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RASOOL, S. and HARMS-SMITH, L.

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TITLE: Towards Decoloniality in a Social Work Programme¹: a process of dialogue, reflexivity, action and change

Shahana Rasool (Corresponding author)

Affiliation: University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Email: shahanar@uj.ac.za

Linda Harms Smith (Corresponding Author)

Affiliation: Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen Scotland and Research Associate, University of Johannesburg

Email: l.h.smith@rgu.ac.uk

Abstract

Both students and scholars have identified the critical imperative to prioritise decolonisation and pedagogical and curriculum transformation in South African higher education institutions. The ongoing context of coloniality, persistent race-based inequalities and hegemonic Western-centric epistemologies led to the Rhodes and Fees Must Fall protests by students at South African universities. As a result of the questions raised by students during these protests, the Department of Social Work at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) embarked on a process of working towards decoloniality in their social work programme. This paper describes the unfolding critical participatory action research process toward decoloniality undertaken by this department. Various theoretical perspectives, including communicative action, reflexivity and 'decolonising the mind' informed the process of decoloniality that began at the UJ Department of Social Work. The process of critical reflection, dialogue, analysis, development of methodologies and initial implementation of changes that were used in this department may offer useful insights for working towards decoloniality in other academic settings.

Keywords: decoloniality; decolonisation; Social Work education; Curriculum transformation, pedagogy.

TITLE: Décolonialité dans un programme de travail social²: un processus de dialogue, de réflexivité d'action et de changement

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Abstract

Les étudiants tout comme les chercheurs ont identifié l'impératif vital et le caractère prioritaire de la réalisation d'une transformation et de la décolonialité dans l'éducation supérieure dans les institutions de formation supérieure en Afrique du Sud. Le contexte continu de Colonialité, les inégalités raciales persistantes et les épistémologies hégémoniques centrées sur l'occident ont entraîné les manifestations de Rhodes et de Fees Must Fall de la part des étudiants d'universités Sud-africaines. Suite aux questions soulevées par les étudiants durant ces manifestations, le Département de travail social de l'Université de Johannesburg s'est embarqué dans un processus de travail de Décolonialité dans le cadre de leur programme de travail social. Cet article décrit le déroulement du processus de recherche sur l'action participative critique vers la Décolonialité que ce département a entrepris. Différentes perspectives théoriques, y compris une action communicative la réflexivité et la 'décolonisation des esprits' a informé le processus de décolonialité qui a débuté au département de travail social de l'UJ. Le processus de réflexion critique, le dialogue, l'analyse, le développement de méthodologies et la mise en œuvre initiale de changements avec lesquels ce département de travail social s'est impliqué, peut apporter un aperçu utile pour progresser vers la Décolonialité dans d'autres contextes universitaires.

Keywords: Décolonialité; décolonisation; étude en travail social; transformation du curriculum, pédagogie.

Introduction

Coloniality - and its matrix of power through the imposition of hegemonic Western epistemologies, structural inequalities, 'race' and gender-based hierarchies - continues to shape societal structures and institutions, including higher education (Mignolo 2011). Although the historical period of socio-political relationships of colonisation and Apartheid has officially ended, it failed to achieve the end of coloniality. Achieving transformation and liberation from ongoing coloniality requires work towards decoloniality³ described as the achievement of liberation from the political and epistemic domination of Eurocentrism and Western imperialism (Maldonado-Torres 2016).

Although the #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall protests of 2015/2016 led by students at South African Universities demanding transformation and decoloniality in higher education led to commitments by scholars, faculty, and university communities, limited progress has been made in the conceptualisation and implementation of these processes (Mbembe 2015; Langa 2016; Harms-Smith 2014; Noyoo 2003). This paper explores an example of work of significant transformation towards decoloniality in one such higher education institution and documents elements of a collective participatory action process in the Department of Social Work at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). Specifically, we reflect on and describe the emancipatory and participatory action research process as praxis. By examining the issues involved, strategies used, stages in the process, and lessons learnt, we provide some ideas that may be useful for the achievement of similar objectives in various other educational contexts.

UJ is a post-Apartheid amalgamation of three institutions, namely the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), the Technikon Witwatersrand (TWR) and the Soweto and East Rand campuses of Vista University, with RAU historically situated as a white Afrikaner institution of the Apartheid era (Bosman and Uys, 2001). In the period immediately after the 2016 student protests, UJ expressed general commitment to representative transformation and embarked on various change initiatives with 'decolonialisation'⁴ a focal point of discussion. Yet, addressing structural coloniality in the curriculum and pedagogy has been slow to receive extensive or systematic attention. Instead, individual faculties and departments embarked on different strategies to address decolonialisation.

³ We use the term decoloniality, rather than decolonisation throughout. The process of decolonisation refers to the undoing the geo-political and socio-historical arrangements of the period of colonisation (Hack, 2008; Maldonado-Torres (2016). On the other hand, decoloniality is a socio-political and epistemic project that achieves transformation and liberation from the particularly extensive form of race-based power relationships "organised as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination" (Quijano 2007, 178). The end of colonialism does not imply the end of the ongoing structural dynamics of Coloniality as the matrix of power, hegemony and dehumanisation of Western domination. According to Maldonado-Torres (2016, 4) decoloniality "is a direct challenge to the temporal, spatial, and subjective axis of the modern/colonial world and its institutions, including the university and the state."

