Class, resistance, and the psychologization of development in South Africa

Brendon R. Barnes
University of Johannesburg

Minja Milovanovic
University of the Witwatersrand

Abstract
This paper focuses on the psychologization of development in South Africa, one of the most unequal countries in the world, through a critical analysis of a discussion on a national radio programme about the meaning of Mandela Day. We demonstrate how speakers draw on common sense notions of race, class, and party politics that (re)produce subject positions from within a rights-based interpretive repertoire that emphasizes structural reform and class resistance, and an agency interpretive repertoire that emphasizes individualism, responsibility, and volunteerism. We further demonstrate how the agency subject position serves to stifle and resist the rights subject position by drawing on common sense “psychological truths” about what it means to be a good citizen.

Keywords
class, psychologization, psychology, resistance, South Africa

The mindset of the poor need to change before I will consider giving more.
(Call for “well-off”, 2014)

South Africa is one of the most economically unequal societies in the world; forged by centuries-old colonialism, racism, and, more recently, liberal macro-economic policies that have fuelled economic inequalities (Beinart & Dubow, 1995; Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). While there is a growing black African\(^1\) middle class,\(^2\) inequality still reflects a
racial dimension that was galvanized during apartheid. Apartheid, it is important to remember, was as much an economic system as it was a system of race categorization, with the black African majority legally relegated to menial jobs to prop up a powerful, predominantly white-dominated, capitalist system (Terreblanche, 2002). The crucial negotiations around the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid saw the black African majority, through the African National Congress (ANC), gain political power but struggle to transform the economic system, especially in terms of economic redistribution (Klein, 2007).

The current inequality figures in South Africa are staggering. For example, 60% of South Africa’s population earn less that R42,000 ($4200 USD) per annum while the top 5% earn 43% of the country’s earnings (Leibbrandt, Finn, & Woolard, 2012). Despite constituting 79% of the population, black Africans make up 90% of South Africa’s poor. In 2011, the unemployment rate (using an expanded definition that includes those who are unemployed and who are not looking for work but desire to be employed) was 53% among black African women, compared to just 8% for white men (Statistics South Africa, 2012). In 2008, black Africans earned on average a mere 13% of the salary of whites—a figure which has changed very little since the early 1900s (Leibbrandt, Woolard, Finn, & Argent, 2010). Twenty years after apartheid, therefore, while some progress has been made to address inequality in some non-income indicators, for example, access to education, housing, and electricity, income inequality has grown in keeping with global trends (Piketty, 2014), and the material conditions of the majority of poor black South Africans have deteriorated.

Two interpretive repertoires have emerged in the media and academic literature about how South Africa should overcome its development challenges. It is important to note, at this point, that we use Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) definition of an interpretive repertoire as “a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events” (p. 138). We chose to use the concept of interpretive repertoires over discourses as interpretive repertoires place less emphasis on power and more on agency of speakers and flexible deployment of language within talk (Edley, 2001). The main focus of the paper, therefore, was on the ways in which speakers adopt subject positions and mobilize interpretive repertoires in their talk about “development” and not necessarily in the overarching discourses that constitute class and “race” in the first instance.

On the one hand, there is a view that the predominantly black African poor have yet to realize their basic human rights as enshrined in the constitution (hereafter referred to as the rights-based interpretive repertoire). Within this interpretive repertoire, the poor’s dissatisfaction and frustration is often demonstrated through protests and calls for structural economic reforms (Ballard, Habib, & Valodia, 2006). Known as the “protest capital” of the world, estimates indicate that as many as 3000 protests have taken place in South Africa over the past 3 years. In Gauteng alone, the economic provincial hub of South Africa, police statistics showed that 560 protests were documented over one 40 day period in 2013 with the police declaring 40 of those as “violent” (Patel, 2013). Protests usually focus on unemployment, poor service delivery (such as inadequate housing, water and sanitation, education, and healthcare), crime, corruption, and low wages. Often inappropriately referred to as “service delivery protests” (they are much
more than service delivery protests), protests reflect a fundamental discontent by the poor with South Africa’s development and protests are met with increasingly hostile police responses (Alexander, Lekgowa, Mmope, Sinwell, & Xezwi, 2012).

