



Colonial methodologies: a discourse analysis of medical students' talk about psychology

Arianna Tello Fadda  and Daniella Rafaely

Abstract

The historical tension between the natural and social sciences, and the associated discourses of superiority and inferiority, remains prevalent today in academia and practice. This study analyses the discourses that medical students at a South African university employ in their talk about psychology. The analysis demonstrates the function of these discourses and locates them within historical debates surrounding the social and natural sciences. More importantly, it identifies how psychology is locked into Eurocentric assumptions of rigour and empiricism. We use discursive psychology to examine five online discussion board entries detailing medical students' understanding of psychology. The findings suggest that definitions of psychology subvert the discipline under the guise of bolstering its value in ways that are comparable to colonial methodologies, thereby reconstituting and reinforcing historical notions of othering in social scientific discourses. This research therefore contributes to debates on the current role and position of psychology in South Africa and helps to destabilise dominant scientific discourses within and against which psychology is enacted in the academy. Through a critical interrogation of such hegemony, this study aims to forge new ways of doing and thinking psychology in South Africa.

Keywords

Colonial methodologies, discursive psychology, medical students, psychology, social sciences

Contemporary psychology has long struggled to position itself within the academy. Its alliance with objectivist and positivist methodologies situates it as part of the natural sciences (Painter

Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Arianna Tello Fadda, Department of Psychology, School of Human and Community Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Private Bag 3, WITS, Johannesburg 2050, South Africa.

Email: ariannafadda8@gmail.com

et al., 2006), while its rather ethereal subject matter positions it firmly within the social sciences (Rose, 1989). This ‘identity crisis’ is not, however, a purely semantic matter: the increased recognition and legitimacy afforded to the natural sciences, along with material benefits including inflated funding budgets, well-resourced departments, and prioritisation of research agendas, position them as a sought-after academic location (Shapin, 2022). In its attempt to access these increased gains, both material and ideological, found in the natural sciences, psychology has allied itself to the hard scientism of the West (Durrheim & Mokeki, 1997; Pérez-Álvarez, 2018), uncritically reproducing its knowledge as ‘self-evident, natural and trans-historical’ (Louw, 2002, p. 2). However, critical historiographies (e.g., Hook, 2004) have argued that psychology’s subject matter – human subjectivity (Danziger, 1999) – is reflexively co-created through the discipline itself (Richards, 1996) which precludes it from enjoying its status as a purely natural science.

Psychology’s crisis is located within a larger historical tension between the natural and social sciences in the academy (Gergen, 1973; Schlenker, 1974). The notion of demarcation in the sciences where specific criteria are used to measure a discipline’s ‘scientific’ status is often in the public interest, particularly in the field of health, in so far as there remains a need for best practice (Fernández Hermida, 2020). Nevertheless, the natural and social sciences are often polarised on a ‘hard-soft’ science continuum (Cassell, 2002; Shapin, 2022; Storer, 1966), the by-product of which is that a single set of criteria is applied to determine the position of a particular discipline, treating ‘science’ itself as an objective truth (Mascolo, 2016). For instance, ‘hard’ sciences have been defined by the scientific method, high predictive power, reproducibility, and impersonality (Fernández Hermida, 2020; Mascolo, 2016; Munro & Munro, 2014; Storer, 1966), all of which have become synonymous with prestige (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018). ‘Soft’ sciences, meanwhile, are antithetically produced as concerned with commonsense knowledge pervaded by scholarly dissent and the absence of predictive ability (Cassell, 2002; Lilienfeld, 2012; Shapin, 2022) which has undermined the intellectual and moral worthiness of these fields (Cassell, 2002; Pérez-Álvarez, 2018; Shapin, 2022). These valuations of the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences also reflect a gendered dimension (Shapin, 2022) that, in a thinly veiled ‘phallic metaphor’ (Cassell, 2002, p. 179), speaks to the male dominance and paternalism of the high-status ‘hard’ sciences such as biomedicine and stereotypical attitudes towards and imbalanced power associated with masculinity and femininity (Light et al., 2022). However, the activity of science is itself social (Storer, 1966), and these criteria, as opposed to being absolute, are continually (re)constituted, and thus prevail, by those who already subscribe to them. Moreover, many social sciences, including psychology, are necessarily distinct from the natural sciences and confining their nature and richness to traditional ‘objective’ modes of study undermines them (Mascolo, 2016). As such, it has been contended that these demarcations are insufficient given the plurality of sciences and that discipline-specific criteria are required (Fernández Hermida, 2020; Uher, 2021), with some suggesting that the ‘scientific’ status of disciplines is entirely redundant and that focus should be turned towards systematic, useful ways of knowing, in whichever form (Mascolo, 2016).