The student #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall movements, which began in October 2015, drew attention to students' experiences of coloniality and extreme race-based socio-economic inequality (Langa 2017). These student movements declared the need to understand the colonial continuities of Apartheid's racially stratified and unequal society, and thus mobilized against the material manifestations of these structural legacies in higher education (Heleta, 2016). Students made demands for eradicating economic, class and cultural barriers to education. They also challenged the nature of the South African education system, which perpetuates the hegemony of Western-centric knowledge, paradigms, epistemology and iconography (Mbembe 2015). Students argued, as Bulhan (2015, 241) did, that the education system contains "epistemic and ontological biases that promote validation of European hegemony and superiority while invalidating, marginalizing, and eroding the knowledge, experience, and rights of colonized peoples".

Echoing critiques among students and social work academics, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) maintains that the African academy has remained a site of Western values, ways of knowing and worldviews, and argues for epistemic freedom and decoloniality to counter the epistemic violence wrought by colonialism. Similarly, social work education in South Africa struggles with its roots in the project of European colonial expansion and 'White' nationalism in Apartheid South Africa. For example, social work education became formalised after the report of the Carnegie Commission of Inquiry into the 'Poor White Problem' in 1932, which also solidified white Afrikaner-Nationalist dominance (Harms-Smith 2014; Sewpaul 2007). Moreover, social workers have also been used as instruments of oppression by colonial and Apartheid regimes. In some instances, this meant many social workers being complicit with 'race'-based, racist and oppressive practices, such as unequal social security arrangements, racist policy implementation and discriminatory welfare services (Patel 2005). These developments produced increased urgency to pursue in-depth transformation within the higher education space, and specifically within the UJ Social Work Department. This urgency was intensified in various ways. The first was the global decolonial turn, that led to an increase in scholarly work locally and internationally (Grosfoguel 2007; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015; Maldonado Torres 2017). Secondly, an increased consciousness was developing in Social Work academia of the levels of coloniality in South African Social Work education (Sewpaul 2013; Harms-Smith 2014; Nathane and Harms-Smith 2017; Mathebane and Sekudu 2018) and the push from students for change described during 2015 and 2016 Fees Must Fall movements (Langa 2017). Hence, the staff at the Department of Social Work at UJ wanted to find ways to address decoloniality in their programme to ensure a more socially just education.

This paper explores the nature of a critical, reflexive, participatory action research methodology developed by and utilised among the group of social work educators at UJ to achieve decolonisation. Our hope in writing-up this process is to engage in an auto-ethnographic practice that both illuminates the potential and limitations of decolonial praxis in university settings, whilst enabling others to build upon the process elsewhere

in a contextually appropriate way. We therefore give attention to the dialogical methodology, as well as its grounding in communicative action, reflexivity, and the process of decolonizing the mind (Habermas 1987; Kemmis 2008; Freire 1970; wa Thiong'o 1986). We thus explore options for identifying and pursuing alternative, less hierarchical, more inclusive and transformational approaches to working toward decoloniality in higher education (Quijano 2007; Reason and Bradbury 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Before offering insights around collective strategies for interrogating the structures and dynamics of coloniality, we contextualise coloniality and decoloniality with reference to the South African educational landscape, and social work education specifically.

Coloniality, Decoloniality and South African Social Work Education

The dynamics of coloniality are ongoing. Coloniality brutalises, diminishes and "as a power structure continues because it invades the mental universe of a people, destabilizing them from what they used to know" (Omnaga 2020). Additionally, the racist capitalist political economy perpetuates societal inequality which benefits the elite through the mechanisms of racism, sexism and other oppressions. Hence, decoloniality is a necessary and ongoing struggle for liberation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2015).

The enduring nature of Eurocentric and American theoretical knowledge is also evident in social work, especially evident in the theorists and authors cited by many Apartheid-era South African social work programmes. Although these theories and texts have been critically interrogated by some South African scholars (Harms-Smith 2014; Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions 2017; Shokane and Masoga 2018), there has been little substantive divergence from their roots. Furthermore, the positionality of social work educators and students has tended to reflect asymmetrical power relationships and structures of historical coloniality and Apartheid, within the ever persistent classist, racist and sexist systems of inequality and oppression which pervade South African society (Noyoo 2004; Bozalek 2004; Sewpaul 2007; Heleta 2016). For social workers to work towards transformation of society they need to engage with praxis that enables critical consciousness so that they themselves are liberated from these dynamics. Similarly, engaging individuals and communities constrained by the legacies of apartheid and ongoing coloniality requires a vigilance and commitment to liberatory, anti-oppressive practice. In this way, working towards decoloniality becomes possible and enables social work to realise the social justice and social action orientation that it claims to embody (Carollisen et al 2017).

After sporadic early work around decolonisation, Social Work academics in South Africa collectively began to focus on decolonisation more intentionally after 2015. The Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) organised regional discussions on decolonisation in various provinces and organised a national conference on the topic in 2017 (ASASWEI 2016; Mathebane and Sekudu 2018; Harms-

Smith and Nathane 2018). However, these efforts remained focussed on the curriculum rather than having a broader programmatic emphasis. The transformation of higher education is a complex process, as change must extend beyond just curriculum content. Anti-colonial knowledge production and critique requires entirely different paradigms of being, acting, and knowing in order to change colonial epistemic foundations and systems (Maldonado Torres 2016). These processes are often slow and contested as they require challenging the underlying ideological structures and systems that perpetuate coloniality.

