First, I would like to recognize the late Prof. Siphiwe Ngcobo’s contribution to the Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), academia, and South African society at large. I also congratulate PsySSA on achieving the 25-year milestone. As we celebrate a similar milestone as a democracy, I wish I could say violence that took Professor Ngcobo’s life has abated or that we have come closer to achieving social justice or that mental illness is more accepted socially.

When I considered my topic, I came across Dennis Fox et al.’s paper titled ‘Critical psychology for social justice: concerns and dilemmas’, where they cite three interrelated concerns: the first concern is that by focusing on the individual rather than the group and larger society, mainstream psychology overemphasizes individualistic values, hinders the attainment of mutuality and community, and strengthens unjust institutions; second, mainstream psychology’s underlying assumptions and institutional allegiances disproportionately hurt members of powerless and marginalized groups by facilitating inequality and oppression; and third, these unacceptable outcomes occur regardless of psychologists’ individual or collective intentions to the contrary. They go on to explain the relevance of three central concepts: mainstream psychology’s restricted level of analysis, the role of ideology in strengthening the status quo, and psychology’s false claim to scientific objectivity and political neutrality.

I would also like to share Saths Cooper’s take on the topic:

The quest for a psychology that is reflective of and accessible to all of humanity should be a truly worthy endeavor that will strengthen our science and its numerous applications globally . . . . The desire for psychology to be more reflexive, eschewing its traditional preoccupation with a limited Euro-American worldview, deserves all of our considered attention.

As a country and globally, we are living through very challenging times where it’s a crime to be different.
I thought during the time allocated I would share the things that keep me awake at night. Two weeks ago, I assisted Commissioner Angie Makwetla to launch her book titled *Femicide – a Family Relives its Pain*. The book shares the pain of a family that lost two daughters 4 years apart to femicide. Last week I buried a colleague, Dr Thandi Ndlovu, an accomplished business woman, philanthropist, and leader. Despite her accomplishments and her standing in society, she endured physical and emotional abuse for almost a decade at the hands of her husband, silently. Yesterday we woke up to news of the rape and killing of Uyinene, the UCT student who was missing for almost a week. This morning I woke up to news of three siblings who were found hanged after being collected by their father from schools, somewhere in Durban. . . the list goes on. No less than 20 women have been killed in the past month alone. As a woman and a mother, I am scared for myself, for my daughter, for my granddaughter. Rape and killing of women in this country occurs across age, race, and social class. As a country, we have a femicide rate that is five times higher than the global average. We are a violent society, we are a sick society. Why? Why do we kill our women and children, the most vulnerable among us? Is it because of self-hate, have we dealt with our violent past? We are the most unequal country in the world. Does continued inequality strip us of our human dignity?

The second thing that keeps me awake at night is linked to the first, inequality. Social justice is about equity, it’s about equal opportunity for all. However, equity is elusive. As a woman you have to work doubly hard for a much longer period compared to your male counterpart to achieve a leadership position. As a Black woman it has to be three times harder and even much longer. When you eventually attain the leadership position, you are paid less and face more scrutiny. This is not just in business, it’s in academia and each and every sector of our society. We don’t value our women, we don’t recognize their immense contribution to society, and more importantly we kill them, men kill them. Social justice is about human rights, and women’s rights are human rights. In today’s *Star* newspaper, no less than eight faces across age, social class, and race were shown, women who have been killed by men in the past few days. Many reasons are advanced as contributors of the sick nation that we’ve become. What would it take to stop the scourge? What role can we play as citizens, as psychologists, as academics?

For a long time we have blamed women for the challenges they face, whether its abuse or for being overlooked or undermined at the place of work. We’ve found it difficult to confront the perpetrators of women’s problems. Men who are the abusers, men who lead in different sectors of society therefore have the power to introduce equity where it doesn’t exist. Men and women together have to confront the challenge, but this has to be led by men. The toxic masculinity, as described by Lauren October, transcends age, generations, social class, and race. According to October, toxic masculinity is the root cause of many social ills in South Africa; notions of masculinity, and what it means to be a man, seem to be the driving factor behind much of the risky behaviour that males engage in, she asserts. Kopano Ratele, in his paper titled ‘African (situated) psychologies of boys, men and masculinities’, argues that an endeavour to contribute towards a de-alineated African-situated psychology of boys, men, and masculinities is warranted. He further states that understanding the relationship of a body of knowledge to the society within which that knowledge is created and applied is actually difficult without understanding the economy, cultures, politics, and histories of that society. Will the development of African-centred psychological perspectives help us better understand the culprits of women abuse – men? Will locating psychology within lived experiences make it more relevant to the majority of our multicultural society? Can psychology help us understand why we are so violent as society. Have we dealt with our legislated violent past effectively or are we role-playing that treatment meted to the majority of fellow Africans from different parts of the continent?

Social justice is about human rights and human dignity which is based on shared values. Social justice is about rights and obligations to fairness, an appreciation of the self, a respect for life, and
a faith in society. When abuses are committed against anyone in any society, the dignity of human-
ity as a whole is compromised. By the same token, it is only when the rights of any individual and
rights of the people of any region receive our care and protection that humanity can achieve shared
prosperity.

Social exclusion is violation of human dignity. As long as we remain the most unequal country
in the world, social justice and prosperity will remain elusive. Universal access to quality educa-
tion, quality health, proper sanitation, and clean water are some of the basic human rights. Our
democracy is threatened as long as the inequality persists; our economic prosperity is unattainable
when we exclude 52% of our population from equal opportunity, from leadership positions, from
equal pay for equal work.

While we argue about affordability of universal health care coverage and why it won’t work, the
main issue that should receive our undivided attention and effort is how we make quality health
care accessible to the indigent. The few educated in this country have a voice, that voice should be
used for the good of all humankind, not for charity purposes but for maintaining peace and achiev-
ing prosperity for our country. When the majority are voiceless and have no seat at the table, their
communication is violence, that communication is a cry for help, to be seen and heard.

How is the discipline of psychology helping in the better understanding of our society and its
issues and, in the process, ensuring that it is relevant for the context? Wahbie Long asserts that
what students and some academics have taken issue with is the Eurocentric nature of academic
knowledge. I quote, ‘Psychological research is frequently autobiographical; psychological
researchers tend to do the kinds of research that resonate with them on a personal level, . . . .’ So,
if we want African psychology to avoid the racially and culturally essentialist cul-de-sacs of the
last two or three decades, we need to do things differently. What’s needed instead is training that
acknowledges the appalling conditions in which too many South Africans live. ‘Questions of class,
inequality, poverty very seldom make it into the consulting room’, he says:

In psychology – not just South African psychology – we tend to ignore questions of social context,
economics and structural violence and how they play out in people’s psychological lives, and end up with
interventions that are ill-suited for the problems people actually have in their lives.

As a non-psychologist, I have no doubt that a lot is happening within the discipline. One of the
initiatives that resonated with me when it comes to research was Dr Shose Kessi’s use of a partici-
patory action research tool called PhotoVoice to overcome what she calls the ‘epistemological
violence’ of traditional research methods. With PhotoVoice, a qualitative method developed in the
1990s, researchers give cameras to community members to document their lives, identify common
challenges, and collaborate on solutions. The goals are to build consciousness and make partici-
pants agents of change in their own communities. Research outcomes determine solutions that we
come up with; the methodology and integrity of the researcher are quite important. The Stanford
Prison Experiment is one reminder of this importance.

As I conclude, I would like to quote Madiba: ‘Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity,
it’s an act of justice . . . ., Social equality is the only basis of human happiness’.

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