This tension between the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences has often been theorised as a colonial practice which imposes the dominance and superiority of the scientific method upon other, alternative, ways of knowing. Grosfoguel (2013), for example, undertakes a critical analysis of the ways that scientific knowledge produces itself ideologically and discursively as a superior form of knowledge. Ryen and Silverman (2000, p. 115) describe this rigid imposition of science’s methods as a ‘colonial methodology’ which mirrors early anthropological attempts to study and understand non-Western populations through a Western lens. These Western researchers sought ‘rationality, organization and structure’ within the Global South countries they occupied as colonial states (Ryen, 2000, p. 223) and justified such field studies by situating indigenous populations as foreign figures in need of examination in support of the scientific process (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Ryen, 2000).

Several authors have highlighted this concept of the ‘other’ and the process through which the boundaries thereof are negotiated. For instance, Said (1978) refers to the Orient and the Occident, the former both the metaphysical blueprint, and simultaneously the construction, of the Eurocentric ideal of that which is ‘oriental’. In each case, the foreign ‘other’ can only be distinguished as such in juxtaposition to that which is familiar. That is, in the first instance, indigenous populations can only be distinguished as ‘non-Western’ in juxtaposition to the readily available notion of the sophisticated, Western researcher educated in the classical sciences (Ryen & Silverman, 2000). As such, the very existence of the ‘other’ is constituted through what they are *not*, consolidating the existence of the Westerner as the mainstream and simultaneously negating the ‘other’s’ own ontology (Fanon, 1952). Such research methodologies embodied colonial power relations, objectifying indigenous groups and subverting their own epistemic systems, thereby further advancing the colonial agenda (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019; Ryen, 2000).

In a similar vein, examining the state of psychology in South Africa in the second half of the 20th century, Seedat (1998) contends that the discipline evidences the mark of colonialism through its reproduction of mainstream, Western ideologies in psychological knowledge production. Mainstream psychology itself, then, fits the description of a colonial methodology, often serving as an instrument of erasure and structural violence (Ratele, 2019). (South) African scholars (e.g., Kessi & Boonzaier, 2019; Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; S. R. Pillay, 2017; Ratele, 2019; among others) have pushed back against this Western ideological alignment through critical discussions regarding psychology’s research agendas, curricula, attitudes, and practice, as well as who such orientations serve (Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; S. R. Pillay, 2017). While a critical psychology has identified the need for redress as a necessary condition for decolonisation, authors (e.g., Duncan et al., 2001) have reiterated how psychology remains locked into Eurocentric modes of knowledge, teaching, and practice that favour the experimental methods of the natural sciences, marginalising those aspects of the discipline that critique the rigid pursuit of scientism and encourage other ways of knowing (Nwoye, 2014; Oppong, 2019). Psychology’s position in the academy is in this way an increasingly complicated one, signifying it as both the ‘otherer’ and the ‘other’. Without dismissing this intricate duality, what has received less attention in the literature, and is addressed in this article, is how psychology’s status as a science is discursively negotiated and contested through the mystification or ‘unknowability’ of its subject matter, which is refracted through a Western lens and subdued into recognisable academic research, and the colonial methodology by which aspects of psychology not subordinated to science are othered and relegated to the margins. This study thus analyses the discourses that select first-year medical students at a South African university employ in their talk about psychology to demonstrate the function of these discourses and locate them within the historical debates surrounding the social and natural sciences. Furthermore, this study aims to identify how psychology is discursively positioned at the boundaries of the social and natural sciences and is subjected to colonial methodologies that make it accessible as a scientific pursuit, with a view to creating new ways of doing and thinking psychology in South Africa.