These reflections led to a collective decision among educators within the UJ Department of Social Work that, in the South African context, it is necessary to critically scrutinise and challenge the histories, underlying ideologies, Eurocentrism and complicity with racist, sexist, homophobic and class oppressions, in order to transform both the social work curriculum and pedagogy. As a group of educators in social work, we identified the need for a transformed social work education that works towards achieving an attitude of decoloniality, that embodies values, insights, and pedagogy that are able to deal appropriately with student need and context. We felt an urgent imperative to act in response, not just to theorise about it. Hence, this article will deliberately utilise 'we', in the sense of the team (see footnote one), rather than just in reference to ourselves (Shahana Rasool, Team Leader, HOD at the time and first author and Linda Harms-Smith, Facilitating Partner and second author), as part of the approach to decoloniality, and to reflect the participatory nature of the process.

Pathways to decoloniality in social work education

Liberation from Apartheid during the 1990s necessitated and presented opportunities for the transformation of social work knowledge and practice. It was a time of exhilarating freedom to participate in social policy development and express a commitment to social justice, human rights, and anti-discriminatory practice. The focus on shifting from individualist ideologies and residual and institutional models of welfare towards developmental approaches (Patel 1996, 2015) was for many years the priority of Social Work education programmes.

Revised learning outcomes and standards for the qualifying social work degree were developed in 2004 (Sewpaul and Lombard 2004). , taking into account the new South African post-Apartheid context and the Social Development paradigm as discussed extensively in Patel (2015). Although some significant changes were required that would embrace anti-oppressive practice and Social Development models, overall the process produced little transformation towards decoloniality. Not all universities embraced a social development theoretical stance, and implementation was not uniform or consistent across various universities. Aspects of the knowledge base and theory in the social work curriculum and in formal texts still included politically conservative, Eurocentric, individualist ideologies centred around helping people cope on an

individual level with structural conditions rather than promoting transformative change in social and economic hierarchies (Harms-Smith, 2014). Whilst there was a move to community development, social action was still the least utilised approach to enable social change, whilst maintaining the status quo, and assimilation or rehabilitation (pathologization) models were widespread.

Similarly, initial efforts at transformation and decolonisation seemed to centre on additive approaches such as including more so-called 'indigenous' literature. In some instances, indigenisation of the curriculum was purported to have occurred by getting students to talk about their 'culture' in othering and patronising ways. These approaches did not foreground indigenous knowledge systems as critical and relevant approaches in their own right (Mogorosi, 2018). Departing from these developments, more transformative and critical ideas around decolonised social work education have recently emerged. At UJ, we therefore decided to explore and pursue an alternative approach to embed decoloniality into the UJ social work programme, with the hope that it would ignite similar processes at other universities.

There seemed to be no extant examples of such a process of comprehensively interrogating transformation and engaging decoloniality within Social Work education. Hence, we began conceptualising a holistic process of deep transformation towards decoloniality beyond the curriculum to include the pedagogy and educational practices of the whole Social Work programme.

Preliminary efforts at decolonisation

The UJ Department of Social Work, consisting of a group of sixteen social work educators, as well as the facilitator, identified the imperative to engage with decoloniality. Prior to this decision, the team had engaged in a two-year process of reading, discussion, research and writing around indigenisation, decolonisation and Africanisation in social work. Cognisant of the #Feesmustfall and #Rhodesmustfall movements, we recognised that what Social Work education has provided is unsatisfactory in light of a South African society fraught with poverty, ongoing structural racism and sexism and a failed developmental state (Fine 2010).

Initial attempts to adapt the curriculum included incorporating local literature, contextual examples, and African cultural practices into the content of teaching. However, these did not facilitate a deep, consistent and coherent transformation towards decoloniality across the programme. The integration of decolonisation into the curriculum remained sporadic, with varying levels of commitment, depending on individual interests, perceptions, ideological orientations, and theoretical alignments. A transformation of consciousness, epistemology, pedagogy, and research remained tenuous.

The demands of the #FeesMustFall movement, together with the national Social Work education conference in 2017, hastened the urgency to work on decoloniality in a deeper and broader sense to include liberatory pedagogical practices (Freire, 1970) and programme change. This led the new Head of Department to embark on a more formal and concerted approach to working towards decoloniality and creating a communicative space for engagement (Kemmis 2006).

