Reader's Theatre: A Critical Lens for Engaging Psychology Students with Socio-Political Reality

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Abstract: Thanks to the intersection of colonialism, late capitalism and neoliberalism, Western medico-scientific approaches dominate psychological training and practice in the global South. Such approaches position patients as passive, encouraging clinicians to impose universalised assumptions in the psychotherapeutic space. Western approaches also undermine any acknowledgement of the socio-cultural, political, and economic causes of distress - such as racism, sexism, and engineered inequality - so prevalent in multicultural and resource-constricted contexts. Taking a transformational and decolonial stance, there is an urgency to develop alternative approaches to address this neglect. In response, this study employs an action research design - with pre- and post-strategy questionnaires and self-study assignments – and explores the usefulness of reader's theatre for developing awareness of the impact of taken-for-granted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values on subjectivity. Findings reflect that through this strategy students can acknowledge how experiences that do not correspond to socio-politically endorsed discourses lead to feelings of anger and resentment for some, as well as shame and humiliation for others. Employing reader's theatre may, therefore, be an important step toward the development of clinicians empowered to work in a respectful and socially just manner with the complexities of distress in the global South.

Keywords: Colonialism, Critical pedagogy, Late capitalism, Neoliberalism, Social unconscious, Transformation and decolonisation of higher education

1. Introduction

The intersection of colonialism, late capitalism, and neoliberalism has significantly influenced many aspects of higher education, including psychological training and practice (Hook, 2001). As many higher education institutions in the global South were founded during periods of colonial domination, they frequently prioritised the agendas of colonial powers over the needs of indigenous communities (Long, 2016). This has resulted in the privileging of Western epistemologies and methodologies at the expense of local knowledge and meaning making systems (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Today, the intersection of late capitalism and neoliberalism has further exacerbated marginalisation in the global South (Hlatshwayo, 2022). For example, in the pursuit of profit and efficiency, there has been a tendency to prioritise medico-scientific models of psychology over more holistic and community-based approaches (Holdstock, 2013). As a result, educators, students, and clinicians - as academic citizens - often engage with the complexities of distress solely in terms of internal defensive operations, negative automatic thoughts, and genetic predispositions (Auld, 2023). This has led to the neglect of socio-cultural, political, and economic factors, all of which can be crucial for understanding and addressing suffering in diverse contexts (Layton, 2007). This neglect is disturbing, especially considering that as long ago as 1989, numerous South African scholars - such as Butchart and Seedat (1990), Foster (1999), Gibson (1989), Mohutsioa-Makhudu (1989), and Swartz and Levett (1989) - highlighted the profound and lasting effects of political oppression, economic inequality, and apartheid on subjectivity.

Ultimately, the prioritisation of Western medico-scientific approaches represents a missed opportunity to see people as active, purposeful agents, who create meaning and make choices in their lives, while their subjectivity is both restrained and contained by their social embeddedness. Transforming and decolonising psychological education, therefore, entails incorporating critical approaches which facilitate the exploration of entrenched, taken-for-granted, socio-cultural, political, and economic discourses (Boyle, 2022, Layton, 2007). In this study, reader's theatre is put forward as one such approach. It is hoped that this strategy will enrich psychological education, fostering a more comprehensive grasp of human experiences across diverse cultural landscapes.

The paper begins with an overview of the need to transform and decolonise psychological education. Next, the group psychoanalytic concept of the 'social unconscious' is discussed. This is followed by an exploration of the utility of reader's theatre as a means of enabling students to become aware of the impact of accepted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values on subjectivity. Finally, a study is put forward to illustrate how, by portraying a character in a play, students have the potential to gain an embodied understanding of embedded socio-cultural, political, and economic discourses operating at an unconscious level.

2. The Imperative to Transform and Decolonise Psychological Education

Scholars of critical theory - such as Butler (1990), Frosh (1999), Grosfoguel (2009), and Haraway (1988) - emphasise how social structures can dominate and oppress. For example, Butler (1990) extends critical theory by exploring intersectionality. In doing so she examines how systems of inequality related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, class, and other forms of discrimination, intersect to produce unique effects. Similarly, Haraway (1988) argues against the idea of disembodied subjectivity, where objectivity and neutrality are considered ideal, and instead promotes the concept of embodied subjectivity. Here, Haraway challenges us – as academic citizens - to consider how our own positions within social discourses shape our observations. Grosfoguel (2009) also asserts that our subjectivity is confined by existing socio-political power relations and hierarchies, while Frosh (1999) suggests that our positions within these hierarchies determines the experiences available to us. From these scholars' work, therefore, we come to understand the necessity for academic citizens to critically examine these dynamics in order to challenge and transform oppressive systems.