Methods

Data source

Data were drawn from an online discussion forum in an undergraduate first-year psychology course taken by first-year medical students at a South African university. The module introduces the broad psychosocial foundations of health and wellness and the philosophy of medicine. It is a closed-service course offered only to medical students. It focuses on the application of key psychological principles and theories to the health sciences, including the influence of heredity and environment

on health and human behaviour, to foster critical thinking skills and self-reflection. Discussion forums are a popular blended learning assessment tool in higher education that encourage interaction between students and lecturers and facilitate peer learning (R. Pillay & Alexander, 2015). For the first activity on the forum, students were asked to reflect on their assumptions about psychology by posting a brief answer to the guiding question, 'What is Psychology?'. These naturally occurring data were chosen because they allow for an 'unmotivated' analysis (Sacks, 1985, p. 27) that does not reflect the researchers' embedded categories, positionings, and concerns (Potter, 2002).

Procedure

The first author reviewed the corpus of responses, which included 167 entries. Only those that went beyond a standard definition of psychology were considered for analysis. Of these, five were chosen for their depth of engagement with the task. The syntax and rhetoric of these entries were then critically examined to identify discursive practices inductively.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the university deputy registrar and a certificate of retrospective acknowledgement of ethical clearance (protocol no. H22/11/13) was issued from the Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) of the University of the Witwatersrand. The students were informed of the research aims, their right to withdraw their data, that their participation was voluntary, and how privacy and confidentiality would be maintained. They provided retrospective written consent for their data to be used in the study.

Data analysis

The data have been carefully analysed using discursive psychology. Discursive psychology investigates the formulation of descriptions as discursive objects (Edwards & Potter, 1992), assuming that descriptions are rhetorical objects that always contain assumptions and evaluations, and that 'mere description' is never possible (Edwards & Potter, 2017; Potter, 1996). It provides the analytic tools for displaying the methods by which these descriptions are worked up and the specific types of work that they are called upon to do. Such discourse work in South Africa serves to demonstrate how wider power relations are reproduced within everyday contexts, making for politically informed psychological research in the country (Levett et al., 1997). Although discursive psychology is not analytically prescriptive, we developed our analysis by iteratively looking at the 'reportings' or accounts in the data entries and the attributional inferences that these accounts made available about the students' discursive actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 154). Specifically, we attended to organisational patterns in when and how explicit instances of traditionally scientific or abstract language were evoked and evaluative statements about psychology as important analytical issues (Wiggins & Potter, 2008).

Results and discussion

The results demonstrate how the students employ scientific discourse to define and locate psychology and, crucially, how descriptions of psychology are either recruited into scientific discourse to make them legible or, alternatively, are discursively 'othered' when they are not able to conform to the requirements of natural science, in ways that mirror Eurocentric worldviews of knowledge (Chompalov & Popov, 2021; Hart, 2010). This provides an important avenue for understanding the

methods by which psychology is itself colonised by the scientific method, and what is at stake in developing alternative conceptualisations that fall outside of this discursive territory.