On the other hand, there exists a powerful neoliberal view that acknowledges rights but also emphasizes agency, choice, and responsibility (hereafter referred to as the agency interpretive repertoire). The agency interpretive repertoire positions poor South Africans as having a right to be unhappy about the slow progress of South Africa’s development, but argues that they should express their discontent “responsibly” (see, e.g., Institute for Accountability in South Africa, IFAISA, 2012). Importantly, this interpretive repertoire emphasizes that ordinary South Africans can make a difference in South Africa’s development. LeadSA, for example, is a national campaign that is widely endorsed by the state, the private sector, the media, and many civil society organizations and aims to promote the idea of individual South Africans taking responsibility for improving the country. Among others, the campaign promotes a Bill of Responsibilities (to complement the country’s official Bill of Rights) that outlines how South Africans should act/behave in order to improve the country and achieve their basic human rights. The agency interpretive repertoire also endorses the democratic right to vote, arguing that the poor should exercise their democratic right to vote for a political party that will be in a position to deliver on promises. The (dubious) sub-text here is that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party is represented as having disappointed the poor and yet the poor “ignorantly” continue to vote them into power based on crude class and race lines (at the time of writing the ANC had been in power for 20 years; see Habib & Naidu, 2006).

The agency interpretive repertoire also encourages volunteerism. A popular campaign in this regard, and the focus of the text presented later in the paper, is “Mandela Day,” where South Africans are asked to devote 67 minutes of their time to a community cause. The 67 minutes represent the 67 years that Nelson Mandela devoted to politics. Mandela Day has become a symbol of the agency interpretive repertoire that focuses on the values that Nelson Mandela apparently stood for (see, e.g., J. Whitehead, 2011). Mandela’s values, however, are by no means uncontested. According to Klein (2007), the story of Nelson Mandela is that he was a radical freedom fighter who led the liberation struggle and was incarcerated for 27 years for his role in the struggle, becoming someone who “changed” to become a symbol of conciliation and forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa. For others, Mandela was indeed a freedom fighter during apartheid but that he (and other negotiators) yielded to capitalist pressures during the negotiations to a peaceful transition and succumbed to white capitalist fears that the economy would collapse if the post-apartheid government pursued a more radical system for economic redress, for example, nationalization of mines and land (Klein, 2007).

On a personal level, as psychologists working in resource-limited community settings, it is striking to note just how polarized these two interpretive repertoires have become. For example, we have often been called on to design agency-based behavioural change interventions to encourage poor people to take the steps to protect themselves and their children from their unhealthy environments through, for example, participating in community food gardens, washing hands at strategic times, and reducing child exposure to the dangers of unsafe energy. There are, of course, a number of problems with this
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approach; not least of which is that most of these problems would be greatly diminished if the poor actually had access to healthy and enabling environments such as clean water, proper sanitation, and accessible healthy food options in the first instance. However, the health behaviour change discourse fits neatly within and is propped up by the disciplinary boundaries of psychology and is, in many instances, celebrated as progressive and relevant (there are, of course, very few health psychologists interested in the health implications of food insecurity). However, when the discussion extends to social justice, economic redress, and how we as psychologists can understand it, it becomes more difficult to justify our work as “psychological.” After all, understanding social protests should be left to sociologists, public management specialists, and political scientists! While we realize that this is a problem of how “psychology” is conceptualized in a post-colonial context rather than whether our work is in fact psychological, the point being made is that the polarization of the two interpretive repertoires is also reflected in the disciplinary boundaries of what we think is psychology, particularly in a developing country context.

In addition, we have observed how difficult it is for poor South Africans to make political statements without their intentions and actions becoming individualized and party politicized. For example, there has been a recent and interesting turn towards more political “body protests” by the poor in South Africa. For example, naked protests by female slum dwellers, protests by women wearing soiled underwear to demonstrate the hygiene implications of inadequate water access in slums, and the placement of human faeces in strategic areas (for example, international airports) to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the lack of sanitation facilities in slums. We have noted just how difficult it is for political protest to raise awareness of the plight of the poor within the context of powerful individualized agency interpretive repertoires that invert the political intention of protests into actions of “lone wolf” criminals with party political agendas (belonging to one party who is trying to show up another party’s failures) rather than political in its broader sense (Robins, 2014). Public and media responses also reveal deep-seated racial discourses representing such protests as revealing a “natural” propensity by the black African poor to behave in inappropriate ways. The political intentions of these protests are subverted by constructions of what it means to be developed, to behave appropriately, and to “participate” meaningfully in a democracy. Class resistance, especially social protests, are therefore stifled by being represented as outdated, backward, and driven by individual and party political criminal agendas rather than any meaningful resistance to a macro-economic structure.