Early on, we acknowledged that to achieve decoloniality, students would need to be involved because the impetus for decoloniality was the 2015/2016 student movements throughout South Africa – this was especially needed in historically ‘White,’⁵ privileged universities. In Johannesburg, students from the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Johannesburg were actively involved in these movements (Malabela 2017, 138). Generally, demands from students included an end to structural oppression and marginalisation of ‘Black’ students; Africanisation of the curriculum; and broader transformation. Students argued that “...their reassertion of blackness and the return to the work of scholars such as Biko, Fanon, bell hooks, and various feminist writers, was an attempt to make sense of their positionality in a world characterised by the exclusion and marginalisation of ‘black’ bodies, on the basis of class, race and gender” (Langa 2017, 8). Hence, students’ ‘voice’ was deemed critically important as leaders in setting the agenda. Engagement with students occurred at a later stage, to allow educators to clarify and engage with decoloniality and find a common understanding amongst ourselves. However, this paper is only able to focus on the overarching process of the work among educators to decolonise our own minds, ways of being, doing and knowing. It refers to the student process as this is a critical part of the overarching process, but does not include the details of the student process, as that will be addressed elsewhere, due to space limitations. As educators we realised that a process of work towards decoloniality would require reflection on our own positionality in systems of oppression and inequality. With this scoping exercise in mind, we embarked on the formal process of work towards decoloniality in the Social Work Programme.

Decoloniality as a process

The overall *aim of the project* was to work towards decoloniality by developing an intervention that created communicative spaces for a critically reflective participatory action research project. The aim was to explore “the shift in the coloniality of discourse, underlying ideologies and pedagogical practices in the social service curriculum of a

⁵ We choose to place racialised categories in single quotation marks to denote these are constructed rather than natural or innate and to highlight our consciousness of the problems associated with reified notions of race as a differentiating category (Soudien, 2017).

South African university through a dialogical process of reflection, engagement, and change among educators and students”.

INSERT FIGURE ONE

Figure One: Phases of the process towards decoloniality

Preparation and planning

In the first phase of the process, initial discussions occurred among all the educators to reach consensus on how the process of working towards decoloniality would unfold. The then Head of the Social Work department, as Team Leader (TL), approached a Facilitating Partner (FP) who had previously engaged in work around decoloniality to assist in facilitating the process⁶. We as the TL and FP (authors of this paper) collaboratively developed a concept proposal outline for the intervention towards decoloniality (Kemmis 2006). This proposal was presented to the team for discussion, thereby developing an intersubjective space for communicative action to enable a collective, rather than subjective and individualised, understanding of what the decoloniality process could look like for the Department (Kemmis, 2006; Habermas 1992). A communicative space is important as collective understandings occur when we “conduct our discussion aiming at intersubjective agreement about the terms we use in understanding situations, aiming at mutual understanding and aiming at unforced consensus about what to do” (Kemmis, 2006, 472). The concept proposal was discussed and commented on over three months, verbally and in writing, informally, in face-to-face staff meetings, in a meeting with a member of the faculty’s leadership, and through a teleconference with the FP. These discussions revealed that critical reflection and review would need to occur in relation to the coloniality of discourse, underlying ideologies, and scholarly and pedagogical practice through a dialogical process. This led to a reconceptualization of the project to work towards decoloniality of the whole Social Work programme.

We collectively conceived of an inclusive and collaborative intervention based on a critically reflective action research process (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Our goal was to move beyond a curriculum review with additional approaches to a deeper interrogation that would be emancipatory for us all as educators. This approach was centred on

⁶ The composition of the facilitating team was important with respect to representations of oppressive power in the form of ‘race’, class, and gender, given the ongoing nature of Coloniality (Baines, 2001; Roy et al, 2013; Ngounou and Guitierrez, 2019). It was critical to use facilitators who were reflective, critical and engaged in work with Decoloniality, racism and sexism (Kishimoto, 2018). We acknowledge, that despite attempts by the facilitators and the type of process embarked upon, power dynamics and the performance of race, class and gender persists at all levels.

working towards a decoloniality of knowledge, mind, and being (Quijano 2007). This critically reflective participatory process (Badat 2015) as a methodology itself challenged dynamics of coloniality and power and enabled a communicative space in which most (since not all participate equally, even if attempts are made to create this space) could share control and power. A parallel process was planned to ensure the voices of students, often marginalized in such processes, would remain influential (Freire 1972).

As part of the preparatory phase, the FP and team members shared appropriate readings as part of a time of self-reflection, reading, and discussion around decoloniality, oppression, power, and transformation. This was critical as existing texts utilised in the curriculum were mostly Western in origin and were seen as unable to transform content and pedagogy in substantive ways. Moreover, there had been little critical engagement with such texts in relation to the decoloniality agenda. Aside from the use of mostly international literature in social work education, when faculty attempted to include local literature, the formal South African texts tended to reflect asymmetrical relationships of power and privilege, and ideologies that failed to advance the agenda of decoloniality and transformation. These included a prevalence of individualist ideologies, discourses that maintain the status quo and social control, and Western-centric epistemologies (Harms-Smith 2014). Furthermore, the curriculum also lacked anti-colonial theory from Africa and the Global South. Texts that were circulate included the works of Frantz Fanon (1968), Paulo Freire (1972), Steve Biko (1972), Gayatri Spivak (2008); Nelson Maldonado Torres, 2017; and Shosi Kessi, 2017. In this way we realised our endeavour to “investigate reality in order to transform it and transform reality in order to investigate it” (Borda 1979 as cited by Kemmis 2006, 470).

This preparatory phase also included one-on-one conversations between the FP and each of the educators to build relationships and reflect on their struggles, attempts, and positioning in relation to decoloniality. From the individual discussions, there were requests for confidentiality and norms to be in place to ensure containment, protection, and respect during the exploration of difficult content. Some expressed concerns about the readiness for change and the realistic possibility of implementing decoloniality in the current system. As a result, we decided, for example, that sessions would not be recorded. Arising from these meetings, the FP developed a workshop outline for the structure, content, and ideas for guest presenters, that was circulated to the team for comment. The programme was designed to allow for reflexivity as a process of engagement, reflection and action, thus encouraging flexibility, as well as a shared and collective control of the process.