The first entry examines how psychology occupies a liminal position between the natural and social sciences:

Good day, in my personal opinion I believe that Psychology is the scientific study of our minds and behaviors. It is the study of conscious and unconscious phenomena, including feelings, thoughts and emotion. It is an academic discipline of immense scope, crossing the boundaries between the natural and social sciences. In psychology we seek an understanding of the emergent properties of brains, linking the discipline to neuroscience, which is why it is a vital course in our studies of becoming future doctors. (Entry 1)

In Entry 1, the student presents psychology as a *scientific study* focused on observable phenomena – *behaviour* – and, later, material, biological matter – *brains* – foregrounding its alliance with the scientific method and the natural sciences (Harré, 2004; Mascolo, 2016; Pérez-Álvarez, 2018) and thus portraying it as empirical and credible and justifying its place within the health science syllabus. However, the student also describes psychology as the study of *unconscious phenomena, including feelings, thoughts, and emotion*, which are all intangible, abstract concepts and thus prescriptive of social sciences (Mascolo, 2016; Rose, 1989). This contradiction in psychology's natural or social science status is made explicit in then describing it as an *academic discipline* that *crosses the boundaries* between *natural and social sciences*. However, despite its status as an academic discipline, its engagement with incorporeal constructs (*thoughts and feelings*) precludes it from being fully embedded in the natural sciences (Mascolo, 2016) and destines it to straddle the boundary between the harder natural and softer social sciences (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018).

The initial goal of psychology as studying the *conscious and unconscious phenomena* of the mind is then reformulated to understanding the *properties of brains*. The transition in which the 'mind' is narrowly reformulated as 'brain activity' is often observed in psychology (Uher, 2021), and it is this link to neuroscience – associated with physical, tangible entities that may be measured, for instance, with magnetic resonance imagings (MRIs) – which makes psychology a *vital* course for *future doctors*; rather than its more abstract, theoretical aspects such as *feelings* and *emotion*. This reformulation is reductionistic (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018) and suggests that it is those aspects of psychology that resemble the health sciences that bolster it (Munro & Munro, 2014), but which nevertheless underscore psychology's inability to inhabit 'true' science on its own.

To summarise, the student positions psychology as located in between the natural and social sciences, with the natural sciences, including medicine, depicted as studying concrete and observable phenomena, and psychology extending this to the more intangible study of feelings and thoughts. Psychology is described in contradictory ways, with its link to the study of a part of the human body (the brain) as a warrant for its inclusion in medical degrees.

The following entry builds on these opposing orientations:

Psychology refers to the study of human nature, but in a more scientific sense than philosophy does. It focuses on emotional-, personality-, and mood phenomena that can be understood scientifically, for example, chemically. Psychology also focuses on solutions to mental dilemmas that might hinder a person's lifestyle. (Entry 2)

It does so by describing psychology as the *study of human nature* including *emotional, personality, and mood* phenomena that can nevertheless be undertaken and understood *scientifically*. By describing psychology using terms like 'study' and 'scientific', it is aligned, as are many of the

entries, with the supposedly elite, empirical investigations associated with the natural sciences, similar to how related terms including 'rigour', 'discipline', and 'systematic' become powerful and exclusionary indicators of status in education research (Keiner, 2019, pp. 527–528). This 'scientific' terminology appears in juxtaposition to psychology's subject matter (human nature, emotions, personality, and mood) which is again more abstract and typically associated with social sciences (Mascolo, 2016; Rose, 1989).

Interestingly, the student goes on to qualify their statement, asserting that this subject matter, human nature, is studied *in a more scientific sense* than in philosophy. In this way, the student renders visible a rank order not only between the natural and social sciences but also within the social sciences themselves. This intra-disciplinary array parallels historical efforts to determine the 'hardness' or 'softness' of social subdisciplines to establish, for instance, behaviourists' theories as having at least greater value and scientific integrity than those of the 'purely soft' sciences like humanistic psychology (Shapin, 2022). Moreover, the student elaborates on the 'scientific' hierarchy they have constructed by asserting that the ordering criterion is the degree to which those abstract aspects of psychology (emotional, personality, and mood phenomena) are *scientifically* or *chemically* and, by extension, objectively and observably, present (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018). Like Entry 1, this undermines the notion that psychology is a stand-alone discipline of scientific principles and instead suggests that it is those aspects of psychology that border the natural sciences such as medicine which legitimise it and grant it its scientific status.

