko (1946–1977); and Paulo Freire (1921–1997). Reference is also made to the work of Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), as an anticolonial theorist who preceded and stimulated the work of Fanon and later, Biko.

However, the absence of black female theorists in anticolonial discourse is of great concern. This absence of women’s voices in postcolonial theory has been problematised frequently (Mama, 2005; Tyagi, 2014). It is argued that the postcolonial feminist ‘suffers from “double colonisation” as she simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy’ (Tyagi, 2014). Mama argues that ‘Africa’s universities remain steeped in patriarchal institutional cultures in which women are generally vastly outnumbered, and their intellectual contribution relegated to the fringes or steadfastly ignored’ (2011: e4). In this regard, the work of African writers that may offer important theory for decoloniality in social work are the South African writer, Bessie Head and the Nigerian British writer, Amina Mama. Head’s (1974) political involvement and writing has been recognised for its contribution as an anti colonial struggle for social change in the Southern African context. She is said to have used an ‘insurrectional’ and challenging approach in her writing that challenged modes of communication and meaning making that upheld the oppressive dynamics of power in apartheid South Africa ... Head’s work should be situated alongside anticolonialism’s rejection of racialism and an emphasis on imagination as a challenge to dehumanising practices. (el Malik, 2014: 494)

With regards to Mama (2005), Ahikire (2014) argues that she makes important theoretical contributions to the international fields of both feminist and African studies, with robust knowledge production in and on Africa. She states that Mama (2005) ‘alerts us to the fact that the world of development is a complex one, in which gains and setbacks are the product of complex negotiations within and across the hierarchies of power that constitute and drive the development industry’ (Ahikire, 2014: 10).

Achieving decoloniality in social work knowledge is an ongoing process that demands interrogation, experimentation and contestation. This chapter proposes the

consideration of a number of theoretical concepts, mainly derived from three theorists, namely Fanon (2008), Biko (1987) and Freire (1970), which cohere with one another and offer specific concepts, methodologies and arguments for decoloniality. Fanon (1963) and Biko (1987) write from contexts of oppressive coloniality in Africa while Freire (1970) writes from Brazil in the Global South. They are by no means exhaustive for the process of epistemic decoloniality but contribute to emerging, transformative discourse.

### **Social work education: origins and ideologies**

Social work history must be interrogated in terms of its ideological origins. Such historiography will account for the sociopolitical context of the time and provide a deeper critical understanding of the developing profession. For example, in the South African context, the origins of social work as a profession are grounded in early British ideological foundations of charity, personal culpability and the well being of society through social hygiene (Ferguson, 2008; Harms Smith, 2014; Nayak, 2015) and later political ideologies of white nationalism and supremacy. Nayak argues that the apparently benign origins as well as the contemporary nature of social work 'must be scrutinised in terms of power dynamics, colonisation, and mechanisms of regulation' (2015: 241). This is certainly true for the European context, and significant in the South African context of racist apartheid and colonisation, where social work as a discipline is a product and instrument of colonial and apartheid history (Harms Smith, 2013). In this context of legislated racist 'separate development' (engineered race based stratification and hierarchies of severe inequality at all levels), social workers delivered different services to different 'racial' categories. The foundational ideologies of social work reside in the same European project of expansion of colonial power, racist capitalism and coloniality and its history grounded in social engineering and white supremism. This continued through policies of neoliberalisation of social work with emphases on individual responsibility, the importance of the free-market as a template for solving social problems, and minimal state intervention or protection of the vulnerable (Sewpaul and Holscher, 2004; Sewpaul, 2006).

Formal South African social work knowledge and discourse (as was the case for many of the helping professions) grew from a conservative ideological base, serving the 'white' group during the earlier part of the twentieth century (Duncan, Stevens and Bowman 2004; Harms Smith, 2014; Mathebane and Sekudu, 2018). Not only had social work itself arisen from the racist eugenics movement, but it also developed practice forms within oppressive and racist colonial and apartheid structures. Mostly Anglo Saxon and European knowledge and cultural systems formed the basis of social work education. As stated by Mathebane and Sekudu (2018:13).

The greatest epistemological (cognitive) injustice in social work has been its historical association with colonialism and imperialism and, by implication, the guileful insertion of a Eurocentric version of social work ... sidelining other epistemologies that would have reasonably accounted for the lived experiences of the Global South.