The aim of this work, therefore, was to demonstrate how these two interpretive repertoires are mobilized and reproduced in the talk of two South Africans. More specifically, the work aimed to demonstrate (deductively) how the interpretive repertoires construct a psychologized, self-actualized, socially compassionate subject whose (noble) goals are to contribute to South Africa’s development; but which ultimately serves to stifle calls for class resistance and structural change. Before we proceed, however, it is perhaps worth reflecting on the various ways in which class has been dealt with in psychology and justify why the analysis of talk provides us with interesting insights into the study of class.
Class, psychology, and talk

Mainstream psychology has mostly assumed that classes are distinguishable, for example, the poor, working, and middle classes have clearly defined material boundaries; that people from different classes perceive and think differently, which may be influenced by their class positions (see, e.g., Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009); that the boundaries between classes are permeable (upward and downward mobility is possible); and that there are psychological impacts related to class position, for example, that living in poverty influences psychological outcomes (Haushofer, 2013). A growing body of literature has also focused on the relationship between inequalities (not just poverty versus wealth) and mental health indicators (Melzer, Fryers, & Jenkins, 2004). Class also features in the different “modalities” of psychological intervention, for example, therapy (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Kim & Cardemil, 2012), coping and resilience (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003) and, perhaps more insidiously, how the poor could think and act their way out of poverty (consider, e.g., Corley’s contentious research on the 20 habits that separate the rich from the poor; Corley, 2009). There are two major problems with the way in which class has been written into mainstream psychology.

First, despite psychology’s acknowledgement of poverty and class as an important consideration (see Carr & Sloan, 2003)—sometimes even misappropriating a language of class, for example, “class consciousness” has been inappropriately used in mainstream psychology as a cognitive-psychological construct as opposed to a socially emergent product of capitalism (Augoustinos, 1999)—the discipline has largely ignored the structural determinants of class inequality (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Vera & Speight, 2003) and psychology has often reinforced psychologized stereotypes of what it means to be poor or middle class (Bramel & Friend, 1981). For example, poverty is often framed “as personal failure and wealth as a personal achievement” (Bullock & Limbert, 2009, p. 220). Calls for the structural determinants of class to be made more overt have permeated various strands of psychology. However, very little psychological research has focused on revealing class-based power and even less work has been done in relation to development in the Global South (with a few exceptions; see, e.g., Kumar & Burman, 2009, who edited a special edition of the Journal of Health Management that focused on critical/subaltern perspectives on the UN Millennium Development Goals). The second issue relates to the assumption that both “class” and its psychological “inner world” correlates can be objectively measured and studied dispassionately to explain the psychology of class (Argyle, 1994). While attempts at understanding the relationship between “psychology” and “class” may be a worthwhile pursuit, what is missing is how representations of class appear and how they are managed in everyday interactions.

A turn to talk, therefore, offers the opportunity to understand how class is enacted in the context of everyday conversation. It moves us away from the assumption that language is transparent and conveys “truths” about how people “think” about class; arguing that language is used to produce and reproduce subject positions (Davies & Harre, 1990; Edwards & Potter, 1992) in the contexts of everyday talk. In other words, notions of class are assumed to be constructed through talk and talk is not necessarily a neutral device that reflects ideas about class.
We also assume that participants adopt subject positions and draw on strategies to introduce, account, and manage those positions in relation to talk about class. While there is some agency in adopting and manoeuvring between subject positions, those positions are limited to what is available within a particular interpretive repertoire (Edley, 2001). We will demonstrate in this analysis, for example, that within a rights-based interpretive repertoire, speakers find it difficult to position themselves as self-actualized, hardworking, and politically astute.

We also draw on previous works that have highlighted how common sense accounts of class manifests in interactions (e.g., Stuber, 2006; Walkerdine, 2003; K. A. Whitehead, 2013) and how alternative accounts, for example, resistance to capitalist ideologies and calls for structural economic reform, are suppressed. We were particularly interested in exploring how, in the context of everyday interaction, common sense “truths” about class are produced and reproduced; who can lay claim to particular kinds of development modalities (how South Africa should develop); which authorities can legitimately speak on behalf of the poor; and how these modalities produce a neoliberal subject that fits in with a psychologized (De Vos, 2012) discourse of development while stifling class resistance.

**Methods**

The study used a purposive approach to identify the text on which our analysis is based. We were particularly interested in finding an information-rich case that highlighted how South Africans talk about class in “natural” interactions to examine how the two interpretive repertoires mentioned in the introduction are mobilized in these accounts. The selected text was a 12 minute and 3 second audio discussion on a national radio programme that stemmed from a disagreement between two South Africans on the meaning of Mandela Day. One of the participants (hereafter referred to as participant X) was the chairperson of an ANC branch who had written about his discontent about Mandela Day activities in a national newspaper. The other participant (A) is a presenter on a national radio programme. The newspaper article by X argued that volunteer activities, encouraged by Mandela Day, such as painting the walls of schools and giving out second-hand clothing to orphanages allow the middle class to feel better, but do not address economic inequality or social justice and therefore maintain the status quo. Participant A took offence to these views as he was a supporter of Mandela Day activities and, in particular, has been involved in the building of a school hall in a low income area. Participant X is a black African male and participant A is a white male.