The third entry similarly conceives psychology as concerned not only with scientific phenomena but also with issues beyond the scientific, and as such, positioned at the boundaries of the natural and social sciences. Importantly, however, we begin to see how, in doing so, these extra-scientific aspects of psychology are othered and undermined for non-conformity:

1. For me, psychology is an extremely demanding and difficult subject to grasp. It deals with the mind and thought, which is unique and ever so different in each person. It involves becoming intimate and face to face with the psyche and personalities inside a single person. Regularly, or in fact every second of our lives is associated and caused by our own mind, our own decisions and thoughts, regardless of whether it's consciously or unconsciously. Psychology is not just a subject of study, but an aspect of everyone's life. It includes the assessment of every thought and judgement, the choices between right and wrong, and many more detailed matters that go far beyond what I can fathom, and are too many to condense into a short response. Psychology is a man-made attempt to understand probably the most bizarre thing in our universe – our own mind. (Entry 3)

This positioning is evident in that psychology's subject matter (*the mind and thought*) is described as *unique* and subjective (*different in each person*), as opposed to science which is invariable, objective, and timeless (Fernández Hermida, 2020; Mascolo, 2016; Munro & Munro, 2014; Storer, 1966). Furthermore, through the description of psychology as *not just a subject of study, but an aspect of everyone's life*, psychology is positioned as not a purely scientific pursuit but also one which is *intimately* tied to an individual's subjectivity, encompassing human self-understanding, morality (*right and wrong*) and other aspects that the student cannot *fathom*.

However, the student also alludes to psychology's inherent unknowability, enacting a form of colonialism that 'others' the aspects of psychology incommensurable with the scientific method. Psychology is described as a *difficult subject to grasp* that deals with *bizarre* matters, which produces it as something that the student cannot get close to or capture the essence of. This is juxtaposed with the idea that what psychology involves is *becoming intimate and face to face* with people's internal states of being. These opposing statements seem to create distance between the student's idea of psychology and that which they suggest it practically entails. In this way, the text

displays a hesitancy to engage with psychology's subject matter, particularly its 'softer' aspects, in a manner beyond the hypothetical – an issue that has been contentious regarding medical curricula development for decades (Carr, 2017). It would seem, then, that when coming *face to face* with the *unique* and *ever so different* aspects of a person – when coming face to face with psychology in practice – it is as if the student is in a stand-off with a strange and unpredictable creature being encountered for the first time.

The student manages this 'unknowability' of psychology by subjecting it to the language of science as a way of making it familiar and apprehensible under a 'universal' norm, thereby asserting dominance over it (Cunneen et al., 2017; Foster, 1982). As such, they, too, refer to psychology as a *subject of study* involving *assessment* – two terms that reflect traditional conceptions of the natural sciences, as argued previously (Keiner, 2019). However, this scientific discourse is used differently from the first two entries: rather than justifying or validating psychology by allying it with the natural sciences, it serves, here, to subdue psychology via an act of othering. In this sense, the natural sciences are affirmed as having more power and importance than the social sciences (Ashcroft et al., 2007). The student goes further and explicitly others psychology by describing it as *man-made* and *bizarre*. The description 'man-made' suggests artificiality and fabrication, indicating a constructed discipline positioned in contrast to the so-called 'natural' sciences and their study of the physical, 'natural' world (Chompalov & Popov, 2021). The word *bizarre* describes something unusual and strange, suggesting that psychology is not simply different to the natural sciences but that this difference is rooted in the foreign and unknowable nature of psychology's subject matter. The twin discursive positionings of psychology as not-quite a natural science as well as possessing a *bizarre* subject matter are a profound reflection of the way that natural sciences assume superior forms of knowledge and use these as the basis for othering disciplines that do not conform to their standards of rigour (Held, 2023). In this way, we argue, it is not merely that psychology is relegated to the boundaries of the natural sciences, but that the natural sciences are positioned as a dominant and default methodology, what we might term a 'colonial methodology' (Ryen & Silverman, 2000, p. 115), that subordinates alternative ways of knowing.