In the current South African context of extreme levels of inequality, ongoing racist stratification of society and neoliberal economic structural arrangements, social work struggles to cope with the enormity of these problems (Kang'ethe, 2014; Sewpaul, 2006). It is accused of using domesticating and colonial approaches, especially in its narrow acceptance of Eurocentric and Western theorisations. To embrace decoloniality and remain true to its commitment for social justice and transformative practice, social work education must turn to anti colonial theorists from which its knowledge and discourse can develop to counter such coloniality (Harms Smith and Nathane, 2018).

### **Colonisation of power, knowledge and being**

Understanding the impact of colonisation and ongoing coloniality (Quijano, 2007) is an important basis from which to seek a conceptual understanding of decoloniality. However, it is difficult to critique Western or European knowledge by using European epistemology. Critiquing foundational knowledges of social work may even perpetuate coloniality if the same Eurocentric perspectives are used to do so. Advancing from a Eurocentric paradigm as the universal, relegates African knowledge to 'indigenous knowledge', maintaining European/Western knowledge as the truth. An African centred position should be assumed, acknowledging all knowledge as indigenous to its own context (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Although Africa should not be generalised as if it is one unified whole, the impact of colonisation is ubiquitous across the continent. This extended to the general imposition of European hegemonic world views, the creation of dependency, the decimation of indigenous cultures and inferiorisation (Said, 1993; Patel, 2005; Fanon, 1952). However, Grosfoguel (2007: 212) argues that 'This is not an essentialist, fundamentalist, anti-European critique. It is a perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms' and about the belief that there is only one epistemic position from which to achieve truth and universality.

When examining the idea of coloniality, current consensus exists that coloniality exerted its destructive impact on the levels of knowledge, power and being (Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). It is a 'peculiar construction of knowledge, power and being that divides the world into zones of being and not being human' (Maldonado-Torres 2016: 19). This threefold understanding of coloniality provides a useful framework for analysis because it offers an analytical device to explore various levels of existence.

Coloniality of being relates to existential, intra psychic and psycho social dimensions. This colonisation of the mind is expressed through racist dehumanisation, objectification and inferiorisation. Gordon (2007: 7) argues that 'Although not all people of African descent were enslaved in the modern world, the impact of modern slavery, its correlative racist rationalization, and global colonization by European nations led to the discourse of questioned legitimacy of such people as members of the human community' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; wa Thiong'o, 1967; Fanon, 1968).

Coloniality of power relates to structural dimensions of dominance where subjugation and exploitation were determined along racial lines. Quijano (2007) argues that even today, coloniality is still the most general form of domination in the world, even after colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed. Quijano (2007: 171) argues that through 'Eurocentricity', racial criteria were imposed as a social classification throughout the world. 'Coloniality of power was conceived together with ... the social category of "race" as the key element of the social classification of colonized and colonizers ... old ideas of superiority of the dominant, and the inferiority of [the] dominated under European colonialism were mutated in a relationship of biologically and structurally superior and inferior'.

Coloniality of knowledge describes the epistemic subjugation of indigenous knowledge and culture. In addition to genocides, Africa suffered epistemicide, which ensured the destruction of history, languages and cultures. This was a 'broader colonial process of desocialising African people out of their cultural and historical context' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018: 24). Ndlovu Gatsheni (2018: 19) cites the Comaroffs (2012: 1) who argued that 'Western enlightenment thought has [...] posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, it has regarded the non-West – variously known as the ancient, the orient, the primitive world, the third world, the underdeveloped world, the developing world, and now the global south – primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means'. Coloniality of knowledge is therefore a foundational concern in any process or attitude of decoloniality.

### **Epistemic decoloniality: towards basic concepts and categories**

Working to achieve decoloniality in social work education is critical. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), decolonising knowledge to achieve decoloniality means 'provincialisation of Europe' and achieving that epistemic freedom, being 'the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism' (Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018: 17). Africa then becomes the centre of understanding itself and while Western streams are not rejected, they are considered in terms of their relevance to the African situation. Similarly, Mignolo (2007: 160) describes how Romania should

reflect on Europe from its own perspective rather than reflect on itself from the European perspective. Similarly, Africa should resist regarding itself from a European perspective but examine European paradigms from an African perspective.