The discussion was selected for a number of reasons. First, it represented a “natural” interaction between two speakers and was not contrived or directed by a researcher, for example, in a research interview. It could be argued, however, that the interview was contrived in that it was a pre-planned radio discussion with an interviewer (A) and interviewee (X). We acknowledge this and indeed take the subject positions related to professional roles as part of the analysis (akin to Goffman’s “Footing,” 2001); but the talk was still “natural” within the parameters of a radio discussion. Second, it was one of few public discussions that foregrounded class as opposed to any other social asymmetries, particularly race that tends to dominate discussions in South Africa. Third, the
discussion received extensive subsequent media and social network attention, perhaps because, as some commentators noted, it summed up the major disagreements about class in South Africa. The discussion was downloaded as a podcast from the radio website and transcribed using a modified Jefferson method (Jefferson, 2004).

It should be noted that although the original newspaper article and the subsequent media responses were not used in the data presented in this paper, they did inform some of our thinking about class. The data were analysed using a form of discourse analysis (Edley, 2001) with a special focus on identifying subject positions within the two interpretive repertoires mentioned in the introduction of this paper. Subject positions are the ways in which people are “positioned” through discursive practices and the way in which the individual’s “subjectivity” is generated through the learning and use of discursive practices (Davies & Harre, 1990). It is important to note that our analysis was not limited to the interaction (as perhaps some forms of conversation analysis would advocate), but our assumption was that talk reflects broader discourses of class-based formations (akin to Omi & Winant’s 1994 analysis of race formations). In this sense, “it is impossible to understand social structure if we do not understand social interaction” (Pascale, 2008, p. 348) and vice versa.

Findings

Extract 1 is taken from the beginning of the interview where participant A introduces the context of the discussion, that is, he represents himself as being unhappy with X’s perspective on Mandela Day as outlined in his newspaper article. A initially takes on a relatively professional tone in keeping with his role as presenter and welcomes X, “X nice talking to you and good morning.” Similarly, X, in keeping with his role as “guest,” thanks A for having him on the show. X is then called on to account for his position. The extract foregrounds, first and foremost, a division that suggests that the poor black African majority votes for the ANC and are in (material) need; and the middle class represents everyone else who presumably do not vote for the ANC and help (or are obliged to help) the poor. In addition, the extract presents and reinforces two interpretive repertoires about how South Africa should develop and, more specifically, what Mandela Day should represent. To remind the reader, participant A (white male) is the radio presenter and participant X (black African male) wrote the initial article.

Extract 1

1 A: On Tuesday [name of newspaper] had an article (.) that was written by an ANC branch
2 member and it was entitled an insult to Madiba (. and it sort of sang Nelson Mandela’s
3 praises which was fair enough I think most people would (.) agree with that one. But he also
4 had a dip about what he called cosmetic and insulting (. ) activities, cosmetic charity and PR
5 activities playing to the gallery while failing to change the world. Now somebody who’s using
6 the platform that I enjoy on [name of radio station] to try and (.) finish (.) a school hall in
7 Thokoza on Mandela Day, I took exception to that and I replied to his article. He’s asked for
8 (.) a right of reply so pleasure to welcome the chairman (. ) of the ANC [name of branch]
9 branch. Interesting we were there yesterday (. ) X nice talking to you and good morning.
10 X: Good morning and thanks for (. ) having me.
A: Yes indeed. Please explain your article. I took exception to it, considering that we are involved in projects for Mandela Day that you seem to be criticising.

X: Yup. Maybe firstly I’m just - this is my personal opinion so I’m not representing any party.

A: I see. Okay, fair enough.

X: Ya. The point I’m making is that Mandela Day has been reduced to a day where people do things that make them sleep at night. You know. More than making those other people to sleep at night. So what I’m saying is, you go there. You distribute these dirty clothes to the orphanage and you come back and you feel so good that you’ve done something. I’m saying that that is not the ideal that Mandela fought for. If I celebrate somebody else’s birthday and I’m claiming that I’m celebrating that person’s ideal, then I must first ask the question: what are those - that person’s ideals. What is it that I must continue from where he has ended? And Mandela’s ideals like I’ve explained in the article are more than just what we are doing and therefore if someone is building a good school in Limpopo because you have seen that in Limpopo people are schooling under the trees and that is - if that is a big project then it must be applauded. But I’m talking about all of us must push for a better ideal for this day because the majority of what they do is just charity. It doesn’t change the people’s lives. It is blasting and patronising the poor. Nothing is changing and we know that Mandela fought for a change. He didn’t fight for a status quo where a particular race or class or gender or sex oppresses the other.