We agreed that intervention should occur over approximately seven days, allowing time for reflection in-between, with an openness to the unfolding nature of the process as both intervention and critically reflective participatory action research. The process outlined in this paper was conceived to be a two-year focused project. Despite the many

competing teaching and research demands, there was deep commitment to finding a way to work toward decoloniality, notwithstanding the 'unsettling' and time-consuming nature of the process. At times, there was frustration with the extensive time, energy and other investments required by this process. Nevertheless, the team was committed to the process although it was a lengthy and 'unsettling' process where dis-engagement from long-held assumptions and a 'destabilising' of views of the self was required by all (Leibowitz et al 2010; Boler and Zembylas 2003).

Every attempt was made to shape the process collaboratively from its inception, such as decisions about readings, who to invite as guest speakers, procedural changes, and ongoing planning. Members of the team of educators led different aspects of the process. Young 'Black' academics volunteered to lead the student process, whilst one of the 'Black' educators doing scholarly work on social work indigenisation and decoloniality co-led the detailed curriculum integration process and discussions (Kemmis and McTaggart 2007; Turton 2018; Zembylas 2018). The various forms of critical, participatory engagement, together with the later student engagement, facilitated 'sense-making' and empowerment as evidenced in the content of conversations and new levels of confidence, increased participation and commitments to changes (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). This facilitated epistemic decoloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018); given that knowledges and ideologies could be challenged, and critical consciousness developed, ensuring that Africa was positioned at the centre in all discussions. Hence, the process gave voice to excluded groups in the process of knowledge co-production and de-universalised Western approaches, whilst foregrounding Africa and African approaches and knowledges (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

Actioning decoloniality

The dynamics of 'colonial alienation' arising from Eurocentric cultural and linguistic domination among ourselves required work on critical conscientisation about positionality of domination and oppression with respect to, race, class, gender, ability, and heteronormativity within the team and between us and students (wa Thiong'o 1986; Fanon 1967). The methods developed for this process therefore reflected an attitude of decoloniality in terms of consciousness of power dynamics and reflexivity, to which we were all to hold each other accountable (Fanon 1968; Maldonado-Torres 2017; wa Thiong'o 1987). Therefore, activities were designed to ensure that some voices did not have more space or power than others, and that those having less power would be enabled to speak, whilst remaining conscious of historical, structural and various oppressions associated with 'race', gender and age (Rasool 2018; Wa Thiong'o, 1987).

The workshop started with discussion and agreement on rules and norms for engagement in preparation for difficult conversations (Ramasubramanian, Sousa & Gonlin 2017). The first two days were composed of presentations by invited academics – external to the department and known for their work in the field of decoloniality -

followed by in-depth reflection and an interrogation of ideas. The goal of beginning with seminar-style presentations was to catalyze in-depth discussions around Eurocentrism, centring Africa, racism, positionality, race, class, gender and other dimensions of power, which are all relevant in the South African context for both educators and students. Peace Kiguwa, a critical psychology scholar and co-facilitator of the workshop presented on Decoloniality in pedagogy and the notion of a pedagogy of hope (Kiguwa and Segalo 2018). Mbazima Mathebane, a social work scholar, explored decoloniality in the context of social work education (Mathebane and Sekudu 2018). Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni presented his work on epistemic decoloniality, locating it in broader debates around decoloniality in Africa (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). Finally, the facilitating partner discussed interrogating ideology in social work knowledge and discourse, and the imperative for change in social work education (Harms-Smith and Nathane, 2018; Harms-Smith, 2020). The conscious selection of external presenters who either represented descriptively and substantively 'Black' Africans and/or those that had a decoloniality orientation in their writing, was critical to deconstructing existing power structures. In addition to the presentations, we used extracts from a powerful video on encounters with racism, 'The Colour of Fear' (Lee Wu Ha 1994), in the context of the USA as a generative 'code' in the Freirian (1972) sense to stimulate discussion. The context of the video offered a sufficient 'distance' to facilitate non-defensive engagement by almost all participants about racism.

Workshop content such as videos, readings, smaller breakaway groups and presentations facilitated reflection on the destructive and oppressive nature of racism for some, while for others, reflection on their complicity with and perpetuation of racism. Educators represented these various groupings, and there was a collective acknowledgement that these processes were painful and difficult. This process of conscientisation for all was crucial given the inferiorization and denigration perpetuated by structural and institutional racism. Engagement around complex and contested concepts meant that attention was not only paid to theoretical or knowledge based aspects but also emotional content or the 'affective domain' (Kiguwa 2017). In this way we were able to enhance a more in-depth level of participation and engagement with generative themes and 'discomforting' and affective content (Freire 1970; Boler and Zembylas 2003). Furthermore, less intimidating, smaller spaces allowed for those less comfortable - due to power asymmetries and multiple levels of oppression such as race and gender (Rasool 2020) - to have a 'voice' (Ramasubramanian et al. 2017). By working in small groups and encouraging pedagogical links between the personal and the political, we were able to move from intellectualising about 'race', to critical self-reflection and developing empathy (Zembylas 2018b; Rasool 2011).