Scholars in the global South - such as Lobban (2013) and Swartz (1989) - emphasise the need to address structural inequalities and systemic injustices in the wake of colonialism. For example, Lobban (2013) calls on educators to facilitate the exploration of how colonial legacies, and other forms of oppression, continue to shape identities in the here and now. In order to address these legacies, as well as transform and decolonise psychological education, pedagogical strategies need to explore how systems of privilege and power operate at both personal and structural levels, and how individuals navigate and resist these systems (Swart, 2013). For, as Hopper (1996) explains, in terms of psychological practice, a clinician who is unaware of the constraints of social facts and forces will be insensitive to their unconscious recreation within the psychotherapeutic space.

In the global South, Western medico-scientific approaches to psychological treatment have continued to dominate, often marginalising indigenous forms of healing that may be more accessible and culturally appropriate for the majority (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, Chiodo et al., 2014, Long, 2016). Traditional healing practices, spirituality, and community support systems are frequently overlooked or stigmatised in favour of Western interventions (Boyle, 2022, Bracken et al., 2016). Additionally, the influence of global pharmaceutical corporations promotes a focus on symptom management through medication, ignoring any underlying socio-cultural, political, and economic impacts on mental health and well-being. It is crucial, therefore, to explore how intertwined socio-political power relations perpetuate colonial legacies and influence subjective reality.

In my previous research on decolonising and transforming psychological education (Auld, 2022b, Auld, 2022c, Auld, 2022a, Auld, 2023), I emphasise the group psychoanalytic concept of the 'social unconscious' to help students understand how their deeply ingrained attitudes and values are rooted in their cultural and societal contexts. We will now further explore this concept in terms of its usefulness within the transformation and decolonisation of psychological education.

3. The Social Unconscious

Scholars working with the concept of the social unconscious - such as Foulkes (2018), Hopper (1996), Volkan (2001), Dalal (1998), and Weinberg (2007) - have drawn from Fromm (2001), who integrates Freud's theory of the unconscious within the framework of Marxist philosophy to emphasise the fundamentally social nature of humanity. In other words, Fromm points out that while individuals believe their thoughts shape their social existence, the reality is that their social existence shapes their thoughts. In arriving at this conclusion, Fromm builds on Freud's idea of an unconscious shaped by repression and proposes that individuals repress not only parts of themselves, but also elements that society unconsciously represses.

Contemporary scholars such as Dalal (1998), Stacey (2003), and Hopper and Weinberg (2011), are influenced by the work of social psychologists like Mead (2015) and Elias (2001) as well as advancements in relational models of psychoanalysis (see for example, Mitchell (1988), Ogden (2018), and Stern (2004)). Highlighting salient factors in these scholars' work, Mead (2015) suggests that individuals shape their lives through a continuous process of gesture and response. Put another way, both our conscious and unconscious lives are continually shaped and influenced by our interactions with others. Consequently, even our most private thoughts are socially formed. Similarly, Elias (2001) supports the idea that individuals are deeply embedded in their cultural contexts. Particularly relevant is Elias's argument that individuals are continually constrained by the demands of their social environment and the need to conform and belong. He argues that identity is not based on instinctual elements like greed or envy, but rather on socially constructed feelings such as shame and embarrassment. These constraints are linked to power structures and develop into what Elias terms the social 'habitus' of specific

groups and cultures, forming the foundation for individual identities. It is not feasible, therefore, to talk about an independent 'I' or 'we' – they are merely different facets of one entity.

Group analytical theorists also emphasise a link between external and internal experiences. Dalal (1998), for example, suggests that we are born into environments with pre-existing socially formed ideas about what is 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong'. Consequently, our anxiety stems from socially formed internal fantasies based on perceived values. These value judgements arise from the social environment, permeate our thoughts, experiences, and language, forming the basis of our deepest psyche. As a result, from a group analytic perspective, we defend ourselves against anxiety arising from abandonment, ostracism, and helplessness in the face of hegemonic socio-political attitudes, values, and norms. Defense mechanisms such as denial, projection, and splitting are, therefore, seen to be constructed not only to protect us internally, but also to keep us intact as a social entity and as individuals within our social group (Jaques et al., 1955, Menzies-Lyth, 1992). Feelings such as shame, disgust, and disdain are, therefore, developed to maintain group safety. Put another way, to avoid exclusion, individuals often accept socially valued traits, and defensively project or repress unwanted aspects of themselves. In this way, society acts as a repressive force, with the social unconscious shaping our perceptions of gender roles, racial stereotypes, and societal expectations of success.