Both participants draw on common sense notions of class and race in South Africa, that is, there is a distinguishable middle class who are represented as helping (or are obliged to help) through Mandela Day activities; and there is a black African poor who are represented as in need of material help. Both participants slip easily between terms such as “helping” and “poverty,” make reference to examples of extreme need, for example, an orphanage or a school where learners are being taught outdoors under trees and make reference to the geographic locations that represent low income areas such as Thokoza (a notoriously impoverished black African township) and Limpopo (a resource-poor province that has experienced a number of challenges in education).

While the two speakers both agree that the poor are in need of material help, two interpretive repertoires are produced about how South Africa should develop—one that emphasizes volunteerism, agency, and the idea that those more fortunate can make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate through, for example, finishing a school hall (agency interpretive repertoire mobilized by A) and one that calls for more radical economic and structural reforms as well as larger scale projects (rights-based interpretive repertoire mobilized by X). Both speakers use schools as examples, but X suggests new schools built by large businesses in impoverished contexts, for example, where children are learning under trees. However, A suggests that individuals can make a difference through, for example, volunteering to help to build school halls. What is also at stake within these two interpretive repertoires are moral claims to Nelson Mandela’s values. X draws on notions of Mandela as a radical freedom fighter who fought for larger structural reform in keeping with earlier historical narratives of Mandela’s life, while A draws on notions of Mandela as caring and compassionate and making a difference in individual’s lives in keeping with later constructions of Mandela in post-apartheid South Africa.
What is interesting is that both speakers appear to have the concerns of the poor at heart and both appear to hold Nelson Mandela (and his “values”) in high regard; logically there is clearly a place for both interpretive repertoires in South Africa, that is, one that calls for both structural change and individual agency; but the two are constituted as polarized and hostile.

The speakers are positioned differently within these interpretive repertoires. In introducing the discussion, A is positioned as a middle class subject through his “privilege” as a high profile radio presenter (whose occupation presumably earns him enough money to not be poor); his “privilege” of hosting a national radio talk show (presumably this “platform” allows him to source funding and volunteers to complete the project); and by being separated geographically from poor townships (he states in line 9 that it is “interesting” that he visited the low income township that X represents the day before, which would not have been “interesting” if he did this regularly). By mobilizing the agency interpretive repertoire, he is represented as attempting to “try” and “finish” a school hall in this particular government school (line 6) that others had not “tried” and “finished.” X, however, is positioned with the black African poor. By mobilizing the rights-based interpretive repertoire, X differentiates between two groups of people, the poor and the middle class, by referring to “people” and “those other people.” X is further positioned as not middle class (and their actions) by emphasizing “you” when referring to Mandela Day activities, for example, “you go there (.) you distribute these dirty clothes to this orphanage and you come back and you feel so good that you’ve (.) done (.) something…” (lines 18–20), and later by referring to “they” when referring to “because the majority of what they do is just charity (.) it doesn’t change the people’s lives” (line 28). X invokes images of continued struggle by using phrases like “Mandela fought” (lines 20, 29) and “we must push” (line 27).

A second interesting observation is how X separates his personal views from his party political views. Following the greetings and introductory remarks, X states that the views he is about to express are his personal opinions that do not represent those of “any political party,” that is, by implication, the ANC (line 14). A initially appears to be surprised by this statement (he responds by saying “I see” followed by a one second pause), perhaps because X wrote the article explicitly in his capacity as the chairperson of an ANC branch. However, A accepts X’s position by stating, “okay fair enough” and, in so doing, invites him to continue. What is interesting is that X was not directly invited to discuss his party political views. X was introduced by A as the chairperson of an ANC branch but nonetheless represented his personal views as separate from his party political position upfront. By positioning his individual views about development as separate from his party political views, X begins his argument by appealing to his status as an individual South African, which, given the ANC branch he is located in, is also black African and poor. We will return to the conflation of race, class, and politics in extract 2 but for now, the point is that both speakers appear to be positioned within two class-based interpretive repertoires that appear to be interwoven with race and party politics.

X mobilizes the rights-based interpretive repertoire by representing the middle class as having a motive for their “cosmetic” Mandela Day activities. He suggests that those activities allow the middle class to sleep better at night but those activities do little to alter the status quo (lines 19 and 20). Here, X draws on the notion of “white guilt” (Steyn,
2001), that is, that the white minority did not give up much (in fact, appear to be better off economically) after apartheid but engage in activities on Mandela Day to appease that guilt and, therefore, sleep at night after engaging in Mandela Day activities. X is also positioned within the rights-based interpretive repertoire that draws on “universal” notions of social justice and “change” that Mandela supposedly stood for, when he states that Mandela Day “doesn’t change the people’s lives it’s blasting and patronizing the poor (.) nothing is changing and we know that Mandela fought for a change (.) he didn’t fight (.) for a status quo” (lines 29–31).