Being embedded in a higher education system that is slow to change and decolonise, and that generally maintains the dominance of whiteness, maleness, and coloniality contributed to vacillating feelings among team members. Dissonance and tension existed between the process of decoloniality and the experiences of the team in their everyday real-world of the academy, especially for young and/or 'Black' and/or female

and/or queer staff members., and. The higher education context is still considered to be Western-centric, racist and alienating, in contrast with the approaches taken in this process which attempted to challenge power dynamics and purported a pedagogy of hope (Maldonado-Torres 2016; Wa Thiong'o 1987; Kemmis 2008; Freire 1970). In higher education, institutional racism is often reinforced through everyday racism (Essed 1991; Stevens 2003). Hence, it is common among both educators and students in such contexts, that the affective responses to these struggles included, at times, anger, frustration, demotivation, and/or distress (Cornell and Kessie 2016; Costandius et al 2018) since calls for decoloniality have been perceived as threatening to those in positions of power.

Moreover, interpretations of the imperative for and appropriate approaches to decoloniality were contested, and commitment to the process was varied (Langa 2017). Although the team included only four 'White' educators, the power differential in terms of 'race', security of employment, title, and location in the university hierarchy impacted on participation. Despite awareness of these structural dynamics, and attempts by facilitators to mitigate them, they understandably also played out at various times during the process through expressions of disagreement, confrontations, or silences among all participants. The process was not linear or unchallenged, it was fraught with dissonance, tension and discomfort. However, creating a 'communicative space' allowed participants to engage with deep-seated concerns and find ways to reach mutual understanding and consensus, despite power differentials.

The 'communicative space' enabled critical reflection and a revision of pedagogy and content. This dialogic approach utilised in the process is aligned with Biko's 'Black' consciousness emphasis on the objective of psychological liberation, which is to "counteract the unremitting assault on the 'Black' psyche through a complex of overt and subtle denigration and inferiorization that was the abiding apartheid ethic" (Cooper and Ratele 2019, 251). Nevertheless, some issues may have been too difficult to confront and were at times left unsaid or unresolved. Sometimes this led to inadequate engagement with comments that lacked insight or reproduced coloniality, denial of underlying ideological positions, or attempts at performativity (Ahmed 2004). It was important to recognise that the discomforting work that the process did entail elicited affective responses and that participants at times elected to remain silent or to avoid discussions, and so a balance between privacy and vulnerability had to be maintained.

This process was also constrained by various dynamics and practicalities associated with a busy higher education context, replete with timeframes and deadlines, and critical ethical considerations. In the context of a workplace, we found that deep introspection that might raise traumatic histories was not feasible. Hence, a focus on the collective, rather than the individual, was central to ensure the space remained "more open and fluid, as a self-constituting public sphere and to see those who participate as committed

to local action but with a wider emancipatory vision for their work” (Kemmis 2001, 97). Nevertheless, the process was dynamic and fluid, with recognition that complete consensus and resolution is not always possible in a ‘messy’ real life context (Bozalek and Biersteker 2010). All of these programmatic components proved powerful in stimulating the important critical and affective engagement, which resulted in ‘generative themes’ identified both during the workshop and in the later analysis and interpretation (Zembylas 2018; Boler and Zembylas 2003).

Thematic analysis and developing a ‘Template for engagement’ with decoloniality

The thematic analysis of the material generated during the intervention stage retained the character of collective praxis as a process of action-reflection-action. The outcome of this third phase was the development of domains and principles (see Fig. 2) to be utilised as a template for the next phase of reflection and change in the programme. These have become the critical elements for ongoing work towards decoloniality in the UJ social work education programme, but they can also be useful in higher education more broadly (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020).

Using inductive and deductive processes, the facilitating partner examined the contents of initial conversations, workshop content, subsequent meetings, large and small group discussions, feedback, and individual reflections. These provided rich data in the form of written summaries and reflections, written contributions by individual participants, minutes, and reflections. For the thematic content analysis, the FP coded the data and identified various categories, themes, and sub-themes (Creswell 2012). Through the fourth and fifth phases (discussed below) of critical and collective team participation through dialogue, these various themes were expanded and elaborated upon by the entire team and with student groups from all year levels in the undergraduate programme.

The process pointed to critical domains in which decoloniality work could occur (see Figure 2), while also pointing toward principles that provided the basis for transformative change (see Figure 2). These were included in a ‘Template for engagement’ that educators would refer to and consider with respect to their role, pedagogy and course content when working on decoloniality. (Harms-Smith and Rasool 2020). The domains incorporated specific *theorists*, consciousness-raising and development of the *educators* themselves; social work education delivery through exploring *pedagogy*, understanding the realities of the *learners’* context and what they bring; the overall *content* of courses; the area of *research and discourse*, and critically the *context*, which either enables or disables decoloniality. The principles that emerged are the specific aspects that need to be considered in developing course content, which assisted in creating a consensus of understanding of the core concepts that would be introduced throughout the curriculum in working towards decoloniality. These principles are: to ensure that *Africa* is at the centre of the programme; to pay attention to and enable

confrontation of *power dynamics*, to consider the intersections of '*race*', *class*, and *gender*; to *foreground structural issues* rather than individualising social problems; to develop *critical conscientisation* among individuals, groups and in society as a whole; to *raise the voices* of the marginalised; and a living *Ubuntu*⁷. These emerging principles emerged from the process of engagement with both staff and students, and the communicative space enabled consensus about the importance of these principles, however these can evolve. Using this template for engagement towards decoloniality, we then considered how the curriculum could be revised in each of the modules.