Grosfoguel (2007: 212) argues for a decolonial perspective to arise from critical dialogue that achieves a 'pluriversal as opposed to a universal world' and that such decolonisation of knowledge must take seriously the work of thinkers from the Global South. In this way, Santos (2014) argues that the hegemonic Western cultural way of knowing is a cognitive injustice. Knowledges of the Global South should be embraced to counter this hegemonic Northern knowledge. However, decoloniality should not only remain rhetoric, but should also be part of a 'knowledge revolution' in the African context (Maserumule, 2015).

The problem of coloniality of knowledge may therefore be summarised as follows:

1. Western/Non Western racist hierarchies are established and maintained through a Eurocentric definition of knowledge, internalised through hegemonic discourses.
2. There was a colonial era missionary zeal to 'civilise' so called 'barbarians'.
3. Eurocentric paradigms of Western philosophy assume a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view.
4. There is a problem of 'epistemic location' where knowledges are seen to be situated either in the dominant or the 'subaltern' contexts.
5. It is a Western myth that knowledge can be 'neutral' and unlocated.
6. Western knowledge is presented as the only universal knowledge and non Western thought is seen as being particularistic.

(Maldonado Torres, 2017; Grosfoguel, 2007; Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018)

Similarly, social work knowledge and discourse require interrogation and transformation, in order to achieve decoloniality. Rich resources of theoretical approaches, concepts and discourses are available for engagement. The following section offers some of these conceptual understandings for the African postcolonial context where people and societies are subject to precarity, collective traumatisation and extreme socio-economic deprivation.

### **Understanding colonisation**

Understanding and disrupting the impact of colonisation beyond the geopolitical historical (which is most often the limit to which education about colonisation extends), requires an interrogation of its impact at these internal intra psychic as well as structural levels.



Fanon (2008: 1) quotes Césaire (1972) in his book, *Black skin, white masks*: 'I am talking of millions of men [sic] who have been skillfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement.' Referring to how colonisation is equal to 'thingification', or what Freire (1970) would refer to as dehumanisation, Césaire (1972: 6) writes: 'I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out.'

'Thingification' is achieved through the disabling psycho-social effects resulting from negation of being, culture and personality (Gibson, 2016). Fanon (2008: 210) describes the impact of colonialism: not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country ... we realize that nothing has been left to chance and that the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. The effect consciously sought by colonialism was to drive into the natives' heads the idea that if the settlers were to leave, they would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation and bestiality.

The colonised are positioned into a paradox because this dehumanisation is presented as advantageous as a process of civilisation. According to Mbembe (2015), colonial violence and plunder are deemed benevolent, absolving perpetrators such as Rhodes. Colonisation may be seen as a historical trauma: 'the colonial encounter is unprecedented; the epistemic, cultural, psychic and physical violence of colonialism makes for a unique type of historical trauma' (Hook, 2004).

This historical basis, together with ongoing coloniality of power, knowledge and being and consequences of global neoliberal capitalism (Sewpaul, 2006; Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018), means that social work must engage with theorists that provide perspectives to resist and challenge these conditions at the individual and structural level.

Fanon's (1967) 'cure' for the colonised is the cultivation of a decolonial attitude, which is 'profoundly epistemological as well as ethical, political, and aesthetic' (Maldonado-Torres, 2017: 439). This requires counter-knowledge, discourse and practices that will dismantle coloniality. However, this attitude of decoloniality includes putting a working humanist programme into practice (Gibson, 2011). Fanon (2008: 5) argues that it is essential that there be a change of material conditions of living and quality of life, only to be achieved when 'things, in the most materialistic meaning of the word, are restored to their proper places'.

Maldonado Torres (2016: 5) cautions that a liberal approach and ideology is insufficient as it 'facilitates a transition from vulgar discrimination to less vulgar but

equally or more discriminatory practices and structures'. What is required for decoloniality is the 'dismantling of relations of power and conceptions of knowledge that reproduce race, gender, and geopolitical hierarchies in the modern/colonial world' (Maldonado Torres, 2006: 117).

Fanon provides a solution to the schism between the study of 'the individual or the ontogenic approach, and the study of structure, the phylogenic approach, by emphasising the importance of a third area namely the sociogenic' (Gordon, 2005: 2). This sociogenic aspect emerges from the intersubjective social world which includes culture, history, language and economics. It brings an important understanding of mental distress and psychopathology arising from structural conditions of oppression (Hook, 2004).