Going further, Weinberg (2007) highlights the traumagenic nature of the social unconscious by drawing on Volkan's (2001) concept of 'chosen trauma' - unresolved psychological representations of a group's shared trauma related to loss. These overwhelming traumas are repressed and denied, lying dormant within the group until reactivated by new threats. This reactivation causes old patterns of conflict response to resurface in the face of the new threat, leading to a compounded sense of distress. For example, the reactivation of chosen trauma can be seen in the enduring impact of apartheid. During apartheid, black South Africans were subjected to widespread oppression, violence, and systemic disenfranchisement, including forced removals, limited access to quality education, economic exploitation, and severe restrictions on personal freedoms (Swart, 2013). Such trauma may be reactivated in contemporary struggles for equality and justice, serving as a powerful reminder of past injustices. The reactivation of such a chosen trauma can have both constructive and destructive consequences on individuals, adding to the complexity of distress experienced in the global South. For example, on one hand, the reactivation of the chosen trauma can fuel solidarity and collective action aimed at overcoming the residual effects of apartheid. However, on the other, it can also lead to renewed tensions and conflicts at both the individual and at the group level, especially when current socio-political conditions exacerbate feelings of injustice and marginalisation.

Drawing these points together, the concept of the social unconscious has the potential to be a powerful tool in highlighting how we internalise, replicate, and reinforce taken-for-granted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values impacting our subjectivity and the meaning we ascribe to our experiences (Dalal, 1998). This insight may prove crucial for psychological education, as awareness of the social unconscious, and the legacy of chosen trauma, could help us understand how our social milieu shapes our feelings, behaviour, and interactions in profound and nuanced ways. To create culturally informed psychological education, therefore, we need transformational and decolonial approaches to counter the domination of Western medico-scientific approaches. In this regard, pedagogical strategies that develop awareness of the social unconscious may be useful in helping students explore the impact of taken-for-granted socio-cultural, political, and economic discourses, and the transgenerational legacy of massive trauma.

4. Drama-Based Pedagogy

Drama-based pedagogy encompasses various drama activities such as role-play, writing-in-role, improvisation, reader's theatre, creative drama, process drama, and tableau (Auld, 2023). Unlike traditional neoliberal pedagogical approaches focused on performance outcomes, drama-based pedagogy emphasises the use of drama activities to facilitate creative learning experiences (Ranzau, 2016). As opposed to conventional methods – such as desk based lectures, lecturer prescribed reading, rote memorisation, and written formative and summative assessments (Freire and Ramos, 1970) - drama-based pedagogy attempts to foster a more dynamic learning environment, with the hope of inspiring deeper student awareness, engagement, and understanding (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003, Burke, 2013, Ranzau, 2016, Wagner, 1976, Heathcote, 2004).

As drama-based pedagogy is grounded in a constructivist framework, it draws from the theories of Dewey (1938) and Piaget (1980). Building on these constructivist foundations, Bolton (1995) emphasises that the effectiveness of drama-based pedagogy lies beyond mere re-enactment tasks. Drama-based pedagogy's transformative potential lies in activities which allow students to step outside their own ethnocentric worldview and immerse themselves in the taken-for-granted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values of the characters they depict

(see Auld, 2023). This immersion enables students to distance themselves from their own perspective and embody situations differently. By doing so, students can step into new points of view in a non-threatening way, reducing defensiveness while examining contentious socio-political issues such as racism, poverty, gender discrimination, unfair labour practices, lack of access to health care, water, food, and social security (Alkin and Christie, 2002, Auld, 2023, Sonn et al., 2013).