What this common sense account of class does, however, is to suppress alternative discourses about class and race in South Africa. It is feasible that the answer to inequality in South Africa is perhaps more radical than that to which X alludes, such as wealth redistribution or the nationalization of land and banks that many had hoped for in the transition to post-apartheid South Africa. It is also possible for South Africans to volunteer their time to social justice movements or that the middle class could volunteer in poor, white communities. It is feasible that help could be in terms of developing critical consciousness among the poor and not limited to material help. It is also feasible that both the middle class and poor people could be volunteering in their “own” communities or that the poor could volunteer to help the middle class (e.g., to help them be better, less greedy people). Nowhere is it formalized that Mandela Day should entail the middle class assisting the black African poor materially. Yet these alternative discourses are virtually absent in the opening lines of the discussion, as both speakers quickly move into a discussion about how the black African poor should be helped materially and adopt class subject positions in relation to that scenario.

In extract 2, we see how the two interpretive repertoires crystallize as the two speakers interact more intensely. The traditional interviewer and guest roles have been replaced by vociferous debate on a more personal level. While X attempts to distance himself from party politics, in extract 2, A brings X’s party affiliation back into the discussion. We pick up the exchange during a heated interaction (approximately 6 minutes and 30 seconds into the discussion) when the two speakers had been interrupting each other:

**Extract 2**

1. A: Alright you=  
2. X: Mandela fought =  
3. A: =Okay, okay you’ve put your point very well you see but you  
4. see you demand the eradication (.) you say people should be demanding the eradication of  
5. corruption (.) of crime (.) of poverty (.) of unemployment (.) etcetera (.) etcetera etcetera etcetera.  
6. You see but your party has been in power: (.) for eighteen years (.) and you have the vote (.)  
7. so surely if you’re unhappy with a lot of those things, you vote out the government in power.  
8. Isn’t that what Mandela did (.) bring democracy (.) so it seems to me that – and (.) and you’ve  
9. pointed out you’re talking as an individual  
10. X: Ya  
11. A: But somebody who’s also the chairman of an A.N.C branch (.) to be criticising individuals for  
12. doing terrific work albeit on a small level, not on a on a macro level (.) don’t you understand  
13. why people take exception to that?  
14. X: No. People can take exception, and I think it’s a (.) a power of opinion  
15. A: Yes
Despite the fact that X represented the views expressed in the discussion as his personal opinions in extract 1, A mobilizes X’s role in the ANC to undermine the validity of his points by (party) politicizing them. Notice how A emphasizes the individual letters of the ANC in line 11 to draw attention to this fact. X is called on to account for his lack of acknowledgement of why “people would take exception to that.” In addition, despite the fact that X did not explicitly mention corruption, unemployment, or crime up until this point; participant A positions X (together with the poor) as “demanding” the eradication of these phenomena. His use of “etcetera” three times suggests an extended list of demands made by poor South Africans who vote for the ANC. His tone with pauses between each “etcetera” also suggests that these demands have become tiresome and perhaps undeserving. Participant A draws attention to “others” who do “terrific work albeit on a small level not on a on a macro level” (line 12). X does not call on A to account for his party political affiliation, which implies that A is using this discursive strategy as a means of criticizing X and undermining the validity of his views.

Moreover, X (and by implication the poor) is positioned as having “the vote” (line 6) but foolishly continues to vote for the ANC. A’s use of the phrase “having the vote” alludes to the fact that the political landscape in South Africa is largely dependent on the party for whom the poor vote (given that the poor are in the numerical majority). Poor black Africans are represented as having an opportunity to change their circumstances but are not doing so because they continue to vote for the ANC. A argues that it is individuals’ choice to vote for a party and that he cannot understand how the poor continue to vote for the ANC when it has failed in its service delivery promises. He argues that “your” party (line 6) has been in power for the past 18 years and that “you have the vote” to vote government out of power but that poor black people (that “you” represent) continue to vote the ANC into power. The use of the term “your” and “you” appears to be heavily racialized. A then constructs a contrast between the seemingly irrefutable notion that democracy is what Nelson Mandela fought for (line 8), rather than demanding the large scale structural and economic reform called for by X. Participant X’s “demands” for economic and structural reform are resisted through a call for the individual right to vote because, of course, this is what A represents Mandela as having fought for.