In Entry 4, we see these systematic practices in further detail:

Psychology refers to the study of the human mind and associated conscious and unconscious behaviours which include: thoughts, emotions and personality traits. This diverse field has applications in a multitude of industries as well as all aspects of life. The intriguing aspect of psychology lies in the diversity that exists in every human mind – while this is challenging when detecting trends and establishing treatment protocols, it lends an incredibly fascinating dimension to this field. (Entry 4)

The student provides a straightforward definition of psychology that includes its status as a legitimate discipline but nevertheless orients to the nature of its subject matter as at least partially intangible in the first sentence. After setting up the distinction between psychology and science, the student positions psychology as subordinate to medicine and resolves this subordination through a colonial description of psychology's academic terrain. Within this entry, psychology is again routinely defined as a *study* upfront, as in the first and second entries, affording it the same connotations of rigour as the scientific method to give it more weight as a discipline (Keiner, 2019; Pérez-Álvarez, 2018). However, psychology's domain of study is *the diversity that exists in every human mind*, which is contrasted with the work of *detecting trends* and *establishing treatment protocols*, setting up again the tension between psychology's project and the nature of scientific inquiry. This statement reflects the same notion of incompatibility between the natural and social sciences as Entry 1 (Pérez-Álvarez, 2018). This tension is seemingly resolved through the student's recourse to an alternative historical discourse that works in parallel to further engender the primary

discourse of the natural sciences as legitimate and the social sciences as illegitimate. That is, it constructs a colonial discourse of the exotic other (Foster, 1982). By emphasising psychology's *intriguing aspect[s]*, *incredibly fascinating dimension[s]*, and *diversity*, the student constructs psychology as having an exotic allure. In this way, psychology is portrayed as something foreign and unknown, yet enticing. That is, the social sciences, including psychology, seem to be likened to the foreigner, often the African, that is far removed from the 'Western world and academic institutions' (Ryen & Silverman, 2000, p. 114), whose body becomes an 'object of knowledge' (Butchart, 1998, p. 2). The natural sciences, including medicine, then, may be likened to the superior, White middle-class anthropologist who seeks to 'discover, research and understand' this foreigner (Ryen & Silverman, 2000, p. 114). The '[fixing of] a boundary' around native populations as something other to what is familiar or known mirrors the boundary between the natural and social sciences to which Entry 1 refers (Ryen & Silverman, 2000, p. 115) and builds on it by 'othering' the aspects of psychology that diverge from the scientific method. This othering is thus reflexively accomplished through the students' demonstrable 'attempts' to portray psychology as a legitimate subject by aligning it with science and tacitly serves to situate psychology as a lesser discipline.

This notion of the exotic other, constituted via Ryen and Silverman's (2000) colonial methodology, and its contribution to the tacit subversion of psychology, is further apparent in the final entry:

Psychology is the study of the mind and the inner workings of it. It describes why we are who we are, the way we act and the way we view the world in ways that are scientifically and biologically fascinating. I am very excited to learn much more on this topic. (Entry 5)

Here, the student similarly orients to the tension between the natural and social sciences and produces a definition of psychology in which the discipline is othered and subdued into a form in which it is studyable through the scientific method. As in previous entries, the student describes psychology as a *study* of the mind, cementing its scientific identity (Keiner, 2019; Pérez-Álvarez, 2018). However, the term *inner workings*, by definition, disrupts this scientific alliance, connoting the existence of a private, inner world within the mind that is only knowable to an individual themselves as an insider of that world and those who work within that territory, in this case, psychologists. The colonial discourse of the exotic other seems again to be evoked to resolve this tension in stating that subjective psychological constructs such as identity (*who we are*) are *fascinating*, again othering the 'unknowable' aspects of psychology that do not conform to positivist scientific principles.