Elaborating, Bolton (1995) suggests that through drama-based pedagogy, students can be challenged to reflect on ingrained ways of understanding, knowing, and being within a specific community at a specific moment in time. Similarly, Stern (2004) sees identity as not solely defined by actions, but also by the meaning attributed to those actions within the context in which they occur. Here, Bolton and Stern's thoughts give us the opportunity to open a door to students becoming aware of the social unconscious. To elaborate, the drama-based pedagogical strategy used in this study utilises the drama activity of reader's theatre. This strategy sees students take on the persona of a character in a play, embodying socio-political discourses which may be similar or dis-similar to their own taken-for-granted world view. Post-production students have an opportunity to engage in self-study, reflecting on the significance of their character's actions both within the context of the play, and when compared with their own personal outlooks. Further, following self-study, educator and students collaboratively create a 'third space' (Gutierrez, 2008) where they combine their insights, bringing greater awareness and understanding of self and other. In this collaborative environment, the diverse cultural backgrounds, discourses, and knowledge of both educator and students can serve as further resources for developing awareness of the impact of taken-for-granted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values on identity.

5. Procedure

To integrate drama-activities into psychological education, the following steps can serve as a guide:

1. Pre-strategy questionnaire

During orientation to their postgraduate psychology programme, students are invited to voluntarily take part in an anonymous pre-strategy questionnaire to determine their receptiveness to engaging with reader's theatre. The questionnaire contains both open and closed questions, exploring the students' thoughts on the utility of reader's theatre to their development as clinicians within the context of the global South.

2. Resources

Students submit journal articles and texts relating to the development and socio-political background of drama activities within their community to the educator. The educator takes the role of facilitator of the strategy. The facilitator then distributes the readings to the class. These readings form the strategy's core textual resources.

3. Initial class discussion

After reading the textual resources, students and facilitator begin by discussing their thoughts on the relationship between drama activities and their socio-political milieu.

4. Reader's theatre

The facilitator gives the class scripts of a short play. Students decide their roles among themselves. Students sit in a circle and read through the play together.

5. Play discussion

Students then discuss with the facilitator their ideas about the socio-political context of each role with the aim of subsequently performing the play in a communal space on campus.

6. Further class discussion

Following the performance, students and facilitator return to the classroom and engage in discussions about how the play and the roles they portrayed impacted them.

7. Post-strategy questionnaire

After the series of discussions, students engage with a post-strategy questionnaire, revisiting their thoughts on the utility of drama activities to their development as clinicians within the context of the global South.

8. Self-study activity

Students are then tasked with writing a reflective essay exploring any impact the strategy may have had on their understanding of self and other.

9. Final class discussion

Returning to the classroom, students share and discuss their reflective essays, comparing insights gained and challenges experienced.

6. Results

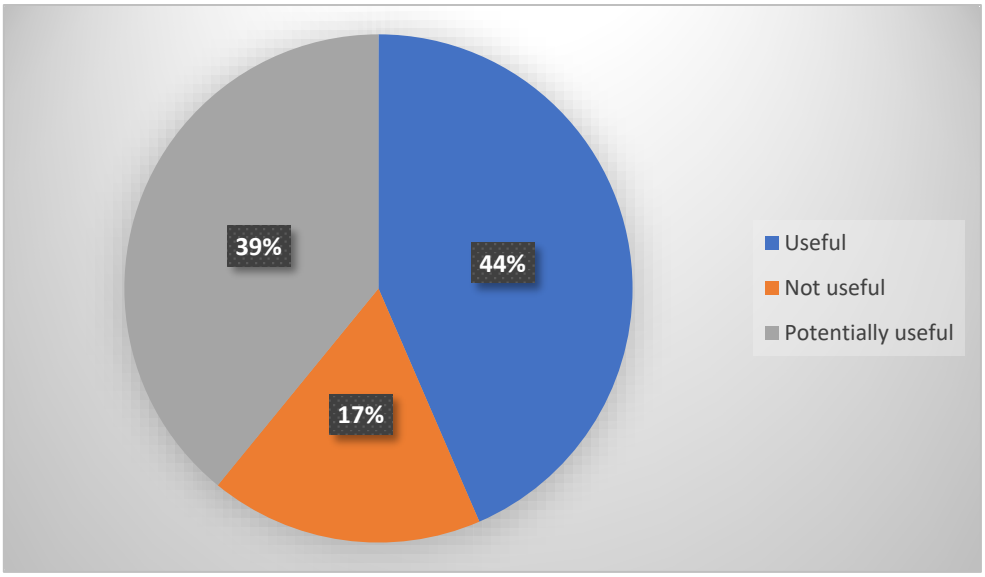

Chart 1: Pre-strategy - students' perceptions of the utility of reader's theatre

Twenty-three students engaged with the pre-strategy questionnaire. Results indicated that initially the minority of students (44%) felt that reader's theatre would be useful to their development as clinicians within the context of the global South.