X finds it very difficult to counter these arguments. He resorts to a rather vague answer in line 14 “No. People can take exception, and I think it’s a (. a power of opinion)” and clumsily tries to deflect the discussion back to his earlier arguments in favour of economic and structural reforms. He suggests that the wealth of South Africa does not lie in the hands of the ANC but is in “us” and “everybody” without actually specifying who “us” and “everybody” is. X attempts to unsettle A’s divisive use of the term “you” by integrating all South Africans into the discussion. X includes himself in the change with the word “us” but then this slips and X excludes himself when he says “those people.” Again, X states that he is not talking on behalf of the ANC and that “those are my opinion,” reverting to his earlier positioning.
X is positioned by A as having views that are inherently party political, and is compelled to distance himself from this. He is represented as having unrealistic expectations about structural and economic reform, as continually “demanding” change through social protests, and as blindly voting for a party that has failed the poor for close to two decades. In contrast, A’s account produces a self-actualized middle class subject who is hardworking and does “terrific work”; is socially compassionate, recognizing social issues beyond themselves and willingly giving of their time and resources to projects such as Mandela Day. This middle class subject is also constructed as task centred, focusing on making a difference on one task on the “micro level” that will make an immediate difference in people’s lives; as engaging in development activities independent of party politics; and as using their democratic right to vote appropriately, contributing to development of the poor because the government is failing in this regard. The agency interpretive repertoire, therefore, produces powerful universal “psychologized truths” about what it means to be a responsible and self-actualized South African citizen who sees beyond themselves, which is very difficult to argue against. This figure is classed and racialized.

In the previous extracts we have seen how the agency interpretive repertoire has been drawn on to constitute a caring, helpful, self-actualizing white middle class that is in contrast with the “foolish,” helpless, and demanding black African poor who need their help. In extract 3, we see how A mobilizes the agency interpretive repertoire to construct a seemingly irrefutable agency position that ultimately serves to marginalize X’s views and to undermine their credibility:

**Extract 3**

1 X: What difference am I making because at night those people must eat (1.0) I’m saying if if if that causes a big - like I say if you go down, you go to this place you build a bigger school because you see them (.) they don’t have school whatever (.) that is a contribution (.) but I’m saying (.) the majority of our people are more entrapped into making them feel good (.) because they’ve done something and nobody is questioning the sustainability of that something that they’ve done (.)

2 A: But what’s wrong with feeling good X?

3 X: [inaudible mumbling]

4 A: I mean you can still question (.) I mean anybody but an idiot (.) would not be concerned about the inequalities in the country (.) alright. Anybody but an idiot of course every time you - but to say therefore (.) that this is a PR seeking exercise (.) because you actually want to do something (.) to help the immediate needs of people in trouble (.) that’s very offensive X (.)

5 X: No (.) the point I’m making A (.) and I’ll emphasise it (.)

Similar to the previous extracts, X and A continue to mobilize different subject positions in relation to South Africa’s development. The two speakers maintain their common sense class–race positions and continue to respectively draw on the rights-based and agency interpretive repertoires. X criticizes the middle class’ activities by suggesting that the middle class become “entrapped” (line 4) into wanting to feel good—suggesting a degree of powerlessness, lack of agency, and thoughtlessness about their involvement in Mandela Day activities. Earlier he offered a similar critique by suggesting Mandela Day...
allows the middle classes to “sleep at night” to appease their guilt, which challenges the agency interpretive repertoire that constitutes them as “caring.”

In response, in line 7, A questions “But what’s wrong with feeling good X?” A calls on X to account for his position as antithetical to what might appear to be a basic element of human existence (wanting to feel good). Positive psychological and emotional functions are constructed as the normative standard from which X’s arguments are evaluated. Again, X finds it difficult to respond and mumbles something that is inaudible. A further attacks X’s suggestions about the middle class not considering inequality when A frustratingly states in line 4 that “(.) I mean anybody but an idiot (.) would not be concerned about the inequalities in the country.” A’s reference to “idiot” implies that he has considered inequality when engaging in Mandela Day activities and that he feels offended that X would imply that. X, again, finds it very difficult to counter these arguments. However, for the first time the possible commensurability of the two positions is introduced. In lines 12 and 13, A states that “they are not mutually exclusive (.) the two views (.) surely ?” to which X agrees in line 14. However, the discussion continues and ends with the two speakers agreeing to disagree.

Taken together, the three extracts demonstrate just how powerful the agency interpretive repertoire is in the talk of South Africans. The image of a self-actualized, caring, hardworking South African subject who gives freely of their time and votes sensibly provides an appealing vision for how South Africa should develop. This subjectivity, however, is classed and raced. X is compelled to speak as an individual independent of party political affiliation and is represented as demanding, unrealistic, and politically uneducated.