The same conceptualisation of psychology as something curious and unknown, however, is here taken a step further. That is, the exotic other that is psychology is specifically framed as *scientifically and biologically* of intrigue. In this way, the far-removed 'native' is explicitly portrayed as something to be placed under the microscope and 'measured, poked and probed' (Graboyes, 2014, p. 379), so to speak, by the more respected, capable scientists of the Western, modern world who conduct legitimate research (Held, 2023). As such, this construction of psychology enacts an intellectual imperialism that undermines the discipline and highlights the remnants of unequal colonial power relations in the way that psychology is understood and positioned in the academy.

Conclusion

This study aimed to demonstrate empirically the discourses employed by medical students when talking about psychology. The students' talk is imbued with tensions that demonstrate the internalisation of psychology's contested place as a discipline. This talk is constructed through, and

iteratively reproduces, this contention and, by recruiting hegemonic discourses of the social sciences as subordinate to the natural sciences, ensures that it is reinforced and ratified.

Psychology's uncomfortable position on the fault lines between the natural and social sciences has resulted in a discipline that allies itself to the 'hard' sciences to increase its legitimacy: positivist logic is applied to the aspects of psychology which are comprehensible to the natural sciences, while territories not amenable to the experimental method are rendered unknowable. In this way, psychology's non-empirical subject matter is constructed as foreign and beyond the scope of scientific study and the academy in discourses of 'othering' that are problematised as an act of intellectual imperialism. We argue that these 'othering' discourses underpinning contemporary understandings of psychology are a colonial methodology that seeks to describe foreign entities through the logic of Western knowledge, thereby consistently reproducing Western knowledge as superior, with all the systemic benefits accruing to this superior form of knowledge production (Cunneen et al., 2017; Hart, 2010; Held, 2023). Our findings are significant for they expose how these constructed hierarchies have material implications for the legitimacy of psychology's knowledge production. This study thus contributes to critical debates on the nature of psychology in the (South African) academy in several ways. First, this article supplements the largely theoretical contributions to decolonising psychology in South Africa (Malherbe & Ratele, 2022; S. R. Pillay, 2017) with an empirical account of how psychology is discursively constructed and colonised as a discipline. To quote Sacks (1995, p. 27), 'criticizing is giving some dignity to something', and in critically analysing talk from students of psychology – those who presently shape psychological discourse – in this way, we not only present a window into psychology 'on the ground' but also contribute to decolonising the discipline by privileging students', rather than academics', voices within the academy. Second, much research addressing the pre-eminence of Western ideologies stems from the Global North (Grosfoguel, 2013; Ryen, 2000; Ryen & Silverman, 2000), making insights *from*, as opposed to *about*, Global South contexts – such as those offered by this article – increasingly valuable in decolonial conversations. In saying this, it should be noted that the notion of decolonising psychology is intricate and, in challenging many problematic conventions in the field, this article nevertheless does so using the medium of the English language. In using, and being bound by, English-language data and analysis, we acknowledge that our critiques are situated within a colonial frame which may inadvertently enact the very same othering practices we contest within other African contexts.

Nonetheless, although only examining select students' discourses, and bearing in mind that medical students come from a background that is heavily dominated by an ingrained natural sciences philosophy, this study contributes to the ongoing debate on psychology's role in South Africa and highlights the more nuanced remnants of Euro-American epistemological structures in how psychology is understood and constructed within the academy. Through critically analysing the reification of the natural sciences, this study destabilises these colonial 'othering' discourses and encourages future research which similarly reveals and addresses such power imbalances in how psychology is conceptualised and practised in South Africa.

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ORCID iD

Arianna Tello Fadda  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3347-9309>

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