This is 'an integrative etiological theory that superseded the nature versus nurture debate' (Bulhan, 1985: 196). Fanon's sociogenic approach argues that the 'seemingly private individual pathology is actually a socially induced pathology of liberty' (Bulhan, 1985: 196). Fanon's view is a revolutionary view of psychopathology, as he recognises the profound transformation of social and economic inferiority into the internalised subjective inferiority, and calls it 'epidermalisation'. He draws attention to the relationship between the psyche and the social order, mediated by institutions and relationships with others (Bulhan, 1985). He cites Fanon (2008): 'If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic, secondarily, the internalisation – or better, the epidermalisation – of this inferiority.' Oppressive social structures, therefore, cause the internalisation of negative identities (Bulhan, 1985: 169).

The colonisation of the mind is described by both Fanon (1963) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) as the process of colonial destruction of language, culture and history of colonised peoples. Fanon (1963: 210) states:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with hiding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

Enforcement of the language and culture of the coloniser led to aspiring towards a 'white', Western, Eurocentric male ideal, described as cultural dissonance (Hook, 2004). Fanon states (2008: 148) for example, 'I read white books and little by little I take into myself the prejudices, the myths, the folklore that have come to me from Europe'. This inferiorisation of indigenous cultures and languages of black African colonised societies leads to 'white' being deemed to be superior and 'black' inferior. This harm done (Hook, 2004), through forcing African people to distance themselves from indigenous languages and ancestors, cannot be reversed unless they embark on the painstaking process of 'unlearning in order to be able to relearn' (Ndlovu

Gatsheni, 2018: 42). Social work, when intervening in people's lives, must engage with and facilitate such processes of reclaiming narratives, languages and histories, and embracing and celebrating cultural practices and traditions.

Fanon explored the way that colonialism and racism are 'two integrated and coordinated assaults on people of colour. The violence that gives them birth and sustains them inevitably reverberates in all spheres of social existence' (Bulhan, 1985: 81). The 'blatant negation of the black man's humanity' and the racism expressed in science and biology around anatomical measurement, became a more subtle, cultural racism (Bulhan, 1985: 92). According to Hook (2004: 92), Fanon prioritises race in his analysis so strongly because it serves as the 'essential and determining quality of identity in colonial contexts'. The objectification imposed on people by racism and racial stereotypes means that the essential quality of 'blackness' precedes and dominates all of life. Hook (2004: 92) cites Fanon (1967) who describes this as being 'overdetermined from without'. Sardar (2008) maintains in the foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks* that it explores how colonialism is internalised by the colonised, inculcating an inferiority complex, and how, 'through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors'. In postcolonial contexts, still stratified by race and class, Fanon's analysis is of critical importance.

Bulhan (1985: 193) proposes that implicit in Fanon's writing is a model of response and reaction to the dominant oppressive culture through personal and systemic violence. During prolonged oppression (although related to colonialism, this argument would also apply in other contexts of oppression), psychological mechanisms of defence occur: compromise, flight and then fight. Each of these phases or states imply various struggles and experiences in terms of identity, self realisation, psychopathology and relationships with others. These are 'modes of existence and of action in a world in which a hostile other elicits organic reactions and responses' (Bulhan, 1985: 193). The first of these so-called stages, compromise, implies assimilation into the oppressive culture and identification with the aggressor. The second stage, known as revitalisation, is what Bulhan describes as 'characterised by reactive repudiation of the dominant culture and a romanticising of the indigenous' (1985: 193). The third stage, radicalisation, occurs when there is an active search for transformation and radical structural change.

Taking into account collective historical colonial trauma, when intervening with people for change, the importance of the internalised struggle of people who suffer oppression in various forms, must be acknowledged. Fanon proposes the importance of work with the self: 'It is through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinise the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world' (Bhabha, 2008: xxxv).

In the context of white racist apartheid and colonialism in South Africa, Biko emphasised Black consciousness as a means of psychological liberation for the Black African from oppression of the mind, as a precursor to physical liberation, arguing for the realisation that 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (Biko, 1987: 68). In this sense, the oppression of the mind is similar to Fanon's (2008) description of the 'colonisation of the mind'.

Such Black consciousness was to be achieved through conscientisation, a political strategy of resistance (also proposed by Freire, 1970) 'in which an attempt is made to develop a heightened awareness of oppressive political conditions of existence' (Hook, 2004: 105). This was to occur through solidarity and collective action among 'brothers' operating 'as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude' (1998: 96).