**Discussion**

This study has foregrounded class as an important feature of talk about development in South Africa. It demonstrated how the common sense conflation of race, class, and party politics serves to create a division between two (classed and raced) subject positions even when the speakers agree that the two interpretive repertoires are not mutually exclusive. Importantly, the agency-based interpretive repertoire served to resist and stifle talk about class resistance by drawing on seemingly incontestable “psychologized truths” about what it means to be self-actualized, responsible citizens. The study builds on previous studies (such as K. A. Whitehead, 2013) by focusing on the (re)production of class positions in everyday interactions suggesting, at least in part, that the production and enactment of class subjectivities are much more complicated and fluid than what is typically represented in structuralist accounts of class and their psychological correlates. The study also contributes to a growing body of critical psychological literature that focuses on the intersectionality (Cole, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006) of class and other social asymmetries in interactional settings (Stuber, 2006; Walkerdine, 2003). Importantly, it contributes to a few studies that have paid specific critical attention to issues of development and underdevelopment in the Global South (Dominguez-Whitehead & Whitehead, 2014; Kumar & Burman, 2009).

One of the interesting findings of this analysis was that the two interpretive repertoires, and the subject positions mobilized within those, remained polarized throughout
the discussion. We would argue that it is precisely the common sense class and race division that could explain why the two subject positions remained so distinct and intact. Because there is such a strong overlap between class and race in South Africa—with the two subject positions presented in this paper mapping this—and that historically there has been so little upward mobility for the majority of poor black Africans, it is difficult to imagine alternative discourses in the current economic and political climate that could straddle the two subject positions.

The agency interpretive repertoire intersects with many of the core tenets of mainstream psychology such as self-actualization, social compassion, hard work, task orientation, and so forth. The psychologization of how South Africa should develop in everyday interaction is reinforced by and reinforces the discipline of psychology. Historically, psychology has propped up the agency interpretive repertoire through the production of self-actualized individuals who are concerned about inequality and to a large extent this remains intact. However, psychology in post-apartheid South Africa has made attempts to reconfigure to be more “relevant” (Macleod, 2004) for the majority of South Africans, including the infusion of community, liberation, critical, and Marxist psychology into the academic discourse to provide alternative accounts for the role of Psychology. Yet, these too have sometimes been guilty of producing uni-dimensional accounts of class and psychology that reproduce the status quo. An example of this is the notion that we need more “psychology” in poor “communities” as they have been typically neglected from a mental health perspective, a view often upheld by the professional bodies that represent psychology in South Africa. More of psychology in poor settings, it is assumed, will help South Africa heal from its historical traumas and improve their mental health. However, there is very little critical interrogation of what is “psychology” and “community” in the first place or whether we need “psychology” at all in poor communities (Palmary & Barnes, in press). The need for more institutionalized forms of psychology in poor contexts becomes a noble and worthwhile cause. More importantly, as the analysis in this article highlights, the production of an agency interpretive repertoire may suppress any meaningful resistance to exploitative capitalist ideologies.

Conclusion

After 20 years of democracy, poor South Africans are materially no better off than they were during apartheid. The agency interpretive repertoire constitutes a powerful set of discursive practices to explain why this is so—the black poor are represented as demanding, unrealistic, and continue to vote for a problematic political party—and suppresses alternative interpretive repertoires about classed and racialized resistance in South Africa. It is this kind of interpretive repertoire that is mobilized by the anonymous South African referred to in the opening quotation of this paper. It is hoped that this work will stimulate more work and discussion on the relationship between race, class, and psychology in South Africa.

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Notes

1. We use the official “race” nomenclature in post-apartheid South Africa, that is, white, black African, Indian, and coloured. In no way do we support the idea that there are biological race differences but we use the categories to make illustrative points about how “race” is enacted with class in interactions.

2. We mostly use the categories of poor and middle class based on the categorization of group socio-economic indicators based on Rothman (2005). We realize that these categories are not exhaustive for this analysis. However, they do represent the two socio-economic groups where much of the contestation of how South Africa should develop is evident.

3. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation that was enforced legally between 1948 and 1994. Apartheid classified all citizens according to one of the following “race” groups: white, Indian, coloured, and black.

References


**Author biographies**

**Brendon R. Barnes** is a professor of psychology at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He is a research psychologist and public health researcher with a Master’s degree Research Psychology; Natal and a PhD Public Health; University of the Witwatersrand. Barnes is primarily interested in the role of psychology in relation to global health. He has received a number of career awards and worked on numerous research projects in Southern Africa, East Africa, and India. He currently teaches research methods courses at the University of Johannesburg and supervises postgraduate students at the Honours, Masters and Doctoral levels. Email: bbarnes@uj.ac.za

**Minja Milovanovic**, MA, is a research psychologist at the Perinatal and HIV Research Unit which is part of the University of the Witwatersrand Health Consortium, Johannesburg. She received her undergraduate degree from the University of Cape Town and her postgraduate degrees from the University of the Witwatersrand. Milovanovic has worked on numerous research projects with a strong focus on health and development in the Global South. Email: minjam@zuzimpilo.co.za