INSERT FIGURE TWO

Figure Two: Template for engagement towards decoloniality

Reflection and action planning

The fourth phase included various and repeated small group discussions to consider how best to incorporate the principles and domains identified during the process of work towards decoloniality . Three to four educators teaching within the same student year group or the within the same substantive curriculum area across all year levels met at numerous times over six months to engage in critical conversations around the various modules with the FP and co-leader.

Although individually responsible for their own courses, this stage offered educators an opportunity to engage collaboratively and collectively to re-examine and plan course modules. In this way, the broader group consciousness that had evolved was brought to bear on the programme, rather than this being done individually. Revisions, changes, and commitments made with respect to the various domains and principles contained in the template for engagement - such as pedagogical practices, critical reflections, personal growth and development strategies, Africa-centredness, structural dynamics, critical conscientisation and inclusion of 'Black' African theorists - were also noted for future reflection, evaluation, and research, and uploaded onto the common research repository in the form of a Google shared drive accessible to everyone that had participated. Colleagues were able to share ideas and give critical feedback on how they

⁷ (2014, p.212) The philosophy of Ubuntu is “anchored on the ethical principle of the promotion of life through mutual concern, care and sharing between and among human beings as well as with the wider environment of which the human being is a part.” (Ramose 2014, 212)

could disengage with or 'delink' from unhelpful knowledge systems and practices and creatively reimagine how modules might look (Mignolo 2007).

This phase identified a need for changing the tone and energy in the entire academic programme and learning context by transforming the entry stage of the curriculum to lay the foundation for decoloniality as an intentional process. For this reason, an early-stage module was re-designed to embed decoloniality as philosophy, pedagogy, and practice at its core and wholistically. We (the authors) worked on redesigning this module so that each of the seven thematic principles (ref the second diagram) form the course content and are taught in detail. However, it was not only curriculum content that was changed, but also the pedagogical approach to teaching and learning to enable education as having liberatory objectives; engaging students to enable dissolution of asymmetrical power relationships; centring Africa in theoretical content and discussion; and the enabling of confident expression of voice by students. This re-imagined course now aims to critically raise consciousness in students and empower them to engage with the successive modules in the curriculum in a critical and reflective way. Through this exposure, it is hoped that students will be enabled to break from being subjects of coloniality in the curriculum to becoming actors and agents in critical engagement with structures of oppression and ongoing coloniality (Burman 2016).

This critical reflective and action planning phase was also complex as it required willingness to experience discomfort through critical communication around course development which is generally managed individually, not collectively. This again challenged hierarchical power relationships within the group, building on what was enabled through earlier phases of the process. Moreover, critical peer reflection and discussion increased the integration of various ideas to ensure substantive planned change and improve consistency and coherence over the entire programme. This phase also enabled deep reflection and preparation for empowering engagement with students in programme design and review.

Student Participation

Engaging students' voices in work towards decoloniality was crucial given their role as primary stakeholders in the education system and the demands of the #FeesmustFall movement (Langa 2017). The interactive and participatory engagement of students is critical to reflect a true attitude of decoloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2017) as it redresses asymmetrical power relationships. We recruited ten students from each year level into a collaborative consultation around decoloniality which was in the form of two workshops of two-days each. Some alumni were included in the facilitation of the process to address issues of power asymmetry between students and educators.

The purpose of the first workshop was to provide space for students to interrogate, explore and articulate their views on decoloniality. In the second day, work towards

critical conscientisation occurred through critical interrogation of the seven thematic principles (See Figure Two). Critical feedback was elicited from students about courses and broader curriculum content in the light of the seven principles in order to make recommendations towards decoloniality of the curriculum. The involvement of students from all year levels enabled participants to hold educators accountable to decoloniality through the ethos and meaning of the principles as they attend courses in coming years. This process is ongoing and not yet fully analysed.

Lessons learned

We, together with many members of the department team, expressly recognise that the process of work towards decoloniality has just begun. The processes described here are our first coordinated steps towards unlearning, re-learning, and engaging in on-going engagement and reflection for moving toward decoloniality in a higher education context. Creating a communicative space for further engagement around coloniality and other forms of oppression and inequality is a valuable tool that can be used in any learning space, within any department, university, educational context, and even expanded more broadly in society.

It is clear that working towards decoloniality is complicated, muddy and difficult, as it is an unsettling and discomfoting process that requires challenging ways of relating, thinking, being and doing. It necessitates the willingness of those who embark on this process to participate in critical self-reflection and challenge current and previous power dynamics, positionalities, hegemonies, discourses, curricula, pedagogies, and practices. Moreover, a deep commitment is needed among educators to cultivate and maintain ongoing critical reflexivity, ensuring changes in content and pedagogical practices, and an ongoing consciousness around work towards decoloniality.