Biko (1987: 29) argues that the first step is

to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward looking process. This is the definition of Black consciousness.

However, this is not a process of 'self enlightenment', 'self help' or 'self esteem development' (Cooper and Ratele, 2018) but rather that Black consciousness was a phase in the process to true liberation, an antidote to the white supremacist racist of the South African context. Biko (1987: 90) argued that rather than artificial attempts at integration between white and black South Africans (similar to depictions of South Africa as a 'Rainbow Nation'), a Hegelian synthesis should be sought. In the face of white racism, Black consciousness should be the response:

the thesis is in fact a strong white racism, the antithesis to this must, ipso facto, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance – a true humanity where power politics will have no place.

Biko therefore argued that in order for complete freedom to be attained, liberation must occur at a psychological as well as a physical level. Liberation from socio economic political oppression was a process which included achieving Black consciousness, which through conscientisation would counter interiorisation. Cooper and Ratele (2018: 250) emphasise that 'political liberation therefore entails both physical and psychological liberation from the imprisonment of the mind occasioned by internalising physical and socio economic oppression and subjugating oneself to sustained interiorisation'. The connection between Black consciousness and, ultimately, political liberation, or between the psychological and the political, is

similar to Fanon's (2008) sociogenic perspective, bringing together the intra psychic and the external, political world.

On the other hand, liberation is constantly challenged by dehumanisation, which Biko (2008) addresses as inferiority enforced upon the black person through domination and oppressive subjugation. Colonisation and racist apartheid policies ensured that African culture, language and history were subjugated and inferiorised as barbaric and superstitious (Biko, 2008). Valorisation of 'white' and systematic impoverishment of those categorised as 'non white', was a dehumanising onslaught on the mind and the body. For Biko (2008: 28), dehumanisation included the deliberate preparation of the black person for a subservient role through apartheid education and to a large extent the evil doers have succeeded in producing at the output end of their machine a kind of black man [sic] who is man only in form. This is the extent to which the process of dehumanisation has advanced.

Current dehumanisation in South Africa still exists through (race stratified) poverty and inequality. Many of these arguments therefore still hold true.

#### **Excursus: on the role of white liberals**

In a context where people are oppressed and dehumanised through structural conditions such as racism, extreme poverty and inequality, the position of those wishing to intervene is particularly complex. In the case of Biko, the role of the white liberal in the liberation struggle and in terms of the problematic power relationships between white and black in South Africa, posed a contradiction. Similar to Freire's (1972) views about the attempts of the oppressor to be involved in the liberation of the oppressed, Biko (1987: 66) states that it is not possible within a system of inequality, for the privileged to totally identify with an oppressed group and that the (white) liberal must fight on his own and for himself. If they are true liberals, they must realise that they themselves are oppressed, and that they must fight for their own freedom and not that of the nebulous 'they' with whom they can hardly claim identification.

Achieving true freedom must of necessity arise and unfold among the very people who are experiencing oppression. Although those seeing something wrong with a system should oppose it, the issue is about who leads that struggle. It should not be the role of white liberals to 'control the response of the blacks to the provocation', and to 'not only be determining the modus operandi of those blacks who oppose the system, but also leading it, in spite of their involvement in the system' (Biko, 1998: 96). Biko had a profound influence on many South African social workers, also the SABSWA (South African Black Social Workers' Association) during the apartheid era,

providing a philosophical and theoretical foundation for hope, liberation and social change (Harms Smith, 2013).

### **Humanisation**

Freire argues that humanisation has been the central concern for humanity and that it is humanity's ontological vocation (Freire, 1972). As people become aware of how contradictory their conditions are with being fully human, they become conscientised towards the need for liberation. Such liberation can only occur when those who are oppressed work towards their own liberation (Freire, 1972). The role of the person working with the oppressed for liberatory education must direct efforts to coincide with the oppressed to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanisation. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them (Freire, 1972: 75)

Dehumanisation must be denounced to achieve humanisation and transformation whereby relationships and society are equal, mutual and reciprocal (Ledwith, 2016). Freire (1972) argues that no education is neutral and that its aim is radical transformation. The individual, the community, the environment and society can be transformed. He held a vision of a new just society where development and education are not separate. Learners should be challenged to change the world and not uncritically adapt to it. Liberatory education supports larger social struggles for liberation rather than adaptation. If education is not liberating, it is 'domesticating' and oppresses people to serve the interests of the oppressors (Ledwith, 2016).