Examples of verbatim feedback from students who felt reader's theatre would be of assistance included:

(i): "Might help with understanding characters and human emotions."

(ii). "I feel it might get us to start thinking about what it is like to be another person."

Examples of verbatim feedback from students who felt that the strategy would not be of assistance included:

(i): "I personally don't see the usefulness of a play as it's not what I am studying."

(ii): "To me, it does not involve helping each other or understanding another person and their situation."

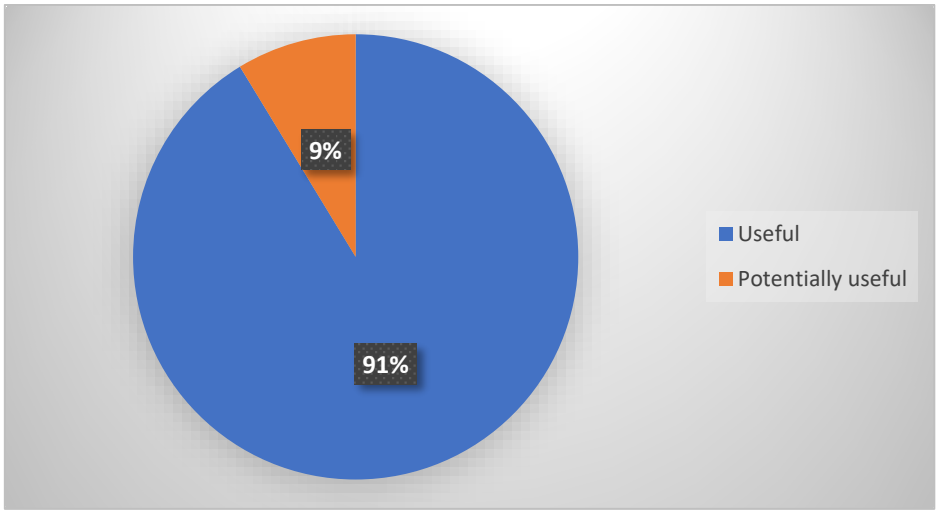

Chart 2: Post-strategy - students' perceptions of the utility of reader's theatre

All twenty-three students engaged with the post-strategy questionnaire. Results indicated that after engaging with the strategy the majority students (91%) now felt that there was utility in engaging with reader's theatre to their development as clinicians. This was a significant difference from the pre-strategy results.

Examples of verbatim feedback as to why students now felt reader's theatre could be of use included:

(i): "It allows the person to put him or her in the clients' shoes as well as see it from their perspectives to be able to understand their emotions and feelings."

(ii): "It forced to me take on the persona and characteristics of my character, allowing me to see different perspectives."

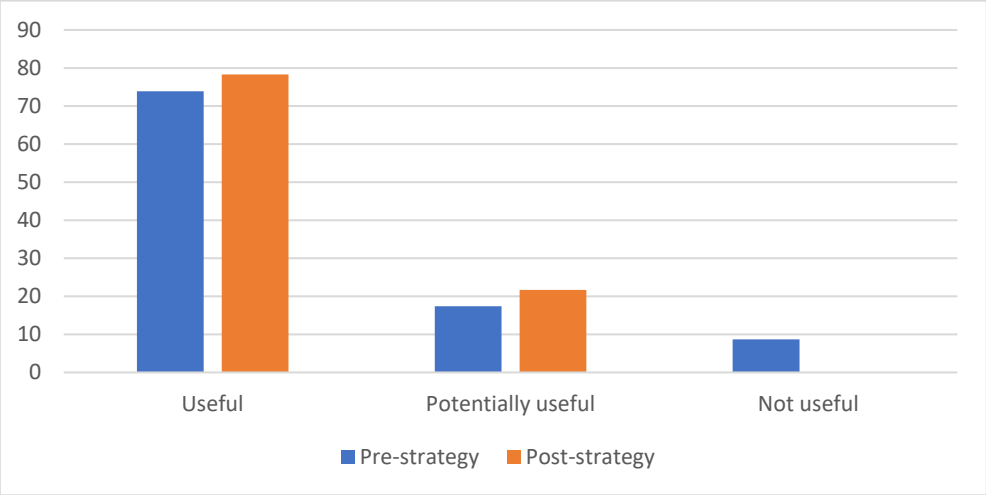

Chart 3: Pre- vs post-strategy - students' perceptions of benefit of understanding the socio-political context of the play

While many students felt that the socio-political context of the play they were engaging with was important to their study of psychology, it is significant to note that while 9% felt it was irrelevant pre-strategy, no students felt it was irrelevant post-strategy.