What became particularly evident was that, whilst as educators we had autonomy and agency to enact curriculum content and to some extent pedagogy, we are steeped in a system since coloniality of power, knowledge, and being remained ongoing within structures of higher education and the broader South African context (Maldonado Torres 2017). Hence, work on decoloniality is constrained by systemic and contextual factors in higher education, itself an expression of power and privilege. Dealing with the limitations of entrenched and ongoing coloniality, poverty, inequality, gender discrimination and violence in the overarching systems within which we work and 'struggle' remains an obstacle. Whilst the imperative for decoloniality is evident for some, there is also resistance, muting, and side-lining because of how processes of decoloniality are aimed at disrupting and challenging systems and processes at structural levels (Heleta 2016; Carollisen et al 2017).

A significant obstacle to decoloniality remains the "neoliberal institutional commitments to diversity and/or affirmative action (which) belie post-colonial higher educational

institutions' support for, and maintenance of, the social reproduction of 'White' hegemony in structural, pedagogical, and knowledge generation practices" (Asher 2009 cited by Lykes, Lloyd and Nicholson 2018, 408). Despite the various contextual and structural constraints, the power of this process itself in giving voice to those marginalised, even in a contained space, initiates a process of further disruption of coloniality of power, being and knowledge (Quijano 2007). The methodology of critical participatory action research was particularly useful in redressing power dynamics and facilitating creative options for involvement in less hierarchical ways. The process itself enacted less hierarchical pedagogies, centred African and decentred Western Eurocentric methods and knowledges, and worked towards critical conscientisation. People who experienced powerlessness were able to take leading roles and re-define the dynamics of relationships and spaces. This ongoing work towards decoloniality has significant potential for achieving a deeper transformation in the programme and therefore among all those who engage in it as educators and students. We hope it will set the stage for a new way of living decoloniality in South Africa and possibly beyond. Aluta Continua!

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FIGURE ONE

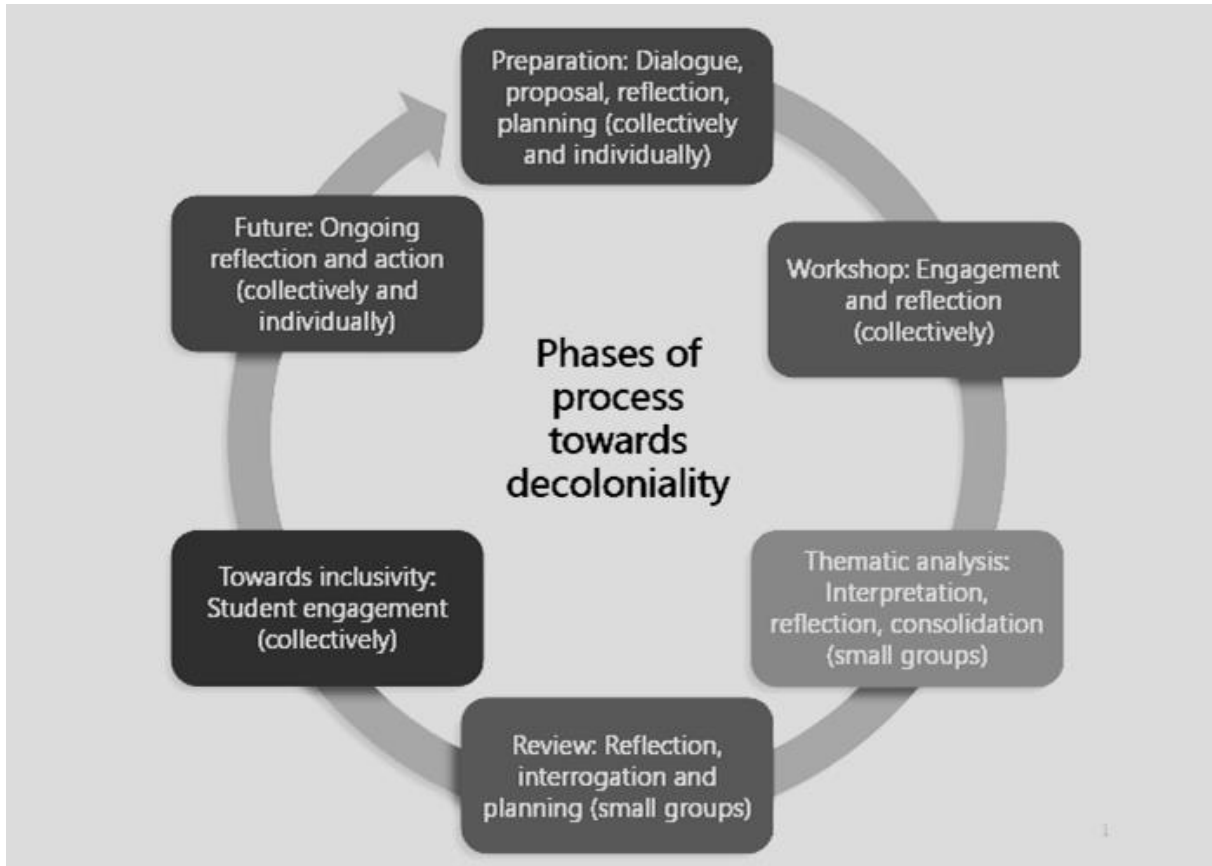


FIGURE TWO