### **Conscientisation**

Conscientisation is an ongoing process of uncovering relationships of domination and oppression and moving towards an awareness or critical consciousness. It breaks through structurally obfuscated or hidden ideologies of oppression to become a subject of history rather than a dominated object. According to Freire, (1972: 160) there is a profound 'effort at conscientisation [conscientizacao] by means of which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical subjects. This is a demystification through which structures of oppression and domination are exposed and political engagement is able to follow. According to West (2004: xiii):

This unique fusion of social theory, moral outrage and political praxis constitutes a kind of pedagogical politics of conversion in which objects of history constitute themselves as active subjects of history ready to make a fundamental difference in the quality of the lives they individually and collectively live.

Freire argues that everyone is able to look at their circumstances or world critically during a dialogical encounter with others, regardless of how submerged in the 'culture of silence' they may be (Freire, 1972). It is not sufficient to examine conditions critically, these must also be acted upon. This cycle of critical reflection and action and reflection is known as praxis. Oppression is domesticating and to escape it, people must become conscious and turn on it – which can only be achieved through praxis. Freire argues that the realisation of oppression must be achieved, thus making oppression even more oppressive and that this 'corresponds to the dialectical relation between the subjective and the objective. Only in this interdependence is an authentic praxis possible, without which it is impossible to resolve the oppressor oppressed contradiction' (1972: 51). This critical reflection on reality, therefore, and the acting upon it as an external reality, constitutes praxis.

### **Dialogue and problematisation**

Dialogue is a method of equalising power relationships between people and therefore leads to empowerment, which is 'about exploring new ways of knowing a paradigmatic shift that allows us to see our identities and realities within this system of competing oppressions' (Ledwith, 2016: 3). Dialogue is therefore crucial for the process of transformation; where relevant, generative themes are uncovered to lead to empowerment. Generative themes which link emotion and motivation provide natural energy for people to engage in praxis. The strategy of problem posing or problematisation rather than problem-solving, leads to a new search for solutions to experiences charged with political significance.

### **Conclusion**

So called decolonisation, or the process of geopolitical retreat of European control of colonised states, has far from achieved decoloniality – of power, of being and of knowledge. The movement of decoloniality of knowledge, power and being, propounded by Latin American theorists (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2007; Maldonado Torres, 2007) and, more recently, among African theorists around epistemic decoloniality (Ndlovu Gatsheni, 2018; Mbembe, 2015) situates well with the call for a pedagogical movement towards decoloniality in social work knowledge and discourse.

The birth and development of social work in colonial contexts had Eurocentric and Western foundations, with knowledge and discourse formalised in institutions perpetuating the colonial power matrix of racism, inferiorisation and destruction of indigenous cultures and structures of helping. This was even more deliberately enforced through legislation in the South African context of apartheid. Not only did social work education and its allied disciplines such as sociology and psychology foreground, promote and impose world view theories and approaches derived from

contexts in many ways alien to the African or postcolonial reality, these theoretical frameworks lacked explanatory power for these contexts.

The epistemic colonisation and what is termed 'epistemicide' (Grosfoguel, 2013), evident in the discourses and ideologies of the discipline, must be excavated and held to account so that a contextually relevant and appropriate African centred social work can flourish. This is what the movement for epistemic decoloniality in social work and its education proposes – that it is imperative that formal discourses and knowledge of social work be interrogated, renewed and transformed. Similarly, narratives, histories and theories with an African and anti colonial basis must be reclaimed. Any interventions defined as transformative and liberatory, directed towards holism, well being and social change in postcolonial contexts, would do well to embrace such processes of decoloniality as their basis of knowledge and discourse. This movement, in order to remain congruent to its claims, must inevitably be broad and inclusive of all of those involved and immersed in social work, its knowledge development and its practice, namely, academics, students, social work practitioners and even those who, as partners, work collectively towards social change. It is in this way that the movement for epistemic decoloniality, initiated and articulated by courageous students of the 'fallist' movement, and currently embraced in South African social work education contexts, will continue in strength. Exploration and engagement with anti colonial theorists as described above (as well as a rich resource pool of significant others such as Bessie Head, Amina Mama, Aimé Césaire, to name a few) provide social work with an opportunity to do just that.

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