Some examples of verbatim feedback as to why students felt the socio-political context of the play could be useful to their study of psychology included:

(i): "The context of the play highlights different societal issues and allows a psychology student a first-hand experience into these issues and how they are represented in real life. Context always matters."

(ii): "Having to understand the context of the play is important as we have to look at things in different perspectives and understand different situations and unravel the scenarios just as you would if a person was in a session with you."

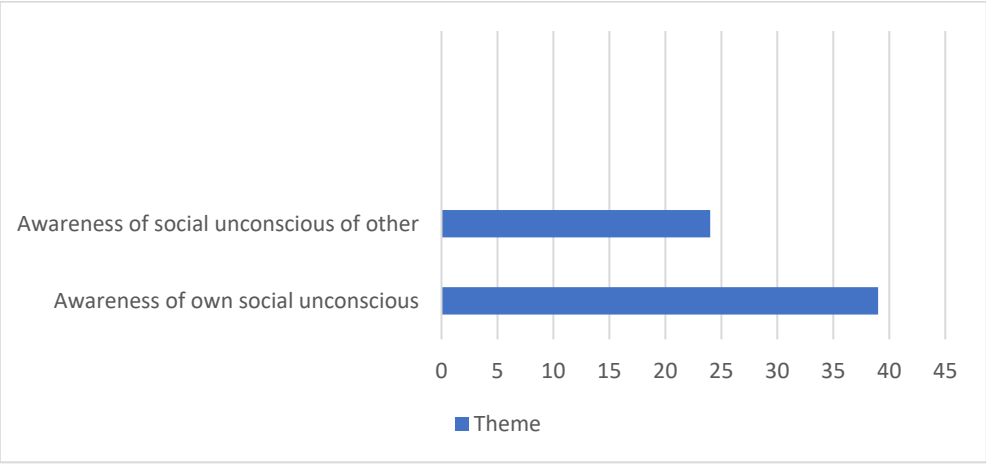

Chart 4: Post-strategy - themes occurring in the students' self-studies

Some verbatim examples of the theme "Awareness of social unconscious of other" occurring in the students' self -studies were:

(i). "The contrast between my beliefs and those of, what I would say is the majority of people around me, underscored the tension between societal expectations and personal convictions."

(ii). "This insight highlighted the intricate relationship between individual identity and social context, shedding light on the complexities of human behaviour."

Some verbatim examples of the theme "Awareness of the social unconscious of self" occurring in the students' self-studies were:

(i). "This play taught me to acknowledge my own personal biases and has enlightened me on my journey of self-reflection."

(ii). "It allowed me to be placed in someone else's shoes and to see things from their perspective and not just my own."

7. Discussion

Anecdotally, as a lecturer in a department of psychology in the global South, I have become increasingly aware of the dominance of medico-scientific approaches to psychology over holistic approaches (Holdstock, 2013). Many universities no longer offer community psychology as a module, preferring to promote courses such as human development or psychopathology. Consequently, educators, students, and clinicians often address the complexities of distress primarily through internal defense mechanisms, negative automatic thoughts, and genetic predispositions (Auld, 2023). From a transformational and decolonial perspective a medico-scientific focus neglects consideration of the socio-cultural, political, and economic factors so crucial for understanding the complexity of suffering in multicultural and resource-constricted contexts. This point was driven home when student voices demanded to be heard in the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall protests of 2015 and 2016 (Costandius et al., 2018, Booysen, 2016). Here, South African students highlighted that colonial legacies are still present in higher education post-apartheid. Being cognisant of student voices and scholarly debate, therefore, we need to examine how systems of inequality intersect (Butler, 1990). Added to this, we also need to be mindful of how our social positions' influence our observations (Haraway, 1988), and how socio-political power relations and hierarchies confine our subjectivity and experiences (Grosfoguel, 2009, Frosh, 2018). Consequently, as scholars such as Butler (1990), Frosh (1999), Grosfoguel (2009), Haraway (1988), Hlatshwayo (2022), Lobban (2013) and Swartz (1989) have suggested, we need to address colonial legacies and systemic injustices by exploring privilege and power dynamics in education, and, as educators, help our students navigate and resist oppressive structures. In other words, decolonising psychological education requires incorporating critical approaches to counter colonial legacies. Therefore, we need to advocate for pedagogical strategies that explore privilege and power systems and their impact on identity. Responding to this call, reader's theatre was put forward in this study in an attempt to enrich psychological education by fostering awareness of taken-for-granted socio-political influences on subjectivity - what group psychoanalytic scholars such as Fromm (2001), Foulkes (2018), Hopper (1996), Volkan (2001), Dalal (1998), and Weinberg (2007) have termed the 'social unconscious'.

Figure 1: Students engaging in reader's theatre during orientation (Auld, 2024)

Based on the work of these scholars, and my anecdotal observations, I employed reader's theatre as a critical pedagogical strategy during orientation to my students' postgraduate psychology programme. Initially students were unsure of the utility of the strategy to their psychological education or future practice. In fact, most felt that reader's theatre was irrelevant to the work of clinicians in the global South. This finding was perhaps reflective of the impact of the intersection of colonialism, late-capitalism, and neoliberalism in higher education. For example, the following verbatim remark perhaps conveys the dominance of a medico-scientific understanding of identity most clearly: "*I personally don't see the usefulness of a play as it's not what I am studying.*" However, after engaging in class discussions, actively finding and sharing resources, as well as undertaking reader's theatre, students were able to gain insight into the impact of taken-for-granted attitudes, norms, and values on the shaping of identity. An example of this insight into the social unconscious is highlighted the following verbatim remark: "*It allowed me to be placed in someone else's shoes and to see things from their perspective and not just my own*." This awareness enabled students to begin to acknowledge the complexity of identity and subjectivity.

As a critical pedagogical strategy, therefore, reader's theatre enabled students to reflect on the impact of the historical, traumatogenic, defensive, and political aspects of the social unconscious. In the safety of the classroom and with the support of the educator and peers, they were able to obtain an embodied sense of how we internalise and replicate socio-political norms, influencing our subjectivity and experiences (Dalal, 1998). This understanding is crucial not only for psychological education but for higher education in general, emphasising the need for transformational and decolonial approaches to counter the dominance of Western scientific models. Pedagogical strategies that develop awareness of the social unconscious can, therefore, help students explore the impact of socio-cultural, political, and economic discourses, as well as the transgenerational legacy of trauma. This approach can create culturally informed psychological education, enhancing understanding of how social milieus shape feelings, behaviour, and interactions (Stern, 2004).

8. Conclusion

Findings indicate that reader's theatre can help students recognise how experiences deviating from socio-politically endorsed discourses can evoke emotions such as anger, hatred, and resentment for some, and shame, embarrassment, and humiliation for others (Alkin and Christie, 2002, Auld, 2023, Sonn et al., 2013). Using reader's theatre can, thus, be a crucial step in cultivating clinicians who are equipped to work respectfully and justly with the complexities of distress in the global South.

Recommendations for future research include, *firstly*, exploring the impact of this critical pedagogical strategy on the remainder of the postgraduate psychology programme. In other words, given reader's theatre was employed during orientation, how do students subsequently engage with more traditionally medico-scientific modules - such as developmental psychology, research methodology, psychological assessments, and psychopathology – which tend to separate the mind from the body, the individual from the social group, and remove values, ethics, and power interests from theory and practice (Boyle, 2022)? *Secondly*, do more traditional medico-scientific modules change from the impact of students who are aware of the influence of taken-for-granted socio-political attitudes, norms, and values on the resources used, and the knowledge produced in these modules? *Thirdly*, would repeating reader's theatre with the same cohort of students at the end of their postgraduate psychology programme aid in their awareness and understanding of the impact of taken-for-granted attitudes, norms, and values on subjectivity? *Fourthly*, would incorporating reader's theatre into the curricula of postgraduate psychological education - as well as other professional postgraduate qualifications - further the transformational and decolonial agenda by highlighting the importance of collaboration and context in professional practice? Incorporating theatre into the curricula could include activities such as exploring the background and function of local theatre, taking students to the performance of a socio-politically rich play, reflecting and discussing insights gained from this experience, undertaking role-plays of socio-politically contentious aspects of the play (see Auld, 2023 for a more detailed discussion of these activities). It is hoped that examining these further applications will be an important step toward the development of professionals empowered to work in a respectful and socially just manner with the complexities of life in the global South.

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